

ATTACHMENT (Module 5)

Lesson 1: Healthy attachment and sleep

Many parents we've talked to wonder if doing some form of sleep training will psychologically damage their child, or if the trust between parent and child will be broken. We totally understand this concern and want to reassure you that your child's healthy development - both emotionally and physically - is our highest priority. In fact, it's exactly why we do sleep coaching in the first place. That being said, we want you to be able to stand behind changes that you make with full confidence, and a solid understanding of parent-child attachment, tears as communication and attuned parenting.

To begin with, we want to discuss the differences between "attachment theory" and "attachment parenting", as a lot of misunderstanding comes from the interchanging usage of these two terms. Simply put, "attachment theory" as a concept was researched and developed by developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth and psychologist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby in the early to mid 1900s. Within attachment theory, attachment is understood to mean an affectional bond or tie between an individual and an attachment figure (usually a caregiver). For an infant, this is instinctual, based on the child's need for safety, security, and protection. Bowlby theorized that there is a sensitive period for the development of attachment (the first 3 years), and that lack of healthy attachment can result in delayed growth, as well as delayed motor, cognitive and socio-emotional development.

In contrast, the parenting movement now known as "attachment parenting" was first started in the 1980s by Dr. William Sears, quite a bit later than Bowlby and Ainsworth's research on attachment. Sears promoted the "The 7 Baby B" guidelines as being the ultimate way to a strong healthy parent-child attachment.

The 7 Baby Bs

- ★ Birth-bonding
- ★ Breastfeeding
- ★ Bedding close to baby
- ★ Baby-wearing
- ★ Belief in the value of baby's cry
- ★ Beware of "baby trainers"
- ★ Balance in parenting

While attachment parenting as a movement has undoubtedly been beneficial for some families, many other parents have felt confused or simply overwhelmed when using this parenting philosophy. Many mothers feel guilty for not being able to give their child the "ultimate strong attachment" because of an inability to breastfeed or carry their babies (which not all babies even like), or not being able to bond with their baby straight after birth (for example, if the baby was in the NICU for an extended time). According to attachment parenting principles, the perceived "needs" of the child are more important than the parents. As coaches, we have seen countless mothers who have struggled past the point of physical and mental exhaustion, trying desperately to be the best moms according to the attachment parenting philosophy, worried that if they "sleep train" their little one the attachment will suddenly break or that their child will be harmed, all the while suffering from the consequences of sleep deprivation themselves.

Fortunately, the scientific research says there's no grounds for fear. There is no evidence to suggest that the tenets of "attachment parenting" *actually* result in a stronger healthier parent-child attachment than other forms of parenting. At best, it is one style of parenting, one which doesn't always serve the whole family.

In contrast to the extensive "requirements" of attachment parenting, the main indicators of a strong parent-child attachment according to attachment theory are actually quite simple.

- 1) Parents should be sensitive and adequately responsive to the child

AND

2) The child should be allowed space to be increasingly competent and independent.

Our philosophy of sleep and attachment comes closer to responsive / aware or attuned parenting philosophies (e.g. Aware Parenting from Aletha Solther, or RIE by Magda Gerber), which promote both meeting the child's actual needs while at the same time encouraging parents to be emotionally present, setting boundaries respectfully, and creating healthy long-term sleep habits.

This is why all our recommended sleep training methods preserve:

- Respect for the child
- Parents' emotional availability
- A nurturing response

For example, even with an out-of-room method such as Intervalled Soothing, if you go in at your set intervals your child will learn quickly that you ARE coming back, just as you promised. It can also be helpful to remember that attachment is not formed or broken within a few days. Studies have shown that attachment develops over the entire first year of the child's life (and beyond!), and that it's influenced more by the nature of the parent's response rather than HOW OFTEN or HOW FAST the parent attended to the baby.

As long as you respond to your baby in a loving and attentive way, attending to their actual needs (not the same as habits!), they will form a secure attachment even if sleep trained at some point. Not to mention that secure attachment is, of course, not only formed around how you respond to your baby at sleep times, but even more so, how responsive you are to them when they are awake, how you interact with them, and how emotionally present you are to them.

In the words of Heather Turgeon and Julie Wright, the authors of one of our

favorite books on child sleep: "For the best sleep you need both the consistency of structured sleep training programmes and the responsiveness (or attunement) of attachment friendly ideas." (p.18 *"The Happy Sleeper"* by Heather Turgeon & Julie Wright).