

Strengthening Families: Nurturing and Attachment¹

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Parenting is a tremendous responsibility full of many moments of joy. But sometimes the rapid rate of a young child's growth and development can leave parents feeling a little overwhelmed. This *Strengthening Families Series* highlights six factors that promote positive parenting and protect against stressors and frustrations that can lead to harsh parenting: Parental Resilience, Social Connections, Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, Concrete Support, Social and Emotional Competence, and **Nurturing and Attachment**. Each of these protective factors offers families and children some defense against distress. However, together they combine to create a solid foundation of knowledge, parenting skills, and support that can help families thrive during everyday circumstances as well as persevere during times of stress or crisis (1).



Overview

Children possess an amazing ability to learn, experience, and feel. When they are nurtured with warmth, compassion, and consistency they can develop at their own pace. Parents who love and respect their children as individuals can seamlessly provide them with a safe and positive environment in which to grow and experience life. According to the Administration on Children and Families,

“As children grow, nurturing by parents and other caregivers remains important for healthy physical and emotional development. Parents nurture their older children by making time to listen to them, being involved and interested in the child’s school and other activities, staying aware of the child or teen’s interests and friends, and being willing to advocate for the child when necessary.”

Children who experience consistent warmth and affection are more likely to do well academically, develop stronger peer and social relationships, explore their environment more, have more self-confidence, have stronger communication skills, and show more persistence in life (3). When children do not experience consistent affection and nurturing, they may have difficulty forming positive relationships; lack of nurturing may even alter brain growth and development (4).

Ideally, families are a safe haven for children where they feel warmth and acceptance. A child's family should provide protection and guidance, teaching children how to grow

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into competent individuals, socially and emotionally. The home environment should foster a sense of security where the child will find protection and know that he or she is valued.

What You Can Do

While nurturing comes naturally for many parents, it can be helpful to think about the concrete ways in which parents can strengthen their bonds with their children. Here are some ideas of things that you can do to help foster nurturing and attachment between you and your child:

- **Make sure your child knows that he or she is the most important individual in the world to you!** As renowned scholar of child development and co-founder of Head Start Urie Bronfenbrenner said, “Development, it turns out, occurs through this process of progressively more complex exchanges between a child and somebody else—especially somebody who’s crazy about that child.” The positive messages we send to our children shape how they see and feel about themselves.
- **Choose to breastfeed your infant, if possible.** Breast-feeding has nutritional and emotional benefits for babies, and recent research has found emotional and health benefits for mothers as well. If you are not breastfeeding, try to hold and cuddle your baby whenever they are taking their bottle.
- **Establish a “give-and-take” relationship with your infant.** Babies learn to interact by responding to visual cues and interactions with parents. By establishing eye contact, making faces, and playing games such as “Peek-a-Boo,” parents create a world that is responsive and understandable for a baby.
- **Learn what your infant or child likes by responding to cues.** Different children will enjoy different kinds of touch and interaction, so pay attention to your child’s reactions. Use these reactions to figure out what works best for your child.
- **Be affectionate.** A hug in the morning is a great start to the day. Children need both physical and emotional affection to help create a sense of security.
- **Encourage your child.** Verbal encouragement is a different form of affection, so find ways to congratulate your child on a job well done or encourage your child in times of challenge.
- **Play with your child.** Remember that children learn through play. It affects every aspect of their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development.
- **Use touch to soothe your children.** When children are upset, they frequently need a hug or a gentle touch to provide them with comfort.
- **Establish consistent and predictable routines that your child can count on.** Help your child know what to expect for morning, afternoon, evening, bedtime, and weekend routines. This predictability will help your child feel secure and safe.
- **Provide consistency in care.** In order to develop healthy attachments, it is important that your child have a consistent, loving caregiver.
- **If you are struggling emotionally, or if you think you might be suffering from any degree of postpartum depression, talk to your doctor.** Parents must take care of themselves to be caregivers for their children.
- **Be your child’s emotional health trainer.** By becoming aware of your own wide range of emotions you can help your child learn to accept and trust that what they are feeling is okay. You can then train them to handle their emotions effectively by using empathy to explore with them what they are feeling.
- **Help your child manage his or her own behavior.** By setting realistic limits for your child’s behavior, you can then help the child manage his or her own behavior by employing rewards and natural consequences.
- **If your child is struggling with specific behavior issues, seek professional advice and reliable resources.** Some children are more challenging than others are; so if you are struggling with your child’s behavior, connect with resources and get the support you need—you are not alone in the challenges you face.



Finding Resources and Information

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning—This site provides resources for parents on a variety of topics related to social and emotional development. <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html>

Child Welfare Information Gateway: Protective Factors to Promote Child Well-Being—This site presents an overview of protective factors and serves as a clearinghouse for related resources. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors>

Healthy Children (American Academy of Pediatrics)—This site provides advice and resources from pediatricians on a broad range of parenting and child development topics. <http://www.healthychildren.org>

Just in Time Parenting—This Cooperative Extension site provides a variety of resources on parenting and allows parents to sign up for “age-paced” newsletters that provide relevant information as your child ages. <http://www.parentinginfo.org>

Parenting 24/7—This site, created by University of Illinois Cooperative Extension, is an excellent resource for “raising children and managing family life.” <http://parenting247.org>

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children—This site provides research and resources related to improving the social and emotional outcomes of young children who are at risk for developmental delays or disabilities. <http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu>

University of Florida Extension Publications (EDIS)—The EDIS website is a comprehensive, single-source repository of all current UF/IFAS numbered peer-reviewed publications. UF/IFAS [academic departments](#) develop and maintain a collection of publications available for universal free distribution on the World Wide Web and through the Florida Cooperative Extension Service [County Offices](#) and [Research and Education Centers](#) state wide. Publications that address the needs of children in Florida are accessible to all at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topics/families/children.html>.

Zero to Three Parenting Resources—The “parenting resources” section of this website has practical resources for parents. <http://www.zerotothree.org/about-us/funded-projects/parenting-resources>

Endnotes

(1) This work is based on the framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, with more information available at <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>.

(2) *Administration on Children and Families. Making Meaningful Connections: 2014 Prevention Resource Guide.* (2014). P. 12: Available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/guide.pdf>

(3) American Academy of Pediatrics. (2011). *Family Dynamics*. Available at <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics>.

(4) Mayo Clinic. (2009). *Reactive Attachment Disorder*. Available at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/reactive-attachment-disorder/DS00988>.