

# Parent-Child Relationships



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## **Introduction**

The following report is an exploration of a narrow field within the broad context of health and human services work. It is not an exhaustive treatment of all effective programs or approaches within the field, but rather a narrow investigation of a topic of interest.

The subject matter of this paper does not necessarily represent an area of financial investment, grant funding, or other programmatic pursuit for United Way of Olmsted County. Rather, this report reflects on a specific type of intervention that allows individuals to reach their full potential, and presents related research.

There may be a wide variety of programs or services that address individual and community needs, and this report is not designed to enumerate all possibilities. United Way of Olmsted County hopes that readers will think creatively about the ways in which the ideas and experiences contained within the report might inform programs, services, and community changes in Olmsted County.

## **Parent-Child Connections**

The relationship between a child and their parent can be described in many ways. It is the primary attachment, in that a child relies on their parents to meet the majority of their material and emotional needs throughout childhood. It also establishes an attachment pattern, in that the nature of the relationship between a child and their parent creates a sort of blueprint for later attachments – children with distant relationships with their parents will often maintain distant relationships with future romantic partners, while those who are ‘too close’ or enmeshed with their parents will often become codependent on future romantic partners (Benoit, 2004).

In the best-case scenario, the relationship between a child and parents creates a sort of ‘home-base’ for the child: a relationship that is unconditional and highly predictable. As the child ages, they are able to take appropriate risks such as making new friends, trying new activities, and exploring new components of their identity. For children with secure connections with their parents, they are able to turn to their parents when life feels overwhelming and unfamiliar, get comfort and advice appropriate to the situation, and then return to exploring on their own (Moretti & Peled, 2004). For many children with this type of connection, even situations that create high levels of stress – divorce, relocation, teenage breakups – can be navigated without creating long-lasting ill effects. This trait is known as resilience.

## **Why Does this Matter?**

The level of emotional bonding or attachment between a parent and their child is highly predictive of the child’s future educational, health, emotional, and relational outcomes (O’Connor & Scott, 2007). The stronger and more secure the relationship is between a child and their parent, the more resilient a child becomes. However, not all parents have the skills needed to develop this bond, for any number of reasons: lack of

knowledge, barriers such as mental illness, chemical dependency, domestic violence, or physical distance between them and the child.

When children try to navigate emotional responses to challenging situations on their own, the result is often maladaptive. Acting out, withdrawing, being oppositional, or over-functioning are just some of the ways in which children try to take control of an uncertain situation. In some cases they may regress and behave in highly-dependent ways in order to elicit the caretaking or soothing response they desire, and in others they may try to cause as little fuss as possible in order to 'not be a burden' to their parents. In both situations, the child is generally emotionally stunted and unable to respond in an age-appropriate way to challenges. Instead of seeking comfort and advice from their parents, they try to 'go it alone,' often resulting in poor outcomes (Wadsworth, 2015).

Youth who have not received the support they need from their parents, such as praise, encouragement, and affection face difficulties in building self-control and are more susceptible to peer pressure and deviant behavior (Barnes & Farrell, 1992). When children and youth are unable to feel supported and loved by their parents, the resulting anger and frustration may result in delinquent behavior (Hollist, Hughes, & Schaible, 2009). Teens with poor relationships with their parents are more likely to engage in drug use, criminal activity, and underage sexual activity. They are significantly more likely to have academic struggles, be diagnosed with mental illness, and skip school (O'Connor & Scott, 2007).

In some cases, the parent-child connection is severed or strained. Typically this occurs after divorce, but can also be due to incarceration or abandonment. Children in these situation experience a wide range of emotional reactions that may feed into mental health issues, such as sadness, anger, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and feeling at fault for their parents' problems. Young children will frequently regress and cling to their custodial parent, while older children will often withdraw emotionally from their parents and begin to connect with peers. Young teenagers tend to either try to avoid growing up or grow up 'faster' (Schwartzberg, 1992). In some situations the custodial parent is able to provide a 'home base' for the child to address these feelings, but may be preoccupied with self-care and unable to attend to their child's emotional needs in an appropriate manner. In some cases, the custodial parent denigrates the absent parent, creating further distress in the child (Amato, 1994). The loss of a parental relationship can be highly traumatic for the child, with unresolved feelings often lasting into adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

In the worst-case scenarios, the parent-child connection is severely damaged due to abuse or neglect to the child, whether emotional or physical. In most cases the victimizing parent is not an option to provide meaningful emotional support to the child. The other parent may be rejected by the child if they were aware of the act and did nothing to stop it, or the other parent may be unable to provide appropriate emotional support for other reasons. For children experiencing this level of trauma, a stand-in adult may serve as the trusting adult in the child's life. In extreme cases, the child may

be removed from contact with the parents all together. In addition to the negative outcomes listed above, children whose abuse and neglect are not addressed appropriately may inflict the same acts upon their future children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

### **Mitigating Poor Parent-Child Connections**

No one is born knowing how to parent, and kids don't come with instruction manuals. However, the quality of a child's relationship with their parents matters in building resilience and reaching developmental milestones so it's important to get it right. The good news is that intervention can help as long as parents are engaged in learning parenting skills and apply those skills at home. It doesn't matter to a child if emotional responsiveness is something that comes naturally to their parent or if it is learned in a classroom, all that matters is that it happens.

Research shows that except in cases of abuse, contact with both parents is generally preferred over contact with only one – and this includes high-conflict divorces and incarcerated parents (Nielsen, 2017) (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). This is not to say that all parents are able to provide a secure emotional attachment with their children, but rather that it is important that a child is not alienated from their parent. When a parent is entirely absent, a child is likely to experience alienation which often includes feelings of inadequacy, abandonment, or vilification. Even a relationship that consists of brief skype conversations about sports or quick activity-based visits is better for a child's emotional development than no relationship at all. Even if that parent cannot be leaned on for emotional support, the child's self-narrative can include them as an adult that shares interests and fond memories.

### **Children With Poor or Absent Parent-Child Connections May:**

- Experience developmental delays
- Perform poorly in school
- Have separation anxiety
- Demonstrate antisocial behavior
- Lack resilience
- Suffer from poor mental health
- Face challenges in sustaining romantic relationships
- Commit criminal acts

## **Successful Models**

**Supervised visitation** allows parents in high-conflict relationships to maintain the child's relationship with the noncustodial parent even when the parents have no interaction due to a history of domestic violence, drug abuse, mental illness, or incarceration. Supervised visitation may also be used when there is a risk or history of child abduction, neglect, or abuse. The noncustodial parent is able to visit with their child in a supervised environment (often a playroom with a two-way mirror) during scheduled visits. This type of program protects children and parents from dangerous situations while providing the noncustodial parent access to their children in order to grow the parent-child relationship (Supervised Visitation Network).

**Attachment-based family therapy** is a 16-week course of therapy for children and youth who have been through trauma. The goal is to strengthen or repair the parent-child relationship and improve family communication, allowing parents to become a trusted resource to their child. This allows the child to improve their ability to cope with stress and learn to explore their own autonomy. This course begins with the child alone, eventually adding the parents. All parties work together to provide a secure relationship in which the child can address factors adding to their emotional distress and work toward developmentally appropriate autonomy both inside and outside the home (SAMHSA).

**The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program** is an example of new-parent home visits. These are typically done by a social worker who visits new and expectant mothers in their homes. These programs are generally voluntary and promote maternal and child health, encourage positive parenting, and promote child development and school readiness. Many times, the program also serves to prevent child abuse and neglect. Through recurring home visits, parents learn how to support prenatal health, breastfeed, and care for newborns. As the children age, specialists educate parents on developmental milestones and behaviors so parents can determine areas in which to give their children additional support. The specialists also encourage praise, positive parenting, and educational play, which is often practiced with the families to ensure the skill has been learned accurately (Administration for Children and Families, 2017).

**Parent/child education classes** cover many of the same topics as new-parent home visits. There is often less focus on prenatal health and more focus on practicing interactive enrichment activities that parents can do at home with their child. Examples include making simple age-appropriate toys out of household materials and interactive play that stimulates brain development. Some programs will separate parents and children during part of the class to assess the children's development while teaching additional skills to the parents such as conflict resolution, emotional regulation, or accessing other resources. These classes often include a home-visit component as well.



## **Find Your Connection**

- 1. Encourage a strong relationship between your child and their other parent.** Regardless of the state of your relationship with the other parent, they are still family to your child. Setting aside differences in order to work as a team, refusing to fight in front of your child, and encouraging the two to interact around activities that they both enjoy allows your child to feel secure and loved. Disparaging the other parent in front of your child or refusing contact between the two (unless there is physical danger) sends the signal to your child that their inborn desire to have a connection with their parent is in some way wrong, and this can have a devastating impact on their sense of self as an adult.
- 2. Parent to meet your child where they are at.** Children rely on their relationship with you to feel secure about their place in the world. Encourage them to take age-appropriate risks, push them to persevere when they encounter challenges, and comfort them when they fail. Do not disclose your own stressors to your children or expect them to meet your emotional needs, and don't saddle them with more responsibility than they can handle. Strive to provide a 'home base' in which they are loved unconditionally, encouraged to have their own identity, and take on increasing amounts of responsibility as they are able.
- 3. Address your past traumas.** Trauma is often passed down generation to generation: those who experienced multiple traumas as a child are likely to pass them on to their children. The best way to stop the cycle is to start with yourself – attend therapy and parenting classes, develop new coping skills, and do the self-work it takes to reconcile your past with your present, before passing it on to your children.

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## **Thanks and Appreciation:**

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