

## An Elaboration on the Distinction Between Controversial Parenting and Therapeutic Practices Versus Developmentally Appropriate Attachment Parenting: A Comment on the APSAC Task Force Report

**R**ecently, a Task Force comprising scholars who are members of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) published in this journal an informative report titled, "Report of the APSAC Task Force on Attachment Therapy, Reactive Attachment Disorder, and Attachment Problems" (Chaffin et al., 2006). The Task Force report reviewed controversial parenting approaches and therapies and made recommendations for assessment and treatment of attachment disorders (Chaffin et al., 2006). The report was endorsed by the American Psychological Association's Division 37 and the Division 37 Section on Child Maltreatment.

We, the founders of Attachment Parenting International (API), an organization that facilitates the formation of parent education support groups, and members of the Attachment Parenting International-Research Group (API-RG), agree with the report of the APSAC Task Force and its conclusions regarding the detrimental effects of controversial parenting practices that have been arbitrarily labeled by others as *attachment parenting*. However, we believe that there is significant confusion regarding the appropriate definition of the term *attachment parenting* and that the Task Force report may have inadvertently contributed to this confusion. We believe that clarity in this regard is central to progress in this controversial area and so wish to offer our thoughts on this important matter.

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### THE TASK FORCE USE OF THE TERM *ATTACHMENT PARENTING*

The Task Force report notes,

The attachment therapy controversy has centered most broadly on the use of what is known as "holding therapy" (Welch, 1988) and coercive, restraining or aversive procedures such as deep tissue massage, aversive tickling, punishments related to food and water intake, enforced eye contact, requiring children to submit totally to adult control over all their needs, barring children's access to normal social relationships outside the primary parent or caretaker, encouraging children to regress to infant status, re-parenting, and *attachment parenting* [italics added] or techniques designed to provoke cathartic emotional discharge. (p. 83)

The Task Force report goes on to acknowledge that

the term attachment parenting may have various meanings. In a less controversial context, the term refers to practices of maintaining close physical proximity between mothers and newborns, which is argued to promote healthy attachment. This is not the meaning discussed here. (Chaffin et al., 2006, p. 79)

By using the term *attachment parenting* when referring to the controversial, abusive practices, the Task Force confuses the controversial practices with the developmentally appropriate parenting practices that are also called *attachment parenting*. We believe that the controversial practices described by Chaffin et al. (2006) can no more be called *attachment parenting*

than witchcraft can be called *modern medicine*. We are concerned that by using the term *attachment parenting* to refer to controversial, abusive practices, the Task Force may unintentionally discourage practitioners or parents from endorsing or engaging in parenting behaviors that have been demonstrated by research to promote secure parent-child attachment bonds, which are necessary for positive child mental health. We suggest that in future reports, the Task Force refer to the controversial, abusive therapeutic and parenting practices as just what they are: controversial and abusive.

#### AN APPROPRIATE DEFINITION OF ATTACHMENT PARENTING

Developmentally appropriate attachment parenting practices are based on mainstream psychological attachment theory which was first conceived by John Bowlby (1951, 1982) and Mary Ainsworth (1982; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The cornerstone of developmentally appropriate attachment parenting is parental emotional sensitivity to children. *Emotional sensitivity* refers to a parent's anticipating and being sensitive to a child's needs and then attempting to meet those perceived needs. Attachment parenting includes warm, affectionate responses to a child's bids for attention. This style of parenting is neither controlling nor coercive. Other parenting behaviors that make up the attachment style of parenting include infant-focused prenatal activities; breastfeeding, when possible, to encourage closeness and healthy development; maintaining close physical proximity through frequent touch, carrying, and physical contact and stimulation with the infant; establishing nighttime routines that support an infant's need for closeness; and avoiding long caregiver-child separations. As children age, attachment parenting continues to include age-appropriate proximity maintenance behaviors, age-appropriate levels of touch, a democratic style of communication and problem solving, and parents' use of inductive reasoning techniques to help children learn positive

behaviors. Most of all, regardless of a child's age, *attachment parenting* refers to a parent's ability to empathize with how a child is feeling and to how a parent views those feelings as important and worthy of parental response.

Hopefully, the distinction between controversial, abusive parenting and therapeutic practices versus developmentally appropriate attachment parenting is now clearer. Moreover, it is hoped that practitioners and therapists aiming to promote secure parent-child attachment relationships now understand that attachment parenting is very different from the controversial, abusive practices that are appropriately criticized in the Task Force report.

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