

Nurture: The Ring that Holds All the Keys

By Arleta James, PCC

"Where touching begins, there love and humanity also begin..." Ashley Montagu

When I write posts about behavior, and ways to manage or entirely cease behaviors, I always work to write a portion of the post that provides some explanation for the behavior, and then I offer some solutions. I believe that understanding more about where a child's particular behavior comes from helps parents live more peacefully with the child. As professionals, we need to understand the motives for behavior in order to select appropriate treatment approaches. Of course, we all need solutions!



This post follows this pattern. We'll discuss a bit about the normal—secure—process of attachment. Then, we'll look at the types of behavioral issues resultant from the insecure attachment styles that result when children experience abandonment, sexual or physical abuse, neglect and pre-natal drug/alcohol exposure prior to the adoption. Lastly, we'll look at nurture as a means to heal trauma. In essence, nurture is the ring that holds all the keys because it is the most powerful parenting intervention.

Touch is critical to human development (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Loving touch leads to healthy attachment, and attachment is the context in which all development becomes possible. Attachment in family life is also the blueprint for all subsequent close relationships.

If you have parented an infant, stop for a moment and think about the hours you spent holding, stroking, touching, rocking, caressing, kissing and hugging your baby. As your 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.

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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.

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 abuse has taught them that affection is sexual, or being beaten 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*. There are several styles of insecure attachment.

Avoidant Attachment

This child's model of relationships is that parents or other adults are not all that useful in meeting needs. So, there is no point in seeking parental assistance. Connecting is limited; parents and adoptee remain isolated from engaging in meaningful interactions. There is little willingness to explore the environment or to play. Avoidantly attached children tend to display dissociative symptoms—flight—throughout their lives (Siegel, 1999). The desire—, early in life—, to have an emotional connection with the care giver was so frustrating that this child learned to tune out in order to survive the rejecting, neglecting relationship. Adoptive parents of children with avoidant attachment commonly report,

"He never asks for any help."

"He takes what he wants without asking."

"He stares at me when he wants something. He won't ask."

"He never asks politely. It is always a demand. 'I'm thirsty'"

"He is always bored. He can never think of anything to do."

"She doesn't play."

"We came home from dinner and he didn't come to greet us. He didn't even act like he noticed we had been gone."

"She can be alone in her room so long that I forget she is there."

"As soon as I start talking, she glazes over."

"He's always where the family isn't. If we're watching a movie, he's in his room. If we're in the front yard cleaning up, he's behind the house."

"She wanders off when we are shopping or she walks way ahead of us."

Ambivalent Attachment

This attachment styles has two subtypes. One is demonstrated by a child who is anxious or "clingy." This child fears the parent may disappear at any moment. These children display considerable distress when separated from parents, although they often aren't comforted when the parent returns. In fact, the returning care giver may be met with anger and a rejection of their efforts to re-connect with the adoptee.

Adoptive parents of these ambivalently attached children may arrive at therapy saying,

"I can barely go to the bathroom. She is at the door wondering if I am in there!"

"We try to go out with friends and he acts so 'bad' the babysitter calls. We have to return home."

"She follows me throughout the house. If I turn around, I practically run into her."

"She can't sleep in her own bed at night. She has to get in bed with us or we find her on the floor next to our bed."

"He won't go to sleep until my husband, who works second shift, gets home from work. He has to know we are both in the house before he will go to bed."

"She can't go to a sleepover."

"She has to be with us at church. She won't stay in the Sunday school class."

A second type of ambivalent attachment is seen in the child who appears to "push" and "pull"—"I want you." "I don't want you." These children had birthparents or care givers who exhibited inconsistency in responding to the child's

needs; sometimes they were unavailable or unresponsive, and at other times they were intrusive. The care giver misread the child's signals. Thus, internally, this child is uncertain as to his own needs and emotional state. This is a child who may not soothe easily, even when the parent is providing exactly what is necessary to aid in calming the son or daughter.

An adoptive parent of this type of ambivalently attached child may state,

"She asks for help with her homework, and when I come to help her she tells me I am doing it wrong. 'That isn't what the teacher said.'"

"When I have bananas, he doesn't want one. If I don't have a banana, look out, there will be a huge fit."

"Getting dressed for school is so difficult. We pick out an outfit and a few minutes later it isn't right. He is screaming and shouting that he can't possibly wear the red shirt!"

"She asks for a hug and when I give it to her, she pinches me or hugs so tight I have to ask her to let go because she is hurting me."

"We have a great time making brownies, and then she won't eat any."

Disorganized Attachment

Disorganized attachment is a mix of the attachment styles discussed above. These children lacked the ability to be soothed by their birthparents because these early care givers were a source of fear—abuse. These children must cope with the loss of their birth parents on top of resolving the terrifying events that most likely led to the separation from the birthparents.

Their adoptive parents report many of the themes as pointed out in the ambivalent and avoidant attachment descriptions. Yet, these parents also report, "He can do something that makes me so angry. We have a big fight. Then, five minutes later he asks me what we are having for dinner. It's like nothing happened!" Or, "When I am angry, he smiles. I almost lose control of myself!" Many abused children utilized smiling or hugging the past perpetrator as a defense against further abuse. When triggered, this coping mechanism appears again in the adoptive family. In common among the insecure attachment styles, is that there was a lack of emotional connection to a parent or care giver in the first two years of life.

Nurture helps to create the closeness essential in repairing this damage. In review, ***consistent, nurturing*** care caregiving promotes attachment. Attachment, in turn, facilitates the manner, "blue print" in which humans interact with each other. Attachment contributes to healthy psychological and physiological development. This is why nurture is the ring that holds all of the keys. Have you ever lost or misplaced your keys? If so, you know you that you can't go anywhere until you locate them. Nurture is similar. ***Providing consistent, nurturing caregiving—at any age—can correct many of the problems caused by the inadequate or abusive parenting the child experienced early in life.*** Once the child is nurtured to a more secure pattern of attachment, development moves forward and behaviors melt away! For example, the child no longer needs to steal to "fill himself up with things" as was described in parts 2 and 4 of, *Anything We Can't Find, He Stole.* The child becomes satisfied with relationships and via connections with others he is satiated with love and good feelings. Now, attached, cognitive, emotional and social development moves forward. He develops cause-and-effect thinking, morals, values, social skills and so on!

Of course, nurturing a traumatized child often is no small task. 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!

Part Two will look at some ways we can help these fragile creatures quell their fears about intimate relationships. *We'll also see that these ideas are very applicable to the resident children. They need nurture to maintain secure relationships with their parents throughout the struggles posed by their traumatized sibling.*

Part Two

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Welcome to Part 2 of our post about nurture as a powerful way to heal the child who has experienced trauma. In Part 1, we looked at secure and insecure styles of attachment. We learned about some of the behaviors resultant when a child develops an insecure—avoidant, ambivalent or disorganized—style of attachment. Additional signs and symptoms of attachment difficulties or Reactive Attachment Disorder may be found at the Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio website – www.abcofohio.net. There is a symptom checklist for children ages 5 and up as well as one for children under age 5.



In this post, we'll look at lots ways to enhance the attachment of even the prickliest child! Pick a few ideas and get started. Don't be discouraged if your attempts aren't immediately reciprocated. As with everything with a child who has experienced trauma, accepting nurture will take time—perhaps eight months, twelve months or even longer in some cases. However, if you don't put the key in the ignition, you'll never arrive at the destination—a greater emotional connection with your son or daughter. Please also keep in mind, nurture is an entitlement. It isn't something children should earn. It also isn't something a parent can choose to ignore or cease just because it can be difficult. It is essential to the well-being and growth of your traumatized child!

The “Cycle of Needs”

A secure—healthy—attachment is formed as a result of the repetition of the “cycle of needs.” A baby cries. Mom or Dad attends to the baby—a bottle, a clean diaper, comfort, a binky and so on. The baby calms. During this process of going from fussy to feeling safe and secure, there is eye contact. There is talking, “Oh my, what does my baby need?” “You are such a good baby.” “What a beautiful girl you are!” And there is warmth—babies get warm when we hold or swaddle them. Feeding and fragrance are also a part of this very sensory cycle—perhaps we put lotion on the baby. Movement occurs—rocking or bouncing the baby on our knees. Touch is involved every step of the way!

So, when we talk about increasing nurture—forming secure attachments—we are really talking about ways to increase the components of the cycle of needs through the child's senses: eye contact, food, smells, movement, talking and touch (Keck & Kupecky, 2002). Throughout this segment, the ideas will all reflect these “key” ingredients. The end result is a recipe for a happier and healthier family!

The “Keys”: Getting Nurture Started Every Day and Over the Holidays!

Eye Contact

As I stated in the blog, *The “Eyes” Have It*, making eye contact is one of the most important forms of communication. Through our eyes we express joy, “first impressions”, honesty, interest in others, confidence in ourselves, remorse, love, intelligence, compassion and friendship. In fact, looking at others is a first step toward making a friend, and eye contact allows those around us insight into our true thoughts and feelings. Traumatized children have great difficulty making eye contact. In fact many prefer to look anywhere but in another human's eyes! Typically, this is related to a lack of self-esteem. Or, these children think that parents, siblings, peers and so on may not like what they see if they get too close a look. So, they avoid the attempted gazes of those around them. We can help children improve their self-perception and feel lovable by gradually getting eye to eye with them:

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- Download the Devo rendition of Peek-a-Boo. This rock 'n roll version of this classic song engages toddlers to adolescents with its lively beat!
- Pop popcorn. Gather all of your children. Have your sons and daughters look at you and then toss a piece in the air. The child who catches it—with his or her mouth—gets a kiss.
- Write an “I love you” message in soap in the mirror. Stand behind the child when he reads it. You may get a glance in the mirror. If not, you still said, “I love you!”(Keck and Kupecky, 2009.)
- Just in time for the holidays, give her a disposable camera. See the family festivities through her eyes (Keck and Kupecky, 2009.)
- Have your child stare at you while you count seconds with different animals—1 elephant, 2 rhinoceros, 3 giraffe, 4 gorillas and so on. See how many seconds—animals— the child can look at you.
- Give a different kiss good-bye each day—Eskimo kisses, elephant kisses, butterfly kisses and so on. This is certain to get a look, especially from the older kids!
- Now that Christmas is coming, hang the mistletoe. This is a surefire method to get in a few kisses each day until December 25!

Smells

Smell is a powerful way to connect. How many of us have fond memories that center around smell? I look forward to going home at Christmas because I know my mother’s home will be filled with the aroma of fresh baked banana bread—one of my favorites! Simmering sauce, fresh baked chocolate chip cookies, homemade soup, a fragrant candle, a scented lotion, a bubble bath—all are nurturing and carry a message of love from parent to child. From time to time when my clients call and report having an “awful” day or the “worst” day ever with their hurt child, I suggest calling Dominos and having pizza delivered. One whiff of a pizza topped with all the family favorites can change the entire mood of every member of the family—for the better! As holiday shopping and preparations become frenzied as Christmas nears, the stress level of the family rises. Try ordering a pizza when things get to chaotic. Likely, calmness will arrive along with the pizza.

Warmth

In addition to baking great banana bread, my Mom kindly warmed my sisters’ and my mittens in the dryer before we set off on our walk to school (Yes, I walked to school!). This was such a special winter treat as was the hot chocolate with marshmallows waiting for us when we got home. Our lunches of grill cheese sandwiches and bowls of tomato soup were also great on those snow days when we spent the morning shoveling the driveway and sidewalks around our house.

The feeling of warmth is wonderful. Babies warm when we hold them, swaddle them, tuck them in their cribs and feed them. School-age and high school kids benefit from feeling warm and cozy as well. An electric blanket, a special blanket, a sleeping bag instead of a blanket, the Snuggie™—the blanket with sleeves, Hanes World Sofest Socks, a special tea, a warm slice of apple pie, a fire in the fire place, or steaming up the bathroom and writing on the mirror (Keck and Kupecky, 2009) are all ways to convey tenderness and affection.

Food

I have suggested many ideas above that involve food. Too often, parents and traumatized adopted children argue about food. I encourage parents to decrease their food battles. They are virtually impossible to win. Nurturing with food might be the better direction. For example,

John, now age 14, was adopted internationally when he was 3 years-old. He has posed many challenges to his adoptive parents, Marge and Paul. Currently, academics have become a major source of conflict. John won't do his homework. He won't even bring his books home! Marge and Paul have been monitoring his grades online. They know his report card, due home today, won't be good. They are fuming!

Rather than meet John at the door, ready for a war, Marge and Paul might want to put out a nice plate of cookies and a glass of cold milk. In calm voices they could state, “My your report card is pretty poor. You must feel terrible about it. How do you think you can work this out with your teachers?” John, who will be waiting for the fight to start, will be

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totally thrown off. Likely, he will be open to his parent's empathy and concern. This family stands a better chance of getting Paul to generate solutions to his school problems because they approached the problem with nurture. Always keep in mind, "you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Preparing food, enjoying it, and even cleaning up after the feast are all part of the rituals of most families. Food is important to all of us. The eating problems of the child with a history of complex trauma—gorging, eating only a little, binging, hoarding, eating slow, being picky, eating during the night, eating lots of starches or sugary foods—are all the result of early food deprivation. Children who have experienced near starvation, pre-adoption, will remain concerned about food—for years! Allowing children more control over their food choices, and nurturing with food—instead of battling—are more effective ways to deal with food issues (Keck and Kupecky, 2009.)

Go ahead, have banana splits for dinner one night. Or, make a milkshake for lunch. Buy some M&M's and sort them by color. Then, eat them! Say, "Yes, you may have a cookie after dinner." Serve gingerale with a cherry in it. Sprinkle some chocolate chips in the pancakes. Enjoy! Enjoy! Enjoy!

Motion

Now that your stuffed, it's time to get moving. Make a New Year's Resolution to use the wii fit Santa left under the tree to play and exercise—regularly— with your sons and daughters. We move babies a lot. We bounce them, pat them, rock them, and drive them around in the car until they fall asleep. We need to move with our pre-schoolers, grade-schoolers and high schoolers!

Remember,

Ring-around-the-rosy, musical chairs, Hula hoops, hopscotch, the excitement of getting a kite to fly? These no battery needed activities are still as fun today as they were when we were kids! If you live in the snow belt, you might want to, build a snow fort, have a snowball fight, make snow angels or build a snowman.

You can also get moving by, tossing a ball with your son or daughter, going for a bike ride, blowing bubbles, building something together, catching fireflies, teaching each other dances, taking a karate or yoga class .

Touch

Too often parents report, "She didn't like being held. So, we stopped holding her." "She liked to feed herself her bottle." "He won't let me hug him." Really, you can't be fully human until you can accept touch!

It isn't uncommon, when a family arrives at our office for therapy, that we have to start with small bits of touch, frequently, each day—a hand on the shoulder as the child walks by the parent for example. Sometimes, we assign hugs as "practice." We tell the child that he must go home and "practice" hugging Mom and Dad 12 times each day. We then demonstrate a "good" hug. Progress is monitored until the task is learned and becomes natural. Small steps, over a long period of time, is often the way in to children fearful (because of past abusive experiences) of the hugs, caresses and cuddles of their parents. It takes nature at least a year to form an attachment. In some cases, it will take adoptive parents this long to help their adopted son or daughter accept their loving touch. (This is another great New Year's resolution!)

For those of you fortunate to have a child who arrives able to enjoy your embraces, here are some ideas to maximize touch: Comb or braid your child's hair (Keck and Kupecky, 2009), hold hands while walking (Keck and Kupecky, 2009), exchange foot massages and back rubs. Boys, in particular, are often receptive to backrubs before they fall asleep., play "this little piggy", maintain a bedtime routine well into the teen years, fathers are natural nurturers via playing horsy, tickling and wrestling, paint each other's fingernails

Communication

When parents talk to their infants, they are actually helping the brain prime itself to develop the skills necessary for conversation and literacy. The child who was neglected or institutionalized was deprived of hours and hours of talking! As this child matures, conversation is difficult. Reading comprehension may lag behind. Parents want to find ways to enhance their adoptee's ability to communicate.

Try starting with nursery rhymes. Yes, even if you have adolescents. The cadence and rhythm of *Itsy Bitsy Spider* or the sequencing of *Old McDonald Had a Farm* is essential to helping the brain develop the skills to talk and absorb the written word. As we'll learn in a post next week, music also improves mood—yours and your children's.

If you have older children, read books together or listen to books on tape. You might find that you need to start with books much "younger" than would be appropriate for the child's chronological age. Share a newspaper article or Internet news story. Look up a topic of interest and take turns reading about it aloud. Some children often leave notes for their parents. I have worked with children who slide notes of apology or love under bedroom doors. Instead of being angry that the note is not "genuine", write a note back. Writing is often an interim form of communication that leads to the capacity to communicate verbally. Order a magazine for your son or daughter and read it together when it arrives (Keck and Kupecky, 2009.) Play the billboard game in the car. Do you remember how? Find words on billboards that start with each letter of the alphabet. Start with "A" and work through to "Z." (Yes, turn off the electronic devices in the car and talk!)

If you want about 100 more nurture suggestions, then look in *Parenting the Hurt Child: Helping Adoptive Families Heal and Grow* by Gregory C. Keck and Regina Kupecky (see Resources). This book provides list after list of ways to nurture children, and they are applicable to *all* children. Or, read my other favorites, *Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents* by Deborah Gray or my book, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*. In Chapter 10, I discuss nurture and offer examples of ways to nurture each member of the family.