



WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH ATTACHMENT ISSUES

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By Linda Ranson Jacobs

04/16/2014

A new report was just released by [Princeton University](#) that stated approximately 40 percent of children in the U.S. lack strong emotional bonds in their lives. A child's primary attachments will form with their parents and begin very early in life. However, there are different levels of attachment that kids can form. In the absence of appropriate emotional bonds with their parents, many of

these children can still bond with an alternate caregiver such as a grandparent, childcare staff or caring baby sitters. These "secondary bonds" allow these kids to move forward with only minimal attachment issues.

Why is this important for our future? If children don't form emotional bonds and connect with their primary care givers as infants, they will more than likely face behavior issues such as aggressiveness and defiance as children and hyperactivity as teens and adults. Because of their behavior issues, many will face limited educational benefits as they may be suspended from school; sent to alternative schools or end up dropping out of school all together. Some may grow up without a developed conscience intent on doing harm to anyone who gets in their way. If children are severely unattached they will not be able to trust others. Because they learn not to trust others, they turn inward and only trust themselves. These are the children who will lie, steal, hurt animals and hurt other people. These are just some of the problems faced by kids who don't develop proper attachments early in life.

Attachments issues can arise in many different environments and are the result of the child not getting adequate time an opportunity to attach with their caregiver. Take for example infants who live in a high stress single parent home. The single parent, whether it is mom or dad, might be in a state of shock and barely surviving. They take the child to childcare, work a full day, pick the child up and stumble home. Hoping the childcare gave adequate care for the day; they may just feed the child and put them to bed as they struggle to keep up with life.

Reasons for attachment issues

- Neglect
- Abuse – emotional, physical, sexual
- Sudden separation from primary caretaker
- Frequent move and or placements (not sure what the 50/50 custody is doing to very young children)





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- Poor parenting skills
- Inconsistent or inadequate childcare

Commonly displayed behaviors by children with attachment issues

- Lack of eye contact (older children may be looking at your eyebrow or nose and not actually be making eye contact)
- Inability to give affection or receive affection
- No impulse control
- Indiscriminate affection with strangers
- Superficially charming and or engaging with adults
- Sneaky or covert with actions such as taking things that don't belong to them
- Abnormal eating patterns (hoarding food, gorging, crave sweets, etc.)
- Learning lags and other disorders such as ADHD, ODD, etc.
- Poor relationships with peers and family members
- Persistent nonsense questions and incessant chatter
- Lack of cause and effect thinking
- Destructive to self and others
- Preoccupied with blood, gore and fires

Ways to help

1. There are many ways those of us in church nurseries and children's classes can help these children.
 - If they are in your nursery, swaddle them as often as you can and sing and rock them or sway with them as much as you can.
 - When you swaddle them, cross their arms over each other so that their little hands are touching the other arm. Or put their arms down to their side so that their hands are touching their legs.
 - They need human touch. Wear collarless shirts so you can snuggle the child right in the crook of your neck. They need skin on skin so to speak.
2. As they get older keep in mind typical discipline won't work with these kids.
 - You can't feel sorry for them but you can empathize with them.
 - They need to be held accountable and every misdeed needs to be addressed.
 - Do not use punitive measures but notice immediately what they did and comment or use a signal such as shaking your head "no" or shrug your shoulders with an look of "Oops, you blew it."
 - Reward systems will not work for these kids; in other words no stickers or stars.





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- Offer a lot of positive choices.
 - Don't judge them because they know when you are judging them.
 - Don't praise them because they will set out to prove you wrong.
 - Notice and describe what they are doing. Many times they won't make eye contact - don't let that throw you. Go ahead and talk to them while you are also looking away at something across the room.
 - Many won't let you hold them or hug them. However, just standing close to them helps.
 - Don't ask them any question you know the answer to. For instance if they steal something don't ask, "Did you take that?" Instead say in a matter of fact voice, "Put it back." Don't give them the benefit of the doubt.
3. While it might seem counter intuitive compared to the above, there are some things to keep in mind.
- Expect them to be respectful
 - Expect them to be responsible
 - Accept nothing less and possibly even more in the area of respect and being responsible. In other words don't put in their minds any self-fulfilled prophecies.
 - Hold the child accountable
 - Be clear and concise with directions
 - Don't use any ambiguous terms such as, "soon", "maybe", "after while", etc.
 - Don't allow yourself to be "sucked" into any arguments even if that means walking away.

There is so much to say on how to minister to kids with attachment issues. The main thing is we must help them attach to us. If they are severely unattached, try to get them to attach to something even if it is a ball, doll or blanket. One time, I had a toddler that attached to a soccer ball. For me that was a sign she was capable of attaching to something.

Pray, pray and pray some more. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and fill you with a special love and concern for these children.

A complete copy of the Princeton report can be downloaded at <http://www.suttontrust.com/our-work/research/download/265>.

Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the



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healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. Linda offers support, encouragement and suggestions to help those working with the child of divorce. She serves as DC4K Ambassador (<http://www.dc4k.org>) and can be reached via email at ljacobs@dc4k.org. You can find additional articles from Linda on her blog at <http://blog.dc4k.org/>.

Free articles and devotions for single parent families in your church can be found at Linda's website Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids (<http://www.hlp4.com>).