

Parent-child attachment: The Importance of Synchronizing with a Child's Emotional States

Attachment is commonly seen as an emotional bond that develops during infancy, with influences that extend across all stages of life. A pioneer in this research, John Bowlby, emphasized the quality of attachment, as it develops in the first months of life between an infant and parent. One of the critical early ingredients is the parent's ability to tune-in to the child's emotional needs and feeling states. In particular, a parent's ability to respond to and help regulate a child's experiences is essential to the development of self-regulation and emotional control, language and cognitive skills and, overall capacity to manage relationships.

The trend in recent research is viewing attachment theory as a regulatory theory, as it integrates both biological and psychological realms. On a moment-to-moment basis, situations can facilitate the child's ability to adapt to the stressor, so that they can approach, tolerate or incorporate these elements to increase future resiliency. Alternatively, mistimed or poorly matched responses of the adult to the stressor is disregulating to the child, as the adult essentially models an inconsistent or maladaptive emotional response to the situation. Over time, the child misses critical opportunities to learn how to manage their feelings and arousal states. This deficit results in disorganized presentation of self, poor capacity to tolerate change and limited ability to learn and develop at later points in the life cycle.

It is increasingly clear that parents play a critical role in bridging their child's emotional experiences with development. Synchronicity can be defined as a match between a parent and child's activities that promotes mutuality in communication and play. Synchronizing with a child's emotional needs and behaviors regulates their attention, facilitates the development of verbal dialogue, and promotes the capacity for self-regulation. It is not simply the case of tuning-in to a child intermittently, instead, there must be a biological rhythm with the child such that the parent is constantly modifying their responses in accordance with the child's emotional state and responsiveness. Therefore, it is not just engagement with the child that is important, but a continual process of coordinated disengagement and re-engagement. Much like a dance pattern, the parent changes their steps and pace with the child's. The younger the child, the more critical it is to begin the dance. We now know that caregivers have a major impact on their child's brain development.

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