

Healthy Attachment *in Early Childhood*

Healthy attachments are the foundation for lifelong health. Building a durable foundation in the earliest years of life supports learning, behavior, health, and mental health into adulthood.

Parents, grandparents, childcare providers, teachers, pediatricians, and anyone helping to care for young children can all help strengthen the roots that help children grow and learn.

Science shows that when we follow these three principles, we create strong foundations for healthy development:

Reduce Sources of Stress

Strengthen Core Skills

Support Responsive Relationships

Together, we can help children feel safe, nurtured, loved, and understood. When caregivers strengthen their relationships and core skills, they manage their own stress more effectively, and in turn, children learn to manage and express their big feelings and engage in learning.



Understanding Attachment

What is attachment?

Attachment is a lifelong process that begins with the emotional connection between an infant and their primary caregiver. It grows through consistent, sensitive, and responsive care, giving children a sense of security and trust. Healthy attachment helps children feel important, safe, and confident. Each caregiver and child bring their own personality, temperament, and experiences to this relationship.

Are bonding and attachment the same thing?

Bonding is the feeling a parent develops during pregnancy and after birth that motivates loving, caring responses to their baby. **Attachment** is the relationship that a parent and child build over time through consistent, responsive interactions.

Both describe the connection between a parent and child, but attachment has a broader and more enduring meaning. Bonding starts with the parent's feelings; attachment develops through repeated, sensitive caregiving over time.

Myth or Fact?

“Picking up a crying baby will spoil them.”

Myth. Crying is a baby’s way of communicating a need. Responding teaches them they are safe and cared for, building trust and emotional security.

“Attachment can only form in infancy.”

Myth. It’s never too late to build attachment. Relationships grow at any age through consistency, empathy, and connection.

“I must be with my child 24/7 for attachment.”

Myth. Children need reliable, responsive adults — not constant contact. The quality of interaction matters more than the quantity.



The Development of Attachment: *Month by Month*

Birth-2 Months

Infants and parents learn each other’s cues. Babies use sight, sound, and touch to connect. Some babies give clear signals, while others are more subtle.

3-7 Months

Families build routines that help babies feel secure. Babies use their whole bodies — smiling, reaching, kicking — to communicate.

8-12 Months

Babies show preferences and begin asserting independence. Simple games like peek-a-boo teach babies that loved ones still exist when out of sight, building trust and security.

13-20 Months

Toddlers are eager to explore. Caregivers keep environments safe, label feelings, and respond sensitively — helping children manage emotions and grow with confidence.

21-26 Months

Toddlers test limits and express strong feelings. Caregivers balance warmth and guidance — firm when needed, but always kind and consistent — responding with empathy and teaching appropriate behavior.

Ways to Foster Healthy Attachment

- Learn your child’s temperament.
- Read their cues and label feelings.
- Accept and validate their emotions, even when different from your own.
- Respond consistently and create daily moments of connection.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood