

## Heart to Heart

### Ideas for building strong ties between parents and young children

Sometimes parents of young children are surprised when their infants' behaviors and responses show they have strong feelings about the way their parents interact with them. Ideally, an infant's behavior will show he feels like an invisible thread has been looped tightly between his heart and those of his mom and dad. The baby or young child finds enormous comfort



Baby learns that when she pats her tray and babbles, her mommy will almost always answer with a warm smile, a gentle touch, happy words, and often something welcome like a snack to nibble or an exciting toy to enjoy. A little one relishes these moments of pleasant interaction and understands that her mommy is a reliable source of the comfort and support she needs.

and satisfaction when such a powerful parent-child tie forms, when hearts large and small are stitched in an ever-closer bond.

Research shows that *how* parents respond to their young children has a significant impact on the development of parent-child attachment, parent-child bonds. Findings from studies of attachment tell us that parents can do several things to build strong

relationships with their children. They are:

- Pay attention to your child's behavior and try to "figure out" what he or she wants or needs.
- Respond to your child's behavior and needs appropriately.
- Respond in ways that the child perceives as pleasant and satisfying.

There are few experiences as enjoyable as happy parent-child interaction. To make this *responsive interaction style* a natural part of everyday life with your young child, put this three-point approach into practice. You might find it easier to use it if you think in terms of three simple questions. Think of it as the **Three-What? Approach**. Ask yourself:

- **What** is my child doing?
- **What** does this behavior tell me?
- **What** will I do in response?

Using the Three-What? Approach means deciding to place a high priority on ***paying attention*** to your young child. This is no small matter given the very busy lives most adults lead today. But, happily, we're not talking about watchdog-like or obsessive hovering. Try simply telling yourself, "Every day I'm going to try throughout the day to be especially attentive to my child and her actions. I'll watch what she's doing and ask myself what it means and what she wants to tell me. Then I'll respond quickly in a positive way, attempting to fill the need expressed by her actions."

Simply do this as part of your everyday routine, during the times you'd normally be present with your child. Soon you'll discover yourself developing more ease and confidence in your ability to understand and meet your child's needs, and she'll develop more comfort and confidence in her relationship with you.

# More opportunities ...

*Ask yourself:*

- 1 **What** is my child doing?
- 2 **What** does this behavior tell me?
- 3 **What** will I do in response?

*Then act!*

**M**oms and dads have all sorts of moments throughout the day when they can be responsive to their young children. Here are some bright ideas for making the most of such important opportunities to be responsive:

**D**iaper changes are—sigh!—a baby-care fact of life. Why not turn what can be a mundane chore into a fun time of interaction with your little one? You'll both benefit!

Does your child's behavior tell you when he needs a clean diaper? Try to notice changes in expression, sudden fussiness, etc., that might indicate discomfort. Then respond right away, gazing warmly at him and talking gently with the baby as you take him to your diaper-change area. You're letting him know you understand what he needs.

Think of ways to make the diaper change itself an interesting and fun time of parent-child interaction. You might:

- Chat to your baby about nearby toys or pictures as you change him.
- Play simple games like "Pat-A-Cake" or "This Little Piggy Went to Market" while touching his hands and wiggling his toes.
- Make up silly rhymes, songs, or raps to sing and say during each step of the diaper change.
- Tickle his tummy, if this is something he enjoys, and say, "All done!" when you're finished.



**M**ealtimes are natural times to build strong parent-child connections. Many families make it their tradition to eat at least one meal together every day, and it can be a perfect time to build powerful bonds among all family members.

Seat your young child in your lap, a high chair, or other infant chair so that she's facing you as you feed her. This way she can enjoy your smiles, movements, and conversation as you spoon up the mashed peas. Encourage others at the table to speak to her, including her in the general interaction during the meal.

It's not necessary for the baby to be the center of attention, but don't ignore her. Watch for behaviors that indicate when she wants to eat more, when she especially likes or dislikes a certain food or texture, when her tummy's full, when she wants to hold her own spoon, when she wants to leave the table, etc. Respond appropriately to such signs and signals, letting her know you understand what she wants to tell you by her actions. Some parents teach their babies and young children a few simple American Sign Language hand signs to help make themselves understood: *more*, *finished*, *eat*, *cookie*, etc.

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