

About Deborah Hage:

Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.

The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.

To learn more about Deborah, her practice and her family, please visit deborahhage.com

Foundations of Attachment by Deborah Hage, MSW

We like to believe love is an emotion which descends upon people in some incomprehensible way, and the euphoric mood is due to some mysterious connection associated with the one we love. The truth, however, is not nearly so romantic. There is nothing particularly mystical about how love develops. Love develops due to the release in the brain of pleasure causing endorphins. The mechanism for releasing the endorphins can be put in place by anyone who chooses to put the effort into it. Much like runners know they will reach a "high" if they run far enough and fast enough, lovers know if they tickle their loved one's ear and whisper sweet nothings they can expect some sort of aroused reaction. The emotion, which we call love, is the result of very specific actions.

The task for parents is to figure out what actions on their part release the endorphins in their child's system, enabling the child to connect pleasure with their parents. They are not hard to discover if parents can remember when they first "fell in love." If that time can't be remembered go to any high school and watch the adolescents in the halls and classrooms. The same elements present in the flirtation and courtship dance need to be injected into the parent-child dance if the two are to "fall in love".

Eyes have been called the window of the soul, as it is through them we make our deepest connections. It would be very difficult to fall in love with someone who avoids eye contact. When people talk to each other it is extremely helpful if they are looking at each other as then deeper, more meaningful interactions occur. One of the first games universally played with infants around the world is "Peek a boo." The baby looks expectantly in the direction of mother's face and squeals with delight when eye contact occurs. Reciprocal eye contact is therefore a pivotal part of making a connection with a child, particularly an adopted child.

The largest organ of the body is the skin. When people are stroked and massaged they are flooded with feelings of good will. Animals are tamed by petting them. Tamed animals are better equipped to respond to their master's voice, stay where they are put and come when they are called. They develop larger brains and are physically larger and more agile. Children who are touched and caressed in non-sexual ways are soothed and comforted by the presence of their parents. They become responsive to their parent's directives and wishes. In essence, they become "tame." Rather than pulling away from the parents touch, they seek it out, particularly when they are hurt or upset.

Food is another pivotal component of arousing the feeling called "love." Not just any food, however, will do. Lovers do not send each other carrots on Valentine's Day. The food of choice is chocolate, though any sugar will serve the purpose of arousing in a child a feeling of good will, which then transfers to the parent giving them the treat. Fast food restaurants know that the right combination of fat, sugar and salt can create arousal in a

person's system and help create an addiction to the food being offered. That magic combination of fat, sugar, salt can also promote attachment.

The inner ears contain tiny hairs which, when stimulated appropriately, can cause a pleasurable shiver to run up and down the spine. Infants are affected by rocking, adolescents by amusement parks. Adults jump out of planes and participate in extreme sports, anything to arouse that shiver of excitement, which keeps them coming back again and again to re-arouse the senses. Movement, rocking, swinging, walking while carrying the child all stimulate the inner ear and help the child connect to the person involved in the movement.

Singing, talking and vocalizations also stimulate the child's attachment behaviors. Becoming accustomed to the parents' voices, finding the voice pleasurable, enables the child to connect and become responsive to the child's voice later. This is critically important when developing cooperative behaviors, such as coming when called, picking up toys when told and staying buckled in car seat.

The process of getting a child to attach to new parents is, therefore, enhanced by incorporating eye contact, touch, sugar, movement and vocalizations in such a way that the child's awareness is heightened and the pleasurable feelings which result are connected to the parent. Any activity between the parent and child which is on the parent's terms and involves these elements in a fun way will be bonding. Swinging a child, playing horsey, playing tag, water games, wrestling, dressing a child silly all are ways to help the child feel pleasure in the parent's presence. Activities are limited only by the parent's imagination. (Therapeutic Play)

If a child avoids eye contact, it can be overcome by playing peek-a-boo with M&Ms. Every time the child makes eye contact a piece of candy is popped into the mouth so the sweetness is associated with the parents and the resistance to making eye contact is overcome in a fun way. Key is having the sweet pass directly from the parent's hand to the child's mouth. If the child feeds himself/herself the impact is minimized.

When a child is resistant to being touched the parent needs to touch lightly and frequently until the resistance is decreased. Brushing a child's hair, quick hugs, light tickles, neck and back rubs, foot massage, rubbing lotion into the child's hands, helping the child dress, tying the child's shoes, This Little Pig, listen to the heartbeat, patty cake with hands, patty cake with feet, wheelbarrow, thumb wrestling, fingernail polish, counting body parts, rubbing noses, face painting, feeling muscles, etc. All are quick, fun ways to get close to a child without activating resistance. (Therapeutic Play With Children)

Many children arrive in the adoptive home scared and angry. Diffusing those feelings is important if attachment is to occur. Telling children in words they are safe and loved does not penetrate the armor of defenses with children who have heard it all before. It is not telling a child he or she is loved which will have the most impact. It is acting it out in joyous, yet intrusive ways, which will help parents get through the wall surrounding injured hearts.

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