

“*What a child does not receive, he can seldom later give.*”

- P.D. James

Bonding and attachment are terms that are often used interchangeably. Bonding is the basic link of trust and heart between infant and parents, usually with the mother first. Bonding and attachment are cornerstones of human development and essential to a child's growth and functioning. At conception, fetuses inherit and absorb both the mother's and father's emotional, physical and energetic DNA. They are like little sponges, absorbing positive and negative energies equally. They internalize whatever energies/feelings the parents are experiencing.

For example: If one or both parents lived during the Depression Era, the fetus would carry the energetic feelings and beliefs of *deprivation* and *fear of poverty* in their bodies. Later, the child is then predisposed to this same energy of deprivation and will likely project the parents' beliefs onto the world. The task of every child (starting at conception) is to bond. Babies bond by absorbing the energy of the world and everyone around them, especially of their mothers and fathers.

Recent studies done at the University of Minnesota, by Megan Gunner (*Child Development*, 75, 497-504, 2004) show that under stress, high levels of the hormone cortisol are produced. This increases heart rate, causes digestive problems, and decreases the ability to think. However, the study also showed that the presence of a loving caregiver during the time of stress reduced the level of cortisol. Although the child still experienced upset, there was a reduction in the levels of cortisol in the body. This shows that a loving, consistent relationship can offset even the most stressful situation. Without that kind of relationship, growth is stunted -- mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Children need good bonding in order to move through the world and accomplish developmental tasks such as walking, climbing, age-appropriate separation, using the toilet, and reaching for their needs in the world. Children who have had good bonding are able to handle the successes and failures of these various tasks. They have the spirit to get up after falling down or failing and trying again. They develop positive core beliefs about their worth. They

believe they are strong, competent, secure and safe.

The kind of bonding we receive determines how we perceive the world, ourselves, and how we interact with others.

The quality of bonding is extremely important in many different ways, such as: building and maintaining trust, developing relationships with others, intellectual achievement, brain language development, development of the nervous system, regulating feeling, identity and self-esteem. Good bonding results in feeling strong connection to self, body, spirit, safety, and a right to live and take risks. However, if an infant doesn't receive good bonding and his/her arrival encounters anger, disappointment, chaos, abandonment or other forms of rejection, h/she will not feel secure about him/herself and his/her existence.

Lack of good bonding and trauma during childhood can create various psychological reactions. Not only during childhood but also throughout life. The child may begin to exhibit signs of distress and agitation or the child could appear depressed. There can be a reduced feeling of the right to exist when this occurs. As an adult, we might compensate for feelings of low self-esteem (given that we never received the positive bonding and attention we needed, or that we received negativity) we will potentially become narcissistic (the focus has to be on us) and develop feelings of endless anger and a lack of compassion for others. These traits impact relationships and create intimacy issues.

If the parent meets the child with violence, rejection, abandonment, or doesn't respond to the child's needs, the ability to trust the relationship will be damaged. This is a form of trauma, and is experienced as such. If the child reaches out and no one consistently responds to the reaching, a feeling of hopelessness will take over. This can result in collapse, depression and despair. The child may compensate for not having his/her needs met by pretending to be excessively independent. Later, as an adult, this individual projects, and lives, the feeling of "no one cares" as if it were true of everyone. Again, this projection has an impact on all relationships.

Stranger anxiety is a natural stage of development in children. The good bonding from a parent at this stage offers

gentle encouragement and reassurance that it's okay to trust others. This encouragement needs to be balanced with an understanding that the child's need to feel safe is of utmost importance. If a child feels that his/her pace to test out the world is being honored, the child will feel safer in the world. On the other hand, if a parent feels frustrated or rejecting the child will have a difficult time feeling safe enough to be separate and safe in the world. This might lead in adulthood to the person's being frightened of crowds, parties, social situations, and in extreme cases, to agoraphobia.

As adults, these individuals will likely be more stuck in life and have a hard time moving forward because they didn't get the bonding, support and encouragement to feel safe and explore life. They are unable to reach directly from their needs and express needs through whining and complaining thus developing a victim mentality.

A child that is mocked, inflicted with guilt or whose boundaries are not respected will feel unsafe to explore the world. The child senses that he/she can't rely on his/her parents to be available and spite develops and an endless underground "no" forms. This creates a self-defeating pattern in adulthood due to the inability to say yes to life. Saying no is their only form of power.

Based on the kind of bonding we received as children, we all have varying degrees of healthy attachment. Therefore we all fall somewhere on the continuum that runs from "well attached" to "poorly attached."

Below are some of the signs that indicate whether or not a child has successfully bonded and attached:

A well-attached child generally:

-Is affectionate

-Is caring

-Is helpful

-Feels bad after doing something wrong

-Has positive interactions

-is willing to exert effort to accomplish things

-Takes responsibility

-Is developmentally on target in its emotional life

Some symptoms of poor attachment that you may see in children:

-Manipulative behavior

-Controlling behavior

-Defiant behavior

-Poor eye contact

-Rage filled behavior

-Is not affectionate

Asks incessant questions

-Acts incapable

-Lies and/or steals

-Is mean to animals

-Has interested in blood and gore

Children who have been traumatized develop behaviors signifying that they feel unsafe, unworthy or unlovable.

They have difficulty with developmental tasks; they become over- stimulated, and have difficulty soothing

themselves. Because children have little control over their environment, they have difficulty handling stress, and their struggle is usually communicated through symptoms.

It would be wonderful if we received all the positive bonding we needed. The truth is that as infants we absorbed the totality of our parent's emotions and energies. Given that our parents were simply human, we carry a certain amount of trauma that has created some level of attachment difficulties that we need to heal. As parents we carry the negative impact of the environmental trauma and our own childhood trauma. As parents we need not be perfect. Our love is expressed every time we take responsibility for our own negativity. Given that all parents were children, we are providing examples of both adult and childhood injury. For those of you who are parents we invite you to begin your own process of awareness around your origins of bonding and attachment.

Overly intense reactions toward your children, or any person, hold clues to your own development of bonding and attachment in your childhood. We simply cannot give what we didn't get. Your unavailability to your children's feelings and reactions is an indicator of your own history as a child of not having a parent available for your own feelings and reactions. Once aware of this you can begin to have more compassion and understanding for your own process of reactions and emotions. This will allow a greater level of compassion and understanding for your children's daily process and the process of the people in the world.

The great thing about bonding and attachment is that you get a million chances a day to meet the needs of your child, yourself and those around. You don't have to be perfect and you don't have to do it every time, just more often than not!

*This article is an excerpt from the upcoming book by Dori Gatter, Psy.D., LPC and Julie Saffir, Psy.D., LMFT on bonding and attachment and healing trauma.*

