

attachment



Attachment is the pattern of relationship between an infant and a caregiver which enables the infant to feel safe and free to learn and explore. A secure attachment in the first year of life has been shown to have a positive effect on social, emotional and mental development. It is a relationship that develops over time in response to sensitive care. Unresponsive, erratic or threatening care can lead to attachment problems that have an ongoing negative effect on development. Secure early attachment is an important foundation for healthy development and for coping with all the challenges that growing up brings.

What is attachment behaviour?

- Attachment is like building a line between two planets, a big planet and a small one that is near it. If you can develop a strong line, the small planet can revolve and do its own thing with no fear of flying out into space. At times in our lives we are all afraid of being lost and of darkness, especially in infancy, but those who have had strong attachments as babies develop a sense of being secure and safely moving through life.
- Attachment behaviour is when babies and toddlers try to get comfort and protection from the people they are attached to. All human babies, wherever they are, have this behaviour in order to protect themselves from danger.

- This can be by smiling and cooing, crawling and following, holding out their arms, crying and many other signals that parents and carers learn to know.
- When the child gets an appropriate response, such as eye contact, a smile, a touch or a quick cuddle, and feels safe, the child then feels free to relax, play and learn.
- If there is not an appropriate response, for example if the baby is ignored or punished, the baby continues to feel anxious or afraid and continues the attachment behaviour. Some babies who are very afraid eventually give up trying.
- So, for example, if the parent thinks a toddler should be brave and pushes him or her to leave the safety of being close before he or she is ready, the child is likely to respond by feeling more afraid and clinging more.
- Helping children to feel safe first is the best way to encourage them to be brave.

Note: Approaching our babies calmly and gently requires a pace of life that is difficult for many of us to achieve in modern times. It actually requires most of us to slow down at least a little and this may mean that we have to make changes to our own lifestyles in order to be with our babies at a pace they can cope with and that allows us to notice the details of their signals to us. It seems important to try to do this.

Responding to babies' cues

- Responding to babies' cues not only helps to develop secure attachment but also is the beginnings of two-way communication.
- Even young babies can give signals that they need attention and signals that show when the carer's response to them is inappropriate, e.g. over intrusive, or when they have had enough.
- To show they need attention young babies may:
 - make eye contact
 - make little noises
 - smile
 - copy the parent's gestures
 - look relaxed and interested.
- To show when they need a break or perhaps a different, gentler approach young babies may:
 - look away
 - shut their eyes
 - try to struggle or pull away
 - yawn
 - look tense and unsettled
 - cry.
- It is important to respond to these signals in ways that meet the child's need, because this says to the baby that he or she has been heard and responded to and it is the beginning of developing a sense of an independent self.

- All babies are different and will develop their own special ways of showing what they need and special patterns of interaction with their parents.

Who do babies attach to?

- Babies develop attachment relationships with their main caregivers over the first few months of life.
- These can be mother, father, grandparent, key child care worker or anyone who has a main role in caring for the child.
- Babies can form attachments with more than one person. In fact if there is a problem with the relationship with the main caregiver, e.g. if the mother is depressed or very distracted, a secure attachment relationship with another caring person can help to balance this and give the baby a positive relationship model.

Note: Becoming attached to another person does not undermine other attachments with the mother or father – it helps it because the baby is learning about being close to people.



Attachment and separation

- By the time your baby is about six months old she will have become attached to the people who care for her most. These people will be her safe base to explore the world for the next few years until she is old enough to really feel secure when you are not there. This can also bring with it fears of people she does not know so well, sometimes even the other parent or a loving grandparent.
- This is part of learning to feel safe in the world and she will soon learn to feel safe again with other people in her life when you reassure her that all is well and if she is not pushed along too quickly.
- During the next few years until they are about three or four, babies and toddlers gradually get to manage longer separations from their special people. At first they continually check – even follow you into the toilet once they can crawl. Then they will move away and play for a while but check back by looking for you or coming to you from time to time. This is how they gradually develop confidence. By three or four they can usually manage a half day or day with other people without being upset, but some children take longer. It depends on their temperament and their early experiences.

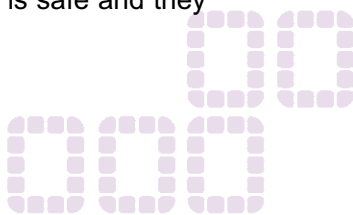
Separation and sleep

- Babies who have slept well for the first six months or so of their lives and then start waking at night or not wanting to go to sleep, may be suffering from separation anxiety.
- This happens because they are afraid when their special people are not there, especially at night. Babies don't understand when you say you will be coming back soon or in the morning. To them it can seem like forever.

What you need to know

Much research has gone into looking at the best ways to give babies secure foundations and the following are the things that have been found to be most helpful in their carers.

- **Realistic expectations of what babies can do** – knowing how babies develop so you don't expect them to be able to do things that they can't.
 - For example, some parents think that young babies are trying to manipulate them when they cry at night.
 - But young babies don't remember that you are there when you are out of sight.
 - They cry because they need something and if parents come when they cry and comfort them they eventually learn to know that the world is safe and they cry less.



- **Being willing to take time to be with your baby** and learn to 'read' her messages.
 - Young babies often give very small signals for what they need and each baby needs carers who learn to know that baby's signals and to respond to them.
- **To be able to respect and think about the baby as a separate person** with his or her own needs and wants and feelings.
 - To think about how it feels for a baby to be suddenly picked up without warning and put down somewhere else, or have a nappy change or be handed to a stranger.
- **Support for yourself** – have someone to talk things over with, to encourage you when you are doing well and to give you a break when you need it.
 - It is often much harder than you would think to learn to understand and respond to little babies, and parents need support too.
- Some thoughtful **understanding of your own parenting**, what your parenting means to you and how it affects the way you feel about and care for children (because it always does).



What you can do

- Think about, treat, and talk to your baby as an individual with his own needs, likes and dislikes.
- Learn to know your baby's signals, what his messages mean, and then respond to them.
- Think about timing. Introduce changes, such as picking up and nappy changing, gently and gradually – tell your baby what you are going to do so the baby learns that the world is predictable. Don't startle the baby.
- Be flexible.
 - Learn to know what works for your baby.
 - Don't stick to a set routine if it doesn't suit your baby and you.
 - Remember that babies grow and change quickly, and need more time awake with you, so you need to respond to their changes.
- Find out about how babies grow and learn so you know what babies are like and don't have unreasonable expectations.
- Copy the baby's little noises and gestures – this is the beginning of conversation.
 - Wait for the baby's response before going on.
 - If the baby looks away or yawns, stop and try again later.
- Make eye contact. Babies like to look into your eyes.

- Notice when your baby is trying to get your attention with looks, smiles or cries. Crying always signals a need.
- Provide comfort when your baby is upset.
- Try to relax and concentrate on the baby's world, what he is looking at, trying to do, feeling etc.
- Give your baby opportunities to succeed and make things happen, e.g. put a rattle where he can hit it and make a noise, or crawl to reach it.
- Find out what your baby really likes.
- Remember you are the most important part of your baby's life.

If you are worried about your relationship with your baby ask for help. It is such an important part of your baby's life that getting help when he is young can make a big difference to you and to your baby.

For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline
8:00am–8:00pm 7 days a week
Telephone (08) 9368 9368
Outside metro area – Freecall 1800 111 546
www.ngala.com.au
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line
Telephone (08) 6279 1200 (24hr service)
Outside metro area – Freecall 1800 654 432



This document can be made available in alternative formats on request. Please contact childcommunity@health.wa.gov.au

To order this publication and others phone 1300 135 030 or visit www.health.wa.gov.au

© Children, Youth and Women's Health Service, reproduced with permission. The South Australian Government does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of this reproduction. The original version is published at <http://www.cyh.com>

Warning

This document is published as general information only. You should always consult a healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of any health condition or symptoms.

Disclaimer

The advice and information contained herein is provided in good faith as a public service. However the accuracy of any statements made is not guaranteed and it is the responsibility of readers to make their own enquiries as to the accuracy, currency and appropriateness of any information or advice provided. Liability for any act or omission occurring in reliance on this document or for any loss, damage or injury occurring as a consequence of such act or omission is expressly disclaimed.



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**