



The Importance of Attachment for Children and Teens

Attachment is a deep and lasting emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space. It is such a strong love that you would be grief-stricken if that person was removed from your life.

These bonds exist across every culture in the world.

Attachment is the bond that children develop with their parents/primary caregivers. This attachment is extremely influential on:

- how the child views him/herself
- how the child relates to others

Healthy attachment leads to self-confident, secure, loved, and loveable children and adults.

The importance of attachment does not end after the early years of life. Attachment behaviors of parents should continue into the teen years and beyond.

Building a Strong Attachment

Attachment behavior in adults includes responding sensitively, appropriately and consistently to the child's needs. The following critical behaviors are just as important for teens as for young children:

- **Use your active listening skills** to demonstrate that you understand where they are coming from.
 - **Look children in the eye** when they are talking to you, even if it means you need to stop what you are doing for a minute.
 - **Bend down to their level** if necessary.
 - **Listen with full attention**, and show that you are listening with phrases such as, "Hmm-hmm" or "Oh..."
 - **Give their feelings a name** – help them to identify how they are feeling

- **Accept their feelings** - even if you don't think they should feel sad or scared in a particular situation, the truth is, they are sad or scared, so let them know you understand. Accepting their feelings does not mean accepting their behavior.
- **Take whatever time the child needs.** It may take some kids longer to develop trust and feel comfortable building a relationship with you. Don't give up.
- **Treat the child with respect.** Treat them as you would like to be treated. Model desired behavior.
- **Nurture the child even when the child seems unlikable.** Separate the child from the behavior. You can love the child even if you don't like their behavior...let them know this.
- **Get excited for their achievements** and encourage them with "You can do it!"
- **Give hugs and kind touch**
- **Encourage a sense of family and belonging** through special family customs and rituals
- **Tell the child something special about themselves every day!**

Attachment Behaviors and Teens

As stated earlier, attachment behaviors from the parent are just as important to teens as to young children. Practice the behaviors listed above with children of all ages, but also take note of these techniques specific to teens to build the bonds of a strong relationship:

Feed with love and respect. It is really easy to fall into a pattern of negative interactions or questioning (Why didn't you finish that work yet? When did you plan on telling me about that?) rather than positive (thank you for helping me...you have the best smile). Adolescents still need to hear, feel, and know that we love them and enjoy being with them.

Respond with sensitivity. When speaking with teens, strive for a tone of respect, dignity, humanity, and care.

- Listen for the deeper meaning behind their words and behavior and respond to that first.

- Act as a loving sounding board without rushing into the mode of problem solver.
- It is wise, with teens, to keep advice that is not requested to a minimum, and if it must be given, do it gently, perhaps first asking if they are open to receive it. This communicates that we believe in their ability to handle their own problems, and we are here to help them when they need us.

Use nurturing touch. It is important that we continue to show physical affection with teens. It can be something as simple as a playful tousle of his/her hair, or a hand on the shoulder, but it communicates your love and connection.

Ensure safety – physically and emotionally. We can't always control life, and sometimes bad things happen to the children. When this happens, we need the teens to feel comfortable coming to us for guidance. One of the best things we can do to increase that likelihood is creating an environment where the teens feel safe expressing anything. Assure the teen, "You can come to me, no matter what has happened, or what you may have done, and I will always be on your team and we can always work things out together."

Practice Positive Discipline. Don't take their behavior personally. Mean behavior is about their tangled up feelings and immature ability to understand and express their emotions. When mean behavior is taken personally, we tend to close off or lash out, which only makes the situation worse. Instead, set limits with a calm, empowered tone.

Provide consistent and loving care. Our teens sense the energy behind our words and actions, and when we are not genuine with them, they feel it. Attune yourself to the teen's mood, and meet them where they are.

Activities that Enhance Attachment between Parent and Child/Teen

I tried to teach my child with books.
He gave me only puzzled looks.
I used clear words to discipline,
But I never seemed to win.
Despairingly, I turned aside.
“How shall I reach this child?” I cried.
Into my hand he put the key:
“Come,” he said, “Play with me.”
(Author unknown)

Playful activities and healthy touch build attachment between parent and child/teen and should take place frequently. Touch, eye contact, and physical/emotional connection are all keys to building a strong relationship. The following is a list of ideas of ways to interact with children of all ages.

- **Copycat or mirroring** – the parent playfully copies what the child is doing. For example, the child is asked to clap their hands, and the adult claps their hands in the same volume and speed as the child. When the child changes his/her style of clapping, the adult imitates. Eye contact, smiles and laughs are all key to building a relationship.
- **Soft toy game** – have the child place a soft toy that is fairly easy to balance on top of his head. Have the parent sit in front of the child and place her hands in front of herself. The child then tips his head when the adult blinks her eyes (promotes eye contact) and the toy falls into her hands. Have fun with this activity – laughter has been found to be healing.
- **Lotion Massage** – use lotion to massage a child’s hands or feet. Massage can relax a person’s body by reducing tension, and the touch is important to enhance attachment.
- **Brushing hair** – this can be a calming activity that promotes connection and includes a sense of nurturing. Allow the child to brush your hair as well.
- **Stack of hands** – put your hand palm down in front of the child and guide the child to put his hand on top. Alternate hands to make a stack. Take turns moving the bottom hand to the top. Putting lotion on hands before this activity can make it slippery and nurturing at the same time.
- **Special handshake** – make up a special handshake together, taking turns adding new gestures.

- **Manicure** – soak the child’s hands or feet in warm water. Using lotion, massage the feet and hands. Paint fingernails or toes the color the child wants.
- **Straight face challenge** – child has to keep a straight face while you try to make him/her laugh.
- **Fortune telling** – look into each other’s hands and tell the fortunes of your dreams.
- **Share a story** – read a book together, or make up a story. You could even describe a day in the child’s life 10 years from now.
- **Hold hands and dance!**

Focus on Increasing your Attachment Behaviors

Each week choose two behaviors from this lesson that you will incorporate into your daily routine. The behaviors from week one should be continued in week two as you add new behaviors – this will help the behaviors become habit.

Example:

Week Number	Attachment Behavior	Attachment Behavior
Week 1	I will use kind touch more often throughout the day.	As the children come home from school I will ask them about their achievements that day and get excited for them.
Week 2	I will have a manicure party with my girls and I’ll do the straight face challenge with my boys as a fun group competition.	I will work to have strong eye contact with my children when they are talking to me.

Use the worksheet below to set your goals for the upcoming weeks.

Week Number	Attachment Behavior	Attachment Behavior
Week 1		
Week 2		
Week 3		
Week 4		