RAISING A SECURE CHILD: Creating an emotional availability between you and your child

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Chapter 2

Is Your Child Secure with You?

It is my belief that all parents want to do well by their children. Even babies can let you know if their emotional needs are being met, but can you pick up on these cues? Psychologists and researchers such as myself have the responsibility to give parents the tools to understand their children’s communication. We also must provide parents with a way to assess the quality of their relationships with their children at every stage of development. As most parents know, parenting is part science, part emotion, and part intuition. The checklists of qualities or developmental milestones we get from books and doctors can appear to be so much fiction when we’re faced with a screaming baby, recalcitrant toddler, or glum adolescent. What’s most important in relationships, however, is the way each person feels. I believe that parents can use a working knowledge of emotional availability to enhance and deepen their connection with their children.

What Is Security for a Child?

*How can you measure whether your child is secure in your relationship?*

Let me give you an example of a classic way researchers would measure the quality of security in a child-parent relationship with the youngest subjects. *Please bear in mind that although I say “baby” at many points in descriptions of security and insecurity, the same principles hold for older children.* For decades, developmental psychology laboratories around the world have been using this procedure to evaluate infants’ emotional status. The results from this procedure place the infant into one of four categories:

- secure
- insecure/avoidant
- insecure/dependent (also known as insecure/resistant
- insecure/disorganized

This experiment is the basis for a great deal of research and is used as a predictor of numerous aspects of child development. The assessment generally takes about 20 minutes and is done in an unfamiliar setting (e.g., a room in a child psychologist’s office or a laboratory room in the child development department of a university). Often the interactions of the parent and child are
filmed from several angles, to allow assessment of the relationship more thoroughly at a later time.

This kind of assessment generally involves babies between 12 and 18 months of age because at this stage the child’s special connection with the parent (termed infant-parent attachment) becomes clearly evident. The child can be brought in by the mother, father, or other caregiver—whoever would be considered a source of nurturing. The process itself is simple:

1. Caregiver and child are brought into the unfamiliar room.
2. Caregiver and child stay in the room together for a few minutes.
3. An unfamiliar adult (in my lab, usually a female university student) enters the room.
4. Caregiver leaves the infant and unfamiliar adult together.
5. Caregiver returns (“reunion”). Unfamiliar adult leaves the room.
6. Caregiver leaves infant alone in the room.
7. Unfamiliar adult goes back into the room.
8. Caregiver returns (“reunion”).

The above events last approximately 3 minutes each. We try to make the assessment as easy as possible for both parent and child, and always halt the evaluation if the child becomes too distressed. We never let the separation between parent and child go for as long as 3 minutes if the baby is crying and clearly cannot self-soothe. At times, we have sent the parent back into the room after as few as 30 seconds.

The actual assessment looks at the “reunion” episodes of the interaction. What does the child do when the parent returns into the room after a brief separation? It is believed that during stressful separation situations, a baby’s “attachment system” becomes activated and heightened (in the same way that separation causes adults to miss adult loved ones). What is most interesting, however, is that this moment of heightened attachment is a clear indication of how the baby views his or her relationship with the parent. It is as if at the moment of reunion the child’s relationship with the parent comes alive for the child.

There’s so much happening as your baby develops during the first year of life. Many parents read and know about different developmental milestones such as crawling, walking, and talking. Pediatricians check on these and many other factors as part of a child’s well-baby checkups. But what is never checked, at least to my knowledge, is an emotional milestone usually clearly seen in infants 9 to 12 months old. Babies develop attachments. Your baby will
develop an emotional connection with you. Only in cases of infants raised in orphanages or institutions where there is no continuity or stability of caregiving do infants develop without attachment.

That there will be an attachment between infants and their parents is a given. What is not a given is the quality of that connection. More than 40 years of research in developmental psychology laboratories around the world has shown that 20 to 30 percent of babies develop some form of insecure connection with their parents. These are children mostly from two-parent, middle-income families! So, being raised in a so-called “normal” context does not necessarily seem to lead to healthy emotional connections for our babies.

**Reading Your Child’s Cues**

Most new parents (or even experienced parents with a new baby) have their hands full simply coping with the physical needs of the child. Although it may be easy to figure out when a child is hungry or wet, parents rarely recognize the emotional signs that indicate a baby is in need of emotional connection. From the moment of birth, however, babies are giving us signs about their emotional states. Parents who can read their children’s emotional communications can forge healthier and stronger bonds more quickly.

In child development studies, babies are usually categorized as either secure or insecure, based on observations of their behavior. Insecure babies are further categorized as either avoidant, dependent, or disorganized. Each of these categories connotes specific kinds of behavior, and each is a result of different qualities of emotional connection of the child with the parent. By using the following information, you can learn to “read” your baby, discover the quality of your emotional connection with him or her, and determine how to create a stronger, healthier, more loving bond between you.

**The Secure Baby and Child**

Watching 11-month-old Eddie with his grandmother, Lynn, was a joy. Lynn’s daughter had been unable to care for her son, so Lynn had been Eddie’s primary caregiver since his birth. It was obvious that the little boy loved his grandmother and felt absolutely comfortable with her. Eddie was an active baby just on the verge of being able to walk. He crawled all over the playroom in our clinic, pulling himself up on chairs, tables, and bookcases. He was happy exploring the area, and happy to return to his grandmother as well.
Lynn was easy with Eddie, yet she kept an eye on him the entire time we were talking. “He’s at the age where gets into quite a bit of mischief,” she explained. At one point, Eddie almost pulled an entire stack of books over on himself, but Lynn jumped up and rescued him just in time. The little boy protested, but Lynn began to tickle him and his protests turned to giggles. He snuggled comfortably in his grandmother’s arms as she brought him back to her chair. Lynn then pulled a wooden truck out of her bag, gave the truck to Eddie, and put the little boy on the floor by her feet. Eddie immediately started playing with the truck, content to stay close to his grandmother and play on his own.

Lynn and Eddie obviously had an emotional connection that benefited both of them. As a result, Eddie’s emotional signals were those of a secure baby. He was happy in his grandmother’s love and secure enough to be comfortable exploring his environment on his own or in proximity to her. The relationship between grandmother and grandson was easy for both of them. This child had been given an excellent emotional foundation that would serve him throughout his life. It’s the kind of foundation most parents would like to ensure for their own children.

In the 20-minute situation in the laboratory, involving eight episodes described above (referred to as “the strange situation procedure”), the secure child will demonstrate longing for the parent and eagerness for the parent’s return.

Approximately 70 percent of the normal (that is, unselected or nonclinical) population in this country are secure, like Eddie. While each child develops at his or her own pace, you can expect to see these signals at some point during your baby’s first year of life.

- Your baby responds to you. For example, when you come into the room, your baby lights up. When you talk, your baby is looking at you and smiling. When you come back into the room after being absent, your baby greets you, happy that you’re back.
- In general, your baby seems to want to be near you, but he or she also is secure enough to be alone for short periods of time.
- Your baby shows age-appropriate independence, meaning that your baby can play by himself or herself for a while, and you don’t constantly have to be “doing” something with your baby. Certainly, all babies go through periods of being clingy and feeling that
they don’t want to separate (e.g., when they are facing a transition, such as a new day care situation, a new nanny, or when they are ill), but such periods are fairly short-lived, and the child typically goes back to normal.

- Your baby demonstrates a balance between autonomy and the need for connection. This is often signaled by something called “secure base behavior,” in which the child leaves the parent to explore his or her environment but then returns to the parent frequently for emotional connection. The parent is a secure base that allows the child to feel free to explore on his or her own. This kind of behavior should be clear by about nine months of age, when your baby is crawling and perhaps even walking. At this point the child will often bring things to the parent and show off the results of his or her explorations. If your baby moves toward you, involves you in interactions, and then moves away, your baby is indicating secure base behavior.

- By 12 months of age, 50 percent of babies are walking, and their field of exploration expands significantly. However, secure babies will still return to their parents to show them what they have found in their explorations, thereby involving the parent in their expanded world. This is one of the joys of parenting: to have your baby come to you, show you things, involve you, make you an audience to his or her play, and when he or she is emotionally fed, to move away to explore the world again.

- There should be a balance between your child moving away and coming toward you over the course of time and over the course of interaction. Some researchers have called this “refueling.” Your baby goes off to explore, maybe in other rooms and areas, but at times he or she looks back to reconnect, to see if everything’s okay and if you are paying attention. These subtle moments of connection are extremely powerful indicators of the health and strength of the emotional bond between you and your baby. I look for this “attachment-exploration” balance in the babies and young children I see.

*Because attachment begins during the first year of life, many of these examples are of babies, but the pattern is similar for a preschool, or older children. Look for the balance between connection and moving away and for delight in interactions with you and with others. With increasing age, children become (or should become) increasingly independent, but with “refueling”, never totally disconnected.*
Your interactions with your child build security.

- During the first year, you should be very attentive to your child’s responsiveness and involvement. When your baby brings things to you, either in the form of objects or in the form of smiles and giggles, that is a demonstration of the child’s desire to involve you in his or her life. When you initiate interactions and your baby smiles, “talks,” or otherwise reacts with pleasure, that indicates the child’s willingness to respond to you.

- Your responsiveness to your child and “joining” in his or her pleasure as he or she interacts with you and with his or her environment keeps your child coming back for more fun with you. Studies indicate that a parent’s sensitivity and responsiveness toward an infant is what helps to create a sense of security for the child, and that a parent’s positive affect is what maintains such security over the course of time.

The Insecure/Avoidant Child

Lorraine tried very hard to connect with her youngest child, Kelly, but with two other children under the age of five, she felt overwhelmed. She saw to Kelly’s physical needs as well as she could; Lorraine just couldn’t pay much attention to Kelly when the other two kids were around. She would put Kelly in her crib with a couple of toys or turn on a video so there would be music in the room. Luckily, Kelly was a pretty placid baby and didn’t make much fuss.

However, Kelly didn’t seem to be that emotionally connected with her mom either. When Lorraine came into the room, Kelly wouldn’t smile or laugh. She didn’t show much notice when Lorraine would try to show her a new toy or a video. By the time she started to crawl, Kelly seemed perfectly happy exploring the room on her own and rarely looked at her mom. Lorraine was relieved that Kelly was so self-sufficient, but she admitted to me that she wished her daughter were warmer. “I don’t feel like I know this child the way I did my first two,” she told me.

Certainly during the baby years, it is crucial for children to learn the skills of independence. But in the first year of life, babies are not supposed to be totally independent. Even when babies appear to be content with their autonomy, it is important to realize there is always a yearning inside them for more emotional connection with their parents. However, the insecure/avoidant child has learned to suppress the outward expression of the need for emotional connection because the parent hasn’t responded to any previous attempts the child has made to
reach out. Because these children don’t feel secure in their parents’ connection, they demonstrate very different behaviors from the secure babies described previously.

This insecurity can be born of many different factors, such as parental unavailability (physically, emotionally, or both), health challenges (e.g., extended separations from parents early on) that cause the child to feel a lack of support or connection, “mismatch” between the temperaments of child and parent, and so on. Insecurity also can be caused by a lack of parental expertise when it comes to creating emotional connections with a child. For many people, after spending a decade or two at work focused on the self-sufficient, nonemotional aspects of life, it is quite a transition to become the parent of a new baby, with all the new roles that entails. Some parents (particularly single parents) spend so much of their energy on providing basic care that they don’t have much left for the emotional work of connecting with their children.

I believe these are some of the reasons that 20 percent of normally developing children demonstrate insufficient emotional connection. This is not abnormal or a sign that something horrible will happen. This just means, based on the type of interactions you’ve been having, that your baby appears more independent and self-sufficient—but in truth, he or she still wants a strong connection with you.

In the 20-minute laboratory procedure, about 20 percent of children will seem cool and rejecting when the parent returns. The child may avert his or her gaze, or make more clear and obvious signs such as physically turning around or moving away. Some children may even try to leave the room with the unfamiliar adult when the parent returns to the room. These children are considered insecure/avoidant.

**About 20 percent of the normal population in this country are classified as insecure/avoidant. The following are some signs and signals of an insecure/avoidant baby.**

- Your child looks away from you and moves away from you a lot.
- You don’t have sustained playtime together, perhaps because of your child’s unresponsiveness.
- When you leave your child in an unfamiliar situation, even briefly, he or she doesn’t light up and show the joy and glee you had hoped for when you return.
- When you try to initiate interactions with your baby, he or she moves away.
• Your child has had to be separated from you frequently or for lengthy periods, perhaps due to medical issues for either of you. Prolonged separations during the first year of life could affect the connection between you. (Here, I am not referring to daily routines, such as going to day care—I mean extended separations that include overnights.)
• You feel disconnected from your child. Things are happening at a functional level for you, but not an emotional one.
• Because your baby seems disconnected, it does not mean that he or she is weakly attached to you or not attached to you. It merely means that there is some insecurity in this relationship that needs some work and correction to get it back on a secure path.

As I described with respect to security, insecure/avoidance is not only a baby characteristic. Many adults mistake total independence or self-reliance for a positive attribute, but in fact interdependence, or interconnectedness (balance between autonomy and connection) is the goal at all stages of life.

Many parents of insecure/avoidant children are also very independent; sometimes they think that a young child can be on his or her own and not need more connection. They might view this quality as the temperament or a personality characteristic of the child. Many such parents have asked me, “Could it be his nature?” What is interesting is that some parents think that disconnection is best because this is what they themselves were used to.

A striking example of this type of perception came from my own child development clinic. When I hire research assistants, I typically show candidates videotapes of parent-child interactions and ask them to verbally narrate what they see in terms of the emotional availability in the parent-child relationship and the quality of connection/attachment that they perceive. (If a candidate’s perceptions of parent-child relationships are distorted, it is very difficult to change them even with extensive training and mentoring, so I choose students who already have clarity of perception.)

One student came highly recommended, with a 4.0 average in a master’s program and great references on her work ethic and character. When she arrived for the interview, I showed her videotape of a parent-child interaction. She described the interaction as wonderful, saying that the baby was very independent and the mother did not stifle the baby’s needs for exploration and growth. She said, “I admire the fact that this baby is moving down and not just sitting on her
mother’s lap but going off and exploring everything in the house. This baby’s going to learn a lot.”

I was taken aback because my observation of the relationship was so different. The baby was squirming down because the mother was holding her in a very uncomfortable position and in a harsh and abrasive manner. The baby could easily have settled into the mother’s lap had her mother been offering confident, comfortable holding. But the child had no choice but to squirm down and go it alone. When she got off the mother, the child hardly turned back and immediately moved to a distant part of the house, happy to be released from her mother’s uncomfortable hold. I imagined that this was a child who would later move away from the family and not write home. Needless to say, this research assistant wasn’t right for our clinic.

If you observe insecure/avoidant behavior in your child, it is important not to mistake such behavior as your child’s nature. One woman said that she thought some babies liked to play with their mothers, but hers did not. But this kind of behavior is nurture, not nature! Babies of all different temperament types show insecure patterns. It is the history of interactions between parent and child that makes some babies seek out their mothers for play while others don’t. If we put off our babies’ attempts to get close to us, then they will stop seeking us out.

However, it is almost always possible to develop a better connection with your child. Especially during the first year or two, both babies and parents are getting used to and learning a great deal about each other.

A skeptic may wonder whether these insecure/avoidant children are merely more independent than the average child—whether they are simply more interested in other objects and toys and do not have as much need to interact with the parent. In fact, this was the view of a group of social scientists. Heart-rate studies indicated that while they were playing with toys (in a seemingly engrossed fashion) and looking away from the parent who had just returned after the separation (remember the sequence of events in which this assessment typically takes place), their heart rate was accelerated rather than decelerated. Acceleration in heart rate indicates arousal rather than attention. If these children were truly independent and more interested in the toys in the laboratory, they would show heart-rate deceleration (indicative of attention to a stimulus). These findings have been replicated and suggest that infant insecurity/avoidance is a quality of the relationship rather than the nature of the child.
Making sure your child doesn’t become insecure and avoidant with you.

- Read your child’s emotional communications toward you. If your child is seemingly avoidant for long periods, try inserting some fun time into your day. Let the clothes sit in the washer for a while and play with your baby. As you play together, make sure you are not only physically there, but also emotionally there. Children want and need your emotional availability even more than your physical availability.
- When your child brings toys to you, be responsive, and make your child feel special about your relationship.
- Be “real” in your responsiveness—again, by being emotionally there.
- Give this some time. Babies don’t respond to parents all the time! They need to have some autonomy, exploration, and independence, too. Since the balance between independence and connection is at the heart of this matter, be available for connection when your child approaches you, and then follow his or her emotional lead.

The Insecure/Dependent Baby and Child

Some insecure babies demonstrate their feelings in ways completely opposite to those just described—they become overly dependent and clingy rather than avoidant. I observed one example of such overdependence when I was working on my doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley. With a video recorder in hand, I had gone into a home with the intention of filming an hour of interaction between mother and child. I had also planned to go on a separate day to be able to capture a different mood on film. When I went into this particular home, the mother said, “My baby’s not really having a good day. She’s been crying quite a bit and isn’t leaving my side. It’s really hard to even go to the bathroom sometimes. But it’s okay—I learned in psychology class that the more strongly attached my baby is to me, the better it is for her development. It gets tough at times, but it’s okay because I know that being so strongly attached to me will be good for her in the long run.”

I videotaped mother and baby for an hour and then left, promising to come back in a week. When I returned, the mother told me that the baby was in a different mood—so I was somewhat surprised to see the same behavior occurring. The child was still crying and clingy, with the mother constantly trying to soothe her without much lasting success. As soon as the child was soothed and the mother put her down, the child would again show distress.
In the 20-minute laboratory procedure, approximately 10 percent of children show both happiness and distress in the reunion moment. They will gravitate toward the parent, seeming to be happy at the return, but then become distressed. The parent’s attempt to comfort such a child often doesn’t produce any sustained soothing, and the child remains clingy and distressed even after the session. Such children are categorized as insecure/dependent.

Which came first in this story, the chicken or the egg? The child’s overdependency could easily have been explained by the mother’s oversolicitous behavior toward her. Equally, the mother’s behavior could have been explained by the child’s clingy dependence.

About 10 percent of the normal population show an overly dependent pattern in relationship with a parent. The following signs and communications are typical of an insecure/dependent baby:

- Often distressed and may at times even seem traumatized by small events. You may have a difficult time understanding the reason for your child’s traumatization.¹
- Clingy and does not easily explore away from you. He or she stays near you.
- Seems sensitive and is easily upset by events.
- Seems younger than his or her age and may seem immature.
- Is very emotional, and may show ups and downs quite a bit.

*It is possible for parents to mistake dependency for a “strong” attachment. Because your child shows the characteristic of wanting to be close with you always, it does not mean that he or she is strongly attached to you. There is no such thing as a strong attachment at any age, merely security or insecurity of attachment.*

When parents do not give children the space to explore their own strengths, children start to view themselves as weak. Babies with colic or another ailment can trigger this dependency dynamic. Illness can either be a cue to teach resilience or a cue for overprotectiveness, based on the parent’s response to the child’s needs.

¹ If your child shows signs of traumatization (e.g., nightmares, sudden fears, fears of specific things or people, such as men with beards) and such behavior occurs suddenly when you did not see it before, it is worth getting some professional consultation to make sure that a specific traumatizing event has not taken place. A more general and consistent pattern of overly distressed behavior is what is described here, not the type of traumatization that would be related to abuse and/or violence.
In truth, the quality of connection is really what is important, as well as whether that connection is secure or insecure. Being strongly attached is not a positive quality for the child. In fact, it usually indicates an overconnection stemming from insecurity. In other words, the child uses overconnection as compensation for the lack of security he or she feels inside. On the parent’s side, overcompensation comes from not trusting the child with independence. The results of such overly connected relationships include parental overprotectiveness and treatment of the child as younger than he or she really is.

As an example of overprotectiveness is treating a 1-year-old baby as an 8-month-old, with continued spoon-feeding and without regard for the baby’s budding sense of autonomy and need to do things on his or her own. Another sign is a prolonged period of breastfeeding, such as a child still at the breast at 2 or 3 years of age. During feeding, the parent might hold the baby in a supine position rather than granting some upright autonomy. The parent might also stress negative emotions, showing great concern over small cuts and bruises and supervising a baby’s play time to the point of hovering.

As the child grows older, the parent might continue to be overprotective. I have seen a father who brushed his 14-year-old son’s teeth for him so that the “child wouldn’t get cavities.” (Note the good and noble reason for overprotection on the part of the parent.) I also have seen the mother of a normally developing 15-year-old adolescent still helping him to put on his jacket. Similarly, I have even seen college students driven to their classes by their mothers, who felt that the kids hadn’t yet honed their driving skills. (Again, such parents usually have noble reasons, citing accident statistics for college students.)

Many children become so accustomed to being catered to in this way that they “require” this type of treatment. They become passive and dependent as a result of caregiving that really offers few opportunities for growth and independence, and thus they continue to evoke such behavior on the part of their parents. Once this dependency cycle begins, it is difficult to know how to alter it because both parent and child have bought into the dynamic. The parents of such children tell me that their children are so passive that they still have to wash their hair for them—this happened even when the child was 14 years old! Such parents say they have to do a great deal for their children because the children just do not have it in them to do for themselves. Again, we return to the issue of nature versus nurture. Nurture can so insidiously prepare
children for dependency that what actually has been created by the environment can easily be mistaken for the child’s nature.

It is important to emphasize here that dependence is not the same as separation anxiety. All children will experience separation anxiety during toddlerhood and most will revisit separation issues at different points in their development. What characterizes the insecure/dependent child is an overall quality of problems with separation that the child has internalized, rather than part of a developmental progression.

A healthy parent-child relationship shows a balance between connection and independence. The need for such a balance continues throughout childhood and into the teenage years. Child development circles used to believe the notion that during adolescence children move away; however, that’s not truly the case. A healthy adolescent moves away to gain greater independence, but continues to desire connection and “refueling.” The refueling may be done through other methods (such as talking on the phone), but nonetheless it involves reconnection. Asking for a parent’s thoughts or advice, introducing friends, or staying near the kitchen in hopes of having that late-night talk are all ways that adolescents continue to connect with their parents.

Although they appear in different forms at different stages of life, the need for a balance between closeness and connection and the desire to explore new territory are the threads that run through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. Indeed, a wealth of evidence indicates that romantic and marital relationships are also characterized by the balance between autonomy and connection. For example, healthy relationships usually demonstrate times of talking and sharing information, and then moving away physically or psychologically “to do one’s own thing.” The skills of reading emotional signals and balancing the competing needs for connection and autonomy are vital for any relationship. Learning to read your baby and young child now prepares you to read your child at a later stage, and, in addition, helps you to read your own relationship with your partner.

**Factors that contribute to the development of an insecure/dependent child and how to counter insecure/dependent behavior.**

- Some children, perhaps due to persistent crying, may have come to expect a great deal of caregiving. It is worth getting some professional opinion about the possible organic (or nonorganic) reasons for the crying so that the parent-child relationship can move on a healthy track.
• The assumption that your child is sensitive and dependent because it is his or her temperament or “nature” can actually prolong such behavior. You can work with any of your children (likely of different temperaments at birth) to become more self-reliant and not so easily distressed.

• Reward your child for expressing emotional needs in a “grown-up” way and do make maturity demands, rather than engaging in great catering services. You don’t need to give up your own needs to be a good parent. In your heart, you might be feeling “fed up” that you are doing so much for your child that other kids this age are doing for themselves, but you continue anyway. It may be time for you to make maturity demands, giving a “gentle push” to your child to go beyond his or her familiar limits.

• Do respond to your child’s positive emotions consistently, and try to respond in a less elevated or exaggerated way to distress emotions. Of course, you need to respond to cries for help, but insecure/dependent children have learned early on to heighten their emotional repertoire to get a reaction from their parents, and they continue “what has worked.” Try responding to your child in positive ways, not in exaggerated ways, to distress situations only.

• Help your child feel strong and robust by the type of physical play you engage in and by the “discussions” you have together. I once heard a mother talking for her baby, “I can do it myself mommy, I’m a strong girl.” Build confidence through such presumptuous talk, even if your child is preverbal.

• Make sure that your child has space to explore, including floor freedom, and that you don’t hover. Let your child explore (hopefully, child-proofing the house will allow for greater safety and floor freedom) and support your child in his or her explorations away from you. Be ready to respond consistently when your child comes back to “visit”—such is the “attachment-exploration balance.”

**The Insecure/Disorganized Baby and Child**

In the 20-minute laboratory situation, a small percentage of children show combinations of behaviors indicative of fear, such as freezing upon the parent’s return, moving toward the parent and then moving behind, and so on. This pattern is referred to as insecure/disorganized. Such a pattern is often seen in children who either have been traumatized, such as through abuse...
or neglect, or have become confused, perhaps by experiences that seem unstable and severely inconsistent. For example, I have seen such behavior in children who experience many changes in their caregiving, as for example, those children who experienced divorce during their infancy and have been spending overnights with both parents after divorce. Likely, it is the lack of stability in the caregiving environment that can create some confusion for young children. I have also seen babies and young children show this pattern if their parents have not resolved issues about a prior loss (and there is no other issue, such as abuse or neglect). Such loss events may include miscarriage, stillbirth, loss of a previous child, loss through giving birth to a child with a disability, loss of a parent, loss through their own experiences of abuse, or neglect or other unfortunate circumstances during their childhoods. It is “not coming to terms with” the loss that leads to problems, not merely the fact of experiencing a loss. Many insecure/disorganized children have an avoidant or dependent core that is palpable within a disorganized demeanor.

A small percentage of babies and young children in the “normal” population show an insecure/disorganized pattern, but approximately 80% of abused children exhibit the following behaviors.

- A child shows avoidant qualities at times and dependent qualities at other times.
- A child might show frightened behavior, perhaps being afraid of the caregiver.

Ensuring that a child does not become confused or disorganized.

- Maintain stable caregiving arrangements during infancy.
- Don’t ignore your own issues related to grief and loss, lest it be transmitted to your child through your own feelings of trauma. Such unresolved feelings of loss or trauma related to loss can make your own behavior disorganized, and hence affect your child. On your own, it may be difficult to work through all of the issues related to such loss; to accomplish this, professional help may be warranted.
- Not having worked on issues related to loss could lead to your own emotional expressions seeming disconnected from your child. Even though you don’t feel disconnected, your emotions may not communicate the caring that you really feel.
Security for Our Children’s Futures

The four patterns just described have been shown to predict how children will develop as toddlers, school-age children, and adolescents, and how emotionally successful they will be as they grow and develop. On the parental side, these patterns are a clear indication of how a preverbal baby experiences its relationship with the parent.

Just like walking and crawling are developmental milestones that children reach at particular stages of life, the infant-parent attachment relationship is an “emotional milestone” that is reached by most infants at the end of the first year. With the exception of children raised in institutions such as orphanages, by the end of the first year of life, almost all children show one of the above patterns, as long as they have lived with a parent and/or spent some time with a parent.

Obviously, we all would like our children to be secure. Secure children are easier for us to deal with, but beyond that, secure children reap many benefits from life:

- **Children who are secure (that is, have internalized an emotionally available home environment so that they feel confident and secure about the parent or caregiver) are happier.** Abundant research of the past 40 years has shown that children who are secure show more positive affect toward other children and seem happier. Such a positive mood is evident in both preschool and elementary school-age children.

- **Children who are secure have better relationships with peers and with teachers.** Such children seem to be more popular and/or have positive friendships. Insecure children are more likely to be bullies and/or victims in their relationships. Because they are not able to hold their own in the peer group, many insecure children seek out the teacher. Such teacher-child attachment seems to offset the neglect these children feel in their peer relationships. What should be encouraged at school with the teacher is a secure attachment (just like there can be secure attachment to a parent, there can be secure attachment with a teacher), rather than dependency on the teacher (which is an insecure attachment to the teacher).

- **Children who are secure are seen as more attractive by other children and are looked at more than insecure children.** Research indicates that secure children are more likely to be picked as attractive, despite the similarity in objective indices of physical attractiveness. It is as if such children seem more attractive because of their
personalities. Secure children also receive more “visual regard” or, simply put, “being looked at by other children.” In the animal kingdom, the leaders in the group are looked at more than those lower in the hierarchy. By analogy, it is as if secure children, being looked at more, are perceived as being the leaders.

- **Secure children are more likely to have a host of other positive qualities as compared to insecure children, suggesting that they are enjoying happier and more competent childhoods.** Studies that have followed secure children into their adolescent years, at least, show that the greater competence still holds.

- **Secure children are more likely to create close relationships as adolescents and adults, as well as with their own children.** Although security is better than insecurity in terms of the child’s happiness and social competence, psychologists in this country generally view the insecure/disorganized child as problematic and view the other two insecure patterns as “normal variations.” In other words, children who feel insecure are not necessarily going to end up having problematic lives—it is merely that, compared to other children who are secure, they show less positive qualities. These less positive qualities do not necessarily place them in a problematic range, although the insecurity may contribute to their feelings of unhappiness and stress in relationships during childhood and beyond.
Chapter 3

The Impact of Your Childhood on Your Child

Your own sense of security as a child and how you think can have enormous effects on your child’s sense of security with you. One of the interesting exercises is to ask, “What type of baby were you?” As documented in numerous research studies, we know that there is a great similarity between the type of baby we raise and the type of baby we were (unless some major changes occurred within us during our adulthood to change our view of relationships). Parents who were raised in an openly communicative and sensitive manner in their own families are more likely to have secure babies. Parents who were raised to dismiss their feelings and not to value attachments tend to have babies who are avoidant. Parents who were raised in an environment where there was a lot of negative emotion, particularly anger, are more likely to have babies who are clingy and dependent, and many of these parents continue to feel anger toward their own parents.

The following questions will help you see whether you fit into any of these three categories. A majority of “yes” answers in any group identifies your category.

Secure Child Memory

1. Were you the type of baby and young child who sought out a parent immediately when you needed some comfort?
2. Do you remember being happy?
3. Do you remember getting a lot of positive attention and caring?
4. Do you remember finding it easy to connect with others, including parents and friends?

Insecure/Avoidant Child Memory

1. Were you the type of baby and young child who did not go to a parent when you felt sad, angry, or hurt?
2. Were you the type of baby and young child who grew up feeling like a loner?
3. Did you not have very many people you could turn to, or did you just not turn to others? Were you basically self-reliant or too reliant on yourself, sometimes despite your best efforts to be more connected with others?
4. Do you remember making efforts at closeness with a parent and feeling rebuffed or just not getting the type of response you had hoped for?
5. Do you not remember much about your childhood, as hard as you might try?
6. Do you remember not being liked very much by your peers, either because you were aggressive at times or because you were a loner?
7. Do you feel that much of this discussion about feelings is “mumbo-jumbo,” or “psychobabble”? Is this what your parents might say or have said about such self-assessment?

Insecure/Dependent Child Memory
1. Do you recall being very close to one parent (or more) to the point of what we call “symbiosis,” or oneness with that parent?
2. Do you remember being an easily distressed sort of baby or young child?
3. Do you remember being overprotected or catered to a lot?
4. Do you recall that you were a bit younger than your age (you may still feel that way)—not necessarily in terms of appearance, but more that people treated you as younger and didn’t give you enough of a chance at responsibility?
5. Did you constantly need people around you, maybe for approval?
6. Did you constantly try to please others to the exclusion of even being aware of what your own emotional needs were?
7. Did you “take care” of younger siblings or a parent so that it seemed as if you were the parent or the roles were reversed?

Whether we were secure, avoidant, or dependent as children (recall that insecure/disorganized children typically show one of the other insecure patterns as a “core”), as adults we are free to adopt new ways of creating relationships with our own children.

Your Own Family History
People bring all kinds of personal history into parenting—that’s not a problem. The problem arises when we don’t resolve those issues ourselves. Our own parents are often our only models of how to relate to children, so they usually have a powerful influence on us, no matter whether we want to emulate them or be completely different. As adults, we need to recognize the
heritage we have brought with us from the family in which we ourselves were raised, and to replicate what was good and eliminate what was not.

Social scientists Carol George, Nancy Kaplan, and Mary Main at the University of California, Berkeley, developed a state-of-the art interview to assess parents’ family-of-origin experiences (called the Adult Attachment Interview). The interview is very detailed and enables the interviewer to obtain information about the parent’s experiences during childhood. It also does something quite tricky—it can help us understand beyond the childhood experiences of parents by going beyond the surface of what they report. In other words, we gain information on both what they say happened as well as some things they may not consciously remember.

**Parenting has a great deal to do with one’s family history—not just what we consciously remember, but, more likely, all of the largely unconscious learning that we bring to our current parent-child relationship.**

**Security during Your Adulthood**

*The “Raised” Secure*

Many (lucky) adults recall having positive experiences as they were growing up, and these individuals are likely to continue that positive heritage in their own families. Research (both by interview and observation of parent-child relationships) has shown conclusively that intergenerational transmission of parenting styles is a fact. In other words, if you remember that you were accepted and your parents were warm and kind to you, then you are likely to do the same for your own kids. Individuals who were raised secure usually provide a coherent account of what happened in their childhood, with minimal real inconsistencies in their story lines. For example, if a mother describes her childhood as beautiful and her parents as loving and caring, we would also expect to hear clear examples of many loving connections during childhood, such as mother planning for a Valentine’s Day party at school and utterly delighting in her child’s (as well as other children’s) pleasure at the party.

Many clear and detailed examples of loving childcare are typically provided, with the parent having access to a relatively full range of emotions. I have now used the Adult Attachment interview with hundreds of mothers and fathers; I feel a genuine give and take, and I
have a sense that I really got to know these people through this process. We call these individuals “secure.” What is crucial to this book is that these secure parents seem to raise secure children.

**Most parents who recall positive and happy relationships during their childhoods really had such relationships and their children benefit from such a past.**

- Such parents are not recalling idealized versions of their childhood; they were truly happy during their childhoods.
- Many such parents have very easy access to their emotions. They smile easily, joke easily, and they are not overly guarded with their emotions. They can relate.

**The “Earned Secure”**

Many parents in the “earned secure” classification relate well to their children, although they may be more guarded with their emotions than the “raised secure” parents because they have had obstacles to cross on the path to their security. They have passed insecure terrain and are now in secure territory, at least within themselves.

Many of these parents, however, describe horrific experiences. Does this mean that they are not secure now because they were avoidant or dependent as babies or children? What we find is that some parents, either through their own psychotherapy, help from a supportive person such as a spouse, or through other life experiences, have come to reflect on their early experiences—sometimes experiences as severe as abuse—and have come to rework those experiences. Reworking is a difficult process and does not happen overnight. I suggest that each parent who perceives his or her child to be currently insecure should take a look at his or her own past. Were you insecure as a child? Has that insecurity within a parent-child relationship been dealt with at a conscious, adult level?

We find that when parents have become reflective about their family-of-origin experiences, their new way of thinking can transform their relationship with their own children. These parents are the “earned secure”—they have created their own sense of understanding of what happened, and in many cases they have forgiven their parents for the stresses of their childhood. These individuals are resilient, but not through “steeling” of emotions; they have coped with the emotions available to them. Because they have not tucked in their emotions into a
compartment as they coped with the stress of not having emotional needs met, they can now have access to those feelings as they relate to their children.

This process entails open, coherent, and reflective thinking. The permission to reflect on the past without immediate threat of trauma or terror (although the actual events may have been painful) allows these individuals to live on a plane where emotions are permissible in relationships. These parents also raise secure children. Because they are aware of the negatives in the past and have “unshackled” themselves from those negative effects, they have gained a freedom that they share with their children.

This holds much optimism for the future of our children. As parents give themselves permission to examine the past, preferably in connection with others in the family, they become freed from repeating it. Their interactions with their children are generally sensitive and caring, and rarely intrusive and hostile. In return, their children are responsive to them and involve them in their lives.

A hopeful and optimistic view is that parents can create their own security in adulthood—they are not constrained by their pasts, if they don’t want to be. To earn security during adulthood, you need to:

- Have access to childhood experiences, and then you can work on such memories. Professional help may be needed if you have had traumatic early experiences.
- Be aware that such realization and work takes time and reflectiveness. Be willing to make such reflectiveness a part of you. Take the risk!
- Know that not everyone chooses to do this work—in fact, it is not clear what makes people want to change. But you are clearly in emotionally healthy company if you choose to earn your security.

**Dismissing Parents**

A subset of adults (about 20 percent of the population) who recall positive experiences with their own parents actually “idealize” their family-of-origin situation. They project a positive image of themselves and of the adults who were a part of their childhood. Because memories of their childhood are too painful, they distort what transpired in their family of origin into a more consciously acceptable form. The process is unconscious; such adults rarely realize
that what they remember isn’t accurate. Indeed, many of these individuals have difficulty remembering their childhood at all. It is as if certain aspects of childhood are blocked. When these adults are interviewed about their childhood, they provide less “meat” and far fewer details. Often they are not very expressive and generally dismiss the importance or expression of emotions.

When asked the importance of early childhood experiences for later personality development, these adults are puzzled by the question and say that they don’t see a link. For example, one such father, Kevin, told me, “My mother, didn’t have much of an effect on me. I don’t see any link. I’m my own person; I really don’t have much to do with her.” Kevin was almost compulsively self-reliant as an adult, yet he could make no connection between his almost compulsive self-reliance and his rejecting mother.

Another woman, Pauline, said that her mother was the best mother possible and everyone on the block loved her. Her mother kept a great house and always had wonderful presents under the Christmas tree. As an unimportant afterthought, Pauline added, “She gave great parties, especially birthday parties for the three boys in the family, but she never had one planned for me…. She was a wonderful hostess at the parties. She was a lovely woman and I miss her.” Pauline couldn’t appreciate the lack of coherence in her own description of such positive, even idyllic family-of-origin descriptions, and the fact that she herself never was the recipient of one of these wonderful parties. She had idealized her description of her own mother and completely ignored any specific details that could not be incorporated into the larger picture of her mother as “wonderful.” Pauline was unaware that she had had a negative early experience with her own mother. Her idealized description of her childhood was actually the evidence of a negative past.

Sadly individuals who have little access to their emotional lives most likely will raise insecure/avoidant children. They are so dismissive of the value of relationships and of emotions as part of important relationships that it’s easy for them to be good providers or good at keeping the house clean or good at some other aspect of parenting that is praised in our society. But what they lack is the ability to be part of the give and take of emotions. They interact in a cool and distant way toward their children. Such behavior does not mean that they love their children any less; it merely is difficult for them to interact in a loving way or to demonstrate their love. Instead, many such parents do nice things for their children and take care of other (nonemotional) more functional aspects of life. Their children are rarely happy and responsive.
Many of these parent-child interactions are like “ships passing in the night” as each goes about his or her own routines. They are not emotionally sensitive to their children, and their children grow with emotional disconnects from the parents.

**Parents Who Are Preoccupied or Overconnected to the Past**

A small group of parents are the opposite of the dismissing parents—they are actually very emotional. I don’t mean this as a “healthy” option, however. Just because individuals are emotional does not mean that they can nurture healthy emotional connections.

In fact, overemotionality is what is seen here. Many of these parents are very angry about the past and what they did not receive during their childhoods. They have access to their emotions (unlike the dismissing parents), but are “stuck” in the past and have not been able to resolve the problems so that they can now have a coherent view of the present and of the family of origin as fitting into their sense of self.

Very often, the children of these parents show the insecure/dependent pattern of relatedness with them, likely because they create overconnections in their relationships. Such parents interact often in a warm way with their children. Sometimes it is difficult to see at first glance that there is anything remiss in these relationships because the parents are pleasing—but they often are either intrusive, not observing boundaries between themselves and their children, or they are inconsistently sensitive. At times, they are quite warm and nice; other times, they “fly off the handle,” not being able to regulate their emotions. It is difficult for their children to feel genuine security with them due to their inconsistent behavior. Further, many of these parents have issues with separation, and see that as a threat to connectedness. They therefore respond to separations (e.g., leaving a child in day care) with intense anxiety and transmit such uneasiness to the child. Not having experienced clear boundaries between family members, in behaviors and/or feelings, such parents have trouble separating themselves and their needs from those of their children.

**Disorganized Parents or Unresolved About Loss(es)**

A last pattern seen involves parents who experienced an unresolved loss or a traumatizing event at some point during their childhood (perhaps by death, divorce, sexual abuse, or other) or during their adulthood (again perhaps by death, divorce, sexual assault or rape; giving birth to a child with disabilities; experiencing prenatal, perinatal, or infant losses, such as miscarriage,
stillbirth, or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; or the death of an older or adult child). What is important here is not so much that there was a loss as that the individual has not “worked on” and resolved issues related to this loss.

A parent with a child who has a severe illness or disability might need to go through a period of mourning the “loss of the perfect child.” Only after some time and processing of what this loss means can the individual (and the couple) open new avenues of understanding and expression. Studies indicate that when parents have worked on and resolved such loss issues with respect to their children with disabilities, they are likely to have secure babies and children. The loss of a child by death is considered one of the most difficult grief and loss issues for an individual and for a family. One of our research participants had lost two children to stillbirth after going through full labor with each of them. A heavy smoker (smoking has been linked with stillbirth), she blamed herself for these deaths and experienced much anguish during this time. When we later saw her, with her 5-year-old son, she seemed very emotionally disconnected both from her son and from others. In the interview, she talked about her other children as if they were still alive. Another mother, who had experienced a stillbirth one year before, gave birth to a beautiful, healthy daughter. Yet, because she had not “worked on” on her previous loss (and losses are not only death-related, but also include all the omissions of understanding and compassion from our own parents), when her daughter was born, she became disorganized in her thinking and psychologically and emotionally abandoned him and the family, recreating the trauma of the prior loss in the new situation.

**Avoiding Transmitting of a Negative History**

Approximately 20 to 30 percent of parents consciously report that they have had negative early experiences with their family of origin. When I speak of “negative” early experiences, I don’t mean that you didn’t appreciate how your mother kept house or that she was not that great a cook. I’m referring to more serious deficiencies in child rearing. Some adults report they were physically or emotionally abused, and others describe milder issues of rejection or lack of understanding by parents. Certainly actual cases of physical, emotional, mental, or sexual abuse are readily identified as negative experiences. But sometimes even cool rejection or omissions in empathy are enough to create negative early experiences for a child. For example, I have interviewed many parents who state that they were never held or hugged in times of distress.
Such omissions of empathic understanding can be as serious (if not more serious) for a child’s emotional development as obvious physical punishment.

If you feel (or know) you had negative experiences in your own childhood, take heart. Many individuals need to and can rework such early experiences. If childhood experiences have been negative (e.g., abuse), individuals need to work at many different levels. For example, if parents were abused as children, they may vow not to abuse in their own family. But they may still engage in subtle putdowns and less obvious signs of bullying with their children. It is as if the parent was able to eliminate obvious methods of abuse but couldn’t avoid the more subtle kinds of abusive interactions they probably learned in the family of origin.

For those of you with negative childhood experiences, working on your psychological and relationship issues provides a positive “break” or discontinuity between childhood and the present. Such work must inevitably include accessing and reworking your emotions. Some of the biggest problems in parent-child relationships arise when parents refuse to access their own emotions because they wish to avoid the pain of doing so. Such individuals—who have had abusive relationships in their families of origin, for instance—might think, “You grow stronger with experiences like that but you shouldn’t dwell on the bad things in your life. You’re weak if you stay at that level. You have to be strong and not let yourself get weak and full of feelings.” One parent, who had lost her father at the age of 5, said in a defiant tone, “Sad—no I was not sad. I was happy about it, because after he died, we had a much better life, and better material possessions because all the uncles chipped in.”

For people with early negative experiences, feelings are something to be avoided, dismissed, and even disposed of. They then enter their own parent-child relationships with a “stiff upper lip” and dismiss the importance of emotions in their children’s lives. One such parent said, “No need to go to the hospital, right, Olivia? You’re not brain damaged, are you?” when her daughter bumped her head on a nearby coffee table as she was crawling about. Such parents deny to themselves and their children the importance of emotional connection or emotional availability. Instead, they rely on what I call “functional availability.” They take care of the things that are needed to keep the family running, but they never share their feelings with their children or ask to share their children’s feelings in return.

One such mother, Sarah, devoted many hours at her son’s school helping the children learn to weave. The many artistic creations in her son’s school were truly beautiful. Yet along
with that great “function,” this mother rarely offered any emotional response to her son, Paul. During one of our sessions, Paul hurt himself with a toy sword as he played with toy knights and princesses. As Paul began to cry uncontrollably, Sarah watched coolly, as if responsiveness was not part of her repertoire. In fact, she continued to read the book she had brought into the session; she barely blinked. Finally, the observer went into the room and offered some words of reassurance to Paul, and he was then able to calm down and continue with the rest of the session.

“Functional availability” is characterized by parents doing everything for their children’s basic care and survival and very little for meeting their emotional needs. The meeting of functional needs is good providing, but meeting a child’s emotional needs as well is good parenting. Children deserve parents who will give them both head and heart, who will take care of all of their needs. If you feel you are not connecting emotionally with your child, it’s your responsibility to pursue counseling or some other means of getting in touch with your feelings.

Making Connections between the Past and Present

Professional help is likely to be most helpful in freeing yourself from your negative past so that your children are freed from its intergenerational effects. Many individuals have difficulty accessing the past, and some dialogue on how the connections can be made is likely to be in order.

One mother, Jayne, whom we had classified as preoccupied or overconnected, described a story that showed she could not make important connections about her past. She first started describing an incredibly fun childhood with great vacations in the outdoors. Jayne described great parents who took pride in each of the children. She also described incredible closeness among all family members. She said that the parents gave each of the children many reasons to feel special, and were wonderful with each of them. But, as Jayne continued to recount her past, she began to cry more and more uncontrollably, with the recognition (on her own) that there was no reason to cry about some of what she was describing (for example, how great the vacations were). Jayne, in fact, used up half a box of tissues, continuing to wonder why she was so emotional. She then went on to describe a volcano of angry emotions about her mother, who did not live up to her promise of being caring in some ways and that Jayne felt alone as she made many life choices. She wondered why her parents never gave her their approval with respect to her career as a dancer, her boyfriends, her choice of life partner, and her husband’s career. She
then described an physician brother, Keith, who was in jail for committing a murder borne of road rage, again without a pause in the recounting of the perfect family. Jayne continued without pause to other topics about her family, not even stopping to provide any detail or to make any connections between Keith and any aspect of their family life. Jayne did not recognize that her overconnected demeanor with her own child was born of her feelings about her own upbringing by parents she viewed as emotionally detached and judgmental.

I encourage you to make connections. Not making the conscious, deliberate, and reflective connections between what we have experienced and how we are parenting means that we will parent in a way that is similar to the way we were parented. Although it is not possible (or necessary) to address every aspect of how we were parented and change everything in our own behaviors, it is important to pay attention to the patterns.

If you see yourself in the dismissing pattern, try to have more access to your childhood by talking to old friends, siblings, and family members. What relational patterns in your family do you all recall that led to your feeling that you need to have barricades in relationships, even in the parent-child relationship? Why are feelings and emotions in their full range not allowed in your relationships? What is the basis of your fear of being close to someone? Try to think about these issues and seek counseling if necessary.

If you see yourself as preoccupied/overconnected with your family of origin and maybe see dependent qualities in your own child, try to come to terms with the anger that you feel about your past. It is a positive attribute that you have access to feelings, but they are mostly negative feelings. Try to see some of the positive and/or decide to create a positive life lesson. By appropriate distancing of yourself from your family of origin, you are in fact learning to be your own person, with autonomy and separateness from your family. Look at your interactions with your child, and you may notice instances of intrusive and/or overprotective behaviors that keep him or her unhealthily connected to you. You might show signs of distress and negative affect and may pay more attention to him or her in such distress situations. Try instead to accentuate the positive, rather than the distress. Knowing that you have a tendency toward hyperemotionality, decide to work on creating a more positive emotional climate, one born of appropriate boundaries between people in the family. Such observing of boundaries will help your child in his or her search for autonomy because you will have given your child permission to be his or her own person.
Perceptions of Our Children

Just as our thinking, reflectiveness, and decision to make connections about our families of origin can and does affect our own parenting, so do other aspects of our thinking. Inge Bretherton, Doreen Ridgeway, and I developed an interview script to help to understand the parental view of the parent-child relationship, and found that a parent’s insight and sensitivity in speaking about his or her child and the parent’s empathy about the child’s behaviors can have powerful effects on parenting as well. We found that those parents who described their children as “not close and cuddly” or “like my ex” or “not someone I feel particularly close to,” but did not describe or qualify such comments with insight and empathy about the children, often had children who were either insecure with them or who were emotionally unresponsive to them. In contrast, parents who described their children in ways that indicated that the children were “happy and loving” or by saying, “she’s my world” or “he’s active and quite difficult, but it’s been a really positive challenge to be a part of his life and to help him to channel all that wonderful energy into his life; I feel I have been given the privilege of helping him to be the best he can be,” usually had children who were secure and emotionally responsive.

Interestingly, some parents who are highly reflective about their families of origin and have “earned security” still raise insecure children. In such cases, I encourage parents to make connections also with their perceptions of their children. Creating more positive perceptions and, particularly, perceptions not only tinged but also soaked in empathy for the child (seeing things from your child’s point of view, finding the heart to help your child, finding and in fact changing your heart to be one that feels what your child feels) can make a huge difference. I have seen from working with families that to have this “change of heart,” they not only have to see the world from a child’s perspective, but they also have to garner a greater capacity to be emotionally “real” with their children, whom they previously found “hard to get to know” or whom they “didn’t feel close to.”

It is difficult to get to know and become intimate when you keep your child at arm’s length or when you cater endlessly but without a true heartfelt connection. Be “real” and make those “real connections” with your child. Also, make sure that your connection is a healthy one—don’t just cater, thinking that such attention creates the context for a healthier relationship that will prepare your child for life. Instead, change your child’s pattern of responding to you and others. If your child is avoidant of you, you may want to be warmer and more emotionally
demonstrative toward him or her. If your child is dependent toward you and others, then treat him or her in an age-appropriate way that gives your child a sense of his or her own agency and strength. You may want to be less intrusive, to give your child more chances for decision making and problem solving—empower your child rather than treating him or her with kid gloves.

Children have a good way of sensing how strong you think they are—if you act as if they are fragile, then that sends a message to them about how much trust you have in them. Decide what the stumbling block might be to making that healthy connection might be and work on it. Instead of quick fixes, go for the “emotionally real.”

The power of adults’ perceptions was clear in a situation that involved friends of mine. In this case, it was the nanny’s perceptions that almost led to a self-fulfilling prophecy, suggesting that caregiver emotional availability (as well as lack of availability) is also important. This family had a nanny from South America, Rosa, who seemed at first to be generally good with the children. But Rosa was still hurting from her divorce and really disliked men. She likened my friends’ bright little daughter, Amber, to her ex-husband and her son, all of whom were born in the same month. Rosa began treating Amber in subtly negative ways, in my opinion, unconsciously projecting her ex and son onto her. As a result, this bright, outgoing, and enthusiastic little girl was slowly becoming shy and withdrawn. Fortunately, the parents realized what was happening at an unconscious level and fired Rosa. Needless to say, it was heart-warming to see Amber return to her old self in a short time.

Traumatic relationships of the past can have a particularly powerful hold on you—be it an ex, a brother, a sister—you need to consciously draw the line between others and your child. Be particularly careful to draw that line if you think your child is similar to your ex-spouse, and you do not think well of your ex any longer, even if the similarity you perceive is a physical similarity. If anything, seeing your child as an extension of yourself (if you think well of yourself) might be a helpful strategy.

**It is less important that you know which particular pattern you are than to know that some emotional work needs to be done.**

- Often, the catalyst for change is the birth of a baby. Some individuals realize that they are projecting onto the baby their own past (often referred to as “ghosts in the nursery”) or that their perception of their child is crowded (they are projecting a disliked aunt, a despised ex onto this child). The nursery is crowded because the excess baggage from
another relationship is there along with the parent-child relationship. Divest yourself of this baggage with the help of a professional, if necessary, or someone you trust.

- It is particularly important that an individual take the time, energy, and confidence to resolve losses. If traumatizing events have occurred, it may be important not to go it alone on this journey—a supportive presence might be of great help in the healing process. *The key to resolution is to make connections, and keep making them, until the pieces fit!*

- It is also important to have access to memories of childhood. If you cannot remember much about your childhood, it might be important to try to access the memories and the emotions associated with those memories by talking to a trusted other.

- If you are still angry with your parents, know that you may be overconnected through your anger. Some work to create boundaries between you and your family of origin might be helpful.

- If your perceptions of your child include some negatives, dwell on what might be causing that. Are you projecting others onto this child that you “do not find cuddly” or are you sidestepping the fact that security, dependence, and avoidance, are created—they are not there at birth. And just as they are created, they can be recreated—with some effort.

- Engage in some *storytelling* about your past and about your child(ren). Through such storytelling, you might have a chance to understand what went on for you and what your vulnerabilities are. Telling your story to someone you trust is an important beginning.

- Unleash and use your intuition, your gut feelings, and your emotions through this process.

- Recognize that this will be a struggle, but one that will yield many rewards for your relationships.

**Is Security an Essential “Ingredient” of the Parent-Child Relationship?**

Most child development professionals consider different types of insecurity “normal variations” in society, and research has confirmed that insecurity is *not* predictive of mental disorder in children or adults. In fact, some of my colleagues would argue that the independence demonstrated by avoidant children might be essential in some occupations, even superseding the need for emotional connection. Some researchers say that perhaps security should not be the goal
for all children. In fact, in some cultures where autonomy is highly valued, as for example, Germany, they see a higher percentage of insecure/avoidant babies than we see in this country. In other cultures where connection is highly valued, as for example Israel or Japan, they report a higher percentage of insecure/dependent babies than we see in the United States.

Despite some differences in the percentages of different categories in different countries, however, generally it is agreed that security predicts better outcomes than insecurity, regardless of the culture, although more research is needed in this area. My personal goal for my child has always been to ensure her sense of security—because I know that provides the emotional robustness for all future relationships and areas of competence. When I discussed many U.S. psychologists’ views on security with a colleague from another country, she said, “In the U.S. maybe you don’t view unhappiness and stress for a child as a life risk, and that is what is at stake here.”
Chapter 5

The Eight Principles of Emotional Availability

I have heard parenting described as “a dance on a tightrope over an alligator pit”—it’s much too easy to make a mistake and fall, and the consequences can be serious when you do. However, when you know the eight principles of emotional availability, it’s like having a balance pole or, even better, a guide rope that you can hang on to as you negotiate your everchanging relationship with your child.

In our research, we evaluate parent-child relationships by separating its qualities into eight areas. We then score each quality on a numbered scale (1 to 9 in some cases, 1 to 5 in others). These principles are what clinicians, researchers, and other child psychologists look for when they are evaluating a parent-child relationship. To conduct this assessment, we observe the parent-child relationship. To conduct your own assessment, you can observe your own relationship with your child, or that of someone close to you, such as your partner.

Many of these eight principles are things parents do naturally—some of the time. However, most of us could use these principles more frequently and deliberately, and thus create deeper bonds with our children at every age, at every stage of development, in tough times or great times and every time in between.

If it feels strange to you to “deliberately” build an emotional connection with your child, you’re not alone. I find that the general perception of most parents is expressed as: “But I love my child, and he [or she] knows it. Why would I have to keep eight different principles in mind just to do something that comes naturally?” Loving our children is one thing; communicating that love in ways that are appropriate to their age and development is another. Emotional availability is a research-based, scientifically validated measurement of the quality of communication and connection between parent and child.

Some of these principles measure the presence of a particular trait or attitude (sensitivity, recruitability, structure, and so on), a couple of them measure the absence of such traits as hostility and intrusiveness, and still others evaluate the child’s response to the parent rather than the parent’s connection with the child.

All relationships are two-way streets, and often the most telling evaluation of the quality of the connection lies not with the parent’s actions but with the child’s response. Sometimes—
and certainly, most often—the parent has shaped the child’s emotional availability as the child grows up. However, we must recognize that all children come into the world with their own temperaments. One child may be quiet and less demonstrative, another hyperactive and overly affectionate. It’s how a parent responds to a particular child’s temperament and needs, and how the child, in turn, reacts to the parent, that makes the difference between a high- and low-quality emotional connection between the two. One of the reasons the Emotional Availability Scales have become so valuable in research settings is their ability to evaluate such relationships objectively, measuring action and reaction, communication and response, regardless of the child’s or the parent’s particular emotional predilections.

I describe these principles in terms of what we look for in a clinical setting, where parents bring their children into a clinic or research lab and are observed for anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour. The following interactions I describe are cases with children in an age range from 9 months to 10 years. I hope to give you concrete examples of the ways each of these principles might show up in your own life. I have tried to avoid a lot of psychological jargon, but you may find some of the descriptions a little clinical. Don’t worry—the rest of this book will give you examples of how these eight components work in the context of real life. I guarantee that once you understand these components, you will find them easy to apply to your own relationship with your child. By understanding these eight principles of emotional availability, you’ll be far more likely to respond to your child in a manner that will connect and support both of you.

I have put the eight principles of emotional availability in the form of questions. I have deliberately used the same questions that form the basis of emotional availability research in clinical settings, simply because the terms are recognized and accepted throughout the field of psychology. By asking yourself these questions, corresponding to the eight principles of emotional availability, frequently, you can assess the quality of your own emotional connection with your child. I hope they will make it easier for you to determine what you are already doing well, and where you can put a greater focus on deepening your relationship as a parent.

These eight questions are: 1) are you “emotionally recruitable” by your child? 2) is your child “emotionally recruitable” by you? 3) How sensitive are you to your child? 4) Do you structure interactions with your child appropriately? 5) Are you available to your child without being intrusive? 6) is there any overt or covert hostility present? 7) Is your child responsive to you? And 8) Does your child allow you to be involved in his or her life?
1. Are You “Emotionally Recruitable” by Your Child?

Sandy, a young mother, took her 3-year-old adopted son, Jeffy, to a community pool. The little boy was very active and prone to inattentiveness—he was what many people would describe as a “handful.” However, Sandy was very good at playing with Jeffy and keeping him on task. She also gave him a lot of space, but when she called him to come and play with her, he would run back to her with gusto. Although Jeffy demanded a lot of his mother’s attention, she was responsive to his needs. Sandy was engaging and lively, and there was a lot of laughter between mother and son. They obviously enjoyed being together. It was clear that the time at the pool was their “special time,” an opportunity for mother and son to connect with each other.

Another mom, Jennifer, was at the same pool with her child, Sherrie, a little girl of about 5 years old. Jennifer had encouraged Sherrie to take her boogie board and swim around, but very quickly the mom settled back in a lounge chair and started working on her needlepoint. Sherrie would occasionally yell, “Mommy, watch me!” and Jennifer would respond, “That’s great, dear,” looking up momentarily and then returning to her needlepoint. After a while the little girl stopped asking for her mother’s attention. Even when Sherrie hit her foot on the edge of the pool and started crying, Jennifer’s demeanor barely changed. After a few moments, she coolly put down her needlepoint and went over to her daughter. “You should know better than to swim that close to the side of the pool,” she said as she reached to touch the child’s hair. But Sherrie brushed away her mother’s hand, very clearly not wanting the consolation. Jennifer shrugged and went back to her needlepoint.

Both mothers spent about the same amount of time at the pool with their children, but the quality of each mother’s emotional interaction with her child was markedly different. What children truly want is not just their parents’ time or attention, but their connection. Children need to be able to recruit parents emotionally—children should find their parents open and willing to connect with them emotionally. Children should not have to spend much effort recruiting parents, who should make sure they are available to be recruited.

Of course, at times you may be preoccupied with other tasks—such as earning a living, or attending to other children, or taking care of chores around the house, or even taking care of yourself. But there are many simple ways to be emotionally recruitable by your child and still tend to the day-to-day requirements of life.
Let’s look more closely at Jennifer’s interaction. When her little girl shouted, “Mommy, watch me!” She did not need to drop her needlepoint, rush to the edge of the pool, and cheer, “Sherrie, that’s amazing! Show everyone what an incredible swimmer you are—everyone, watch my little girl!”? because it wouldn’t be true emotional recruitability. Instead, the behavior would demonstrate the kind of overcompensation and false emotion that, according to research, actually indicate a very poor parent-child relationship. If Jennifer had put half of her attention on Sherrie while she kept doing her needlepoint, so when her child shouted, “Mommy, watch me!” she looked up and said with genuine warmth and encouragement, “Great, Sherrie—you made it all the way across the pool!” she would have helped Sherrie feel her mom was emotionally available. This kind of specific response—one that makes it clear to the child that her mother has indeed been observing her—delivered with an obviously real emotional connection, will indicate that the mom is involved in the child’s activities while allowing her daughter to learn, grow, and explore for herself.

The key to emotional recruitability is not simply paying attention to your child—it’s the genuine caring and warmth you bring to the interaction. One of the most wonderful things about children is the fact that their emotions are so close to the surface. When children are happy, sad, upset, or joyful, or if they find something funny or scary, they communicate it—immediately! Adults lose much of this awareness of their own feelings so it is vitally important when you are with your children that you allow your best emotions—love, reassurance, caring, and warmth—to come to the surface easily and often.

Emotional recruitability also has to do with picking up children’s signals and responding appropriately to them. When children want your attention, do they want you to kiss them? Cuddle them? Teach them? Help them? Cheer them on? Advise them? Laugh with them? Cry with them? You can demonstrate your emotional recruitability by responding appropriately to the stated and unstated needs of your child. No, you don’t have to be able to read minds! Luckily, reading a child’s needs is usually pretty simple.

2. Is Your Child “Emotionally Recruitable” by You?

What makes a good mother or father? How do you know when you encounter one on the playground, walking down the street, in day care, or perhaps in your own home? Good parents aren’t determined by what they do but by how they are around their children. When you think of
good parents, don’t qualities such as warmth, emotional connection, and strength without rigidity all come to mind? But how can you really tell whether people are good parents? You watch their children. Specifically, in a clinical setting, we watch the child’s emotional response to the parent—his or her openness, comfort, security level, and general emotional recruitability by this particular adult.

A parent’s emotional availability is not enough to create a strong connection with a child; the child also must be emotionally available to the parent. As I said earlier, certainly some children are less disposed temperamentally to be recruitable, but ultimately the emotional recruitability of children has to do with the way they are raised. The most important factor is the quality of emotion you offer your child. If you are consistently warm, loving, caring, and supportive, your child will most likely mirror back what he or she receives.

In the example of the mothers and children at the pool, 3-year-old Jeffy might appear to be the more difficult child to recruit emotionally—he was certainly more hyperactive and scattered than 5-year-old Sherrie. Yet, due to the connection that his mother, Sandy, had obviously created over time, when she called him to come and play with her, he returned willingly. Jeffy felt safe enough to leave Sandy and explore his environment, yet he clearly enjoyed their interactions just as much. He was eager for and open to the emotional connection offered through his relationship with his mother.

Sherrie was obviously seeking emotional connection with her mother, Jennifer, when she called out, “Mommy, watch me!” Yet it was also clear that she felt she had to demand her mother’s attention rather than assuming it would be there. Once Sherrie had asked for the attention and was refused, her level of emotional recruitability dropped dramatically. When Jennifer tried to re-establish a connection when the little girl injured herself, Sherrie turned away. She was no longer emotionally recruitable by her mother in that circumstance. In truth, Sherrie was simply mirroring the lack of emotional connection she had received from her mother.

When a child is emotionally recruitable by a parent, there’s a palpable sense of strong connection between the two. Junior can be off exploring or playing and Mom can simply be watching, yet her quiet supportiveness tells her son that it’s okay for him to be on his own. In this emotionally connected atmosphere, Junior feels safe and happy—but he will return to Mom for emotional “refueling” every so often. The mother’s emotional availability fosters the child’s willingness to be available in return.
In school-age children, emotional recruitability manifests in the child’s willingness to connect with the parent. For example, most parents will ask their kids, “How was school today?” Children who feel connected with their parents will usually be willing to talk about their activities and share some of the incidents of the school day. Emotionally recruitable children will also wish to include their parents in special activities, such as sports, recitals, ceremonies, and so on. When there is a healthy emotional connection between the parent and child, the child also will feel free to invite friends over to play or for dinner, thereby including the parent in some aspects of peer relationships.

Parents of emotionally recruitable older children will usually experience both a sense of connection and a feeling of growing independence on the child’s part. Like toddlers who can explore their environment because they are confident their parents are in the room, older children who maintain a secure relationship with their parents feel free to explore an ever-widening universe of friendships, situations, and challenges. Because these children feel certain of the love and support of their parents, they can be far more open to discovering and developing their own abilities and emotions.

In clinical settings, because parents know they are being observed, we often see them being attentive, nice, and positive with their children. However, if this is not the parent’s typical behavior, the child usually makes it clear by his or her response. Specifically, there is a visible lack of emotional recruitability in the child. It is as if the child were saying, “Mom, I’m dumbfounded that you are so nice to me because you’re not like that at home,” or “Mom, get off it, you’re putting on an act,” or perhaps, “Mom you’re not giving me any responsibility for growing up. You do everything for me, and some of this I’d like to try all by myself.” Signs of a lack of emotional recruitability in a child range from ignoring the parent’s requests, to turning away from the parent, to consistent demands for attention (and a show of surprise when it is offered), to refusing to play with the parent or taking over the game or activity completely once the parent tries to get involved. In older children, lack of emotional recruitability manifests as unwarranted secrecy; a lack of enthusiasm when it comes to sharing news, events, or activities; an unwillingness to include parents in any part of their lives; refusing to invite friends over; spending as much time as possible outside of the home; and so on.

If children are unresponsive to overtures by their parents, chances are the parents were unresponsive to begin with, like the little girl in the swimming pool who rejected her mother’s
caress. If you had seen only that one moment of the mother-daughter interaction, you might believe that the child was simply not warm toward her mother: Perhaps she just isn’t a demonstrative child, you might think. Certainly there are children whose temperaments are more phlegmatic, or who prefer a greater degree of independence. But time and time again, research has shown that the quality of the parent’s ability to connect emotionally with the child contributes greatly to the child’s willingness to connect with the parent.

How do you get your child to be emotionally recruitable? It starts with your being emotionally recruitable by your child. Children learn from parents what being emotionally connected feels like, and then they respond in kind. You have to create an environment for your child that is rich in love, security, and emotional sharing. In your child’s life, the most important gift you can give is connecting with him or her emotionally.

Remember, this kind of relationship should not feel like pulling teeth! In an emotionally connected relationship, the parts fit together. Parents offer warmth and caring to their children, and the children respond in kind because they feel loved, cared for, and supported. Children want their parents to be part of their emotional lives, and vice versa.

“Recruitment” is a way to express your (and your child’s) willingness to create and maintain an emotional connection. What the word suggests is that you can be counted on and that you are a participant.

- I am not suggesting that you be hyperemotional or fake emotionality. Being overly demonstrative and exaggerated in expressions is not at all the aim in becoming “emotionally available.” Maintain your unique and personal style—just allow for the space between you and your child to be filled by being “real.”
- Take the lead in becoming emotionally available, whether it is for the first time if you just had a baby, or belatedly if your child is older. Show the way!
- I guarantee that your child will become as available to you as you are to your child. Relationships are dynamic—we often get back what we invest. Many dads have expressed the difficulty they find in showing their feelings to their children—likely, because men are generally not socialized to be emotionally expressive in their other relationships. Yet, most dads are emotionally connected (in a healthy way) with their children. If it is difficult for you to show your feelings, start with small steps in emotional
communication. Dads don’t have to look like moms as they interact—far from it. Dads need the space to find their style of emotional connection with their children, and each style will be unique.

3. How Sensitive Are You to Your Child?

How many times have you heard parents say (or even said yourself), “I just can’t figure my child out,” or “I didn’t know that was coming”? These statements are common when parents refer to adolescents (who constantly amaze and surprise us), but they are equally true with infants and young children. Often, parents tend to think they can read and know what is going on with their children, but in truth, they are either guessing or theorizing based on what they remember from their own early days (or perhaps learned from their other children).

Sensitivity is your ability to read your child, and be emotionally and openly communicative with him or her. Sensitivity is the tool that allows you to create a strong emotional connection with your child. It refers to a variety of qualities in a parent, such as responsiveness, accurate reading of your child’s communications, ability to resolve conflicts smoothly, and so on. When you are sensitive to your child’s needs, you can offer him or her the response that is appropriate to the moment. This usually makes the child feel loved, supported, and connected, because you have read his or her needs and filled them in an appropriate way.

Sarah’s 1-year-old daughter, Meg, is just beginning to walk. In our clinic, we observed their interactions for about an hour. It was obvious that Sarah was sensitive to her daughter’s emotional and physical needs. When Meg would bring Sarah a block or play toy, Sarah would respond warmly, admiring the toy and asking Meg questions about it. Both the tone of Sarah’s voice and her clear interest in Meg’s activities were sincere and appropriate (i.e., not overenthusiastic or false). When Meg toddled away to investigate something on her own, Sarah chatted casually with the researcher while still keeping an eye on her daughter. After a while, Meg started getting frustrated with the wooden train she was playing with—she couldn’t get it to move. Noticing Meg’s frustration, Sarah went over and checked in with her daughter, asking, “What is it, honey?” She then offered her another toy. After playing with Sarah for a few minutes, the child went off exploring again, and Sarah returned to her seat.

Sarah’s responses showed she knew her daughter well and was attuned to her physical and emotional needs. She was comfortable letting Meg explore on her own, but she also was
interested and connected with whatever her daughter was doing. She didn’t overwhelm Meg with false attention or emotion; she also was able to diffuse the potential frustration about the toy quickly, and move the child on to other activities. Sarah is an excellent example of an emotionally sensitive parent.

Infants and young children often cannot tell us what they want and need in words, but they do communicate nonverbally. This includes communication about their emotional needs as well as their physical ones. When Meg came to Sarah to show her the toy, it was obvious that she wanted her mother’s attention. However, Sarah also picked up the subtler signal of Meg’s frustration with the train and the need for some help and/or redirection. Many mothers are very good at deciphering their children’s nonverbal clues, whether it be facial expression, body language, behavioral cues, or others. “When my son comes home from school, I can tell in a minute whether it’s been a good or bad day,” one mother reported. “When he’s had a bad day, he gets this furrow between his eyebrows. Even when he tries to tell me everything’s okay, if that furrow is there I know something’s up. I don’t push him about it, but after we chat for a while, he’ll usually clue me in to what’s going on.”

Some of the most important nonverbal clues are signals of avoidance because they are signs that the child is becoming emotionally unrecruitable. Moms report, “My baby doesn’t come to me enough,” “I wish my baby were more affectionate to me,” or “My baby would rather play by himself than with me.” But they don’t interpret these behaviors as signs that their children are feeling a lack of connection with them. Many parents take the view, “Well, my baby’s just like that; it’s his [or her] temperament [or genetics].” But in our research we see children of all temperaments being responsive or unresponsive, within the range of what’s “normal” for them. Often, when there’s a problem with a parent’s level of emotional recruitability, we see the child being more responsive with one parent than the other. No matter what your child’s temperamental tendencies, it’s up to you to read the positive and negative signals your child is giving you, and shape your own emotional connection to suit his or her needs.

Of course, no parent can be attuned to a child at all times; everyone misses signals every now and then. It’s the overall level of sensitivity to your child that is important. When we measure sensitivity in a clinical setting, we look at a variety and number of parent-child interactions over a period of time, rather than examining one particular instance. You should do
the same when assessing your own sensitivity. Here are some of the key traits of a parent who is sensitive to his or her child:

- **Predominantly positive, in terms of both facial and vocal expressiveness.** Especially when dealing with infants and preverbal children, your facial expression and voice are what communicate your level of emotional connection and caring for your child. A sensitive parent is predominantly positive rather than bored, discontented, or harsh.

  Paul works at home, and it is his job to pick up his son, Ethan, from preschool each day at noon, get him lunch, and then put him down for his nap. Although Paul’s work as a graphic designer can be very demanding, he makes this time with Ethan their special time. He is attuned to his son’s moods and needs, and is good at responding to both verbal and nonverbal cues. In contrast, Paul’s wife, Deborah, who is an attorney, is not particularly sensitive to Ethan. She admits that too often she “brings her day home” with her, and her fatigue causes her to respond harshly to Ethan’s demands for her attention. Even when she means to be warm and caring, her face doesn’t communicate her emotions well. Sensing this, Ethan turns more to his father than his mother for emotional support and connection.

- ** Appropriately responsive to the circumstances and the child’s emotions.** If you laugh and smile at everything your child does, you will come across as unauthentic and not spontaneous. Indeed, it is often inappropriate to be positive to everything your child does, as this would seem more like a performance than real emotion. A general positive attitude is more important to a child, as long as it is genuine and emotionally based.

  Carl, a divorced father with two children from a previous marriage, vowed that he would be a better father when he and his second wife had their daughter, Lisa. But if you ask most observers, they’ll tell you that Carl tries too hard. Lisa, who’s seven, is involved in gymnastics, and whenever Carl sees her do anything—a somersault, a back bend, a cartwheel—he praises her enthusiastically and extravagantly. But his response is inappropriate for the level of achievement, and Lisa knows it. It feels false to everyone but Carl, who thinks he’s being a “good parent.” If Carl were more sensitive to Lisa’s needs, he could offer support and encouragement in a more genuine way, at a level of positive emotion appropriate to what Lisa is experiencing. This would create a stronger sense of connection between father and daughter.
• **Displaying congruence between verbal and nonverbal expression.** If your words are child receives more clearly?

   Joanna has three children under the age of five. She tries to be warm and caring with her children, but she is frequently preoccupied with household tasks. When her 5-year-old son, Brandon, proudly shows her his latest drawing, she responds, “That’s beautiful, dear! Why don’t you put it on the refrigerator?” However, she barely looks at the paper and her voice sounds distracted.

   Brandon is confused: he’s getting one message from his mother’s words and another from her tone and actions. Joanna is trying to be sensitive to her child but can’t. This kind of pseudosensitivity creates confusion for the child.

   Jim is a big, bluff, hearty kind of guy who came from a family that always teased each other unmercifully. When he had a son, Jim’s idea of affection was to croon to his son, “Jimmy, you’re a little stinker, you know that? How’d you get to be sooo ugly?” Jim’s adult friends found this to be funny, but as his son Jimmy grew older and started to understand the words his dad was using to express his affection, he grew confused and started to turn away from Jim. Jim, on his part, didn’t understand what was going on. “I’m just teasing the kid!” he’d protest. “Can’t he take a joke?”

   Yes, he could—if Jimmy were old enough to understand that his father’s tone and emotion were genuine and the words were meant to be funny. The sensitive parent expresses the emotion he or she wants to communicate through words, facial expressions, and vocal tones. The child should get one message, rather than being confused by conflicts between verbal and nonverbal communication.

• **Clarity of perception and appropriate response.** Being sensitive to your child means you can read your child’s signals and communication accurately, and then respond in a manner appropriate to the child and the situation.

   Emily’s two-year-old daughter, Sydney, is deaf. When they came to our research laboratory, I was interested to see how the two would interact. It was delightful to watch them together: Emily was clearly attuned to Sydney’s needs, discerning when her daughter became bored with the puzzle she was working with and moving her smoothly on to another activity. Emily could “read” her daughter’s emotional cues with ease and accuracy, and respond appropriately to the child’s needs.
If your child begins to show boredom during play, it is important for you to recognize such signals and adjust your behavior accordingly. If your perceptions are distorted (for any of a number of reasons), you may not be able to soothe your child if he or she becomes upset. In some cases, you may even label your child’s expressions and emotional states inaccurately (“You’re not upset—you’re just faking!”), mimic sarcastically (“Oh, gee, Johnny took your favorite toy. Boo hoo!”) or behave in other mismatched ways to your child.

Karen became a mother when she was 16 years old, and her own immaturity seems to prevent her from interacting appropriately with her son, Matthew, age 4. When another little boy started a fight with Matthew on the playground, Karen came up to Matthew and jerked him away. “You’re always getting into trouble!” she scolded him. She didn’t notice that Matthew wasn’t responsible for starting the fight. Matthew protested and then started to cry, which caused Karen to snap, “Stop that. You’re a big boy now, and big boys don’t cry.”

Because Karen lacked the emotional maturity to deal with her son’s distress, she reacted with anger instead of a more supportive response.

- **Aware of timing.** During the course of a day, or simply an afternoon, parents and children interact in many ways—playing, feeding, bathing, joint “chores,” and so on. When it comes to assessing a parent’s sensitivity to the child, the timing of many of these activities may be more important than the content. Children rely on a sense of rhythm and progression in their days—they need some kind of order to provide a sense of security and safety. Sensitive parents are careful not to introduce abrupt transitions between activities. They soothe the baby before they put it down for a nap. They don’t initiate play or other interactions out of the blue, or interact with their children to the point of overstimulation.

  Awareness of timing becomes even more critical with older children and teenagers. Knowing when to broach difficult subjects or ask questions is a vital parenting skill.

  Chuck knew that his teenage daughter, Mary, had an important math test coming up. Math wasn’t Mary’s strong suit, and Chuck wanted to help her, but he also knew that Mary hated to admit she needed help in any subject. The week before the test, Mary
brought an English paper home and proudly showed it to her father: she had received an A+. Chuck praised her highly, read a little of the paper, and commented on how well she had expressed herself. Then he said, “I always did really well in math and science when I was in high school, but I could never write compositions. I was really grateful that my mom was so good at writing. She checked stuff over for me and helped me out with my English papers. And I always looked over the checkbook for her to make sure her math was right!” After they both laughed, Mary admitted she wasn’t as good at math as she was at English, and mentioned the upcoming math test. “Maybe I could help you study,” Chuck said. “I think I can remember my algebra. I’d sure like to give you a hand if I can.”

Because Chuck was sensitive to Mary’s emotions, he was able to offer help in a way she could receive it. He also acknowledged her excellence in one area before bringing up discreetly the place where she needed assistance. The timing and manner of his offer showed his emotional sensitivity to his daughter.

- **Flexible in terms of attention and behavior.** A parent whose attention is flexible can do other things and still be able to respond to his or her child. If a parent’s attention is less flexible (like Sherrie’s mother, Jennifer, at the pool), the parent “tunes out” when absorbed in a task and “tunes in” only when he or she is ready.

  Flexibility in behavior should be an obvious requirement when it comes to being a caretaker for your child, but it is even more important when it comes to being emotionally sensitive to your child’s needs. Two areas in which flexibility in behavior is critical are (1) getting a child to accomplish a difficult goal (eating vegetables, for example); and (2) parent/child play (a child will change the game and the rules in a heartbeat, and the sensitive parent will adjust accordingly).

  Getting her older son toilet-trained had been a real battle, so with Alison’s younger son, Charlie, she decided to adopt a more flexible approach. Instead of requiring Charlie to tell her whenever he needed to urinate or defecate and then standing over him until he did, Alison told Charlie, “I think you’re a big enough boy now that you can start to use the toilet instead of going in a diaper. Let’s try this. Whenever you need to go, you tell me, and then you decide whether you want to use the toilet or your diaper. If you
want to use the diaper, fine, but if you’re ready to go like a big boy, I’ll take you to the toilet.” Alison also set up a chart on the wall, and every time Charlie used the toilet he got to put a sticker on the chart. Alison had to be very flexible. For the first few weeks Charlie elected to use the diaper a lot more than the toilet. Even when he said he wanted to use the toilet, he sometimes wouldn’t make it in time. Alison continued to make toilet training a game, rewarding Charlie when he acted like a “big boy” but encouraging him in whatever choice he made. Even though Charlie took longer to train than his older brother, the process was far more enjoyable for both mother and son.

Pat and Arthur have very different styles when it comes to playing games with their kids. In some ways, Pat is just another “big kid.” When she plays with her 5-year-old son, she becomes a fireman, a horse, a space man—whatever the game requires. She’s very creative, too, suggesting ideas for new story lines and ways to play, but never insisting that her ideas are better than her son’s. In contrast, Arthur is far more structured in his interactions with both his 9-year-old daughter and his young son. He insists they follow the rules exactly when playing board games, and he is clearly uncomfortable when it comes to “pretending.” He loves his kids, but he relates to them as he thinks an adult should, rather than being flexible enough to enter into their play in ways that connect on the level of just having fun, and seems less emotionally available than Pat.

Linked to flexibility in play is another trait of the sensitive parent: variety and creativity in modes of play. How creative are you as a parent? How good are you at eliciting a positive response from your child? How willing are you to join in your child’s activities in a playful rather than didactic (teaching) way?

- **Showing acceptance of the child.** One of the simplest ways for us to assess parental acceptance is to notice how parents address the child as well as whether they talk to the child at all. A more sensitive parent typically speaks to the child as if he or she were a separate, respectable person with clear needs, wishes, and goals. Even with very young children, a sensitive parent will offer choices, ask the child’s opinion, and be willing to accommodate the child’s requests within reason. A sensitive parent also holds conversations with the child, even a baby. A baby understands a great deal of nonverbal communication and grows with verbal conversations. A sensitive parent will generally describe actions to the baby, helping the infant to be a part of the parent’s world.
Conversely, a more insensitive parent may make disparaging comments either to or about the child, sometimes in the form of jokes or offhand remarks. This type of parent may treat the child as a possession or a doll, make condescending observations within the child’s hearing, or act as if the child is far younger than he or she is (“infantilizing” the child).

Ever since Katherine’s daughter, Anne, turned 12, there has been a lot of friction between them. Anne wants to dress like Britney Spears, while her mother wants to keep her in little-girl jumpers and ankle socks. Katherine insists that Anne is still a child, makes fun of Anne’s attempts to mimic the artists on MTV, refuses to allow her to try on lipstick at home, and refers to the afternoons Anne spends with her best friend, Cynthia, as “playdates.”

Katherine is having a difficult time accepting that her daughter is growing up, and she refuses to offer the emotional support Anne could use. If Katherine simply recognized that Anne is changing from a child to a young woman and acknowledged her awareness of the differences, Anne would be less likely to want to “grow up” even faster than she is. With a little awareness and emotional support on Katherine’s part, this could be a time when mother and daughter become closer, a closeness that would serve both of them well as Anne enters her teen years.

- **Empathy.** Empathy is the ability to take the perspective of the other and to feel what he or she feels. Much of sensitivity is about empathic understanding of the child. With a toddler, the sensitive parent is empathic of the child’s issues with autonomy and/or with tantrums. With an older child, the sensitive parent is empathic about problems with peers. The sensitive parent is able to feel empathy for the plight of the child and about the trials and tribulations of growing up. Thus, the empathic parent refrains from shaming, or belittling, and instead helps the child to understand his or her feelings.

- **Ability to handle conflict.** How conflict situations are handled is a very clear indicator of the degree of parental sensitivity. No parent is perfect, and a certain amount of conflict or mismatched interactions between parent and child is normal. It is common to see parental insistence on a goal (helping clear the table, for example) meet child resistance (Melissa wants to watch TV instead). How parents and children move from conflict to more harmonious states is as important as the quality of the harmonious state itself. With a sensitive parent, conflicts are usually resolved with negotiation and co-determination of
outcomes (Melissa will help clear the table for five minutes before her show comes on). If the parent is less sensitive, insistence and resistance provoke rising levels of anger and frustration. The parent finds it difficult to relinquish control and/or to give credence to the goals and desires of the child. The result is something like: “Clear the table right now, young lady, or you won’t see any TV tonight!” from the parent, and then the child feels frustrated and powerless and may break a few dishes “by accident.”

Sensitive parents don’t have to demonstrate their emotions in a certain way. They may be soft-spoken or animated, gentle or strong, low-keyed or vivacious. Often men and women have completely different styles when it comes to being sensitive to their children. The real test is not so much the style of the parents, but their willingness to be attuned to the needs, desires, and goals of their children, and to express themselves in an emotionally connected manner.

The ability to hear the voices of your children and give them the feeling that you understand them is what it’s all about.

- Many parents know that it can be difficult to “read” an adolescent but that they need to try anyway. Babies have voices that need to be heard also. Listen to and understand the emotional signals and communications of a relationship with a baby as well as a young child. Long before there is clear verbal give and take, your child is telling you what he or she needs—if only you listen and understand.

- A parent cannot be sensitive without the child. Sensitivity is looking to your child’s experience of you and adjusting your behavior accordingly. When you are able to hear your child, not just “hear” yourself in the interaction, then you are truly sensitive to your child.

- One mother was heard to say, “I don’t really know this child.” Work on the stumbling blocks to your sensitivity. Try to explore what it might be that is keeping you from feeling empathy toward your child and not just acting in a sensitive way (but gritting your teeth).

- Are you and your child enjoying each other? Nothing is a better indicator of the health of a parent-child relationship! Let your own intuition be at work here as well.
4. Do You Structure Interactions with Your Child Appropriately?

In our research studies, parents who structure well (e.g., breaking up play tasks into smaller pieces, limit setting) may actually seem to be providing few clues and suggestions to the child, but the child almost automatically picks up such suggestions. This indicates the parent-child interaction is a highly familiar routine, one that is comfortable for both parties. It also indicates that this parent has an intimate knowledge of what works for his or her child.

*Structuring by Limit Setting*

Research has shown that children who are raised in an emotionally connected yet consistently structured environment have less drug use, less promiscuity, and get better grades.

Even though we want our kids to keep growing and learning and trying new things, as parents, we realize that our kids sometimes don’t know how to set limits appropriate for their age and abilities. Who has to do it for them? We as parents do! Limit setting and discipline are other forms of structuring behavior. It is important for you to provide appropriate rules and regulations for your child (depending on age and stage of development) and then stick by them—and for you to be comfortable in doing so. You must be firm but not harsh.

Limit setting and discipline are an important part of the parent-child relationship. Limit setting also should include preventive measures whenever possible. Remember that toddlers like to explore, so rather than having to tell your child, “Don’t touch” all the pretty knickknacks in Grandma’s house, you might very quietly remove everything breakable that might be within your child’s reach during a visit.

In the case of structuring and limit-setting behaviors, too much or too little are equally bad. Even inconsistent structuring can be difficult for a child. Parents who create a certain framework of structure but then back off at the first challenge or difficulty leave the child feeling as though they can’t trust the structure—the scaffold isn’t steady beneath their feet. Some parents are overstructured in some circumstances (around school or drugs or sex, for example) and completely unstructured in others (not asking the child to do homework, or unconcerned about when the child gets home for dinner). In these cases, discipline and limit setting are inconsistent, with predictable results. Children who are faced with inconsistent structure are getting mixed messages, and often they respond with confusion, frustration, and eventually, defiance.
Not too long ago, a teenage girl, Brittany, was referred to me as a real discipline problem. She had a history of problems in school, was abusing alcohol, and had become pregnant. The mother, Beth, accompanied her daughter to the session, and complained, “I don’t know why she’s so wild. I never asked anything of any of my kids. The only thing I ever demanded of them was that they go to church on Sunday and not take the Lord’s name in vain.” She also described a household in which there were no rules or expectations for positive behavior.

Beth had a lot of rules and structure around religion, but provided almost no structure in any other part of her children’s lives. Brittany interpreted this as meaning that her mother didn’t care about her and only cared about shoving her version of God down her throat. It’s no wonder Brittany acted out and ran wild.

We often see low structuring behavior when parents play with children in our clinics. In one such case, a father played with his son for a half-hour without making one suggestion or contribution to the game. He did everything the child wanted, certainly, but added nothing himself in the way of new activities or independent ideas. There was some structure simply because parent and child were playing together, but it was definitely not an optimum, vital experience for either father or son. In some cases, parents provide no structure at all. In the lab, we see parents who play alongside their children, but not with them. It is as if they were playing separate games, with no interaction at all. Limit setting and discipline also tend to be nonexistent in these cases, with predictable consequences.

Kids need structure and limits. They need boundaries, if only to have something to push against so they know they’re growing. But structure can be perceived as either jail bars or scaffolding, depending on how it’s done by parents. While structuring may not be the most pleasant part of emotional availability, when parents can set frameworks for their children in a supportive and caring way, children will feel secure, focused, and happy.

Eight-year-old Todd was a child who always pushed the boundaries set for him. He rode his bike farther, and faster than anyone; he climbed higher trees than any of his friends. But his parents were always firm when it came to the rules around Todd’s behavior. He wasn’t to endanger himself or others; he wasn’t to stay out late without calling first; and he was to act in a responsible manner when it came to his 5-year-old brother, Mike.

One day Todd got caught up in a game he was playing with his friends, and he left the playground, not telling Mike where he was going. Mike, who was busy on the monkey bars,
didn’t notice Todd was gone until 20 minutes later. He looked around for his older brother for about 10 minutes, and then started to cry. A neighbor noticed Mike’s distress and drove the boy home.

When Todd came home later, his dad asked him what had happened. Todd admitted he had forgotten about Mike. “My friends and I wanted to ride bikes and so we left,” he said.

“Todd, I know you want to be with your friends, and most of the time that’s just fine. But Mike’s not old enough to ride bikes, and you were supposed to be keeping an eye on him,” his dad replied. “Mike was really scared when he realized you weren’t there. You know that leaving Mike alone broke a rule. So no bike riding for a week, and when you’re done at school this week, you’re to come straight home every day.”

“No fair!” Todd protested.

“Sorry, Todd, but it is fair. In the future, if you aren’t able to keep an eye on Mike, you can bring him home before you go off with your friends.”

Todd’s dad did a great job of providing structure. The rules for Todd were clear, simple, and easy to follow. They allowed Todd room to be active and explore while still demanding that he be responsible. When the rules were broken, the consequences were also clear, immediate, and appropriate to the violation. The punishment was meted out without a lot of emotion or hostility on the father’s part. This kind of structuring allowed both Todd and his father to feel comfortable and confident in their relationship with each other.

Structured during Play

“Structuring” doesn’t simply refer to setting limits for appropriate behavior for your child. Optimal structuring provides consistent (but not overdone) clues and suggestions as well as a framework, rules, and regulations for your parent-child relationship. It’s not about guiding every moment of your child’s life, but providing a supportive frame in a relaxed, unforced way.

Optimal structuring usually has both verbal and nonverbal components. Using more than one form of communication helps to give the child a greater range of clues to the desired response to the parent.

Conversely, parents who are following the lead of their children and letting the children structure a particular game or other play must attune themselves to the verbal and nonverbal clues their children are providing. Sometimes your child will tell you, “Mommy, you’re not
playing the game right!” but more often there will be nonverbal hints of the child’s wanting to take the game in a different direction.

During playtime with the child, the parent who understands how to structure offers guidance but not direction. The parent is an active participant in the play, providing information, breaking down steps to help the child complete a puzzle or game or task, and physically helping the child when the child wants it (but not until then). Such parents may allow the child to win the game or diminish the importance of parental victory.

Connie was delighted when Alexander, her 6-year-old son, declared, “I want to learn how to play chess!” Connie had played the game all her life, and had entered a few tournaments in high school. She wanted to make sure, however, that Alexander regarded chess as a game, not as a competition between them. Connie explained to Alexander what the different chess pieces were, and then showed him how to set up the board. Then she took him through a few basic moves, explaining how each piece moves in a different way. She made the game into a story about gallant knights, valiant pawns, sneaky bishops, gracious queens, and powerful kings. She let Alexander make his own moves, seldom offering advice but making sure he remembered the basics of the game. At age 6, Alexander’s attention span was limited, so they played together only as long as he remained interested in the game. The more he understood, the more interested he became. Connie deliberately let Alexander win the first few games they completed. After that, she would occasionally win a game and explain how she did so.

Connie’s goal was to foster her son’s interest in chess and to share her love of the game with him. Because she was able to structure his experience of chess in ways appropriate to his age, attention span, and abilities, Alexander grew to love and appreciate the game. The relationship between mother and son was also deepened by their common interest, but more important, by their emotional connection during the process of learning.

From the time she could walk, Sonny always loved messing around the kitchen while her mother, Louise, cooked. As the child grew older, she demanded that her mother let her “help” with the cooking. Louise was very careful to give her daughter specific tasks appropriate to her age. She had her put rice into a cup and then use a spatula to level off the top. She asked Sonny to mash up a cooked egg yolk with a fork, and then put the paste into the potato salad Louise was making. As Sonny grew older, she learned how to beat eggs, measure flour, roll out cookie dough, and so on. Louise always gave Sonny specific instructions, showed her how to carry them
out when necessary, and then thanked her for her help. Eventually Louise could tell her daughter, “I need three eggs beaten, and then mixed into the ground beef for the meat loaf,” and be confident that her daughter could handle it. By the time Sonny was 7, she was making simple cakes and side dishes on her own, with her mother offering the occasional suggestion. Louise created a favorable structure in which Sonny could learn more and more about an activity she enjoyed—cooking—at levels appropriate for her age and abilities. The structure also helped Louise enjoy the experience of teaching her daughter, thus strengthening the connection between the two.

One of the most important components of structuring is providing a supportive frame in which the child has a chance to explore and try new things. Parents have to allow children room to grow, and any structure they establish must be flexible enough to give children increasing amounts of autonomy. Good structuring is like a scaffold: within it, children can climb higher and higher, learning more and more, confident that there is a solid framework to support them every step along the way.

Parents who feel they always need to be liked may have a difficult time with setting limits. They don’t want to risk alienating a child by setting limits. A great way to set limits is to first have an emotional connection with your child, and that emotional connection can really be forged through play. The more you play and interact with your child, the more you can expect that he or she will listen to your limits. Because you have joined his or her world, your child will return the favor.

**Structuring and limit setting are crucial aspects of parent-child emotional availability.**

- Many parents realize that to be sensitive, you need to read your child’s signals and communications, but they are surprised that to structure during play, you again need the same skill and inclination. As you play, make sure you are following your child’s lead rather than the other way around, but also provide well-appointed suggestions and be a participant. Being emotionally available in such a play situation also means that you attend to, acknowledge, and take notice of your child’s emotional reactions and preferences. Play is your child’s time with you.
• Play with your child so that you get to know him or her. Without enough one-on-one play, it is tough to get to know your child enough to know how to structure. That half hour a day would be the most desired slot of time for your child, so set up the emotional connection by arranging regular playtimes that enable you to hone your structuring skills.

• During play, and at other times, be a participant rather than a removed and distant presence. How do you become a participant without becoming intrusive? One of the nicest techniques you can use is to “describe” rather than prohibit. If you see your child do something he or she should not be doing, rather than saying, “Don’t” or “I told you not to do that,” or other such intrusions, merely describe. For example, if your child is about to put a wet glass near the TV monitor, say, “Sweetie, you are about to put a wet glass near the TV.” If your child is killing one dinosaur with another during play, say, “The dinosaurs are fighting.” These comments are descriptive, and make your child feel that you are a participant without being judgmental or prohibitive. They make you emotionally present, yet nonintrusive.

• Structure play that is appropriate to your child’s age and development. Good structuring usually involves making suggestions that might help your child get where he or she needs to go while letting your child think that he or she is doing it on his or her own. Teaching over our child’s head or setting overly strict or overly lax and permissive limits is less likely to help your child than setting clear, understandable, and consistent limits. Structure play by giving a “gentle push” rather than “taking over.”

• Our studies have indicated that structuring becomes particularly important as children approach school age. Parents who structure well during play have children who do better in school in a variety of ways. So, along with your sensitivity, your structuring provides your child with a sense of trust and support.

• Just like with sensitivity, nonhostility, and the other components of emotional availability, it is important to be consistent. It builds trust!

• Limit setting is often difficult for a parent, particularly one who has a deep need to be liked as a peer. What parents don’t realize sometimes is that children can find other peers—they need parents to set limits. If you play with your child, you can then set limits that are effective. Children like limits because they instinctively know that parents
struggle with setting limits. Such struggle is appreciated and is a sign of parental caring—because it takes work!

- Our studies also show interesting links between the different components of emotional availability. For example, parents who structure their children’s interactions and set appropriate limits also seem to manage their own aggressive impulses well (i.e., they are nonhostile and peaceful). It is likely that such parents instinctively know or have learned that they need to contain child misbehaviors, and if the children are the ones who have the control, parents respond by being hostile. It is easier to be peaceful with a child who listens to you than a child who is defiant. A subtle nod is often acknowledged by some children, whereas yelling is the only thing that is acknowledged by more defiant children.

To get the effect and expectations you want, play with your child. The more you join your child’s world, the more you can expect from your child in terms of attentiveness to your requests.

5. Are You Available to Your Child without Being Intrusive?

Intrusive parental behavior can take many forms. If parents set the pace and tone of interactions too often, this can be intrusive. Asking too many questions, directing the course of play rather than letting the child take the lead, making suggestions, and creating frequent theme changes are all indicative of intrusion into the child’s autonomy.

One of the ways in which we see parental intrusiveness is with overstimulation. For example, during physical play with a child, the parent might get rougher and rougher until the child reacts adversely. Overstimulation is a frequent risk with babies, especially for first-time parents. It’s all too easy for well-meaning parents to play with the baby too much, make too many cute faces when the baby is looking away (a signal the child has had enough), pick the baby up and jiggle him or her when the baby is tired, change the position of the baby for no particular reason, and so on. It takes practice to learn to read your child’s cues, and to recognize when the baby or child wants to interact with you, and when it’s time to leave him or her alone.

As the child goes from infant to toddler stage, intrusiveness can take the opposite direction. Instead of overstimulating, the parent becomes overprotective. For example, a parent who doesn’t allow a normal, well-developing preschooler the chance to walk up and down stairs might be considered intrusive. However, the determination of intrusiveness depends upon the
child’s level of development. Your 1-year-old child may not be ready for the stairs, but your 2-year-old may be. Cutting up your 5-year-old’s food is definitely intrusive, but at 3 or even 4, you’d better take charge of the knife if you want to avert the possibility of disaster.

The other way that intrusiveness can manifest is in overdirectiveness. Children have to be given room in which to experiment for themselves; an overly directive parent does not allow the child to develop his or her potential. Some parents spend a lot of time directing their children to accomplish certain activities, “helping” them to succeed at games, and “showing” them the best ways to do things. In extreme cases, overdirectiveness can take the form of physically moving, pushing, or manhandling the child.

Sally wanted to teach her daughter, Kim, to knit. She had tried several times, but the little girl couldn’t seem to get the hang of it. Sally talked her through each step, her voice getting louder and louder as her frustration increased. Finally, Sally took Kim’s hands in her own and “showed” her how to make stitches correctly. Kim burst into tears and said, “I don’t want to learn to knit!” Instead of a chance to develop a deeper emotional connection, Sally’s intrusiveness had made the knitting lesson a source of upset for both her and her daughter.

The reasons behind parental intrusiveness can be conscious or unconscious, and include traits such as:

- **An overdeveloped need to control the environment.** This can be a reflection of obsessivecompulsive tendencies on the part of the parent. If the child does not do things exactly as the parent would like them done (as in the example of Sally and Kim), criticism or perpetual corrections may be the result.

- **Viewing the role of parent as that of a teacher.** This can often arise with parents, who feel the children they take care of have to catch up developmentally, emotionally, or educationally, or a combination of all three. We sometimes see such behavior in foster parents who feel that their role is to teach and help a child catch up.

Dan, an artist, uses every opportunity to teach his son, Kevin, about art, instructing him on the proper use of line, color, shape, form, and texture. Unfortunately, Kevin isn’t interested in technique—he just likes using paints and crayons. Dan’s efforts to teach his son continually backfire as Kevin gets bored and Dan gets frustrated. Dan’s overdirectiveness creates a great deal of tension between father and son.
• **Subtle or not-so-subtle personality dysfunctions.** A parent with narcissistic tendencies (read “self-centered”) might come home from work and want the child to stop whatever he or she is doing and be with the parent. Such a parent might feel rejected if the child doesn’t want to stop watching TV, and therefore may turn off the set (intrusive behavior).

• **Issues about control in the family who raised us.** A parent may overcontrol because he or she was controlled in an authoritarian way in the family in which he or she was raised. Such forcing of a child, as in “you must clean your plate,” can eventually lead to eating disorders in children and adolescents. This parental behavior can stem from the belief that children need to be told and controlled on many matters, rather than simply trusted to be an autonomous individual who can share in decision making with the parent. Similar power struggles can occur around sleeping. Such power struggles often resolve when children are given some control.

• **Achievement, overachievement, or perfectionistic needs.** Sometimes parents push too hard due to their own agendas. You might be teaching your child how to play with toys, rather than allowing your child to discover. You might expect your child to do everything your way, rather than you following your child’s lead. Inside, you might be feeling that you know better and will give your child a head start if you transmit this knowledge. Your need to be the perfect parent can actually make you intrusive. If you are pushing your child too far, he or she may burn out. It is important to stop running every aspect of your child’s life. Many parents tell me that they feel they are not being good in their role unless they interact and teach something with their child all the time. Do not overinvolve yourself. Just sit back and relax sometimes. Of course, some parents are rarely involved and that is not helpful either.

Optimal nonintrusiveness is the ability to be available to your child without being intrusive. Parents who score high in this area let their children take the lead while playing, and base their own interactions on the children’s direction. There is a sense of ease and spaciousness in their time with their children. Discipline is firm without being harsh, and it is appropriate; it does not upset the relationship when used. Parents set limits by using gentle reminders, changing moods (helping a rambunctious child to calm down, for example), and preventive measures such as offering the child a new activity or removing a possible problem (an inappropriate game or
book, for example) from the environment. When shifting activities, nonintrusive parents take advantage of spontaneous moments rather than abruptly making transitions.

Most important, remember that intrusiveness is determined not solely by your actions as a parent, but also by your child’s response to your efforts. One child’s fun roughhousing is another child’s overstimulation. It all depends on the response of your child.

Many well-meaning parents become intrusive at times. In other words, sometimes caring a great deal can lead to intrusive behaviors, such as wanting the child to eat enough, wanting him or her to do well in homework, or knowing that staying with the wrong crowd can only be bad for the child. What, then, does a parent do?

- Just like all aspects of emotional availability, intrusiveness is not just a quality of the parent but a quality of the relationship. What might feel intrusive in one relationship may seem like true caring in another relationship. If you are feeling, or you are made to feel, intrusive, ask yourself if your child has shut you out in any way. If so, you might intuitively feel that you are being intrusive because the relationship has become less of a two-way street. It is then necessarily to bring things back to a nonintrusive form; sometimes just the recognition of your intrusiveness can do the trick.

- Being overly forceful about eating is rarely the answer to eating difficulties and can often exacerbate the problem. The soundest advice, given by pediatricians, is to have food available, but not control, let alone overcontrol, its intake. Power struggles rarely help.

- Power struggles also rarely help in the area of peers. Having dialogues and coaching of your child is very different from intrusion. Even if your child isn’t initially available for the dialogue, the ice might melt with time, and true dialogues, rather than diatribes, rarely seem intrusive to children.

- “Be there.” At some points in development, particularly in adolescence, just being a physically available, nonintrusive presence can be what your child needs. You can respond and interact as you are “invited” to join—such “being there” or “being available” is very reassuring, not intrusive, to children and adolescents. For example, as you drive your child to soccer practice, it might seem less intrusive to talk about “that crowd” than if you sat your child down for a serious talk. The quality of being available and
emotionally present, without feeling an urgency or desperation to take over, is an important aspect of “emotional availability.”

6. Is There Any Overt or Covert Hostility Present?

Our research indicates that 20 to 30 percent of parents show some degree of hostility (irritability, bad words, and the like) toward their babies and/or young children. Not surprisingly, these percentages get higher as children move toward adolescence.

It is normal to feel some degree of irritation or anger toward a child every now and then. Being completely responsible for the well-being of a tiny, helpless human being is sometimes exhausting, frustrating, and maddening. However, emotionally available parents are able to avoid projecting those emotions on or toward their children. Such parents can regulate their emotions so that their children do not feel like the targets or the sources of the parents’ distress.

Remember, as a parent, you are seen by your children as their primary source for everything—food, security, love, health, and so on. When you take your feelings out on your child, you threaten the foundations of his or her very life. Develop the ability to diffuse hostility and frustration so it is not directed at your child (or indeed, expressed around your child) as a key component of creating an emotionally available relationship.

The topic of yelling or screaming is worth mentioning. Such parental outbursts can be just as scary and humiliating for a child as physical abuse. Apologizing as quickly as possible is not a complete remedy, but nevertheless should be done to show respect to your child. Working on the connections between how you were treated when you were a child, your perceptions of this child perceptions, and the reasons for your hostility can make a clear difference. One mother who was generally very sensitive and caring told me that although she has worked on many issues related to the emotional unavailability of her own mother, but when she is tired or stressed, she “becomes her yelling mother”. In the future, give yourself a “time out” before the “point of no return.”

Research has indicated that when children hear yelling, they become energized and frenetic in their activity. Much of the yelling or intrusiveness delivered by a parent is meant to stop unwanted child behavior, yet such hostility fuels the very aggressive and overly active behaviors it is supposedly designed to stop—because when there is yelling, the child hears the
negative energy but cannot process the words. For example, if you yell, “Don’t do that!” your child likely hears the negative energy and little of the content.

Recently, Bob has been going through a very stressful time. He was laid off from his job, and had to take a different position at a lower salary. He now has to work much longer hours. Having grown up with an abusive father, however, he is completely committed never to let his own negative emotions affect his relationship with his family. So Bob has developed several strategies to help him leave his troubles behind when he comes home. Bob uses the drive between the office and home as his chance to unwind. He plays jazz, which he loves, on the car stereo, and he makes a conscious effort to put any bad moments of the day out of his mind. Bob has also set up a signal system with his kids. If the day has gone well and he is in a good place, when he walks in the door he calls, “Where are my red Indians?” That means he’s ready for anything—his two sons (ages 7 and 9) can tackle him, tell him about their day, ask for help with homework, and so on. If, however, Bob walks in and says nothing, the kids know he still needs a little space and time to unwind. Most of the time, the kids will wait a while until Bob has had a chance to hang up his coat, put his feet up, and maybe spend a while talking with his wife about what’s bothering him. But Bob has an agreement with himself that no matter what, he’ll come to the dinner table in as good a mood as he can. His kids feel supported emotionally because they know how important they are to their father and that even though he is going through some rough times, his negative emotions are not directed at them.

Often parents think they are “keeping the lid on” their negative emotions when they are around their children, but unless they can process and handle such emotions, there is a tendency for them to “leak.” This leakage usually creates covert rather than overt hostility. Signs that your child may read as covert hostility include a slightly raised voice, boredom, impatience, and so on. This can progress to, for example, resentment, “huffing and puffing,” rolling your eyes, teasing with an edge, raising your voice, being easily irritated, or showing a long-suffering attitude. Covert hostility can produce passive-aggressive behaviors, or cause you to disconnect emotionally from your child as punishment. Therefore, you must be wary and deal with your negative emotions by all means available (psychotherapy, talking to a spouse or good friend, introspection) to prevent their impact on your emotional involvement with your child.
Even “leaks” of covert hostility can be detrimental to a child. In our research, we go into people’s homes and videotape parent-child interactions for an hour or more per session. For obvious reasons, we usually don’t see overt signs of hostility, such as yelling or hitting, during our time in the home. But we do see low levels of covert hostility, such as rolling the eyes or making a sarcastic comment (“What a mess you made,” or “What a dirty little girl you are,” for instance). We see the same thing in classroom settings. A parent might go into the school classroom and compliment the child on a picture well done and then turn to the teacher (within earshot of the child) and say, “What is it?” (with a laugh). These are leaks of covert hostility, and they signal to the child that the parent has some negative feelings toward him or her. On another note, hostility that is in the environment (e.g., yelling between spouses) even though it is not directed toward the child, also affects him or her.

In its most pronounced form, hostility becomes overt. Parents are overly harsh, abrasive, and demeaning, either facially or vocally, or both. They may threaten and/or frighten the child, with teasing, shaming, ridiculing, and so on. Sometimes the threats may be in the form of a joke (“I’ll send you to an orphanage if you keep that up”), but the child takes such threats of separation or abandonment very seriously. In some circumstances, the hostility is not directed at the child but is a significant part of their environment. A parent who habitually loses his temper and yells at anyone and anything, for example, would be demonstrating overt hostility. Unfortunately for their health and sense of security, children are very emotionally attuned as a rule; when they are young, they cannot differentiate between hostility at home and hostility directed toward them. Be aware of your expressions of unresourceful emotions, and do your best to handle them quickly in ways that will not affect your child.

*I have seen many parents who show a capacity for sensitivity, but who also “fly off the handle” easily. Parenting is not about sainthood. All children push their parents’ buttons sometimes. But, as a parent, one of the most important “lessons” you can “teach” your child is how you (in regular, day-to-day life) regulate your emotions when the going gets rough.*

- When you are tired, or stressed, or pushed and pulled in different directions, you are at risk of “losing your cool.” You later regret it. Before the point of no return, give yourself a time out. After making sure that your child is safe (e.g., he or she is not in the bath or on a changing table), just excuse yourself.
If you have crossed this boundary, do apologize to your child. Adults do make mistakes and children can see that correcting mistakes is possible. Restore justice and fairness by an apology—relationships should be just and fair, not angry and unfair. By apologizing, you at least show that you are holding yourself to the same standards that you hold your child. Many adults mistakenly feel that they have privileges that children do not have—and that their own behavior is not the point.

Through your own nonhostile, peaceful, just, and fair interactions with your child, you are teaching him or her to interact in this way with others. When you are covertly hostile, impatient, shaming, or putting others down, you are subtly bullying your child, and your child is learning an important negative lesson—that he or she can be bullied by others in relationships and that he or she can do the same to others. More obvious lessons about violence, the permission for violence, and the like are learned in overtly hostile relationships. Children carry these templates into their other relationships. A third-grader once told me, “My mom threw this paperback at me in the kitchen.” He was also a child who showed aggressive displays with peers on the playground. Parent-child emotional availability in the home will teach your child emotional intelligence, but most lessons occur when you are least aware that you are “on stage.”

Some parents see a lot of covert (or overt) hostility in their own behavior, and feel badly that they have “stepped over the line.” Many more parents use threats but don’t ever carry out such threats—they don’t even have any intention to. Nonetheless, threats of violence (“if you do that again, I will throw you against that wall”), threats of separation (“I’m going to leave you kids if you do that”), threats of loss (“I’ll kill myself”)—are as real to a child as the action. Such threats are frightening and lead to your child being frightened of you, even though it might seem difficult for you to believe that saying something threatening (and never intending to do it) can seriously frighten your child and make him or her feel insecure with you and his or her own world.

We have them for only a short time and then they go off with their life lessons. One father said of his son, “He only remembers all the things I did wrong, but I also did so much for him.” This father was right. Hostility is remembered—not necessarily at a conscious, mental level, but at the level of feelings. Memory is not objective; it is emotional. To build positive emotional memories, unload stress, think positive thoughts,
relax as much as you can, take time outs, find supportive networks of friends and family (parents need support!), but do limit even covert hostility. Children remember about us (and about others) the emotions they feel when they are with us.

7. Is Your Child Responsive to You?

Once again, we’re back to the child’s side of the parent-child equation. I hope you’re beginning to see that the components of emotional availability are part of a whole relationship construct, with many different factors interrelating and interacting to form a healthy (or unhealthy) whole. Ultimately, any relationship is about just that: the act of relating to each other. In the parent-child relationship, ideally the parent has the most responsibility and flexibility in creating something that both parties will enjoy. However, the only way to tell whether the relationship is working is to see how the child responds to the parent’s attempts to connect emotionally.

In our research, we see a child’s responsiveness to the parent reflected in two aspects of the child’s behavior. First is the child’s eagerness or willingness to engage with the parent when the parent offers a suggestion or moves to interact with the child. What we are looking for is a child who looks up and talks to the parent in an enthusiastic, engaged tone—a child who appears eager to connect with the parent. What is important is not just the response itself, but the emotional quality of the response from the child. If the child ignores the parent when approached, or generally appears bland or blasé to the overture, then obviously the child is not demonstrating an optimum emotional response. If the child looks up and talks to the parent but uses an unenthusiastic tone, that is not an optimum response either. In a few cases, the child may even need to be encouraged to respond to the parent. Conversely, we have seen situations in which the parent doesn’t bother to reach out to the child or bother to initiate contact, and the child continues to play on his or her own. In those cases, it is clear that emotional responsiveness is limited not by lack of response on the child’s side, but by lack of initiation on the parent’s. Remember the little girl, Sherrie, in the swimming pool, described earlier in this chapter? By the time her mother paid attention to her—when the child was hurt—the little girl no longer responded to her mother. Her level of emotional responsiveness had decreased because the mother had not responded to her earlier.
The second aspect of a child’s behavior that indicates lack of optimal responsiveness is what we call a “negative cycle of connectedness.” When a child is approached by the parent and, instead of ignoring the overture, becomes whiny, complains, insults the parent, cries, or appears anxious or fearful, something is obviously wrong. The child is responding negatively to the parent’s attempt to connect, and this often indicates a dysfunctional means of maintaining contact.

Patty was a premature baby, and her lungs were not fully developed. Throughout her infancy she had had trouble with asthma, bronchitis, and a range of other lung-related problems. Her parents were both so concerned about her health that practically every time Patty coughed, they would rush her to the hospital. They found it difficult to relate to their daughter without an overlay of fear and worry. Whenever Patty’s parents tried to play with her, Patty would become whiny and push them away. The family had created a negative cycle of connectedness.

This is not to say that smiling, laughing children are always considered emotionally responsive. Some children will smile and laugh a great deal during a play session, but if the emotion is directed only at the play activities, and it is clear that the child is avoiding the parent by focusing emotion on the imaginary world of play, then it is obvious that the child is not connecting with the parent. Also, some children use nervous, over-bright smiles and laughter as a way of pleasing others, rather than to indicate happiness.

Children who are emotionally responsive to their parents usually demonstrate a generally happy and content countenance. They are content pursuing autonomous activities but they also respond in a positive way toward the parent at appropriate points. Their response generally shows pleasure and eagerness without any sense of urgency or necessity. They smile or laugh appropriately, and usually attend to their parents’ comments, questions, suggestions, and demonstrations with ease. Emotionally responsive children may not respond to every request, however, especially when they are engrossed in play. But there is the sense that, for the most part, the child is comfortable with and willing to respond to the parent’s overtures.

If the emotional responsiveness is not optimal, the child may respond but seem unenthusiastic about doing so. The child may respond slowly and reluctantly, continuing play as if he or she didn’t hear the parent. The child who always responds to the parent in an overeager, overly bright way is also not optimal; this may indicate a reversal in roles (the child feeling like
he or she has to take care of the parent). In the most serious cases of emotional nonresponsiveness, the child’s emotional health may be in danger. Here we see the kind of avoidance behaviors described above—ignoring parental requests, turning away from parents, strong protests that appear inappropriate, and so on.

When I say “responsiveness,” I am not referring simply to the child’s compliance with the parent’s wishes, but to the emotional richness, happiness, and tenderness that is shared between parent and child. Therefore, the importance of a child’s responsiveness cannot be overstressed. This measure is the best clinical criteria for assessing the child’s emotional availability to the parent. As a parent, it is your best, clearest indication as to whether you are connecting emotionally with your child in ways that touch his or her heart. If you feel your child is not being responsive, the best thing you can do is to tune up your sensitivity. Remember, children connect with us when they feel loved, safe, and cared for, and when their needs are being met. As the parent, you have more tools for “reading” your child’s needs and emotions than your child does. If you can meet your child’s needs in a responsive way, your child is more likely to respond to you in kind.

**Remember the description of the secure child in Chapter 2, as showing a balance between exploration and wanting to be close to you.**

- You can do your own observation of your child’s emotional connection with you by taking note of his or her responsiveness toward you. Remember, responsiveness is not obedience or compliance. It is *emotional* responsiveness toward you, with a balance between connection with you and explorations away from you. A child who shows positive responsiveness toward the parent is likely to be secure with that parent. So, go on and observe whether your child is responsive to you—seeming generally happy and content in his or her life and showing a balance between “moving away” and “moving toward” you.

- Some children are emotionally responsive, but show many signs of distress, whining, and the like. These children have become accustomed to drawing people in through negative cycles of relatedness. They have learned that if they are distressed, they will receive caring, and if they whine, someone will come to soothe them. Many of these children engage in dependent interactions with their teachers as well, staying near the teacher and
being comforted by adults. Rather than engage in catering behavior that would encourage and prolong this type of responsiveness (an unhealthy kind), trust your child to grow emotionally, and subtly and kindly demand more mature emotional responses from your child.

- Many children show pleasing behaviors toward parents and/or others, as if they are engaging in caregiving or parenting behaviors. If such a pattern of pseudoforms of mature behavior is going on, again let your child know that he or she does not need to “take care of others”—that he or she is the kid. We have seen such behavior in children when a parent is depressed or traumatized; the children then take it upon themselves to “make things right.” Obviously, such behavior is burdensome for the child and can be framed into a more positive and healthy direction. Play with your child and in the context of play, you can show that your child is heard and that he or she does not need to be the pleaser all the time; he or she can also be pleased.

- Some children seem avoidant and unresponsive. If during play or otherwise, your child seems not to “return the serve,” then try not to keep “hitting the ball.” Instead, wait for your child to come to you, and then elaborate and show pleasure in positive sharing of emotions together. With consistent availability and emotional responsiveness on your part, your child will begin to relearn the language of relationships and will likely become less avoidant and unresponsive over time. Many children (especially foster and adopted children) have become so unresponsive and avoidant over time that it is a challenge to win them over. The same strategies can work with them, except that the parent needs to know that he or she is “in it for the long haul.” Progress can be met by several steps back in such relationships. The idea is to maintain the trust and consistency and to “surprise” such a child about relationships by not giving up in the face of such challenges.

8. Does Your Child Allow You to Be Involved in His or Her Life?

This is a measurement that will gain in importance as your child grows and matures. Parents usually must be totally involved with babies’ lives simply because babies can do nothing for themselves. But as your baby grows, goes to day care, then preschool, then school, then middle school, high school, and beyond, your child will be the one who decides just how much
he or she wants to let you in. Evaluating your level of connection when it comes to your child’s allowing you access to his or her life is a key measurement of emotional availability.

When we assess involvement in a clinical setting, we look at the degree to which the child attends to and engages the parent in play. Typically, children will make parents either the audience for their activities, or engage them as playmates or support people. Asking questions, narrating a story line, requesting assistance, or demonstrating materials to parents are all examples of involving behavior. Sometimes children will involve parents simply by looking toward them. A healthy parent-child relationship has a balance between autonomous play and requests for parental involvement. The child appears eager but not anxious to engage the parent. The relationship is a comfortable, positive one for both parent and child.

At lower levels of involvement, children show more interest in the task at hand than in engaging the parents’ attention. It seems that these children are more oriented toward solitary play, with occasional reference to parents. Parents appear more like tools the children use when needed, rather than a desired audience. As the amount of involvement decreases, these children may avoid their parents altogether, literally turning their backs on them. Or the opposite may occur: the children may overinvolve the parents, insisting they cannot play by themselves, offering toys, and constantly speaking to, looking at, or seeking physical contact from the parents. These actions may be accompanied by anxiety, whining, “acting out,” complaining, and other forms of negative emotional expression. Such behaviors suggest that the children are assuming the lion’s share of responsibility for maintaining contact and interaction with their parents. At the most severe levels of uninvolvement, children do not seek to involve parents at all. If parents try to engage the children, there may be some response, but the children make no attempt to elaborate on the exchange and do not initiate new ones. It is as if the children are completely uninterested in the parents. Of course, many children will show a range of involvement, depending on their mood, but here we are talking about what your child is usually like.

One of the ways we measure a child’s involvement with the parent is through “storytelling talks.” We meet with the child separately and ask him or her to tell a story about his or her parents. Often, uninvolved children will tell stories about being angry with their parents, or stories in which they are hurt and their parents don’t comfort them. Conversely, children who enjoy involvement with their parents will relate incidents in which their parents took care of
them, or about going on outings or adventures with their parents, or perhaps about going on adventures by themselves and being warmly welcomed by their parents when they returned.

The highest compliment your child can pay to you is the desire to involve you in his or her play, problems, school, and life. Healthy levels of involvement mean that you have earned the love and trust of your child. It is one of the last, best measures of the success of your efforts to create a strong and supportive parent-child connection.

Of course, in real life, the eight elements of emotional availability are not separate at all; they are interrelated in complex ways in your child’s life. And best of all, most of the time you connect emotionally with your child without having to think about it. Research is very useful because it is able to analyze what good parents do, consciously and unconsciously, to build healthy relationships, as well as how parents with challenges are not accomplishing the same thing. However, research can sometimes make the process seem clinical and overwhelming. It is not. Parenting is a job for which you take all the information you consider useful, put it in the back of your mind, and then deal with the child in front of you. It’s kind of like sailing a boat. You can study nautical theory and the dynamics of wind and waves, and this knowledge can help you figure out what to do on a boat, but when you’re out at sea, with waves hitting the sides of the boat and the sail flapping in the wind, you don’t stop to think, “How much air pressure does that sail need to get me across the lake?” You let the knowledge you’ve studied and absorbed help you as you make the split-second decisions required by the circumstances of the moment.

The eight elements of emotional availability can give you a strong basis for connecting emotionally with your child if you simply remember the basics. Be available emotionally to your child. Share your emotions. Be sensitive to his or her needs. Provide structure without intrusiveness. Look for the ways your child wishes to involve you in his or her play.

If your child is responsive to you, your child is also likely to be involving you in his or her life. But, take note—is your child involving you in positive or less positive ways?

- Your child’s involving behavior, such as running up to you to tell you something as you are about to leave his or her school and giving you a kiss, is a sign that your child is including you in his or her life. It’s a wonderful sign.
Conversely, your child is also involving you if he or she has started bullying other children at school and you are getting regular phone calls from the teacher or principal. Negative forms of involving are a child’s cries for help. Children don’t know how to describe that they are feeling depressed or rejected or angry, and thus they “act out.” Your responsiveness to your child during such times is a gift.