

# Indiscriminate Friendliness

## You and Your Foster Child

Indiscriminate friendliness is when young children approach and interact with strangers in the same way the children do with their primary caregiver. Such children are not fearful or wary of strangers and might even be overly friendly to them. It is called indiscriminate because it is the kind of behavior children usually reserve for their primary caregiver, whether that is a parent, foster parent, or someone else who regularly takes care of them.

Some children are very outgoing by nature and approach people without hesitation. For others, indiscriminate friendliness is a response to severe abuse or neglect, the inability of parents to care for them, or dangerous living conditions.

Although the primary caregiver may be pleased the child is so outgoing, indiscriminate friendliness is not developmentally appropriate. Young children should be wary of strangers. Most infants develop something called stranger anxiety between 6 and 9 months of age. They become wary of strangers and want to be close to their primary caregivers. Indiscriminate friendliness may be a sign that the child is having a problem forming that closeness or a secure attachment with his or her primary caregiver.

An attachment is a close emotional bond between an infant and primary caregiver. This bond is important. It acts as a kind of blueprint for future relationships. Indiscriminate friendliness can develop if a child is deprived of a caring environment early in life and doesn't form that secure attachment. It is sometimes seen in foster children, usually those who have had many placements or those who have endured severe neglect.

### Tips for dealing with indiscriminate friendliness

Recognizing and understanding indiscriminate friendliness are important first steps toward handling this behavior appropriately. Here are some tips that should help:

### What to look for

There are several signs of indiscriminate friendliness. Among children who are 1 year old or older, examples of indiscriminate friendliness include the following:

- Not showing fear of strangers.
- Showing a high level of interest in strangers.
- Enthusiastically investigating strangers without being afraid or wary of them.
- Asking or indicating that they want to be held by a stranger.
- Fussing when the stranger tries to return the child to the caregiver.
- Seeking comfort from strangers when upset or otherwise distressed.

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### Not a minor or harmless behavior

Indiscriminate friendliness may seem like a minor behavioral problem, particularly when you consider the possible outcomes of severe abuse and neglect. But indiscriminate friendliness can be dangerous for a child and lead to problems later in life. For example:

- Children might encounter a stranger who intends harm. If indiscriminately friendly children approach a child predator, they could be abducted and suffer further abuse.
- Indiscriminately friendly children's behavior might make the primary caregiver feel the children do not need them when that is not the case. This mistaken view can complicate the relationship between a child and parent or other primary caregiver and make it difficult to form a trusting bond.
- Children who are indiscriminately friendly are at higher risk for psychological and behavioral problems, including depression and aggression toward peers. Such problems can make it difficult to form healthy relationships as adults.

### Why indiscriminate friendliness occurs

Researchers believe there are a few reasons why some children who have been severely deprived or neglected can become indiscriminately friendly.

- One is that they are trying to adapt to a harsh environment. For example, children in orphanages where there are not enough caregivers may develop this behavior to get noticed and comforted. Some want to be played with.
- They may be trying to make up for a lack of stimulation. Children who have been seriously deprived at home may overcompensate for this lack of attention by seeking it from other adults with whom they come in contact.

- They may have just discovered that adults can provide for their emotional needs. Some deprived children may never have known that. Once they find out adults can comfort them, they may seek comfort from any adult.

### How to cope with indiscriminately friendly behavior

- Always keep an eye on your child when in public. Until your child understands that not every stranger is actually friendly, you must keep close watch over your child to protect him or her from predators.
- Teach your child to ask you before approaching strangers. Your child should understand that it's OK to talk to new people—as long as he or she lets you know beforehand. Teaching this might take a while. Be patient and consistent.
- Be careful not to make your child too fearful. You want him or her to be cautious but not overly afraid of all strangers. You still want your child to be able to seek help from a police officer or other appropriate adult in case of an emergency.

### Attachment difficulties can be improved

Studies suggest that attachment problems in children who have been seriously deprived or neglected can improve under the right circumstances.

- Children's attachment often improves a great deal shortly after being placed in a nurturing environment. But it may take years for a problem to go away completely.
- Adopted orphanage children, for example, are able to form attachments to their adoptive parents. But many still display some indiscriminately friendly behavior.
- Most importantly, research suggests that a child with an attachment disorder can form a secure attachment with a caregiver given proper intervention, such as an enriching home life and loving, supportive caregivers.

