

# Evidence-Based Parenting: Dispelling Myths about Attachment Parenting

A growing body of scientific evidence reveals the profound connection between the quality of a child's early relationships and the shaping of both the structure and function of the brain.

Children's health and wellbeing is highly dependent on their intrauterine experience and on the quality of their relationship with primary carers during the first three to five years of life—the period when the brain develops most rapidly. Children's sense of security, resilience to stress, emotional balance, full intellectual development, and ability to make sense of life and create future meaningful interpersonal relationships depends on the quality of their connection with, and attachment to, primary caregiver(s).<sup>(1)</sup> Symptoms of insecure attachment include an inability to deal with stress and adversity, lack of self-control, antisocial attitudes and behaviors, learning difficulties, depression, addiction, aggression, susceptibility to chronic illness, and violence.<sup>(2,3,4)</sup>

Few parents can practise all of these aspects all of the time, and parenting is far too individual and complex for there to be only 'one way'. Fostering connection with your child is the key, not rigid rules. Parents, in interaction with their children, shape their own unique style of parenting.

## **What is Attachment Parenting?**

Attachment parenting (AP) is the most common name applied to parenting approaches that utilise these scientific findings.<sup>(5)</sup> AP builds and maintains the secure bond that parents and infants and children need in order to thrive, by providing the nurturing that meets their biological and emotional need for connection. AP practices include keeping babies in close physical contact (in-arms, slings or backpacks), breastfeeding, co-sleeping, providing caregiver constancy, and responding to baby's cues.

Attachment parenting is often confused with attachment theory. Attachment theory, as developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth in the 1960s, is now applied extensively in the treatment of severely attachment-disordered children. AP draws on the same body of knowledge, but applies it *proactively*, promoting a style of parenting that fosters secure attachment.

Unfortunately, most popular parenting practices do not recognise that infants' attachment to their caregivers is of central importance, and subsequently do not promote the principles and practices that foster this connection. From this perspective, attachment parenting can appear to be more demanding than other forms of parenting and runs counter to the most common ones. Additionally, few people in Western society experienced



the level of secure attachment usually produced by AP methods (and furthermore are unaware of what they missed). As a result of these and other complex factors, there is often resistance to AP, and it is sometimes even ridiculed by mainstream media, (e.g., "Being There" Producer: Krisztina Katona, *60 Minutes*, October 22, 2006).

Attachment parenting offers a way to break the cycle by not passing on to the next generation, that which most of this generation did not get.

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## After Attachment, what then?

The first three years are a time when babies and toddlers most need to feel bonded with their caregivers. The next stage of development—individuation—is equally important to the bonding period. A baby needs to see caregivers as an extension of herself, whereas a toddler needs to have her separate-self emerge within a caring supportive environment. The focus of parenting then evolves from *attachment* to *connection*. Connection parenting focuses on maintaining a consistent loving connection, regardless of the presence of any conflict, and draws on the foundations of connection that were forged in the early bonding period.

## Common myths about Attachment Parenting

**Myth:** Attachment parenting creates 'spoiled' and overly dependent children.

**Fact:** Attachment parenting fosters the secure attachment between children and caregivers that promotes later psychological wellbeing. Having most all of their needs for human nurturing met, children develop a deep sense of security and wellbeing — the outcome of having received so full a measure of the security and affirmation of belonging in the early years. Self-assured children are less likely to be aggressive, need less supervision, and have fewer problems separating from parents when it is developmentally appropriate.

Infants are innately attuned to and affected by the presence and facial expressions of their caregiver. The most powerful enhancers of brain development are the quality of the parent-infant attachment and the responsiveness of the caregiving

environment to the cues of an infant — the facial expressions, vocalisations and body language that communicate their feelings, and their emotional and physical needs. A stage of healthy dependence is necessary in order for a child to become securely independent.

The consistent availability of a caregiver who responds appropriately to her cues, builds confidence and helps a child learn to trust herself; and attachment enhances development.

Securely attached babies, feeling responded to, connected, and valued, cry and fuss less — which means they have more time to learn and grow in positive ways. They are more receptive to interacting with, and learning from, their environment.

Insecurely attached children require discipline because they operate from a base of fear and anger rather than trust. The sensitivity that attached parents develop allows them to see from their child's point of view, and the commonly-dreaded practice of 'discipline' becomes something you do with rather than to a child.

Attachment-parented children learn to *care*, for other people and the world. Because they are accustomed to being fulfilled in their interpersonal relationships, they develop a strong capacity for intimacy. Their parents develop confidence sooner, enjoy parenting more, and develop a sensitivity that carries over into other



Kindred magazine, formerly *byronchild*, Australia's leading publication for Attachment Parents, will be available in newsagents from Dec 5, 2006, by subscription at [www.kindredmagazine.com.au](http://www.kindredmagazine.com.au) or by phone at 02 66844353

aspects of their life.

Far from being overindulged, attachment-parented children are not 'the centre of attention': rather they are an integral part of the normal flow of life. The physical closeness grants them the security they need, so that care-givers can carry on with their life.

*References in bibliography:* Odent, Sears

**Myth:** Attachment parenting is impractical and exhausting.

**Fact:** Raising a child in our modern culture is a monumental undertaking

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— regardless of the style of parenting chosen. Although the stresses of parenting cannot be fully alleviated, they are likely minimised the more we are able to meet our children's nurturing needs.

In the short-term, some of the demands of attachment parenting may seem more time-consuming than the expedient-seeming alternatives, but in the long-run the increase in connection makes life with children much easier and more enjoyable.

The close proximity within the mother-baby unit during the early weeks and months allows the baby's natural attachment-promoting behaviours and the mother's intuitive caregiving to unfold. Trust and love blossom. Connection fosters contentment, and attached children cry and fuss less. The parent-child relationship becomes a compassionate and cooperative, rather than adversarial experience. Many parents report feeling 'tied together' rather than tied down.

Breastfed babies have fewer illnesses. They wake less often in the night and because they are healthier, they tend to be happier, and cry less. Money, time, and effort is saved in not buying formula. Outings with baby don't require cleaning, packing, and carrying bottles and accessories. Away from home, there is no need to find a place to warm a bottle. For the working mother, the end of the workday's instant connection confirms that she is irreplaceable to her baby, as only she can offer him a warm breast full of sweet milk.

At night, snuggled alongside his mother's body, he sleeps more soundly. There is no being woken by his cries from another room, and no getting out of bed to comfort him. Mother draws him to her breast and, most often, drifts back to sleep without having fully woken. There is no need for the paraphernalia needed for baby to sleep alone — cot, night light, monitor, 'blankie', pacifier, etc.

With baby carried in a sling, hands are free for other things. There is no need to make special arrangements for the baby's sleep, no scheduled nap times to be enforced. Baby wakes and sleeps according to her needs rather than a predetermined schedule. When out, slings and backpacks give far more mobility than a stroller.

The more we can give ourselves to the basic needs of the young, the easier life can be. The child whose needs are met, is far less likely to be disruptive when parents must focus on something other than him. The absence of a needy, whiney child makes parenting less exhausting, more practical — and the joys are multiplied.

*References in bibliography:* Buckley, Gerhardt, Sears

***Myth: Leaving children alone to cry themselves to sleep is harmless and teaches them to self-soothe.***

***Fact: A baby who is trained not to cry on being separated from a parent may appear to be calm and content. She is neither. Her stress levels have gone up, not down. Although many baby sleep trainers claim there is no evidence of harm from practices such as controlled crying, there is a vast difference between 'no evidence of harm' and 'evidence of no harm'.***

According to the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health, 'There have been no... sleep laboratory studies... that assess the physiological stress levels of infants who undergo controlled crying, or its emotional or psychological impact on the developing child.'

Furthermore, controlled crying is 'not consistent with what infants need for their optimal emotional and psychological health, and may have unintended negative consequences'.

While it may appear that controlled

crying 'works' and may appear to relieve some of the mother's stress, the question is, at what cost?

When controlled crying 'succeeds' in teaching a baby to fall asleep alone, it is due to a process that neurobiologist Bruce Perry calls the 'defeat response'. Normally, when humans feel threatened, our bodies flood with cortisol and other stress hormones and we go into 'fight', 'flight', or 'freeze'. Since babies can't flee, they first try to fight by communicating their distress through crying. When their cries are ignored, they have no choice but 'freeze' or 'defeat' response. They eventually abandon their crying as their nervous system shuts down against the emotional pain.

The baby who is left to cry will learn that he cannot make a difference, so what is the point of reaching out — a belief he will likely carry throughout his entire life — a type of post-traumatic stress syndrome.

It is normal and healthy for infants and young children not to sleep through the night and to need attention from parents. Their shorter sleep cycles allow them to experience more rapid eye movement (REM) sleep which is important for their brain development.

An infant — or young child — crying is a signal of distress or discomfort. Attending to their needs/crying will not cause a lasting 'habit'. Even if baby is dry and fed and isn't in pain she may need human contact, and the appropriate response then is to hold, stroke, sing or talk to her. Infants are more likely to develop secure attachments when their distress is responded to promptly, consistently and appropriately. While initially this may appear to be more demanding on the caregiver, the gains will be found in the long run as they learn to settle more quickly, secure in the knowledge that their needs for emotional comfort will be met.

When parents help babies to regulate

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their own emotions through a strong connection, babies learn how to do this for themselves as they grow older, developing a healthy autonomy. Research indicates that responding appropriately to baby's cues can have positive long-term, and possibly even trans-generational consequences.

*References in bibliography:* Sunderland, McKay

**Myth:** *Daycare centres adequately meet the needs of infants and young children.*

**Fact:** *'Caregiver roulette' — the pervasive use of frequently-changing caregivers, is endemic to millions of young children. When both parents are employed full-time, about 80% of a child's waking hours are spent with substitute caregivers. In addition, the frequency of caregivers' changing is disturbing, often every four or five months. This discontinuity of care is emotionally devastating, and affects the ability of children to trust their primary caregivers.*

Lack of a consistent caregiver for the young child causes later social consequences, since the type of attachment that forms between child and caregiver serves as a prototype for all later social relationships. Babies who receive responsive and consistent care develop the sense that their world is satisfying and that people around them are responsive and caring. Those who learn they cannot trust, may feel that adults are replaceable, love is uncertain, and human attachment is a dangerous investment.

There are strong links between caregiver roulette and poor school performance, delinquent behavior, mental illness, and difficulty in establishing intimacy — children deprived of love have difficulty experiencing love. Most substitute care — as it is now — simply does not provide

the consistency and quality of nurturing required to fully meet a child's needs.

It may be possible to have it all — career and family — but not at once, or all of the time, if our children's needs for optimal development are to be met. This may mean downshifting — at least for a time. The returns from investing in the caregiving of young children are monumental, and costs of not doing so can be tremendous — financially and emotionally — without a secure foundation being made in the early years.

**Recommended alternatives to parenting without a village or extended family include:**

- one parent (or both parents, alternating) stays at home for continuity, ideally with a social support system to counter the isolation inherent in a nuclear family.
- a long-term substitute caregiver who can offer the quality and consistency of nurturing care needed—perhaps a relative or friend; or several families can pool finances to employ a quality caregiver; or trade child care and 'employment hours' with each other.
- daycare that gives top priority to creating and sustaining a strong and healthy connection between caregiver and each child, and parent, such that the caregiver becomes a primary 'other' to the child — and parent.

As growing numbers of women — and men — are taking time out to become their children's primary caregivers in the very early years, they are affirming mothering — and fathering — to be a critically important role choice. By fully meeting children's needs for continuity of care, we contribute to the happiness of the next generation and generate the social and human capital essential to the wellbeing of our culture — and our world.

*References in bibliography:* Manne, Grille, Gerhardt.

Prepared for *Kindred* magazine and the Alliance

for Transforming the Lives of Children, by Meryn G. Callander, Alok O'Brien, John W. Travis, MD, and Kali Wendorf.

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