

TIP SHEET FOR RELATIVES AS PARENTS

DEVELOPING HEALTHY ATTACHMENTS IN YOUR FAMILY

Attachment is the emotional bond between two people. Developing attachment is basically developing the ability to have a relationship with someone. During babies' first few weeks, months, and years of life, they develop attachments to the people they spend the most time with – typically their mom or dad. Usually these attachments are healthy, but sometimes they can be unhealthy. Or, sometimes the child doesn't learn how to attach, especially if he is neglected.

The child living with you now may not have been with you since birth. So you may need to work at developing a healthy attachment with him or her. Having a healthy attachment to you will help your child feel safe and secure. What can you do to help your child develop healthy attachments within your family?

- **Spend time together.** This may seem obvious, but it is very important to spend time as a family, focused on your child. It may mean playing a game together, going for a walk, or reading books. Most children desire having your undivided attention.
- **Develop consistent routines.** Your children may have had a lot of chaos or inconsistency in their past, so developing consistent routines will help them to learn that your home is a safe place. They will learn to trust that certain things will happen every day, or even at certain times during the day. For example, having the same bedtime routine every night can be very reassuring to a child. It is also helpful to let your child know if there will be a change in her routine.
- **Offer physical affection.** Learning about appropriate physical affection is very important for children. This will help them learn about healthy relationships. It is a good idea to ask before touching, especially for children who have been abused. Offering a hug when you see that your child is upset may help him feel loved. However, do not force physical affection, and never let someone else force your child to hug or kiss them if the child doesn't want to.
- **Help them identify their feelings.** Some children have trouble telling us how they feel, so they may need us to identify their feelings. For example, if a mother does not come to visit your child and he begins throwing things, you may need to say, "You seem really angry right now. It must be hard when Mom does not come for your visit." When your child realizes that you understand his or her feelings, the child may begin to open up more and share with you how they feel. Remember that children's behavior, whether positive or negative, is usually an attempt to tell you how they feel or what they need.
- **Play and have fun.** Last but not least, it is important to spend time playing and having fun on a regular basis. You have probably heard that "laughter is the best medicine," so try to find ways to help your child to laugh. It might be watching a funny movie or baking cookies, or anything else that your child enjoys.

Building healthy attachments is not something that will happen immediately. It will take time, and will probably happen as a result of the little, every day interactions that help your child to feel safe and secure. For more information, visit www.zerotothree.org, www.scholastic.com or www.helpguide.org and type *attachment* in the search box.

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