

Theraplay: Enhancing Attachment, Building Trust, Having Fun!

by Arleta James, PCC

Touch is critical to human development. Loving touch leads to healthy attachment, and, attachment is the context in which all development becomes possible. Attachment is also the blueprint for all subsequent close relationships.



Nurture Creates Attachment

If you have parented or cared for an infant, stop for a moment and think about the hours spent holding, stroking, touching, rocking, caressing, kissing and hugging the baby. As the child grew, touching and holding continued—hugs and kisses before getting on the school bus or while bandaging a boo-boo, snuggling while watching television or reading books, pats on the back for accomplishments, stroking hair as a gesture of affection, and lots of kisses and caresses just out of love!

As a result of consistent and predictable parental nurture and support, this child develops a [secure attachment](#). The child trusts his parents to meet his needs, “My parents are always there for me.” He feels good about himself, “I am worthwhile.” He seeks out his parents when he needs help or comfort, “I can rely on my parents.” He has absorbed the skills to navigate life. He can develop solutions, handle stress, regulate emotions, follow directions, complete tasks, and the list goes on.

He demonstrates empathy and remorse, “I have hurt mom’s feelings. I need to make this right.” He strives to have fun. He explores his environment. He seeks parental praise for a job well-done, “I want to please my parents.” He enjoys intimacy. He seeks out companionship, “I want to be around others.” He can do all of these things within relationships with parents, peers, teachers, coaches, neighbors, etc. His blue-print is, “I am safe within relationships.” He applies his secure model of attachment to all human interactions.

In adulthood, this secure attachment will allow him to continue to have close interpersonal relationships. He will feel love and give love. He will understand his past—emotional baggage will not interfere with his capacity to interact in his marriage, with his children, in his career and so on.

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Many adoptees arrive in the family having been deprived of enormous amounts of emotional and physical nurturing in the months or years prior to the child's adoption. Or, their sense of touch, love and affection may have become skewed because sexual abuse has taught them that affection is sexual, or being beaten—physical abuse—is the way touch is administered from a parent to a child. Their style of attachment, their ability to navigate relationships, reflects their traumatic experiences and is insecure.

The adoptee's healing is halted or at least greatly slowed down if we don't find ways to nurture him. This is no small task. Often, adoptive parents are being asked to hug and caress children who are quite similar to porcupines! Their quills—behaviors—rise up, shoot out and penetrate—reject the parent—frequently!

Theraplay® is one way we can help these fragile creatures quell their fears about intimate relationships. Theraplay's nurturing games can be a key to helping parents heal their traumatized child.



Nurture is the Key to Healing the Traumatized Adoptee

We'll also see that Theraplay is also very applicable to the resident children. They need nurture to maintain secure relationships with their parents.

Theraplay® is a structured play therapy for children and their parents. Its goal is to enhance attachment, self-esteem, trust in others and joyful engagement. Because of its focus on attachment and relationship development, Theraplay has been used successfully for many years with adoptive families."

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Theraplay is organized around four dimensions:

- **Structure:** The trained Theraplay therapist, and once familiarized to the activities, the parent selects and leads the activities. The fact that the adult is in charge is reassuring and helps the child to develop self-control. It is especially useful for children who are overactive, undirected, overstimulated or who want to be in control.
- **Engagement:** Engaging activities offer pleasant stimulation, variety and a fresh view of life, allowing a child to understand that surprises can be fun and new experiences enjoyable. The child is focused on in an intensive way to make a connection with the child. Engagement is especially great for children who are withdrawn, avoidant of contact, or too rigidly structured.
- **Nurture:** Soothing, calming, quieting, caretaking activities make the world feel safe, predictable, warm and secure. This dimension meets the child's unfulfilled younger needs; helps the child relax and allow herself to be taken care of.
- **Challenge:** Challenging activities help the child take a mild, age-appropriate risk, and promote feelings of competence and confidence. They stress cooperation rather than competition. Challenging activities are especially useful for withdrawn, timid or rigid children.

Sean was 15 years old. He was adopted at age 3 by Wilma and Andy. He had presented various challenges for 12 years! He especially liked to dismantle things. Anything he could get his hands on was immediately taken apart, because he wanted to "see how it worked." Unfortunately, he lost pieces of items, and so, many of his learning projects were ruined. He loved to take batteries. It was difficult to keep a flashlight, the remote control, and the other kids' toys and so on operational.

He displayed symptoms of an ambivalent attachment. He hated it when Mom was out of the house or out of sight. He called her on her cell phone constantly. Even if she didn't answer, he kept calling and leaving messages. When she was home, he followed her everywhere. She had had a shadow for 12 years!



Ummm! These are great cookies!

Theraplay was selected as one intervention because Sean so resembled a three 3 year old socially and emotionally. He eagerly participated in the activities! He especially enjoyed a cookie game. He laid across his mom's lap and looked into her eyes. She held an animal cracker, and she provided directions. "I want you to bite off the back feet. Good! Now, bite off the head! Great, you are listening so well!" He giggled and giggled and asked for another cookie and another cookie and yet another cookie!

Children, little to big—sometimes very big—love Theraplay! Give it a try. Visit the [Theraplay website](http://www.jkp.com/) today to learn more about this fun form of nurturing. Stock up on the cookies—the other kids will want a turn!