

## An Understanding of Parent-Child Attachment Issues

By Robert O. Roland

Attachment is that unique connection developing between parent and child that begins before birth and continues through the first three years of life. It will determine the child's ability for a healthy development, for his reciprocal emotions, as well as his ability to build future relationships. The desired result for good attachment experiences is the child's ability to self-regulate his own emotional states. The primary determining factor is the processing of stress between the child and parent.

The *right* side of our brain (the orbital-frontal cortex) is the area where our socio-emotional development is centered. A part of this called the 'amygdala' begins a chain reaction that results in the pituitary gland secreting hormones in response to stress. The *left* side of our brain, specifically the 'hippocampus,' works to reverse this process, thus calming the child.

Here is where you the parent impact the situation. The parent's response to the child's stress develops and strengthens the hippocampus. The parent acts as an extension of the child's hippocampus; therefore, the parent's response develops the child's ability to regulate emotions. When you become an influence that is inducing calm, the child becomes more self-regulating of stressful situations. This is particularly important during the infant and baby stages when neuropathways are being formed.

The results of not responding properly to our pre-school children's stressful situations can have long-term ramifications. Through the improved (and in some cases new) technologies used in research, we have greatly increased our understanding of brain function. We know that the hippocampus actually grows smaller in situations where the parents do not provide relief from sustained stress; thus resulting in a reduced ability for the child to self-regulate its emotional states. Since the hormones of the pituitary stay in the blood stream for 36 to 48 hours, some children stay in a constant state of stress-readiness. There are behavioral implications to always being prepped for the fight or flight syndrome one of which is a reduced ability to learn.

When an infant expresses needs that are met with anger or are ignored by the parent, the infant develops a hostile picture of the world. Leaving him alone to deal with the stress doesn't develop a more independent individual; rather it creates a more dependent child. His amygdala is strengthened thus making him a more sensitive and fearful individual. The good news is that, unlike many parts of the brain, this area is open for development throughout the life of the person. Parents can reverse the way a child responds to stress by changing the way they respond, i.e. supporting a child during stressful times. The brain can lay down new neuropathways replacing earlier fixed stress responses.

Our goal is not to eliminate all stress from a child's life. Not only is that impossible, but normal age-appropriate stress has some beneficial results in character development and preservation. However, the younger the child (especially during those first 18 months) the more the parent must connect with the child as that extension of his hippocampus in order to reduce the stress thereby helping him become calm. God has instinctively built this tendency to comfort into mothers. It is only since God has been removed from the equation (the last 100 years of child development theory) that we have seen a shift to disregard this aspect of parenting.

How does incorporating this information look in day-to-day living? One way is to respond to your child's communication appropriately. Consider crying a means of communication not something to be corrected or ignored. If all bases have been covered (diaper, food, warmth) consider that the infant may just crave your presence – a good thing to be nurtured and rewarded. I do not mean by this to turn yourself inside out every time your child cries – but there is wisdom in considering your infant a person with personal needs beyond the physical: fear, loneliness, boredom, frustration. Remember your infant is new to your home and does not know your language. He depends on you, especially mom, to run interference for him. Comforting is a big #1 objective. Simply cradling/suckling an upset infant is good for both of you.

The whole goal of parenting is to produce mature independent godly adults. It is counterproductive to enforce this independence too soon or to fear "spoiling" the child and therefore ignoring their cries. Even as adults we struggle with being ignored – imagine the impact on an infant who is just beginning to put together who he is and who you are, and the value of

each. Spoiling never comes from too much personal time and focus. Spoiling always comes from overindulgence in “stuff.”

There are many books and articles dealing with attachment behaviors and problems. A few are listed below, but a longer list is available upon request.

McEwen, B. (1999). Development of the cerebral cortex XIII: Stress and brain development – II. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

Zero to Three (1994) *Diagnostic classification of mental health and developmental disorders of infancy and early childhood*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Clinical Infant Programs.

DeGangi, Georgia (2000) *Pediatric Disorders of Regulation in Affect and Behavior*. New York: Academic Press.

