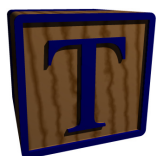


Attachment and Independence

Are these statements true or false?

- *A baby who is very attached to either or both parents is likely to become overly dependent on them.*
- *Parents spoil a baby by picking him or her up frequently.*
- *By ignoring a baby's cries, parents are "building character" and making their child more independent.*
- *If parents respond to a baby's demands for food, comfort, and attention, he or she will become even more demanding.*



There was a time when many parents thought that picking babies up, cuddling, and talking to them were bad practices. We know now, however, the answers to all the above statements are *false*. Studies show that it is essential for parents to be responsive to their babies. When parents respond quickly and consistently to cries during the first months, babies cry less often and for less time later on.

In other words, once babies feel sure of their parents, they become less demanding.

In general, the more love you give your baby, the more lovable he or she will become and the easier it will be for him or her to make friends with other people. A strong attachment to you gives your child the security and confidence to separate from you later on. The secure child becomes independent and reaches out to others.

Let's look at how this happens.

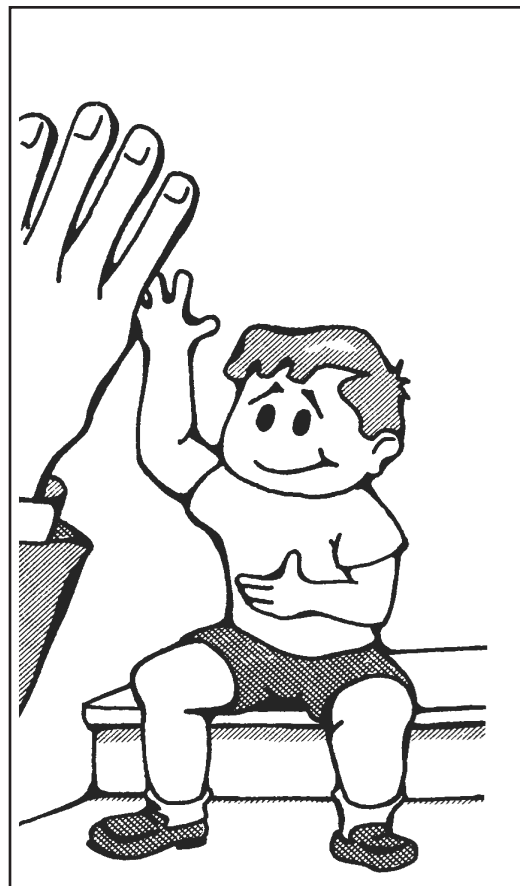
A bond is born



Babies at first know nothing of you or your love. All faces are the same to them. But without knowing it, babies begin to build a special bond with you. They cry. They startle. They stretch and wiggle. Their hands and feet speak as well as their faces. When babies act in these ways, you want to respond.

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Gradually, you learn to "read" and respond to your baby's needs. You learn what those squirms and stretches mean, and how to interpret different cries. You discover just how your baby likes to be held, talked to, and stroked.

At the same time, babies learn to recognize your special touch, smell, and voice. They begin to associate you with feeling comfortable and secure. When they cry, they rely on you to come. You may not be able to relieve all discomfort, but what counts is that you are there trying.

Gradually, babies begin to love and trust you.

Letting go is hard to do

Although a strong bond with you makes it easier for your children to let go, separation isn't always easy. During the first 3 years, many children have a hard time letting their parents leave. When you go, your baby may cry as if abandoned forever. Your toddler may cling to you when you reach for your coat. Young children may not know you still exist when you are out of sight.

H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

Little by little, though, your children will work through their anxiety. Their fears are eased and the road to independence is smoother when you:

- Prepare children when you leave.
- Get them used to new people gradually.
- Provide a routine they can count on.
- Let them take something familiar to a new place.
- Encourage them to act out their fears.

Separations need not be a nightmare, and can even strengthen the bond between you and your child. If you build a strong relationship, you and your child can become involved in new experiences and have more to share when you come together.

Making separations easier



Most of us find it hard to separate from those we love. For children, learning to say goodbye is one of the most difficult adjustments they have to make. How you handle their first separations, then, is of the utmost importance. Here are some ways you can help your children meet this challenge.

Prepare children for your departure. Talk to children beforehand about where you are going and why: "Mommy is going to work, and Mrs. Moran is going to take care of you every day." Be sure that they know when they can expect your return: "when you wake up," or "when Daddy comes home."

Never sneak away from your child. Always tell him or her when you must leave.

Provide a routine they can count on. It's easier for young children to let go of you if you leave at roughly the same time and place every day. You might arrange for a special activity just before you leave—read a story or play a record. Children also feel better if they know you will return at a certain time—after nap, for example, or when the clock says 3.

Of course, the unexpected can occur. But in general, let children count on your comings and goings.

Get them used to new people gradually. Whenever possible, leave children with someone they know. Invite the babysitter to come for a visit once or twice before the sitter stays alone with your child. Or spend a day or so at the day care center with your child before he or she stays there alone.

Try to keep the same person caring for your child. Changes are hard on children.

Encourage them to act out their fears. Acting out the separation helps children feel in control. To help children see that you can disappear and reappear, play "peek-a-boo" or "hide-and-seek" with them. Or encourage your children to take a pretend trip.

Help your child understand that "goodbye" does not mean "forever."

Let them take something familiar to a new place. Accept children's need to take along something of their own to a new place. A blanket or toy that reminds them of you and their home can help them feel safer in strange places.

Let them keep something important that belongs to you—a pair of gloves or a purse, for example.

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