

# Understanding Attachment and Relationships

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**T**he warm connections a child has with another familiar person are called relationships. These relationships might be with a mother, father, grandparent, and other relatives or important caregivers. Happy relationships help a child form healthy attachment. **Attachment** is the ongoing emotional bond the child builds with a familiar adult through a nurturing relationship. Infants and toddlers who are building attachment tend to seek and maintain closeness to important people in their lives, particularly in stressful situations.

When infants and toddlers have healthy relationships that support attachment, they learn to trust that the world is safe, and they have confidence to explore and learn.

Here are some of the behaviors you may see in your infant or toddler that show he or she is building relationships and close attachments:

## **Infants (4 weeks to 18 months):**

- Act happy with familiar adults
- Show pleasure when interacting with adults
- Accept comfort from familiar adults
- Smile at familiar adults
- Act happy
- Respond positively to adult attention
- Smile back at familiar adults
- Calm down with help from familiar adults



- Make eye contact with others
- Act in a good mood
- Seek comfort from familiar adults
- Show affection for familiar adults
- Enjoy being cuddled
- Enjoy interacting with others
- Respond when spoken to

**Toddlers (18 months to 36 months):**

In addition to the above,

- Express a variety of emotions
- Reach for familiar adults
- Make needs known to familiar adults
- Act happy when praised
- Make others aware of their needs
- Show interest in their surroundings
- Respond to their name

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## Healthy Relationships that Lead to Attachment Can Support Your Infant and Toddler Throughout Life

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<b>If Now...</b>	<b>Then Forever</b>
Your infant coos and laughs when you smile at her.	She will enjoy laughing and interacting with close friends.
Your infant calms down when you hold him close and talk gently.	He'll be able to calm himself in stressful situations in safe and healthy ways.
Your toddler lets you know she needs help when something is difficult.	She'll know it is OK to ask for help, and she will offer to help others as well.
Your toddler happily waves good-bye to you when you drop her off at her caregiver's house.	She will develop a sense of trust that you will return because you said so.



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## Tips for Supporting Relationships and Attachment

- **Connecting with your child's caregiver:** Let your child's caregiver know what you do at home to comfort your child. For example, "When Maria wakes from her nap, I pick her up and we snuggle with her blanket while I sing to her. Can I share one of her favorite songs with you?"

*Good communication between parents and teachers helps your child go back and forth between home and school much easier. This helps your child feel safe and comfortable.*

- **Activities and Experiences:** During daily routines such as meals, bath time, and nap time, you can engage in eye contact and share smiles, conversations, stories, and books.

*These day-to-day interactions are a way for you and your child to continue building strong ties to each other, the foundation for later relationships. Reading books to your child while you are snuggling together will help her learn to read later on, even if she's too young to understand the words yet.*

- **Responsive Caregiving:** Respond to your child's attempts to communicate with you through facial expressions, gestures, cooing, babbling, and words. Gently mirror his sounds and expressions.

*Your encouraging responses help your child learn to value himself and others. Knowing that others understand him and want to interact with him will help him feel more eager to explore new activities and new ways of doing things.*

- **Environment:** Have comfort items available within your child's reach.

*As your child begins to build trust and has a sense of safety, she will start to explore her surroundings, looking to you for guidance. Sometimes having a favorite toy or cuddly blanket on hand may provide some additional comfort as she learns about her world.*

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## Parent Reflection — Thinking About Your Own Relationships

Think about a healthy, loving, relationship you have with someone in your life. Take a few minutes to think about that special person and what qualities he or she brings to the relationship. For example, is this person a good listener? Does the person make time for you?

Write down the words that describe this person and what he or she does to make this relationship a good one.

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Next, think about what this relationship brings to your life. What are the benefits? For example, this relationship might help you keep your sense of humor!

List some of the other benefits this relationship brings to your life:

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You probably said that people you love and care for tend to be good listeners, are trustful, and make you laugh. Having them in your life helps you feel a sense of security and well-being.

This is exactly what we want to bring to our children's lives. Infants and toddlers need love, nurturing, and care in order to feel valued, to have a sense of security, and to be happy. If your child receives these things she will be more able to accept loving relationships and will be able to be someone's best friend.