

Building Connections with Your Foster/Adoptive Child

By Joann Seeman Smith, Ph. D., LMHC

Attachment is a subject that I believe is very important to foster and adoptive parents. I often hear concerns about attachment disorders and am frequently asked about the best ways to build positive attachment. First, I believe it is important to understand what attachment is. Attachment is the relationship between a child and a caregiver that makes a child feel safe, secure, and protected. As you think about the children in your care, one of the best gifts you can give them is being a safe base. Work toward being that stability and safety for them, even when they are doing their best to push you away.

It is important to remember that working toward a healthy stable attachment can be very difficult. Often children who have attachment issues work very hard to sabotage interactions because they can then predict what is going to happen. We as parents have to work against those interactions and help these children learn new relationships and heal those past traumas. This can be especially difficult when you have parented (fostered or adopted) these children in your home for many years. It can feel very frustrating when the same attachment issues continue to keep coming up or they continue to test your stability and love. It is during these times when it is important to stay calm and not take the “attacks” personally. You want to focus on the relationship that you would like to have with them and remember that sometimes the deck is stacked against you, but it is important to not give up hope.

One of the questions I often get from parents is “What can I do to help them feel safe?” There are four areas that I remind parents to focus on: stay calm, be consistent, make connections, and keep them safe. Staying calm seems very easy in concept but can be one of the most difficult things to do when kids are working extra hard to push you away; however, it is going to be one of the most important aspects in this new relationship you are trying to build with them.

Next, it is important to be as consistent as possible. When we are inconsistent in our parenting it can be very confusing and does not foster a sense of safety. Consistent rules and interactions are going to be two key pieces to this area. When kids know what to expect it is much easier for them to follow directions and have positive interactions.

Thirdly, and the most fun area in my opinion, is making connections. We want to have positive connective experiences as often as possible. I always tell parents the days that you like your children the least is when you need to connect and love them the most. This can be very difficult to do but there are many different options for activities to work toward healthy, positive connections. Dr. Becky Bailey, an award-winning author and internationally recognized expert in childhood education and developmental psychology, offers suggestions and activities that you can engage your child in to help build that connection through her website **www.consciousdiscipline.com**.

Lastly, I believe that safety is at the heart of all healthy relationships. I build my therapeutic relationships on the reminder that it is my job to keep them safe. I am not going to allow them to hurt themselves and I am going to do my best to not allow anyone else to hurt them either. Reminding children to stop activities they are engaging in because they are not safe and you cannot allow them to continue. Reminding them at times when they are feeling really scared or upset that they are in a safe place and you are going to do your best to keep them safe in your care.

I love working with families on building a secure and healthy attachment. There are ways you can engage with your child and many interactions and activities to assist you in building your relationship.