



Attachment in infancy important in child development

January 23, 2012

Elizabeth Fallen, LCSW

Evansville Courier and Press

Babies are cute, right? The way they coo, look at us with their big, bright eyes, try to grasp our hands, smile and giggle. Babies also know how to get our attention by crying. The fact is, babies are built to elicit certain caretaking responses from their grown-ups — eye contact, nurturing touch, a soothing voice — responses that are essential to a baby's social and emotional development.

According to the Indiana Association for Infant and Toddler Mental Health, "attachment" is a strong emotional tie, to a specific (adult) person, who supports the child's need for safety and security. Attachment takes place over time, with repeated interactions between the child and their caregiver. In other words, babies need ongoing and repeated positive interactions with their caregiver to develop a secure attachment. Having a caregiver who is emotionally and physically available helps babies develop a sense of trust that their needs will be met.

John Bowlby, founder of Attachment Theory, found that babies are likely to form emotional attachments to familiar adults, especially if those adults are sensitive and responsive to the baby.

Babies demonstrate their attachments by seeking out a certain adult, especially in distressing situations and they use their adult as a "secure base" (Ainsworth 1978).

These attachments are linked to later personality and emotional development. Without secure attachments (either the absence of a consistent caregiver or a caregiver who is not sensitive or

responsive to a baby's needs), a baby can suffer long-term negative emotional and cognitive outcomes. Outcomes including: behavioral problems, trouble regulating emotions, difficulty interacting with peers and even parenting as adults.

A psychologist by the name of Harry Harlow conducted controversial experiments in the 1960s that demonstrated a baby's need for security and comfort. Harlow used baby monkeys; the monkeys were taken from their mothers shortly after birth. They were then offered two "surrogate" mothers: one made of wire mesh that had a bottle attached and the other made of soft cloth but with no food.

Amazingly, the babies spent more time clinging to their "soft" surrogate than the one offering food. In addition, the monkeys demonstrated significant distress when separated from their soft "mother."

Knowing how important early relationships are, some early childhood mental health specialists refer to difficult relationships as "ghosts in the nursery," while those positive relationships have been called "angels in the nursery."

One predictor of how we will parent is how we were parented ourselves. Parents who had inconsistent or chaotic caregivers when they were younger have a much more difficult time providing a supportive relationship for their own children. Can these skills of being a nurturing, supportive, responsive parent be relearned as an adult? Research suggests yes, with the right interventions.

Your baby is communicating with

you more than you may realize. So, be sensitive, respond to them, nurture them, love them — it is vital to their future.