

Responsive Care: Nurturing a Strong Attachment Through Everyday Moments

Responsive care is characterized by warm, loving interactions in which parents read and sensitively respond to their baby's cues. When parents tune in to children's feelings and needs in this way, it has lifelong benefits for a child's overall development—laying the foundation for healthy brain growth, strong social skills, the ability to manage one's actions and emotions, and academic success. Responsive caregiving by parents can also result in children having fewer behavior problems later in life. When children learn to trust that their needs will be met by their loved ones, they are free to focus on the real work of childhood—playing, learning, and forming strong, positive relationships.

WHAT DOES RESPONSIVE CARE MEAN FOR PARENTS?

- **Being a good observer.** Babies are communicating from day one through their sounds (cries), words, facial expressions (smiles or grimaces), or body movements (when a baby arches his back). The same message—"I'm angry"—can be communicated in different ways by different children. For example, one toddler might act out aggressively—hitting and kicking—when he is upset at not getting something he wants; another toddler may cry inconsolably; and another toddler may shut down and become quiet and withdrawn.

Responsive parents tune in to their child's cues and patterns of behavior to understand what she is trying to communicate. A mom might observe that her baby is slow-to-warm up—she gets quickly overwhelmed and starts to fuss and cry when passed from relative to relative at large family gatherings. She needs time and support to feel comfortable first, before being held by people she doesn't know well. A dad might learn that his toddler gets frustrated easily when she faces a new challenge. Over time, he discovers that when he stays calm and coaches her to solve the problem, she is much less likely to give up.

- **Responding sensitively to a child's behaviors or communications.** Responding sensitively to children's feelings and needs lets them know they are important and loved. This builds their self-confidence and strengthens the bond between you. This might mean comforting a crying baby, or stopping a tickling game when your baby starts to arch his back and fuss, understanding that this is his way of communicating that he needs a break. It is important to remember that being a responsive parent doesn't mean always getting it right. It's all about being flexible and open to learning—seeing what works and trying a different strategy when something isn't working as you hoped.
- **Taking turns in parent-child interactions.** Give your baby or toddler a turn in your play and conversations. When you describe a picture in a book you are reading to your baby, pause for a minute and look expectantly at your little one. Babies, even as young as 3 months old, may kick, coo, or gaze at you in response. These simple interactions teach babies the "rules" of conversations and relationships, forming the foundation of early communication skills.
- **Staying calm when a child is upset.** Children pick up on the emotions of their closest caregivers. When parents get upset and highly emotional (angry, frustrated) in reaction to a child's breakdown, it tends to intensify the child's distress and makes it harder for her to regroup. When parents stay calm during children's breakdowns, young children learn, over time, to regulate their emotions and responses—to manage their frustration, to cope with normal life stresses, and to calm themselves. Research shows that this skill of self-regulation is critical to a children's ability to be successful both in school and work, and to develop strong positive relationships as they grow.