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Answering a Child's Hunger for Connection: Why Relationships Matter

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As a new parent I thought I just needed to love my child enough and attachment would take care of itself. I soon realized it wasn't this simple. I started wondering how I could cultivate and protect my relationship at every turn – from sleep issues to temper tantrums? As I waded through the parenting and professional literature on attachment over a decade ago I was dismayed – while there was agreement as to its importance, there was a lack of depth in explaining it's overall purpose, how to cultivate it, and how it played a role in the development of a child. It was ironic to me that attachment could be so detached from any roots making sense of it.

In the middle of the 20th century John Bowlby coined the term 'attachment' but it is clear as we head into the next century there is a need to reflect and deepen our understanding.

Advances in neuroscience are helping to affirm the physiological and chemical underpinnings of attachment, reaffirming what some Grandparent's have always known – children need strong connections with adults. While we seem to intuitively understand the importance of attachment, the definition varies and often focuses exclusively on babies – not considering the rest of childhood and adolescence not to mention adult relationships! Attachment is the name given to the science of human relationships and there is a plethora of research on this subject.



One of the leading neuroscientists in this area, Dr. Jaak Pankseep states that attachment behaviour stems from our innate 'seeking instinct'. The seeking instinct leads us to pursue people and things we are attached to, in fact, a large part of the brain is geared towards this seeking behaviour. We are driven to pursue or

preserve relationships with our attachments, keeping things close that matter. When thinking of the panic created in losing our possessions such as keys, a cell phone or wallet, we realize how powerful our attachment is to everyday objects. To take it a step further and consider human relationships and how important they are to us and our children, it helps to make sense of how separation can stir us up emotionally.

It still begs the question why attachment is so important and what purpose it serves in raising children? From the Neufeld approach, the purpose of attachment is clear – it is what renders our children dependent on us and gives us the capacity to care for them. It is the glue in our human relationships, the chemicals that bond us to one another, and the space between us that connects and creates a sense of home. I still remember when I first heard Dr. Gordon Neufeld state it wasn't just how much we love our children that mattered but how much they loved us too. Their attachment to us gives us the capacity to care for them. Ironical as it is, while we give birth to our children, they also give birth to the parent inside of us and from this place we lead them towards maturity.

How Can We Cultivate Strong Relationships with Our Children?

Attachment research suggests three things are critical in this respect. The first is the expression of delight, enjoyment and warmth. I still remember how my grandfather's eyes twinkled when I came to visit. He always seemed to find the patience and time to play board games with me. He would tour me around his garden revealing its many treasures and put up with many of my practical jokes. For me it was never about how much money he had, how much quality time he spent with me, or the presents he gave me, but how I knew I mattered to him. There was a sense of delight whenever I visited and a sense of sadness in saying goodbye. It wasn't what he did but rather how I felt around him – I could rest in his care assured his attention for me would always outweigh my needs. When you have this type of invitation to exist the only thing left to work at is in discovering, playing, and becoming your own person.

The other attachment ritual that helps foster strong relationship is that of the collecting dance. To engage a child's attachment instincts and collect them we just need to find our way to their side, to use our voice or to gather their eyes, focus on what they are doing or something of interest to them. In these times we convey a desire to be close and extend an invitation to be cared for by us. Before we give them directions or share our desires, it will help to collect them first and put us into relationship so that their ears will open to our influence. We don't need to push our values onto our children, we only need to invite them into relationship and they will be inclined to follow us.

The other necessary condition to providing for a child's relational needs and strengthening our connection is generosity. There needs to be a sense that if they need one hug there are 5 in us to give. It is about filling them to the point where their attachment instincts are satiated, providing rest in their limbic/emotional centers of the brain. When they can take our love for granted they will be free to explore and attend to things that are novel and new. Children only grow when they are at rest and the deeper the attachment roots, the greater their capacity to reach their potential as separate, social, and adaptive beings.

We need to preserve our place in our children's lives as we compete for their time and attention – from too much peer interaction, technological devices, screen time, instruction and schooling, and all within a context that generally doesn't understand the importance of attachment for children. We need to hang onto our kids, be their best bet, and find a way to inspire them to depend on us. When we take the lead in fulfilling their relational needs they can rest in our care and grow into the people that only our love can make them.

Copyright 2016 Dr. Deborah MacNamara is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute, in private practice supporting

families, and author of *Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers* (or anyone who acts like one). Please see www.macnamara.ca for more information or www.neufeldinstitute.org.

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