Attachment in Children: Tips for Caregivers

At one time or another it is likely that you will have children in your care who exhibit a range of behaviors that do not make sense to you and/or for whom your usual methods of discipline seem ineffective. If this is the case, it is possible that the children may not have developed a secure attachment with parents or prior caregivers. Many children in family foster care have lived in environments that did not allow them to develop secure attachments. Insecure or even disorganized attachments may also occur when children experience traumatic separations and losses. Children in foster care have experienced separation from family and resulting losses of many types. In these circumstances, children's behaviors may seem overwhelming at times. However, there are some things you can keep in mind that may be of help to you in caring for children.

Building Positive Attachment

When children's behaviors are overwhelming to you, it may be difficult to consider ways to build positive attachment. However, that is actually the best way to address the behavior challenges in the long run. Children may continue to exhibit negative behavior as a way to ensure that you do not have positive interactions with them. Therefore you may have to work hard to build positive moments into your relationship:

- Search for the rare moment when children are able to interact positively with you and seek to build on this moment by giving the children attention. You want the children to see that positive interactions are rewarding.
- Try to find out what the children like to do and make a special effort to spend time with the children doing these activities. It could be something simple like baking cookies or playing a game.
- Help the children develop a lifebook. The children may not be able to resist the fun of looking at pictures and having the opportunity to talk about themselves.
- Encourage the children to attach to a special blanket or stuffed animal or toy, regardless of the children's age. The children need a comfort object.
- Build nurturing and supportive routines into the children's day-to-day life. The children who will not accept a hug or any type of affection, may allow you to fix their hair, read a book, or watch a favorite show together.
- Create supportive family rituals. Rituals help children develop a cohesive sense of self through merging the past with the present.
- Find creative ways to communicate. Send the children a note, draw a picture, take a picture, or start a diary where you write back and forth to one another.
- Encourage the children to be a part of your family. Explain your family traditions and rules.
- Encourage participation in family projects. Let the children know what life is like in your family on a day-to-day basis. This is referred to as “claiming” the child.
Handling the Bad Moments

The behaviors that children with attachment issues present can be overwhelming and frustrating. But there are things you can do to help both yourself and the children get through these moments.

- Realize that the behavior has very little to do with you or your parenting. The behavior is likely the result of many things that have occurred in the children's lives that you cannot control or change and the children cannot control or change.
- Handle poor behavior with as little emotion as possible. Seek to keep your voice low and even. Matter-of-factly state the rule or the behavior you are addressing as well as the consequence.
- Prioritize the behaviors you will address. Behavior that compromises the children's or someone else's safety is always a priority and most children, regardless of their attachment issues, will have some understanding of this.
- There may be some bad moments that you need to ignore.
- Protect the children from hurting self or others when the children tantrum. This is best done by giving the children pillows to hit, escorting the children to a safe space (where hard objects are removed and the space is filled with pillows and blankets), and reassuring the children of safety.
- You can say, “I am here to make sure you are safe.” Never yell or demand that the children stop the behavior. You can encourage the children by saying, “I know you are afraid. But I believe that you are going to be able to handle your feelings very soon. I am here until you can.”
- Avoid long lectures. The children are usually in an emotional state and are not able to attend to what you are saying. You will likely get more frustrated.

What to Do in the Long Run

Resource parents who deal with children who have attachment issues will tell you that it can be a long process before you see progress. But they would recommend you do the following:

- Involve the children's team in order to ensure that the children receive all needed services. The children are also likely to have issues in school. Therapy is usually necessary, as the children may have experienced multiple losses and trauma. The team needs to work together on the children's behalf.
- Develop clear rules and expectations that are simple to remember. The online course titled “Understanding Behavior of Children in Foster Care” is devoted entirely to discipline of children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Also, the in-service training offers several courses to help foster parents deal with behaviors.
- Expect the children to exhibit behaviors that are younger than their chronological age. Instead of getting angry or trying to get the children to change the behaviors, help the
children to move through them. For example, if children insist on sleeping with the light on, then let it be. Then try a dimmer light, then move to a night light, all the while encouraging and helping the children to feel safe.

• Patience, patience, patience.