

Daily Union Article

Saturday, October 21

Title: Building Relationships from Birth

Parenting is a tough responsibility. Our children don't come with operating manuals nor do they begin life by communicating their needs in ways that parents can readily understand. Unlike universal directions that come with a build your own entertainment cabinet, every child is unique with their own personality and their own temperaments.

The first step to being a parent lies in building a strong relationship with the child. Whether you adopt or give birth to your child, the relationship that develops is crucial. The moment you first hold a child, an exchange is taking place that leads to attachments that impact that child for the rest of their lives.

Babies who experience warm, loving relationships develop the sense of security needed to live in their environment. However, babies that are not welcomed into a warm inviting environment tend to lack the security needed for their natural growth and development. *"These babies learn that the world is unreliable and expect later relationships to be negative."*

K-State Research and Extension has adopted a learning series from the University of Georgia called **Building Baby's Brain**. This multi-lesson program helps adults understand the important role they have in helping infants have the best environment possible for the child's brain to develop optimally.

Nurturing Positive Relationships is one of the lessons in this program. In the paragraphs to follow, I am sharing an excerpt from this lesson to introduce the value and importance of developing positive relationships with babies.

❖ **What Are Attachment Relationships?**

Attachments are long-term relationships that develop through regular interactions between baby and adult, beginning at or even before birth. When a parent rocks the baby, responds when she cries, or comforts her when she falls down, the attachment relationship between baby and parent becomes stronger. When the parent responds warmly and consistently to the baby's needs over time, the baby learns to trust the parent to take care of her. This trusting relationship is the foundation for a lifelong secure attachment between parent and child.

Unfortunately, not all attachment relationships are positive. If a parent does not respond to the baby, responds with anger, or is inconsistent in meeting the baby's needs, the baby learns not to trust the parent, and an insecure attachment may be formed.

Attachment relationships can change over time. If an adult who has been insensitive or inconsistent learns to be more reliable and nurturing, an insecure attachment may become more secure. If a previously reliable adult becomes unpredictable or stops responding, a secure attachment may become insecure.

❖ Attachment and the Brain

Infants' experiences are vital to the brain's wiring process. Wiring for attachments occurs in the emotional center of the brain known as the limbic system. The limbic system is made up of two parts: the amygdala, which receives emotional information, and the hippocampus, which stores those emotional memories. When a baby's basic needs are consistently met by a nurturing adult, the amygdala registers the positive experiences and the hippocampus stores them. Over time, the limbic system becomes wired for secure attachment. When an adult responds to an infant's needs with gentle touch and loving voices and helps ensure that the baby's basic needs are met, she learns that she can trust the adult to meet her needs.

Adapted from UGA Extension Series Building Baby's Brain, authored by Diane Bales and published August 2014.

When these types of attachments are not formed, the child can develop a psychiatric condition called an "attachment disorder." The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry reports that there is no known cause of attachment disorders, but research suggests that inadequate care-giving is a possible cause.

At an age as early as one year, physicians, psychiatrists and other professionals with specialized training can identify the indications that a young child has an attachment disorder. Children with attachment issues can develop one of two possible disorders: Reactive Attachment Disorder or Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder.

Both of these disorders are serious clinical conditions and require a comprehensive treatment plan that includes both the child and the family. If you know of a parent who is struggling with their parent-child attachment, there are resources available in our community to help. Both the Konza Community Clinic and Pawnee Mental Health have staff to help the child and entire family work through building stronger, more meaningful attachments that will help children take a more positive path.

The influence parents have on the brain development of their infants and children is significant. Creating a nurturing and predictable environment for children is a serious responsibility that supports healthy brain development. Spend time with, have fun with, and be available for your children and know that your positive influence is important!

For more information about how parents can help build their baby's brain, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully.