

# **Eight Principles of Parenting The Adopted Infant & Young Child**

## **What is Attachment Parenting?**

Attachment parenting is an approach to parenting that fosters strong, healthy bonds between parents and children. Attachment parenting values and respects children's physical, psychological and emotional needs that nurtures trust and empathy for others that can last a lifetime.

### **1. Educate Yourself (to the extent possible) about the Birth Mother's Pregnancy & Birth Experience and Prepare for Parenting Your Adopted Child:**

Before adopting, prepare yourself by learning as much as you can about the birth mother's pregnancy and birth history and the possible effects on brain development. If possible, learn about the child's early care experiences by the birthparent or grandparent care. Ask questions of your adoption agency about whether or not your child experienced abuse or caregiver roulette and what symptoms to be aware of regarding attachment difficulties. Part of preparation is examining how you were parented and your strengths and weaknesses in your parenting attitudes and to seek professional help early on if necessary. The Adult-Attachment Interview (AAI) can help parents identify their own level of secure attachment and whether or not it is a good fit with the adopted child. The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2) is another great assessment for identifying strengths and weaknesses available through The Nurturing Parenting Program. Become informed about normal child development milestones and be open to learning from your child. Some children may be behind developmentally and emotionally. Dr. Bruce Perry advises that parents of children with traumatic or abusive histories care for their child at their emotional age rather than their chronological age until they mature developmentally. Learn about the resources in your area that can provide you with helpful information and support. [Attachmentexperts.com](http://Attachmentexperts.com) offers excellent information and guidance for parenting these children.

There are many compassionate adults who are willing to adopt children with attachment difficulties. It's important to keep in mind the intensity and focused attention that these children typically require. They need an inordinate amount of attention so consider the impact on your family and existing children. Some children with attachment difficulties do better as an only child because they don't feel that they have to compete for adult attention as they would when there are other children in the home.

### **2. Feed with Love and Respect**

Feeding your baby goes beyond providing nutrients; it is an act of love and one primary way you will begin to form an attachment with your baby.

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Babies are born with instinctual feeding behaviors, such as rooting, sucking and crying, that are designed to ensure the close proximity of his mother or primary caregiver. When using a bottle, use techniques that mimic the breastfeeding relationship, such as creating a peaceful environment, cradling him near your chest, switching sides and whenever possible reserving the feeding experience as special time with the primary caregiver.

The adoptive mother of an infant may be surprised to learn that many adoptive mothers have been able to produce breastmilk through the use of a breast pump and nursing supplemental system and at least partially provide breastmilk to their baby. This can be a beautiful bonding experience for both baby and mother.

If you adopt a child who was severely neglected as an infant you may consider offering older children a bottle while holding (and rocking) them. If they weren't held and fed as an infant this may be an unmet emotional need that you can fulfill and often this is the only time they will allow themselves to be touched. Some adopted children may prefer sugary and high carb foods and it will take some patience on your part to transition them to healthier foods. Seek out professional help from a therapist with an expertise in attachment if your child shows signs of overeating or hoarding food.

An adopted baby or child from a foreign country may be used to certain types of foods and will adapt more easily if you provide them with foods they are used to while slowly introducing them to new foods.

### **3. Respond with Sensitivity**

Respond sensitively to your baby's signals. Babies communicate their needs in many ways through their body movements, facial expressions and crying. Your baby or child will learn to trust when responded to sensitively and consistently. Understanding your child's cues and responding appropriately and sensitively is the cornerstone of attachment parenting and builds the foundation for trust and empathy.

Yes, it's ok to pick up a crying baby or hold and comfort an older child. You won't spoil him. When your baby or young child receives consistent, empathic responses to his feelings and needs, he learns to trust those who care for him. Over time he will learn to regulate and soothe his feelings on his own. A baby's brain is immature and underdeveloped at birth and should not be forced to self-soothe. When you choose responsive parenting, your child will grow into a peaceful, compassionate adult with the capacity for secure, healthy relationships.

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If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed and struggling to remain calm and be responsive, please seek support from a spouse, friend or professional.

### **4. Use Nurturing Touch**

Physical touch is one of our five senses that infants literally not live without. Nurturing touch provides important physiological and psychological benefits to your child. Physical touch stimulates growth hormones, digestive enzymes and the child's immune system. Most importantly touch stimulates the hormone oxytocin that is considered the "bonding" or "love" hormone. Loving touch such as skin-to-skin contact, infant massage, and carrying your baby helps facilitate a strong emotional connection. It literally helps you to "get in touch" and more attuned with your child.

Some children with an abusive history or those who may have been born prematurely have learned that touch is bad or painful. Be patient and try to touch in ways that will be accepted as non-threatening such as a quick hug, scratching the child's back gently or just a gentle touch of the hand. Using games such as writing letters on the child's back, or telling a story using touch on their back (like the itsy bitsy spider) is a non-threatening way to introduce more touch time with an older child.

Sometimes you may have to wait for the older child to initiate touch after they have learned to trust. As your child learns to trust you then you can begin to introduce massage or possibly the use of an infant carrier if the child is a baby or toddler.

### **5. Ensure Safe Sleep, physically and emotionally**

It's important to be responsive to your baby's or young child's night-time needs. Infants often need feeding, comfort, and reassurance during the night to feel secure. API promotes keeping baby in close proximity to you in a safe sleeping environment. Individual infant sleep patterns vary and you will need to remain flexible. An adopted infant or child may have sleep difficulties during the transition into their new home. Understand that it is developmentally appropriate and normal for infants to wake up during the night to feed and seek physical contact. Not only will your baby will feel more secure but you will strengthen your attachment relationship. Older children may wake due to nighttime fears and sleep disturbances. Try to be patient and understanding. By demonstrating comfort and empathy, the child learns to trust that you are present and available to him.

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Remember that every baby is different with different needs. To meet your baby's need for closeness, try a co-sleeper bed that attaches to the side of the adult bed or have a bassinet close, within arms reach, so you can respond when your baby needs you. Older children may be afraid to sleep alone, so you might try a pallet or mattress on the floor next to your bed. Some adopted children have experienced many losses in their life and are trying to learn to trust again. Any changes in routine should be gradual and openly talked about with the child. If possible, find out how your child's nighttime needs were met at night. For instance, if they are being adopted from an Asian culture, they may have slept with their foster parents at night and sleeping alone will be very difficult for them.

### **6. Provide Consistent, Loving Care**

Infants have an intense need for the physical presence of a consistent, loving, responsive caregiver, ideally a parent. By avoiding frequent or prolonged separations from your child (biological and adopted) until she is developmentally ready, you strengthen the relationship and protect your healthy attachment. Avoid "caregiver roulette"; continuity of care is critical for a baby or young child to develop a secure attachment and trust.

Children with attachment difficulties are very vulnerable to changes in caregivers. When a baby or child is adopted it is critically important that parents consider making it possible for one parent to stay home and be the primary caregiver of the child for as long as necessary for the child to develop trust and a healthy attachment.

### **7. Practice Positive Discipline**

Positive discipline incorporates the "golden rule" of parenting; treat your child the way you would want to be treated. It is an overarching philosophy that helps a child develop a conscience guided by his own internal discipline and compassion for others. Positive discipline is rooted in a secure, trusting, connected relationship with your child. Discipline that is empathic, loving and respectful strengthens your connection and makes positive discipline easier.

Children with attachment difficulties may be a real challenge when it comes to setting boundaries. They tend to test the limits because they have not yet learned to trust anyone. It's extremely important to be consistent and respectful. If a child has difficulty in transitioning from one activity to another, respect that and give them a five or ten-minute notice or set a timer. As the adult, it will be up to you to know your child and anticipate their needs and what triggers their behaviors.

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Try not to take their behavior personally and realize that they have difficulties with big emotions and it will be up to you to try to stay calm and to help them regulate back to calm. A behavior problem is a relationship problem so the better your relationship becomes, the better your child's behavior. Again, you may need professional help and support.

**Attach.org** is a great resource for finding an informed therapist in your area as well as offering conferences for parents and professionals.

### **8. Strive for Balance in Your Personal and Family Life**

No one's physical and emotional needs can be met all the time but it's important for parents to nurture themselves and their relationship when possible. Expecting complete balance and harmony all the time is not realistic. However, it is important, to continually reflect on the needs of individual family members and discuss creative solutions together. Balance becomes more obtainable as your baby gets older. Even small bits of personal time and connection with other caring adults can greatly improve your mood and ability to remain emotionally responsive to your child- read, walk, meditate, listen to music.

Balance in one's life is not an end goal but a goal that all parents must work on daily. Parents of attachment challenged children can burn out quickly without strong support by a therapist and support of family or other parents. Family members especially siblings can experience stress and loss of their parents when an adopted child requires a lot of time and attention. It is important to continually reflect on the needs of individual family members and discuss creative solutions together. Seek help and support when you need it. Remember that ALL parents need support, even in the healthiest birth families with extended family around them. Adopting a child puts you in a unique category with many unknown challenges. Create a strong network of support before you adopt, so that these resources will be in place once you have your child in your home. Caring for yourself becomes even more critical than caring for your child. You will be much more able to respond to your child's needs when you are nourishing your own.

#### **Resources for adoptive families:**

[www.attach.org](http://www.attach.org)

[www.Attachmentexperts.com](http://www.Attachmentexperts.com)

[www.adoptivefamilies.com](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com)