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Positive Parenting

Building Healthy Relationships With Your Kids

Parents have an important job. Raising kids is both rewarding and challenging. You're likely to get a lot of advice along the way, from doctors, family, friends, and even strangers. But every parent and child is unique. Being sensitive and responsive to your kids can help you build positive, healthy relationships together.

"Being a sensitive parent and responding to your kids cuts across all areas of parenting," says Arizona State University's Dr. Keith Crnic, a parent-child relationship expert. "What it means is recognizing what your child needs in the moment and providing that in an effective way."

This can be especially critical for infants and toddlers, he adds. Strong emotional bonds often develop through sensitive, responsive, and consistent parenting in the first years of life. For instance, holding your baby lovingly and responding to their cries helps build strong bonds.

Building Bonds

Strong emotional bonds help children learn how to manage their own feelings and behaviors and develop self-confidence. They help create a safe base from which they can explore, learn, and relate to others.

Experts call this type of strong connection between children and their caregivers "secure attachment." Securely attached children are more likely to be able to cope with challenges like poverty, family instability, parental stress, and depression.

A recent analysis shows that about 6 out of 10 children in the U.S. develop secure attachments to their parents. The 4 out of 10 kids who lack such bonds may avoid their parents when they are upset or resist their parents if they cause them more distress. Studies



Wise Choices

Tips for Connecting with Your Kids

- Catch kids showing good behavior and offer specific praise.
- Give children meaningful jobs at home and positive recognition afterward. Don't be overly critical; instead, help them improve their skills one step at a time.
- Use kind words, tones, and gestures when giving instructions or making requests.
- Spend some time every day in warm, positive, loving interaction with your kids. Look for opportunities to spend time as a family, like taking after-dinner walks or reading books together.
- Brainstorm solutions to problems at home or school together.
- Set rules for yourself for mobile device use and other distractions. For instance, check your phone after your child goes to bed.
- Ask about your child's concerns, worries, goals, and ideas.
- Participate in activities that your child enjoys. Help out with and attend their events, games, activities, and performances.

Links

- [Family Checkup: Positive Parenting Prevents Drug Abuse](#)
- [Adventures in Parenting: Learn to Be Effective, Consistent, Active, and Attentive](#) pdf
- [Play to Learn](#)
- [Help Youth Succeed: Learn What Successful Parents Do](#) pdf (ORI)
- [Parent Information](#) (CDC)
- [Essentials for Parenting Toddlers and Preschoolers](#) (CDC)
- [Communicating With Your Child](#) (CDC)

suggest that this can make kids more prone to serious behavior problems. Researchers have been testing programs to help parents develop behaviors that encourage secure attachment.

Being Available

Modern life is full of things that can influence your ability to be sensitive and responsive to your child. These include competing priorities, extra work, lack of sleep, and things like mobile devices. Some experts are concerned about the effects that distracted parenting may have on emotional bonding and children's language development, social interaction, and safety.

If parents are inconsistently available, kids can get distressed and feel hurt, rejected, or ignored. They may have more emotional outbursts and feel alone. They may even stop trying to compete for their parent's attention and start to lose emotional connections to their parents.

"There are times when kids really do need your attention and want your recognition," Crnic explains. Parents need to communicate that their kids are valuable and important, and children need to know that parents care what they're doing, he says.

It can be tough to respond with sensitivity during tantrums, arguments, or other challenging times with your kids. "If parents respond by being irritable or aggressive themselves, children can mimic that behavior, and a negative cycle then continues to escalate," explains Dr. Carol Metzler, who studies parenting at the Oregon Research Institute.

According to Crnic, kids start to regulate their own emotions and behavior around age three. Up until then, they depend more on you to help them regulate their emotions, whether to calm them or help get them excited. "They're watching you to see how you do it and listening to how you talk to them about it," he explains. "Parents need to be good self-regulators. You're not only trying to regulate your own emotions in the moment, but helping your child learn to manage their emotions and behavior."

As kids become better at managing their feelings and behavior, it's important to help them develop coping skills, like active problem solving. Such skills can help them feel confident in handling what comes their way.

"When parents engage positively with their children, teaching them the behaviors and skills that they need to cope with the world, children learn to follow rules and regulate their own feelings," Metzler says.

"As parents, we try really hard to protect our kids from the experience of bad things," Crnic explains. "But if you protect them all the time and they are not in situations where they deal with difficult or adverse circumstances, they aren't able to develop healthy coping skills."

He encourages you to allow your kids to have more of those experiences and then help them learn how to solve the problems that emerge. Talk through the situation and their feelings. Then work with them to find solutions to put into practice.

● [Parenting Videos](#) (CDC)

References

[Reciprocity among maternal distress, child behavior, and parenting: transactional processes and early childhood risk.](#) Ciciolla L, Gerstein ED, Crnic KA. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology.* 2014;43(5):751-764. doi:10.1080/15374416.2013.812038. Epub 2013 Jul 2. PMID: 23819445.

[U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study](#) (ECLS)

Meeting Needs

As children grow up, it's important to remember that giving them what they need doesn't mean giving them everything they want. "These two things are very different," Crnic explains. "Really hone in on exactly what's going on with your kid in the moment. This is an incredibly important parenting skill and it's linked to so many great outcomes for kids."

Think about where a child is in life and what skills they need to learn at that time. Perhaps they need help managing emotions, learning how to behave in a certain situation, thinking through a new task, or relating to friends.

"You want to help kids become confident," Crnic says. "You don't want to aim too high where they can't get there or too low where they have already mastered the skill." Another way to boost confidence while strengthening your relationship is to let your kid take the lead.

"Make some time to spend with your child that isn't highly directive, where your child leads the play," advises Dr. John Bates, who studies children's behavior problems at Indiana University Bloomington. "Kids come to expect it and they love it, and it really improves the relationship."

Bates also encourages parents to focus on their child's actual needs instead of sticking to any specific parenting principles.

It's never too late to start building a healthier, more positive relationship with your child, even if things have gotten strained and stressful. "Most importantly, make sure that your child knows that you love them and are on their side," Metzler says. "For older children, let them know that you are genuinely committed to building a stronger relationship with them and helping them be successful."

By being a sensitive and responsive parent, you can help set your kids on a positive path, teach them self-control, reduce the likelihood of troublesome behaviors, and build a warm, caring parent-child relationship.

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