



Topic:

Is a parent-child relationship strengthened by the way the parent responds to their child's behavior?

Research tells us:

Research findings show that the relationship between parent and child grows stronger when the parent is attentive to the child's behavior and responds to the child in accepting, pleasing ways.

Acting on the evidence:

Parents can help their child understand that adults are reliable sources of comfort and support by:

- 1 Paying attention to their child's behavior and identifying their child's needs.
- 2 Responding to their child's behavior and needs appropriately.
- 3 Responding in ways the young child perceives as pleasant and positive.

Heart to Heart

The strength of the relationship between an adult caregiver and a young child is affected by the adult's responsiveness

Research findings show that consistent, reliable parent responses to child behavior—that is to say, responses that occur with appropriate frequency and that are made in pleasing, positive, and welcoming ways—can help parents and their young children develop healthy and secure early parent-child bonds.

Danielle Z. Kassow, Ph.D., Associate Research Scientist, and Carl J. Dunst, Ph.D., Research Scientist, staff members of the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, identified and examined 13 studies focusing on how the social-emotional relationships between parents and their children are affected by parents' response style. They analyzed research involving 962 infants and their parents who participated in studies published between 1984 and 2001. All of the studies focused on responsive, consistent, and emotionally pleasing parental behavior occurring mainly during everyday routines or free play.

When taken as a whole, the research evidence shows that relationships between young children and their moms and dads or special caregivers tend to grow stronger when:

1. The adults consistently respond to their children's behavior, and



When parents respond to their young children in positive, consistent ways, they nurture strong and enduring parent-child connections. The child is comforted and grows in confidence as he or she experiences and comes to expect loving, attentive responsiveness from the caregiver.



- The babies come to rely on their parents' responses, being confident that mom or dad will respond happily, readily, and pleasantly.

By the time a baby reaches a developmental age of six months, she learns that there is a connection between what she does and what her parent does next. In other words, the baby realizes that “when I do this, this is how that big person will respond.” And research findings show that consistently attentive ways of responding often have a positive effect on the closeness of the bond that develops between parent and child.

Let's take a look at how this beneficial way of responding occurs in one young family:

It's easy to see that first-time mom Ndiagna Long and her six-month-old daughter, Rania, are thoroughly



Baby enjoys making Mom smile with her toy.

“tuned in” to one another. Baby Rania’s ready smile and attentiveness to her mama’s every action, and Ndiagna’s steady, happy responsiveness to her little one’s behavior

have played an important part in building the strong connection that’s so evident between the pair.

On a typical Saturday morning, Ndiagna putters about the living room tidying up the clutter that’s collected during a busy work week. Rania lies on her tummy on the carpet, surrounded by playthings. Catching sight of her mother, she pats the bright yellow cover of a picture book, gazes intently at Ndiagna, and releases a volley of urgent coos and chirps.

“Rania wants to read a book!” Ndiagna responds with a smile, taking in the scene. “That’s a good idea!”

Mom gazes happily at her baby’s face, sits beside her on the floor, and lifts Rania into her lap as she continues to speak: “You picked this book. You said,

‘Mama, let’s read!’”

For the next few minutes, mother and baby explore the book. When Ndiagna sees Rania growing restless—looking away from the book, pushing to get down, calling out and pointing to another toy—she says, “You’re ready to go!” and places Rania back on the floor. Soon the baby is happily reaching for her favorite noisy rattle.

Mom responds to baby’s behavior that says, “I want to share this storybook!” Baby Rania has learned that her mama welcomes her vocalizations, facial expressions, and actions, and that it won’t take long before she answers them with words and pleasant expressions. Rania relies on her mama’s willingness to try to figure out what the baby’s gestures and vocalizations mean and to respond to them appropriately. She has learned that when she needs a playmate or some extra attention, she can count on her mama to listen, to look, and to act in a welcoming way.



Mom responds to baby’s behavior that says, “I want to share this storybook!”



Mom’s consistent responsiveness builds a happy mother/child bond.

Take another look:

Visit www.researchtopractice.info to read or download the complete research synthesis by D. Kassaw and C. J. Dunst (2004). Relationship Between Parental Contingent-Responsiveness and Attachment Outcomes. *Bridges*, 2(4). Copies of the

synthesis, this *Bottomlines* research summary, and a variety of practice guides based on this topic are available online. Paper copies may be ordered from Winterberry Press, P. O. Box 2277, Morganton, NC 28680. 800-824-1174. www.wbpress.com.