

# ATTACHMENT: Who Loves You, Baby?

by Lisa Belisle, MD, MPH

**T**HE GOAL OF RAISING READERS is to get books to children. We supply books to medical providers who pass them along to their patients at well-child visits. The hope is that children will cherish these books and the process of reading itself. Ultimately, however, a book is simply a tool—one that is only as effective as the person reading it to the child. Brain development depends less on the tools a child can access than his attachment to those who teach him to use those tools.

Attachment theory has been explored by various child development experts for more than forty years. John Bowlby uses the term ‘attachment’ to describe a “pattern of interaction that develops over time as the infant and caregiver interact.”<sup>1</sup> Attachment has also been called ‘bonding,’ which denotes the connection between caregiver and child. Early bonding has a significant impact on the way a child deals with future relationships, and in his ability to learn.

Learning begins in infancy. An infant begins to observe life processes through his experiences with those who care for him. A child is first exposed to the idea of cause-and-effect in his interactions with his caregiver. He learns that when he cries, he can expect attention to his needs. He understands that he can have some control over his environment. He also gains a sense of what he may encounter in different situations. “The repeated experiences of an infant become encoded in memory as expectations about the world that, over time, become a lasting mental model.”<sup>2</sup> If a child has appropriate expectations, he will more readily engage in new relationships and learn new activities.

Children who have secure attachments to their caregivers are observed to:

- have higher self esteem, to positively engage and respond to other children, and to be more empathetic [as preschoolers],
- be more self-reliant [but also] more effective in using adults when appropriate,
- be more likely to be accepted by their classmates and were better at forming close relationships with friends [in middle childhood],
- show capacity for intimacy, self-disclosure and successful functioning in mixed gender peer groups [in adolescence], and
- interact in a more positive way with romantic partners [as young adults].<sup>3</sup>

A child who has a normal attachment to his caregiver has a ‘secure base’ from which to explore new things. This base becomes a place of safety and solace when a child feels threatened. Children who do not have a secure base are very tentative in their explorations. They focus on basic survival, rather than trying to better understand their environment by learning new tasks.



The importance of a child’s relationship to his environment cannot be understated. Children are born with genetic potential. How this potential is manifested depends on a child’s interactions with the world.

As the “architect” of a child’s brain development, a child’s caregiver plays a crucial role. Most synapses are made before the age of five. Once these are forged, the brain operates on a “use it or lose it” model. The synapses must be utilized in order to be maintained. Children depend on their caregivers to facilitate exposure to ongoing stimuli that keep the connections intact.

One way of facilitating this exposure is by reading to children. Reading provides a multi-sensory experience in the setting of a loving environment. It is an emotionally satisfying activity. It is also a way of modeling a desirable behavior. Children who enjoy this type of association are more likely to mimic the behavior as they grow older. Reading begets readers.

Readers are not born—they are made. Learning to read requires good genetic potential, coupled with sufficient exposure to relevant tools (i.e. books). Both of these are only minimally useful without positive child-caregiver interactions. Make this your focus at your next well-child visit.

As you hand over a beautiful, new Raising Readers book, be sure to ask the question...

“Who loves you, Baby?”

**raising  
readers**

#### REFERENCES:

- <sup>1</sup> *Zero to Three Bulletin*: Attachment Theory and Research, Volume 20, Number 2, October/November 1999.
- <sup>2</sup> *Brainwatch*, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, Volume 1, Issue 5, April 2000.
- <sup>3</sup> *Zero to Three Bulletin*: Attachment Theory and Research, Volume 20, Number 2, October/November 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> *Brainwatch*, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, Volume 1, Issue 5, April 2000.

**Environmental factors play a crucial role in the establishment of synaptic connections after birth.**

**For the infant and young child, attachment relationships are the major environmental factors that shape the development of the brain during its period of maximal growth. Therefore, caregivers are the architects of the way in which experience influences the unfolding of genetically preprogrammed, but experience-dependent brain development. Genetic potential is expressed within the setting of social experiences, which directly influence how neurons connect to one another. Human connections create neuronal connections.<sup>4</sup>**



# raising readers

A Family Health and Literacy Program  
for Maine Children Ages Birth to 5 years

## Good Books *about attachment!*



**The Irreducible Needs of Children —**  
What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish  
By T. Berry Brazelton, M.D. and Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.  
Perseus Publishing, 2001; ISBN 0738205168

Brazelton and Greenspan outline seven fundamental requirements of a healthy childhood: Ongoing nurturing relationships, physical protection, safety, regulation, communities, cultural continuity, and the need to protect the future.



**Guess How Much I Love You**

Written by Sam McBratney  
Illustrated by Anita Jeram  
Candlewick Press, 1996; ISBN 076360013X

During a bedtime game, every time Little Nutbrown Hare demonstrates how much he loves his father, Big Nutbrown Hare gently shows him that the love is returned even more.



**The Runaway Bunny**

Written by Margaret Wise Brown  
Illustrated by Clement Hurd  
Harper Collins, 1972; ISBN 0060207655

A little bunny who, pretending to run away, tells his mother how he will escape. She is always just behind him, even as he goes to the end of the earth.



**Oh My Baby, Little One**

Written by Kathi Appelt  
Illustrated by Jane Dyer  
Harcourt, 2000; ISBN 0152000410

When a baby bird's mother hugs him before dropping him off at school, she reminds him that "even when I'm far away/ 'this love I have will stay/ and wrap itself around you/ every minute of the day."

## MAINE ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

**T**HE MAINE ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH is an organization for professionals concerned with the emotional, physical, social and cognitive well being of children birth to age 5 and their caregivers. They seek to:

- Encourage awareness of infancy as a critical period of development.
- Increase the sophistication of members' ability to respond to the needs of infants and their families.
- Promote optimal development and wellness of the child and family through prevention, identification, treatment and support.
- Facilitate cooperation and collaboration among groups, agencies and individuals that serve children and families in Maine.

The MeAIMH's 17th annual conference on Friday, May 21st from 8:30 to 4:00 at the Ramada Conference Center in Lewiston is entitled "Promoting Self-Regulation: Sensory Integration and Coping Styles" Keynote speaker is G. Gordon Williamson, Ph.D. Clinical Professor in the Rehabilitation Medicine Department of Columbia University.

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