



BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS *with Your Kids*

Parents have an important job. Raising kids is both rewarding and challenging. You're likely to get a lot of advice along the way, from doctors, family, friends, and even strangers. But every parent and child is unique. Being sensitive and responsive to your kids can help you build positive, healthy relationships together.

"Being a sensitive parent and responding to your kids cuts across all areas of parenting," says Arizona State University's Dr. Keith Crnic, a parent-child relationship expert. "What it means is recognizing what your child needs in the moment and providing that in an effective way."

BUILDING BONDS

Strong emotional bonds help children learn how to manage their own feelings and behaviors and develop self-confidence. They help create a safe base from which they can explore, learn, and relate to others.

Experts call this type of strong connection between children and their caregivers "secure attachment." Securely attached children are more likely to be able to cope with challenges like poverty, family instability, parental stress, and depression.

A recent analysis shows that about 6 out of 10 children in the U.S. develop secure attachments to their parents. The 4 out of 10 kids who lack such bonds may avoid their parents when they are upset or resist their parents if they cause them more distress. Studies suggest that this can make kids more prone to serious behavior problems. Researchers have been testing programs to help parents develop behaviors that encourage secure attachment.

BEING AVAILABLE

If parents are inconsistently available, kids can get distressed and feel hurt, rejected, or ignored. They may have more emotional outbursts and feel alone. They may even stop trying to compete for their parent's attention and

start to lose emotional connections to their parents.

It can be tough to respond with sensitivity during tantrums, arguments, or other challenging times with your kids. “If parents respond by being irritable or aggressive themselves, children can mimic that behavior, and a negative cycle then continues to escalate,” explains Dr. Carol Metzler, who studies parenting at the Oregon Research Institute.

As kids become better at managing their feelings and behavior, it’s important to help them develop coping skills, like active problem solving. Such skills can help them feel confident in handling what comes their way.

MEETING NEEDS

As children grow up, it’s important to remember that giving them what they need doesn’t mean giving them everything they want. Think about where a child is in life

and what skills they need to learn at that time. Perhaps they need help managing emotions, learning how to behave in a certain situation, thinking through a new task, or relating to friends.

“Make some time to spend with your child that isn’t highly directive, where your child leads the play,” advises Dr. John Bates, who studies children’s behavior problems at Indiana University Bloomington. “Kids come to expect it and they love it, and it really improves the relationship.”

Bates also encourages parents to focus on their child’s actual needs instead of sticking to any specific parenting principles.

By being a sensitive and responsive parent, you can help set your kids on a positive path, teach them self-control, reduce the likelihood of troublesome behaviors, and build a warm, caring parent-child relationship.



TIPS FOR CONNECTING WITH YOUR KIDS

- » Catch kids showing good behavior and offer specific praise.
- » Give children meaningful jobs at home and positive recognition afterward. Don’t be overly critical; instead, help them improve their skills one step at a time.
- » Use kind words, tones, and gestures when giving instructions or making requests.
- » Spend some time every day in warm, positive, loving interaction with your kids. Look for opportunities to spend time as a family, like taking after-dinner walks or reading books together.
- » Brainstorm solutions to problems at home or school together.
- » Set rules for yourself for mobile device use and other distractions. For instance, check your phone after your child goes to bed.
- » Ask about your child’s concerns, worries, goals, and ideas.
- » Participate in activities that your child enjoys. Help out with and attend their events, games, activities, and performances.