

Parenting Practices for Children with Early Trauma or Attachment Problems

By Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D.

When humans fear for their safety, they rely on survival skills. This is true for soldiers in the midst of a battle, victims of a violent crime, and young children who are unable to rely on a parent to take care of them and protect them. When children start out life relying on survival skills, they form habits that are hard to break later on when they are safe. Children who rely on *survival skills* may assume the following:

- Don't upset people because they will hurt you.
- Shut down to avoid pain.
- Don't trust others to help you or keep you safe.
- Control what you can.
- Get whatever you can get.
- Reject before you get rejected.
- Fight your battles yourself.
- Charm and recruit and manipulate to get what you need.
- Make sure you have back-ups in case you lose a protector (or parent).
- Always be ready for danger.

In contrast, children who start out life feeling safe, protected, and connected to their parents learn to use family skills from the beginning. Children who rely on *family skills* may assume the following:

- Expect care and protection from your parent.
- Trust your parent to be there for you.
- Seek attention and proximity with your parent.
- Look to your parent for guidance when unsure.
- Communicate your feelings and needs to your parent.
- Try to make others happy because relationships and positive attention feel good.
- Trust that you can handle upsets or pain if your parent is there to calm you.
- Calm down in response to parent comfort.
- Connection and touch and interdependence feel good.

If your child is still relying on survival skills, the first step is to restore your child's sense of safety and trust. A good mantra is "connection before correction." If children are misbehaving, it is important to bring them closer and reduce the chances for them to get in trouble. Your child may also need to be taught that connection feels good. If your child does not seem to like cuddling, eye contact, or touch, try to pair these important relationship behaviors with things your child does like such as food or lotion or music. The best strategy is to create moments of shared joy with your child through laughter, play, and quiet moments together. It will take time,

Developed by Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist.

Children's Program 6443 SW Beaverton Hillsdale Hwy Portland, OR 97221 503-452-8002.

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patience, and lots of reassurance. As children are learning to trust in safety and connection, they will gradually let go of their survival skills and switch over to family skills.

Children learn to be soothed and to self soothe through a secure attachment. It is the connection with a parent that wires the child's brain for self calming. Thus, children with early trauma or attachment problems may have more difficulty calming down when frustrated, scared, or upset. They may go from 0 to 60 and struggle to rally. They have to learn how to shut off the alarm when upset, and this takes time. The tricky thing is that their stress responses sometimes look like intentional, provocative, challenging behaviors that can push a parents' buttons. Yet, if the parent becomes upset, what will happen to the child's fear? It will become even more intense, and most likely will only make the problem behaviors worse. For this reason, parenting a child who has a history of attachment problems or early childhood trauma requires a different set of parenting tools that may be different from how you were parented.

When you look at challenging behaviors through the lens of attachment and early trauma, you can assume that these behaviors are driven by fear and stress, and they are not a personal attack against the parent. A child may *lie* as a desperate attempt to avoid blame, rejection, or parental anger. A child may be *aggressive or violent* because he is afraid and hasn't learned how to control his emotions yet. A child may be *defiant* because she perceives an adult limit as a threat to her ability to have control, something she lacked when she was little and in danger. A child may *hoard* food or small items because she is panicked that her parents will not be able to keep her fed or tend to her needs. Children who have not learned how to soothe themselves or to be soothed may turn to "quick fixes" when upset or dysregulated such as *sneaking* access to electronics, *stealing* money or treats, and so on. A child who has been traumatized may act out in response to reminders of the trauma. Parents must do their detective work to know and anticipate their child's triggers so that they can minimize exposure and also provide extra support in times when children are reminded of past trauma.

Because children with early trauma or attachment problems may have more difficulty calming down when upset, they may be more likely to pass the point of no return and have a *rage or meltdown*. When children become this upset, they have passed the critical window. Often, the parent must simply stay calm, close, attempt to soothe and ride out the storm. Children may say shocking things when they are this upset because the thinking part of the brain has been temporarily hijacked due to the rage. For this reason, children may say or do upsetting things when this upset. It is important for parents to remember that their child is not in a rational state and for parents to not personalize the child's behavior. If parents can provide a high level of connection and empathy *before* the child goes past the critical window, they can often minimize the upset. This is why it is so important for parents to not "get louder" in an effort to subdue an escalating child.

Keep in mind that being calm, empathic, connected, and responsive does not mean that the parent eases up on limits. Children who have been frightened want consistency, structure, and limits. They want to know what they can count on. This is why it is so important to not relax limits because you feel sorry for your child. Being nurturing is not the same as giving in to a child's demands.

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A key part of reducing challenging behaviors is building up skills that will help the child succeed. Your child may need to be taught skills for calming down, tolerating upsetting situations, accepting limits, resisting temptations, and seeking support. In addition to teaching the skills, parents need to *model* the skills by telling the truth, staying calm, being steady, and communicating feelings appropriately. Finally, this is hard work. For a child to have the courage to give up survival skills, even in times of stress, they will need to have parents who are quick to catch and reward their successes. Look for the positive and help your child see his successes each and every day.

Examples of attachment-based parenting practices:

Sleep Issues: Create shared bedtime rituals with gradual transition. Co-sleep with child initially. Check in on child frequently until asleep. Door open, night light, music, dream catchers, audiotape of parent's voice.

Difficulty tolerating separation from parent: Use trust-building mantras ("Mommy always comes back"), transition items in times of separation (e.g., pictures of the parent, scarf with parent's scent), practice separation in gradual increments with rewards for successful coping, distract from anxiety during separation time.

Aggressive, oppositional behavior: Time-in or "thinking time" close to parent instead of time-out, high attunement or empathy on front end of emotional upset, acts of repair to teach importance of making amends after child is calm.

Hoarding, gorging: Concrete reassurance that parent will meet child's needs, Allow child to have nonperishable food items on hand between meals, pair eating with affection from parent, teach portions and "listening to body," acknowledge the fear and reassure

Stealing, sneaking, lying: Scale back level of freedom and keep child closer, focus on behavior that was wrong and not on whether the child "fesses up," emphasize connection and provide reassurance if child denies wrongdoing. Acts of repair to teach concept of rebuilding trust.

Inappropriate boundaries: Keep child close to parent. Strictly enforce boundaries even if it is embarrassing. Do not allow child to be affectionate or to chat with unfamiliar adults. Make concrete rules that child will understand about safe and appropriate touch.

Toileting problems: Anticipate regression in times of greater stress and remain calm. Keep the emotional charge out of accidents/clean-ups. Focus on successes.

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