

Parent-Child Relationships



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When looking at parenting in general, parents use and incorporate many different parenting styles to raise their children. This can include relational aspects such as communication patterns, emotional stability and vulnerability, trust, and attachment. In a study conducted by Ainsworth et al. (1978), many parental relationships across the world, approximately 60-65%, are characterized by having a secure attachment between the parent and child. When a child is securely attached to their parents in infancy and early childhood, this lays a foundation for emotional health and relationship success later in life. Children who experience secure attachment with their parent explore the environment around them while using the parent as a secure source of support when they feel stressed. When the parent is not present, the child may become distressed. However, upon the parent's return, the parent can soothe the child by being present (Dyer, 2018).

In a time of distress, a parent who is securely attached to their child can soothe the child. However, there are numerous ways that a parent can be “emotionally responsive” or sensitive to their child that allows for a positive influence on the child and the given situation. This is often referred to as sensitive responsiveness, where the parent can tailor their response to a situation based upon the needs and signals of their child (Ainsworth, 1969). Below are some examples of how a parent can be sensitive to their child when a stressful situation arises with their child.

Component #1: Awareness of Signals

When a situation arises with their child, a sensitive parent will make themselves emotionally and physically available so that verbal and nonverbal signals of their child can be identified effectively. Furthermore, a parent who can be physically and emotionally sensitive to their child can have a strong ability to detect low-intensity signals from their child rather than ignoring the child's signals until there become intense and persistent. For example, a sensitive parent can detect and identify whimpering from their child instead of neglecting the child's signal until they are crying.

Component #2: Accurate Interpretation of Signals

When a child is experiencing a given situation, it is important to see the situation from the child's perspective. A sensitive parent interprets the verbal and nonverbal signals of their child in a way that is congruent to the child's level of development. This allows the parent to resist the urge to view the situation from their personal perspective or distort the child's message to fit their perspective.

Component #3: Prompt Response to Signals

When a situation arises with their child, a sensitive parent responds quickly to the given situation. In many parent-child relationships, parents use the wait-and-see approach where parents do not jump when the baby/child cries but instead wait to see if the child can soothe themselves. However, a parent who is sensitive directly rejects this principle.

Component #4 Appropriate Response to Signals

When a situation arises with their child, a sensitive parent responds to soothe their child. In parenting, there is not a single response to a given situation, given that circumstances and children vary. Because of this, sensitive parents implement different ways to soothe their children. When trying to soothe, a sensitive parent will observe their child to see if their effort to soothe is working. If not, the sensitive parent will try a different way to soothe.

References:

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