

# Early Childhood Exchange



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In our last issue of the ECX we considered the effect of day care on infant-parent attachment. Now we go the next step, looking at the attachment of infants with their day care providers. This can be a scary topic for parents, but I think the news will be reassuring to parents and providers alike.

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## THE EXCHANGE

In our last issue we asked about infants becoming attached to their providers, and how everyone feels about that. Sharon Johnson of Madison wrote to us with these thoughts.

"I can't imagine a provider not becoming attached to infants in her care.

"An infant needs to be nurtured, loved, rocked, held, cuddled, and fed. To do care for an infant requires a provider to have constant close contact with that child. I find it impossible to not become attached.

"Some of my parents have found it "heartbreaking" at first. But I take the time to explain, by word and with written material, the positive aspects of this relationship. The child's feeling for me is love, but a different, special love than what he or she feels for the parent."

The Early Childhood Exchange is produced by University of Wisconsin Extension and the UW School of Family Resources. Dave Riley wrote and edited the text. Jane Weier and Joann Turner handled the production and distribution. Artwork is by Carol Goodsell. You may write to us at 1300 Linden Drive, Room 235 Home Economics Building, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, 53706. For more information, contact the Extension Home Economist in your county.

## WHEN CHILDREN TREAT THE DAY CARE PROVIDER LIKE MOM

What does it mean when a young child calls her day care provider "Mommy", or treats her like mother?

For the mother, it usually brings a confusion of strong feelings, including jealousy, anger, and guilt.

Many employed mothers are proud of their child's independence, but also can feel vaguely uneasy about leaving their children in the care of others. They wonder: should I spend more time with my child, as most mothers did when I was a child? Am I being a good mother? If their child is in full day care, 30 or more hours per week, they may wonder if they (and their children) are missing something important about parent-child relations in the early years of life. When her child calls the day care provider, "Mommy", a mother might ask herself, Who's the real Mommy here?

Child care providers can also have confused feelings when a child calls them "Mommy". Embarrassment may be felt first, along with a bit of pride and pleasure. Good child care providers love the children in their care. It feels good to know you are loved back. But you might feel guilty as well, knowing that you aren't really the mother of this child.

What can research tell us about this? First, babies and caregivers really do form strong emotional bonds with each other, not unlike the bonds of parents and their infants. But the research evidence also shows that babies in full day care still maintain the strongest attachment to their parents.

### How Do You Know When an Infant is "Attached"?

From about age 6 months onward, infants develop their earliest emotional bonds to others. Developing a secure attachment relationship with at least one other person—a person the baby trusts to dependably meet his/her needs—is one of the most important tasks of infancy. The attachment figure is the person who the infant:

- \* clings to when upset, finds comfort with;
- \* looks at and moves toward following a separation;
- \* and relies upon as a source of security, as a secure base from which to explore the world.

### What Kinds of Attachment are There?

Quality of attachment can be observed in reunion behavior after separation: how the child greets and gains comfort from the adult. If the infant seeks the nurturance of the adult, and utilizes that nurturance to feel secure, then we can say that a "secure attachment" exists. Most infants, about three-fourths, have a secure attachment with their mothers by age 12 months.

The remaining one-fourth have insecure attachments: they are strongly attached, but the infant has difficulty using the adult effectively to calm anxieties. Some of them avoid the adult when she or he returns. Others give a mixed message: they go to the adult,

then seem to resist being comforted. They may push off if held, or even cry as if angry.

Have you observed this? Child care professionals verify with their own experience what researchers have observed in controlled experiments: infants form strong, secure attachments to not just mothers, but also to child care providers. (They also form secure attachments with fathers and other family members. In fact, some children even form something like an attachment with inanimate objects: their "security blankets"!)

Does the provider replace the mother? The short answer is "No". Researchers have investigated this possibility, and two of their research projects are worth describing in detail.

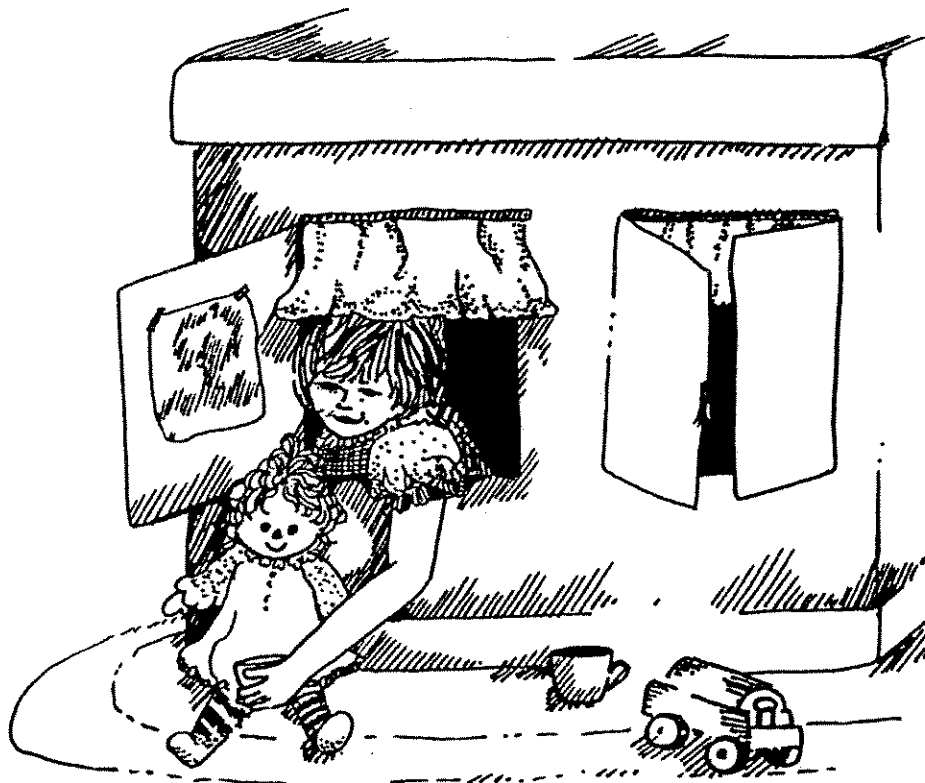
### The Kibbutz Babies

Some agricultural communes (kibbutz) in Israel have used a form of day care that

looks extreme by American standards. Group child care begins at the age of four days, when the baby is brought home from the hospital. The baby sleeps and lives in an infant house, under the care of a trained caregiver, called a metapelet. The parents may see and care for the baby as much as they like. Typically the parents return to work within six weeks. By the age of 1-1/2, most parents see the baby once each day for about three hours in the evening. The baby returns to the infant house to sleep.

The researchers asked: will the infant be better able to use the metapelet or the mother to calm its fears? The investigators observed the infants using each adult to calm themselves after a stressful separation. The results showed that the infants were more secure with their mothers.

Given the small amount of time the mothers and their babies spent together, this was a somewhat surprising finding. We



know that attachment is not a matter of biological bonding, as with some other animals (for example geese). Adopted babies—adopted early—are no different from biological babies in their attachments with their rearing-mothers. This is a relationship that develops over time. Researchers have not found any “natural” or instinctual advantage for the biological mother.

So why did the babies have more effective attachments with their mothers on the kibbutz? It probably reflects the quality of interaction during those three hours the mother and infant had together each evening. The metapelet, remember, had other infants to attend to also all day.

This idea is supported by research on American mothers who are employed full time outside the home. Many of them com-



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pensate for being away all day by giving their children extra attention in the evening. One study found that they spent as much time in high quality interaction with their children each day as did homemaker mothers.

### **An American Experiment.**

With the growing number of infants in full day care, American researchers have also wondered about child care providers becoming like mothers to young children. In one study, each infant or toddler was

videotaped in a somewhat stressful situation. To one side of the room was the child's mother, and to the other side was the child's day care teacher. The adults were instructed not to talk or gesture to the child. Who would the child go to when stressed?

The results showed that the children spent much more time close to the mother than to the provider (and much more time close to the provider than to a stranger in the room). The same pattern held true for the amount that the children shared toys, communicated with, and touched the different adults.

The studies agree on two points: First, infants form secure attachments with their providers. But, second, providers do not replace parents. The infant-parent attachment remains the most important emotional bond in the young child's life.

## How does the Child View This?

We began by noting that parents and providers alike are somewhat confused and embarrassed by children's confusion when they call the provider "Mommy". But how does the child feel?

Chances are good that the child doesn't know or care if you are embarrassed or jealous. From the infant's point of view, all that matters is that he or she develop a secure attachment relationship in every important setting in his or her life. If this happens, then the child has a much improved chance of developing well both social-emotionally and intellectually.

Clearly, parents and providers do not compete for the affection of young children. Providers are not substitute or alternate parents; they are supplementary care givers. They supplement and support the

efforts of parents to raise their children well.

If a child feels a trusting, secure, loving relationship with the child care provider, parents should rejoice. Even if the child slips up and calls another adult "Momma", the real mother can rest assured that she still has a special place in her child's life, and she can be thankful that she has found a loving person in the community to help her with her childrearing efforts.

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## UW-EXTENSION BULLETINS

The following bulletins are available in your county from the University of Wisconsin-Extension office. You can ask for them by number. Prices are shown.

- |          |        |                                                                                          |
|----------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| B1708    | \$1.25 | Communicating with your infant through play: Toys and activities for the first two years |
| B8NYFS10 | .30    | Infants and parents                                                                      |
| B8NYFS04 | .30    | Terrific and terrible two year olds.                                                     |
| B1682    | .50    | Toys and things to fill a child's world.                                                 |
| B2997    | .15    | Making music with your child.                                                            |

## Helping Form a Secure Attachment

Why do some infant-adult pairs form a secure attachment, while others don't? Researchers believe both members of the pair contribute to the attachment relationship.

Some infants seem to be born better able to use the nurturance offered by adults, and better able to elicit good parenting from the adults around them. These are babies who respond quickly and positively when you do anything that meets their needs. They are good at teaching you how to be a good parent or care giver.

Of course, care givers differ too. Some are very skilled at meeting the physical and social needs of babies, while other people are not so competent. What exactly is it that highly skilled care givers do, that helps form a trusting, secure attachment with the infant?

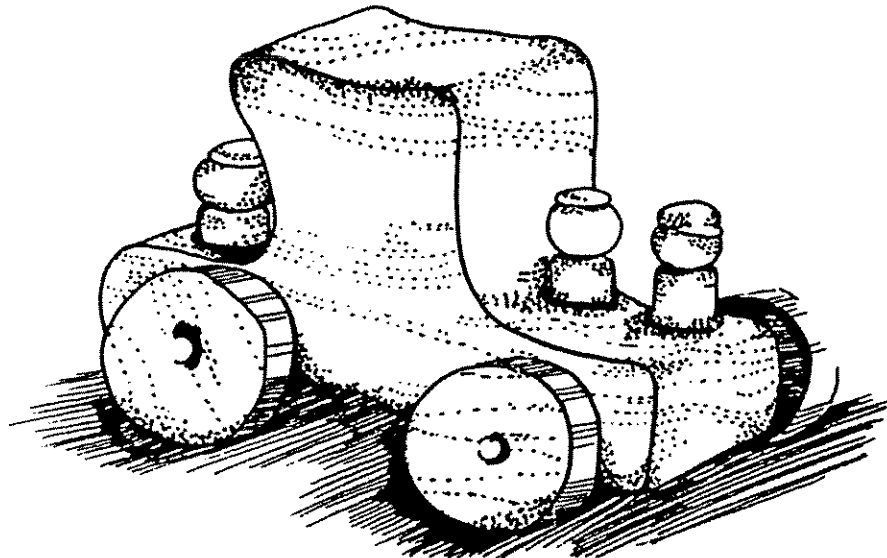
In a nutshell, researchers say that sensitive social responsiveness leads to a secure attachment. This means you are

there when the infant needs you, that you can be counted on to meet his or her needs, especially social needs. Researchers have known for decades that even very young babies need much more than physical caretaking (food, warmth, dry bedding, safe conditions, etc.). Babies also need sensitive, loving responses from the people around them, and if they don't get this they suffer problems in the develop-

ment of their social and thinking skills.

Parents and care givers who are responsive to young children respond quickly to their needs, and they respond in a way that is in tune to the baby. For example, they may respond differently to a different cry; the response is not automatic, like just sticking a bottle in the baby's mouth whenever she/he cries. The adults who develop secure attachments with their infants respond to crying more quickly, with less frequent ignoring, and with more observable affection than do other parents/care givers.

These parents and care givers are rewarded for their efforts. Babies who receive a more rapid response at age 4 months have been found to cry less at 8 months. When the response is more sensitive to the baby's needs, then the baby is more likely to have a secure attachment at 12 months. Secure infants have had their needs met in a relatively dependable fashion in the past, so they trust that the world will take care of them. This makes them



easier to be around, because they have fewer needs now and are easier to comfort.

Being a sensitive care giver also means knowing when you have overstimulated an infant. While babies need lots of loving and lots of stimulation, they can also become overwhelmed by it all. Sometimes they need to roll away from you, to shut off the stimulation and calm themselves. A sensitive caregiver understands this, and doesn't try to recapture their attention right away or too forcefully.

How sensitive you are has less to do with the amount of stimulation you provide a child, and more to do with how you provide it. A sensitive caregiver reacts to the baby's signals. The interaction has turn-taking, like a game of ping-pong.

First the baby sends a signal, perhaps a sound or a look or a movement. The adult notices and signals back, perhaps imitating the sound, or touching the foot that moved, or simply telling the baby what she or he just did. Then the baby responds again, and the adult responds back again. It goes on like this, a pattern of careful reacting to each other. Babies who receive this high quality interaction are more likely to develop a secure attachment, and to develop their thinking skills.

One of the surest signs of a care giver who is sensitively responsive is social interaction during routine caretaking tasks. Does the care giver talk and play with the baby while feeding or diapering her/him? If the answer is yes, then you know that this caregiver is doing much more than simply meeting the child's minimum physical needs