

Love Is Not Enough: How Loving Parents Can (Inadvertently) Produce Vulnerable Kids

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PART 1 Why love alone doesn't ensure resilient and emotionally intelligent children

How can a child who is loved and well cared for not have a good enough parenting experience and be at risk for developmental problems that may affect them physically, emotionally, socially *and intellectually*?

A parent can deeply love their baby, yet be ill equipped to meet the needs of the infant's immature nervous system. The infant cannot soothe herself, and thus relies on the parent to do so. She constantly looks to the parent as a source of safety and connection and ultimately, a secure attachment. If a parent is consistently depressed or anxious, angry or grieving, pre-occupied or not able to be calm and present for the baby for any reason, the infant may be compromised physically, emotionally and/or intellectually.

Effective parenting is not so much about *doing* as it is about *being*. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying." The language of attachment is not about words. It's about being. John Bowlby, the first to write about attachment, named the cues for attachment, all of which are non-verbal. They are:

- Eye contact
- Facial expression
- Tone of voice
- Posture, gestures, and movements
- Touch
- Pacing, timing and intensity

We exhibit some of these cues in every interaction with another human being. Babies, whose nervous systems are still developing and who rely on the caregiver for safety and nurturing, are particularly attuned to these signals. And, each of these signals can help the infant to settle and feel nurtured, or can create fear and, over time, can cause the infant to turn away, shut down, and begin to mistrust themselves and the parent. Below is an outline of points from the latest research in neuroscience and attachment.

1. From the perspective of the infant, love and secure attachment or emotional connection are not the same.

First, we must understand that bonding with the baby is not the same as creating a secure attachment. Although the terms bonding and attachment are often used interchangeably, they are different. Bonding begins in utero and continues through the first year of life. Healthy bonding happens when the baby learns to trust that his needs will be met. Through a series of cycles where the baby has a need, communicates that need which gets met in a timely manner,

the baby settles and begins to learn that he can trust the caregiver to meet his needs. The experience of repeated cycles of having needs met increases his level of trust and bonding.

Attachment, on the other hand, is a longer process and involves trust, mutual feelings of affection and a broader scope of met needs. In a healthy attachment the child depends on the parent for not only physical needs and safety but emotional safety and nurturing, as well. It involves the presence of the parent with the infant, the connection that evolves between the two that helps to create the sense of emotional security. It is the parent *being with*, not just *doing for*, the infant that makes the difference. This relationship-building involves the parent reading and responding to the infant cues. Thus, the parent provides a secure base from which the infant can explore the world and as a source of comfort and affection.

It is interesting to note that current research shows that **bonding is not an indicator of child outcomes while attachment is a strong predictor of later social and emotional outcomes in children.**

2. Infants don't reason – they experience. Based on their experience, they feel safe, secure and begin to trust that their needs, both physical and emotional, will be met, or they feel unsafe and uncertain that their needs will be met. While the infant brain is growing exponentially, it is still very immature. Babies do not have the capacity to think things through. For example, they cannot understand that mom is tired and needs to rest and will meet the baby's needs later.

3. Loved children and well cared for infants feel less connected to and trusting of a caregiver who is consistently **emotionally** unavailable due to stress, depression, overwhelm or trauma. These conditions may make a caregiver:

- Less emotionally available
- Inept at reading the infants cues
- Impatient with normal infant demands
- Unable to self-soothe and therefore teach the infant to calm and soothe and later learn to manage stress

4. An infant who feels disconnected emotionally from her primary caregiver is apt to feel unsafe, confused and insecure at a time when her brain needs relationship in order to support its optimal development. Instead of learning from her experience that the world is safe and her needs will be met, she learns to cope in ways that may later prove to be problematic. For example, infants who are allowed to cry consistently and are not responded to in a timely manner often shut down and learn not to cry. Later these children experience emotional and relational difficulty. Crying is a major way babies communicate. If they are crying, they have a need, whether this need is to be fed or to be close. Allowing them to cry for extended periods of time (over 90 seconds) without being responded to, gives a message that their needs, either physical or emotional, are not important. The child will soon learn, "My needs aren't important (therefore) I must not be lovable/ worthwhile/ good enough, etc."

5. One of the effects of a secure attachment is resilience, the ability to face, overcome and be strengthened by life's adversities. Resilience begins before birth and continues throughout childhood. To build resilience, children need more than the basics that sustain life.

- They need protection and support to weather the inevitable storms of life.
- It is the parent's job to help them make sense of these storms.
- Resilience is built when children know they can trust the parent. This feeling of safety and trust eventually leads to self-trust.
- Children need to be given appropriate boundaries, direction and support for trying things on their own, a bit at a time, so they can experience success.

Resilience is strengthened when children:

- Have a sense of themselves as valued and valuable;
- Have caregivers who repair missteps, who don't hit the mark every time and who can say, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Let's try that again."
- Are taught to read the cues of others and begin to express empathy;
- Know they can turn to the parent, ask for help and express feelings, no matter what.

Part 2: Tips for creating and fostering a secure attachment in your growing child

1. It's important to note that a newborn needs the parent to regulate their entire being: everything from breathing and temperature regulation to receiving and digesting food and sleeping. And, each baby's nervous system and needs are different. Having the caregiver be sensitive to the baby's signals and responding appropriately is vital to creating a secure attachment. As these needs are responded to in a timely way, the baby settles. Also, as the baby expresses feelings, which they do from very early (distress, fear, pleasure) and these feelings are received and reflected in facial expressions and actions, a secure base begins. Some things that help you feel in sync, or congruent, with your baby:
 - a. Read her cues. What do you imagine she is trying to express? Reflect that back to her in facial expression, sounds and/ or words.
 - b. Become familiar with his preferences: schedule, timing, pace of feeding, ways he likes to be held and spoken to, etc.
 - c. Respond as soon as possible or at least within 90 seconds of your baby's protest. Try to soothe her before her upset escalates.
 - d. Slow your pace, remain calm, focus your attention on a two-way communication between you and your infant
2. Let's revisit the essentials of attachment, the non-verbal cues, and look at how to make sure they are positive experiences that build a secure attachment between you and your little one.
 - Eye contact: Eye contact can be too much or not enough. Notice if you and your baby are able to have consistent, appropriate eye contact. Babies thrive on your loving gaze.

Watch the cues. If he is looking away or pushing away he may need a bit of space. Come back when his cues change.

- Facial expression: We've all experienced someone saying one thing yet meaning another. Check that your facial expression is congruent with your intention and that it conveys to your baby that you are calm, present and attentive.
- Tone of voice: Regardless of your words, if you are feeling frustrated, anxious or angry your baby will pick this up in your tone and will respond accordingly. If you are feeling out of sorts, try to calm yourself with a big belly breath before interacting with your baby.
- Posture, gestures, and movements: Like facial expressions, our gestures say a lot. Notice that your gestures are congruent with the message you want your little one to receive and that your movements are not too quick for her to integrate.
- Touch: Babies need nurturing touch. And, be sure your touch is gentle. Research has indicated that boy babies are treated much rougher than girls, sometimes dangerously so. Remember that your little guy is fragile and needs a lot of tenderness. Save the rough and tumble for when he can run and play with you.
- Pacing, timing and intensity: Babies' pace is much slower than our everyday life. So, when interacting with baby, slow down and notice how she responds. Sometimes simply slowing your pace, lowering your tone of voice and being less intense can settle a fussy baby. Watch your baby's cues. If she turns away, puts her hands in front of her face, pushes, etc. she is trying to communicate with you. She may be trying to tell you that things are moving too fast.

3. Talk, play, sing, interact and explore the outside world with your infant. Babies are very curious and want to explore their environment. This begins with exploring your face. As you mirror the baby's facial expressions and sounds, a conversation begins. She leads and you follow. She makes a sound and you smile and make the same sound back. No matter what you've been told about your voice, it's important to sing, coo and babble to your little one. When you sing and play with your infant, he begins to feel connected and you help expand his world.

4. Be assured that there is no way to be a perfect parent. Your infant does not need you to be perfect. He needs you to be present, calm and available. **Attachment research has demonstrated that parents with a securely attached infant are "on target" only 30% of the time.** The other 70% of the time they are trying again and making repairs. If you don't get it right the first time, take a breath, let your infant know you are there and are working with her to guess and meet the need adequately. This is much like learning to dance with a new partner. You may step on a few toes and make a lot of missteps but with dedicated practice and a passion for the dance, you will soon feel good about the relationship and delight in the process.

5. Know that your baby is a developing being with her own unique gifts, needs and potential. Be curious about what she is trying to express and reflect this back to her in language. For example, if she is fussy and she is dry and fed, you might guess, "Sweetheart, are you tired?" or, "Was that loud noise scary for you?" Then slow down, lower your voice, hold her and watch what happens.

Notice your expectations, disappointments and/or frustration with anything that happens with baby. Let yourself be curious about his experience and what he might be trying to express. Honor your baby's uniqueness.

6. Talk to your little one when you are interacting. Even though she may not initially understand the words, she will understand your meaning by your non-verbal cues, such as the sound of your voice. Your speaking directly gives her an excellent foundation for her developing brain. If you tell your baby what you are doing, she will begin to understand the tone and cadence of your voice and trust the sequence of what is happening. For example, if she awakens from a nap in the crib, you pick her up and tell her what you are going to do. "Hey there, Precious, let's check your diaper and then mommy's going to nurse you." With this she settles and learns that her needs will be met and her capacity to wait will increase as she learns sequencing and patience.

7. Feeding time is not just about making sure your baby gets the appropriate nutrients. It is a prime time for forming a secure attachment. These special moments are to be cherished as this is an important time for you to be totally present and communicate your love just by your closeness and eye contact. Nurse or feed your little one with full attention, not while you are on the phone or attending to your email. Never prop a bottle. The eye contact, your presence and the sensation of receiving nurturing goes a long way toward helping your baby know that he is safe, secure and loved.

Also, you are beginning to establish the child's relationship with food that will last a lifetime. As we know, food is much more than nutrition. It is also about emotional nurturing. If feeding is a mechanical act, what she learns about herself and food is very different than if feeding time is a relational and satisfying experience.

8. Try to remain calm when responding to your infant. If you do not feel calm, acknowledge that to the baby, take a breath, get a drink of water and come back to the baby as quickly as you can. "Sweetheart, Daddy is having a hard time right now, it's not about you. Okay, let's see what's troubling you. There. Let's both breathe and have a cuddle." If you consistently have difficulty responding calmly to your infant, consider getting some help.

- Take a look at your stress levels.
- Do you need more sleep?
- What resources do you have (family, friends, professionals, reading materials, an activity you enjoy, etc.)?
- Don't blame yourself or others
- Don't let too much time go by before you reach out.

9. Touch your infant often in nurturing ways. Everything from a full body massage at bath time to letting him grasp your hand, take every opportunity to safely touch your little one. Cuddling and touching works wonders for their developing nervous system. Biologists tell us that we are born nine months too early. We are so underdeveloped that it takes several more months to be able to hold the head up and do simple tasks. Some cultures make sure that babies are worn or held

for the first seven to nine months. This touching and rocking exponentially assists brain development and helps assure a secure attachment.

Newborn infants thrive with skin-to-skin contact. As often as you can, take your shirt off and lay your diaper-clad baby on your chest. You can use a large shirt or blanket to warm the two of you. Skin-to-skin contact helps infants settle as it regulates their body temperature (up or down), respiration, and heart rate. Babies who are consistently held skin-to-skin gain weight faster. Nursing this way is best when possible. Also, this is a great activity for dads. It promotes initial bonding that begins the secure attachment process and helps release the “love hormone”, oxytocin, in both moms and dads, as well as baby.

10. Sleep: A lot is written about infant sleep. We note here that while newborns have irregular sleep patterns at first, they will settle into more regular patterns as they mature and their needs are met. Important to note that if your baby has trouble sleeping, cries a lot or is difficult to soothe, it is critical not to let her “cry it out”. Babies allowed to “cry it out” will eventually stop crying but they are not learning to trust the outside world. They are learning to shut down and distrust that someone is there for them to meet their needs.

11. Try to achieve some balance in your life. Being a parent is the hardest job any of us ever undertakes. The responsibility is tremendous. The work is unending (and the rewards can be infinite!). Here are a few tips:

- Prioritize. Meeting baby’s needs comes first. Let some things go for now. Don’t worry if the house isn’t as tidy as you’d like. Family time is more important than anything. Remember: although it seems like this will go on forever, babies do grow and things do get easier.
- Ask for help. If you are having difficulty and are feeling stressed, know that friends and family are often happy to help. Ask someone to add your grocery list to theirs, or to come and help with laundry, for example.
- Nurture yourself in small ways. Make a list of 15 - 25 things you can do for yourself that feels nurturing, takes less than an hour and costs almost nothing. For example:
 1. Take a few deep breaths
 2. Get a drink of water
 3. Have eye contact with a nurturing adult
 4. Ask for a hug
 5. Enjoy a coffee or your favorite tea
 6. Call a friend
 7. Take a hot bath or shower
 8. Listen to your favorite music
 9. Read a fun magazine, poetry, or a chapter in a novel
 10. Take a walk
 11. Write in your journal
 12. Do something artistic
 13. Paint, draw, write
 14. Bake your favorite muffins

15. Dance around the living room
16. Sit under a tree
17. Meditate
18. Listen to an audio deep relaxation
19. etc

As silly as it seems, it is important to make the list and put a copy on the front of the refrigerator to remind you. Your list will be unique with specific activities, names and places, things that are meaningful to you. These things may seem small and inconsequential, yet any one of them can help you stay on track or get back on track if you become dysregulated. And, by the way, you will benefit most from numbers one through three above as they help the nervous system to settle and provide a stable foundation for whatever is to follow.

What are some tips for fostering secure attachment in pre-school aged children?

1. Continue to be consistently responsive to your child's needs and feelings. If your child is whining or misbehaving, he is trying to tell you something. Slow down, everyone take a breath and guess what might be going on. Reflect feelings.
2. Be respectful. Treat your child the way you want to be treated. For example, when she makes a mistake, don't call her names or belittle her. Don't talk about her in front of others as if she weren't there. Try not to ignore, interrupt or dismiss an attempted communication.
3. Honor your child's temperament. Part of being responsive to your growing child's needs is understanding and being sensitive to her temperament. Is she a bit shy and slow to start, high spirited or unique in some other way? Each of these merits special consideration. Be careful not to shame or cajole your child for their way of being.
4. Be more accepting of your child's mistakes and a bit less controlling. She will increasingly want to make choices and do things for herself. Support her to try new things. Even though this may take more time, be patient, this is how she learns and gains self-confidence. What does it hurt if her clothes don't exactly match? When you say, "No" be sure there is an important reason, like for comfort or safety.
5. Avoid being over protective or permissive. Children need room to explore, make mistakes, and have their own adventures. When we smother them, we give them the idea that they can't do things or think for themselves. Conversely, when we lack appropriate boundaries or are permissive children sense a lack of caring and presence.
6. Help your child to name and express his feelings appropriately. "You seem sad right now. Are you disappointed we couldn't go to see your friend? Come tell me about it." You may discover that disappointment would not be his word. He might cry and say he is mad. Just being with him and his expression is important. Don't try to talk him out of his feelings. Another example might include, "I see that you're angry. You may not pinch your sister but you can squeeze my hand and show me how angry you feel." Engage your child and allow him safe ways of expression. Let him know, for example, that hitting pillows, tearing up newspapers, or stomping feet are all acceptable. Express empathy, "I'm sorry your toy broke. You were looking forward to playing with it. That's a bummer." You may offer a solution, but be sure you have reflected the feelings first. Also, try talking less and listening more.

7. Having a regular routine is important. Now is the time for creating structure and setting limits. Orient her about what is happening, tell her what is expected and support her to be successful in the activity. Let her know, for example, that she will need to be ready to leave in ten minutes, then help her complete her activity and begin to move toward the car.
8. Relax, laugh and play. Preschool age is primarily about learning through play, learning about self and the world. Engage in imaginative play, games and song.
9. Implement "Special Time" with your child. This is especially important for working parents who have not been with the child during the day. Special Time is a regular period of one-on-one time spent together in an activity that is fun for both of you. Talk to your child ahead of time. "I really want to spend more time with you so we are going to have 'Special Time' every day where you and I do something fun together." The idea is that you, as the parent, want to spend time with the child. It is not "I'm going to spend time with you because you need it." Rather, "I want to spend time with you because it is important to me. I love being with you." When children are small, 4 to 6 years old, 20 minutes every day, say right after school or before dinner, is good. As the child gets older, this can move to once a week for an evening or Saturday morning, for example. During Special Time the child usually names the activity, something that is mutually engaging, like doing puzzles, learning to ride a bike, or baking cookies. Avoid things like watching television, going shopping or doing adult chores. Children look forward to Special Time and want to plan what they are going to do. A side benefit is that children begin to understand times of inclusion and times they are not included. "Daddy has special time with you. He also has special time with Mommy." Ideally each child has Special Time on a regular basis with each parent.
10. Use the time in the car for connecting and learning. Many families spend a lot of time getting from one place to another. Don't miss this precious opportunity to engage your youngsters. They love to play and sing together. Sing anything they like. If you don't know kid songs, get a CD and sing along with it. Games such as, "I spy" (one person names what she sees – "I spy something red" -- and the others guess what it is); "20 Questions" (one person thinks of something and others guess and she answers 'yes' or 'no'. The person to guess is the next "It"); or make up your own games of counting, alphabet, reading road signs, etc. In playing and singing together, not only do your children feel a part of things and connected but the time goes by quickly and everyone arrives in better shape. This takes more effort than handing your pre-schooler a device, but it pays great dividends for children and parents alike.

What are some tips for fostering secure attachment in elementary school aged children?

1. Don't do everything for your child. Have children increasingly take responsibility for cleaning up, putting laundry away, clearing the table, etc. Sharing tasks helps them learn responsibility and have a sense of accomplishment.
2. Continue or begin "Special Time" (see above) or at least build in time for talk (mostly listening) every day, at dinner, before bed or traveling in the car.
3. Share your interests and values. For example, your love of music, art, reading, or the outdoors. Include him in projects such as gardening, building, or services you provide such as taking food to a sick neighbor.

4. Encourage art projects. Art and crafts help children learn new skills and integrate basic skills such as reading and math. Remember it is about the process of creating, not the product, so it doesn't matter if it is a useful trinket or a work of art.

What are some tips for fostering secure attachment in preteen and teenage children?

1. Continue to be responsive to your child's needs and feelings. Keep the lines of communication open. Listen deeply and be oh, so careful not to judge her or her friends. Create regular times for just the two of you to engage in something of interest to your teen. Show interest in what she is doing. And listen more than you talk.
2. Keep the reins light – allow for more independence, more learning from consequences rather than rules. Families do well when there is mutual respect and everyone in the family lives by a few simple rules. For example: a) Be respectful of self and others; b) Do what you say you will do; and c) Do your job/school well. Often few other rules are needed. With this, mutual trust is built and teens take on increasing responsibility.

Part 3 Red flags that signal a need for professional help.

Infants:

- Doesn't engage in eye contact
- Rarely smiles
- Doesn't reach to be picked up and held
- Rejects any efforts to calm and soothe
- Absence of interactive /back-and-forth play
- Absence of mirroring responses
- Lack of response when parent leaves the room
- Cries and cannot be consoled

School age:

- Avoids eye contact
- Rarely smiles
- Prefers to be alone
- Avoids physical contact or affection
- Lacks appropriate emotional responses
- Needs to be in control; seems inflexible
- Does not show empathy, care or affection
- Harms self or others

Preteen and teenage:

- Avoids eye contact
- Rarely smiles
- Prefers to be alone
- Avoids physical contact or affection

- Emotionally detached; may be hypervigilant but does not react to those around him
- Aggressive if anyone gets too close
- Does not show empathy, care or affection
- Harms self or others