

# Attachment and Relationships

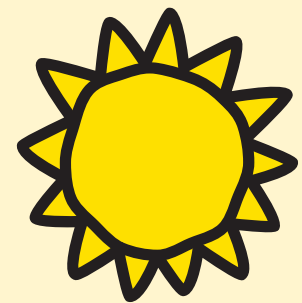
In order for children to feel supported and develop trusting relationships, they need a caring and consistent environment where their basic needs are met. This requires a parent or caretaker to be attuned and responsive to the child's daily emotional and physical needs. For example, when a baby cries, does the parent or caretaker react and provide timely support? This might include making eye contact, smiling, picking them up in an attempt to soothe the baby's distress, changing their diaper or feeding them.



This reciprocal process between caregiver and child serves to strengthen their relationship and a shared emotional exchange known as **attachment**. Children who regularly have their needs met by a trusted adult develop a secure attachment, creating a sense of safety and resiliency. These children have confidence in the adult's ability to regularly assist and care for them when in need. For instance, an injured child would seek out their parent

for comfort and first aid. They rely on this stable connection with the caregiver to help navigate uncertain or distressing experiences. This bolsters their ability to cope independently over time.

When a child's needs are ignored or neglected, they may feel the caregiver is unreliable and unable to comfort them, resulting in an insecure attachment. This lack of predictability and responsiveness has the potential to disrupt the child's emotional and physical development. In particular, an unstable parental connection may impact their ability to form trusting relationships with others.



To some degree, attachment can evolve and change overtime, so it's important to provide empathic and consistent responses to a child's needs, especially during or after traumatic experiences. Spending more focused time with the child demonstrates your availability and investment in their well-being.

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# How are attachments strengthened?

There are various ways caregivers may improve and strengthen the relationship with their children. Use the acronym **PEAR**, to be:



## **P**resent.



**Over time, the child will learn they can anticipate your regular presence and care. For children with trauma histories, reminders of your presence, and thereby their safety, are especially helpful. This consistent support helps the child cope with stress and regulate their emotions.**

- Be consistently available to provide comfort through words, predictable environments, touch/hugs (as appropriate) or close proximity.
- Establish a reliable structure using a daily routine. Following a schedule increases a sense of predictability and decreases uncertainty.
- Plan ahead together for situations that might be difficult. Incorporate their feedback about what might help them cope best.

## **E**mpathic.



**A warm, compassionate, nonjudgmental and nurturing approach can strengthen attachment.**

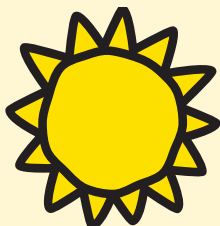
- Provide a safe environment to talk about feelings openly and acknowledge the child's thoughts/emotions.
- Be mindful of your own observable behavior and affect around the child to model calmness and approachability (welcoming/open posture, soothing tone of voice, soft smiling).
- Offer compassion through statements of validation and care such as, "That sounds like a difficult thing to go through," "What was that like for you?," "I'm always here for you to talk things through," or "How can I help?"
- Communicate acceptance and understanding as the child learns adaptive ways to cope.

## **A**ttentive. **Being "tuned in" to the child's temperament and needs can make them feel well cared for and safe. This sense of harmony and shared understanding improves your connection.**



- Be attuned and learn to interpret their verbal/nonverbal cues that communicate daily needs (emotional and biological). Understanding this helps you respond quickly and meet their emotional and physical needs.
- Communicate that you are listening attentively and are genuinely interested in their needs/thoughts through your eye contact, facial expressions, and responses.
- Be actively engaged with your child by having "time-in" including lots of playing, talking, making eye contact and smiling.

## **R**esilient.



**Children engage in observational and social learning throughout their development. They rely on caregivers as models who provide information on how to interact with the world around them. Parents can help children develop resiliency and other aptitudes, while simultaneously strengthening their relational bond. This may be accomplished in various ways:**

- Model self-regulation and adaptive coping to show examples of resilient behavior children can mimic. For instance, when a parent is extremely stressed, they might practice deep breathing, take a nature walk, or engage in a guided imagery exercise to better regulate their emotions.
- Provide education about a variety of coping skills verbally, with printed instructions/visual reminders, or electronically (via phone apps) to help them manage stressful experiences.
- Practice using coping skills together (relaxation activities, deep breathing, drawing, etc.) based on their interest and developmental level.
- Use play and conversation as an opportunity to explore and promote their existing strengths. Identifying these can remind children to incorporate them when under stress.

If you need immediate support, call the Wolfson Children's 24/7 Kids & Teens Helpline at 904.202.7900 or text LIFE to 741741. If there is an immediate safety concern, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

# Attachment and Relationships: PEARent Worksheet



Use the fillable worksheet below to explore opportunities to be more **Present, Empathic, Attentive and Resilient** in an effort to strengthen the relationship with your child.

<b>P</b>	List ways you aim to be increasingly available for your child:
	How can you make your child feel more safe and cared for?
	What aspects of a daily routine could be added or improved upon to help your child feel supported?
<b>E</b>	How might you show compassion through your behavior?
	Imagine your child seeks out reassurance or shares difficult emotions with you, what might you say?
	What if you notice they are feeling sad, yet do not reach out. What would you say to open the lines of communication and show support?
<b>A</b>	What are ways you can show more attentiveness?
	Describe some of your child's verbal or nonverbal cues that indicate they have an unmet need or strong emotion:
	What "time-in" activities might your child enjoy most?
<b>R</b>	What are your strengths as a parent?
	How can you use these strengths to teach resiliency in your child?
	What are your child's favorite activities that also help their emotion regulation, resiliency and coping abilities?