

Attachment-Based Strategic Parenting

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Parenting can be challenging; some parents report feeling stressed in their role as a parent dealing with children's difficult behaviors. The stress and resulting conflict have a negative impact on the closeness of the parent-child relationship and on the home environment and functioning of the family as a whole. Parenting can be even more challenging for adoptive and foster parents because of the history of attachment disruptions, it's negative impact on the child's emotional regulation, coping resources and functional capacity. This in turn often creates adjustment difficulties with their new family. This article will briefly present an attachment-based strategic parenting approach that facilitates effective parenting and thus reduced parenting stress, improved child behavior, closer parent-child relationships, and more enjoyable family life.

INTRODUCTION

There are many parenting approaches. Some focus on techniques and some focus on attachment. Strategies without attachment are ineffectual. Human beings are social and relational beings and as such relationships are critical in parenting. There are some approaches that focus only on attachment. Attachment is very important but by itself is insufficient in achieving effective parenting. Parents often understand the importance of remaining calm, providing choices, and spending time with their child as a way of improving parenting. However, parents also want to know specifically and practically how to respond to conflict and child misbehaviour. When parents lack specific parenting skills or are experiencing stress they often resort to old interactional patterns. An attachment-based strategic parenting approach begins with attachment but goes further by helping the parent not only learn but effectively implement specific strategies and interventions in response to specific behavior issues. In addition, the parent gains a much greater understanding of the meaning of the child's behavior and thus greater insight in responding more effectively.

ATTACHMENT AND THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Behavior occurs in context, primarily within the context of the family and family relationships. An effective parenting approach must then not only address conflict with the child and the child's behavior but also understand the child's behavior within context. The parent-child attachment is key to a child's overall development including social, emotional and cognitive. Emotional regulation depends upon a

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positive experience from infancy where the infant develops trust that the attuned parents will positively respond to the child's distress. When achieved children grow up with the ability to emotionally regulate themselves and thus engage in effective problem solving and satisfying social relationships.

Attachment-based strategic parenting works with parents on developing a parent-child relationship based on empathy, understanding, acceptance, genuineness, and playfulness. It will help parents develop an increased understanding of child development, understanding of their child, their child's behavior and their child's feelings, improve communication, increase self-confidence as parents, increase their feelings of warmth towards their child, and reduce parenting stress. It also has significant benefits for the family as a whole including assisting the family to reduce presenting issues, strengthen parent-child relationships and attachments, improve the family's coping skills and psychosocial adjustment, and improve the family's ability to have fun and enjoy each other.

STRATEGIES

Strategies and interventions are important but need to be utilized in a manner that communicates acceptance to the child. It can be difficult for parents to change interactional patterns with their children. It requires an intervention to be specific, and for the parent to have the opportunity to practice using it. It is the implementation that is often difficult particularly for changes to be maintained in the long term.

Strategies need to be focused on helping the parent learn how to avoid power struggles and how to focus on what they have control over not what the child has control over. In so doing the parent avoids giving the perception of trying to control the child while maintaining real control. Strategies are utilized within the framework of attachment as children are much more compliant when they feel a strong positive relationship. The child then perceives the parent as being reasonable, fair and willing to share control which motivates greater compliance and fewer conflicts.

Steps to Parent Response

The steps to a parent's response to misbehaviour or conflict, based partially on Parenting with Love and Logic, involves leading with empathy, validating the child's feelings, giving the problem back to the child, assisting the child with identifying choices or options and allowing the child to make the choice and to accept responsibility for the choice. Often parents jump too quickly to dealing with an issue. They miss the significant benefit of empathic listening.

Empathic Listening

Empathic listening is about the parent reflecting back to the child what they are saying, doing and most importantly feeling. It can be challenging to learn to understand what the child is feeling and what the meaning of the misbehaviour is. For example, parents often are able to see that a child is angry but may miss identifying, understanding or respecting the feelings underneath the anger such as disappointment, frustration, sadness, or anxiety. Empathic listening has the primary benefit of helping the child de-escalate or remain calm enough to resolve the issue.

Limit Setting

Practical limit setting skills are important in effective parenting. Louise Guerney, developer of Filial Therapy, suggests a three-step limit setting approach to misbehaviour involving stating a limit, giving a warning, following through with a consequence. The difficulty that parents often have is the child does not respond to the warning and so they do not follow through or know what to do, and parents then get frustrated. As such, the child learns that the way to get what they want is to dig in and not comply and the parent will eventually give up. Attachment-based strategic parenting works with the parent to develop effective multiple responses for each problem issue. It is also very important for the parent to fully understand the meaning of the misbehaviour as that will more clearly direct the most effective parent response. If the first response does not work the parent already has in mind what responses they will utilize next. If implemented by the parent remaining calm and showing empathy, understanding, and acceptance, the child eventually complies and will respond to the initial direction.

CONCLUSION

Effective parenting involves healthy attachment at its core and practical and specific strategies. When achieved, families report significant positive changes including reduced child behavior issues, reduced parenting stress and improved parent-child relationship. Effective parenting also results in those changes being maintained in the long-term.

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