Attachment

You & Your Foster Child

A guide for foster parents

An attachment is a close emotional bond between an infant and a parent, foster parent, or other primary caregiver. This bond is important. It acts as a kind of blueprint for future relationships, shaping what the child will expect of significant others in relationships. There are secure attachments and several types of insecure attachments. The type of attachment that children develop influences how they view themselves.

Many children have secure attachments. They interact well with their caregivers, look to them for reassurance, and usually stay fairly close to them when strangers are present. They might cry when the caregiver leaves the room, but they are easily soothed.

Insecurely attached children might avoid, ignore, or resist their caregivers. Some may not get upset at all when their caregiver leaves the room, while others may get very upset. Experts suggest that secure attachments will develop when the caregiver responds to the child in a way that is finely tuned to the child's needs and is warm, sensitive, and responsive. The caregiver doesn't have to be perfect. The care most children receive is sensitive enough to develop secure attachments.

With patience, love, and time, even children who have endured neglect and/or abuse can learn they are worthy of love and grow to expect that others will respond to their needs.

A publication of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development made possible with help from the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund For Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

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Tips to help you understand and cope with your foster child's attachment

Understanding something about your child's attachment and how to deal with it will help both you and your foster child.

Attachment develops gradually over time

Researchers have found that a child's attachment is formed in phases:

- Infants as young as 4–6 weeks of age can tell their primary caregivers from other adults and respond differently to each. Primary caregivers may receive more positive reactions from an infant, while strangers may receive cautious or inquisitive responses, depending on the temperament of the infant.
- At about 7 months of age, infants have developed increased cognitive abilities, which lead to them to understand that people continue to exist even when they are out of sight. This can result in much stronger protests when you leave your infant alone. A few months later, your infant also might become more sensitive to strangers and become upset when strangers approach, even when he or she is with you.

Children placed in foster care at later ages may have a more difficult time separating from their original caregiver than infants. Also, older children may have trouble forming an attachment to a new caregiver.

Factors that can lead to an attachment problem

Any of these situations, either alone or together, can contribute to difficulties with attachment.

- Length of exposure to poor environments. Children placed in foster care after 6 months of experience in neglectful, abusive, or inconsistent environments are more likely to have more attachment problems.
- Child maltreatment. Children who are badly treated are more likely to develop an attachment disorder.
- A mother who suffers from depression. Depression can leave a mother unable to form a secure attachment with her infant.
- Severe deprivation. Children who are severely deprived—either by a neglectful parent or from time spent in an institution—may have difficulty forming secure attachments to other people.
- High stress. Parents who experience high levels of stress can have trouble forming secure attachments because they may have little emotional energy for meeting their infant's emotional needs.
- Foster care. Some children in foster care have a higher risk of attachment problems, particularly those who have had more than one foster home, have been in foster care for a long time, or who have had a bad foster care experience.

Coping with your foster child's type of attachment

- Be patient. Forming an attachment to a new caregiver can take three months or longer. During this time, your foster children may act like they don't need you. But they do.
- Be sensitive and responsive. Sensitive and responsive care promotes better behavior and relationships.
- Be willing to form an attachment to your foster child.
- Keep your relationship with the child's biological family positive. It will help avoid disruptions in care and improve your relationship with your foster child.
- Educate yourself about your child's needs. Mental health, health care, and social service agencies offer information about how issues such as prenatal drug and alcohol abuse, neglect, and child abuse can affect a child's development.
- Use available resources, such as support groups, mental health care providers, and others that offer support and guidance for dealing with issues that foster children and families can face.
- Examine your own history. A history of negative experiences such as depression can affect the care you provide. Understanding your own experiences can help you be more responsive to your child and may lead to better outcomes.

Attachment problems can be resolved

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

- Children with attachment problems often improve a great deal shortly after being placed in a nurturing environment. But it may take years for the problem to go away completely.
- Most adopted orphanage children, for example, are able to form attachments to their adoptive parents.
- 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.