

## Nurture: The Ring that Holds All the Keys – Part 2 (of 2)

Welcome to Part 2 of our post about nurture as a powerful way to heal the child who has experienced trauma. In Part One, we looked at secure and insecure styles of attachment. We learned about some of the behaviors resultant when a child develops an insecure—avoidant, ambivalent or disorganized—style of attachment. Additional signs and symptoms of attachment difficulties or Reactive Attachment Disorder may be found at the [Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio](#) website. There is a symptom checklist for [children ages 5 and up](#) as well as one for children [under age 5](#).



In this post, we'll look at lots ways to enhance the attachment of even the prickliest child! Pick a few ideas and get started. Don't be discouraged if your attempts aren't immediately reciprocated. As with everything with a child who has experienced trauma, accepting nurture will take time—perhaps eight months, twelve months or even longer in some cases. However, if you don't put the key in the ignition, you'll never arrive at the destination—a greater emotional connection with your son or daughter. Please also keep in mind, nurture is an entitlement. It isn't something children should earn. It also isn't something a parent can choose to ignore or cease just because it can be difficult. It is essential to the well-being and growth of your traumatized child!

### *The "Cycle of Needs"*

A secure—healthy—attachment is formed as a result of the repetition of the "cycle of needs." A baby cries. Mom or Dad attends to the baby—a bottle, a clean diaper, comfort, a binky and so on. The baby calms. During this process of going from fussy to feeling safe and secure, there is eye contact. There is talking, "Oh my, what does my baby need?" "You are such a good baby." "What a beautiful girl you are!" And there is warmth—babies get warm when we hold or swaddle them. Feeding and fragrance are also a part of this very sensory cycle—perhaps we put lotion on the baby. Movement occurs—rocking or bouncing the baby on our knees. Touch is involved every step of the way!

So, when we talk about increasing nurture—forming secure attachments—we are really talking about ways to increase the components of the cycle of needs through the child’s senses: eye contact, food, smells, movement, talking and touch (Keck & Kupecky, 2002). Throughout this segment, the ideas will all reflect these “key” ingredients. The end result is a recipe for a happier and healthier family!

*The “Keys”: Getting Nurture Started Every Day and Over the Holidays!*

### *Eye Contact*

As I stated in the blog, *The “Eyes” Have It*, making eye contact is one of the most important forms of communication. Through our eyes we express joy, “first impressions”, honesty, interest in others, confidence in ourselves, remorse, love, intelligence, compassion and friendship. In fact, looking at others is a first step toward making a friend, and eye contact allows those around us insight into our true thoughts and feelings. Traumatized children have great difficulty making eye contact. In fact many prefer to look anywhere but in another human’s eyes! Typically, this is related to a lack of self-esteem. Or, these children think that parents, siblings, peers and so on may not like what they see if they get too close a look. So, they avoid the attempted gazes of those around them. We can help children improve their self-perception and feel lovable by gradually getting eye to eye with them:

- Download the Devo rendition of Peek-a-Boo. This rock ‘n roll version of this classic song engages toddlers to adolescents with its lively beat!
- Pop popcorn. Gather all of your children. Have your sons and daughters look at you and then toss a piece in the air. The child who catches it—with his or her mouth—gets a kiss.
- Write an “I love you” message in soap in the mirror. Stand behind the child when he reads it. You may get a glance in the mirror. If not, you still said, “I love you!”(Keck and Kupecky, 2009.)
- Just in time for the holidays, give her a disposable camera. See the family festivities through her eyes (Keck and Kupecky, 2009.)
- Have your child stare at you while you count seconds with different animals—1 elephant, 2 rhinoceros, 3 giraffe, 4 gorillas and so on. See how many seconds—animals—the child can look at you.
- Give a different kiss good-bye each day—Eskimo kisses, elephant kisses, butterfly kisses and so on. This is certain to get a look, especially from the older kids!
- Now that Christmas is coming, hang the mistletoe. This is a surefire method to get in a few kisses each day until December 25!

### *Smells*

Smell is a powerful way to connect. How many of us have fond memories that center around smell? I look forward to going home at Christmas because I know my mother’s home will be filled with the aroma of fresh baked banana bread—one of my favorites! Simmering sauce, fresh baked chocolate chip cookies, homemade soup, a fragrant candle, a scented lotion, a bubble bath—all are nurturing and carry a message of love from parent to child. From time to time when my clients call and report having an “awful” day or the “worst” day ever with their hurt child, I suggest calling Dominos and having pizza delivered. One whiff of a pizza topped with all the family favorites can change the entire mood of every member of the family—for the better! As holiday shopping and preparations become frenzied as Christmas nears, the stress level of

the family rises. Try ordering a pizza when things get to chaotic. Likely, calmness will arrive along with the pizza.

### *Warmth*

In addition to baking great banana bread, my Mom kindly warmed my sisters' and my mittens in the dryer before we set off on our walk to school (Yes, I walked to school!). This was such a special winter treat as was the hot chocolate with marshmallows waiting for us when we got home. Our lunches of grill cheese sandwiches and bowls of tomato soup were also great on those snow days when we spent the morning shoveling the driveway and sidewalks around our house.

The feeling of warmth is wonderful. Babies warm when we hold them, swaddle them, tuck them in their cribs and feed them. School-age and high school kids benefit from feeling warm and cozy as well. An electric blanket, a special blanket, a sleeping bag instead of a blanket, [the Snuggie™—the blanket with sleeves](#), [Hanes World Sofest Socks](#), a special tea, a warm slice of apple pie, a fire in the fire place, or steaming up the bathroom and writing on the mirror (Keck and Kupecky, 2009) are all ways to convey tenderness and affection.

### *Food*

I have suggested many ideas above that involve food. Too often, parents and traumatized adopted children argue about food. I encourage parents to decrease their food battles. They are virtually impossible to win. Nurturing with food might be the better direction. For example,

*John, now age 14, was adopted internationally when he was 3 years-old. He has posed many challenges to his adoptive parents, Marge and Paul. Currently, academics have become a major source of conflict. John won't do his homework. He won't even bring his books home! Marge and Paul have been monitoring his grades online. They know his report card, due home today, won't be good. They are fuming!*

Rather than meet John at the door, ready for a war, Marge and Paul might want to put out a nice plate of cookies and a glass of cold milk. In calm voices they could state, "My your report card is pretty poor. You must feel terrible about it. How do you think you can work this out with your teachers?" John, who will be waiting for the fight to start, will be totally thrown off. Likely, he will be open to his parent's empathy and concern. This family stands a better chance of getting Paul to generate solutions to his school problems because they approached the problem with nurture. Always keep in mind, "you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Preparing food, enjoying it, and even cleaning up after the feast are all part of the rituals of most families. Food is important to all of us. The eating problems of the child with a history of complex trauma—gorging, eating only a little, binging, hoarding, eating slow, being picky, eating during the night, eating lots of starches or sugary foods—are all the result of early food deprivation. Children who have experienced near starvation, pre-adoption, will remain concerned about food—for years! Allowing children more control over their food choices, and nurturing with food—instead of battling—are more effective ways to deal with food issues (Keck and Kupecky, 2009.)

Go ahead, have banana splits for dinner one night. Or, make a milkshake for lunch. Buy some M&M's and sort them by color. Then, eat them! Say, "Yes, you may have a cookie after dinner."

Serve gingerale with a cherry in it. Sprinkle some chocolate chips in the pancakes. Enjoy! Enjoy! Enjoy!

### *Motion*

Now that your stuffed, it's time to get moving. Make a New Year's Resolution to use the wii fit Santa left under the tree to play and exercise—regularly— with your sons and daughters. We move babies a lot. We bounce them, pat them, rock them, and drive them around in the car until they fall asleep. We need to move with our pre-schoolers, grade-schoolers and high schoolers!

Remember,

- Ring-around-the-rosy
- Musical chairs
- Hula hoops
- Hopscotch
- The excitement of getting a kite to fly?

These no battery needed activities are still as fun today as they were when we were kids! If you live in the snow belt, you might want to,

- Build a snow fort
- Have a snowball fight
- Make snow angels or
- Build a snowman

You can also get moving by,

- Tossing a ball with your son or daughter
- Going for a bike ride
- Blowing bubbles
- Building something together
- Catching fireflies
- Teaching each other dances
- Taking a karate or yoga class

### *Touch*

Too often parents report, "She didn't like being held. So, we stopped holding her." "She liked to feed herself her bottle." "He won't let me hug him." Really, you can't be fully human until you can accept touch!

It isn't uncommon, when a family arrives at our office for therapy, that we have to start with small bits of touch, frequently, each day—a hand on the shoulder as the child walks by the parent for example. Sometimes, we assign hugs as "practice." We tell the child that he must go home and "practice" hugging Mom and Dad 12 times each day. We then demonstrate a "good" hug. Progress is monitored until the task is learned and becomes natural. Small steps, over a long period of time, is often the way in to children fearful (because of past abusive experiences) of the hugs, caresses and cuddles of their parents. It takes nature at least a year to form an

attachment. In some cases, it will take adoptive parents this long to help their adopted son or daughter accept their loving touch. (This is another great New Year's resolution!)

For those of you fortunate to have a child who arrives able to enjoy your embraces, here are some ideas to maximize touch:

- Comb or braid your child's hair (Keck and Kupecky, 2009)
- Hold hands while walking (Keck and Kupecky, 2009)
- Exchange foot massages and back rubs. Boys, in particular, are often receptive to backrubs before they fall asleep.
- Play "this little piggy"
- Maintain a bedtime routine well into the teen years
- Fathers are natural nurturers via playing horsy, tickling and wrestling
- Paint each other's fingernails

### *Communication*

When parents talk to their infants, they are actually helping the brain prime itself to develop the skills necessary for conversation and literacy. The child who was neglected or institutionalized was deprived of hours and hours of talking! As this child matures, conversation is difficult. Reading comprehension may lag behind. Parents want to find ways to enhance their adoptee's ability to communicate.

Try starting with nursery rhymes. Yes, even if you have adolescents. The cadence and rhythm of *Itsy Bitsy Spider* or the sequencing of *Old McDonald Had a Farm* is essential to helping the brain develop the skills to talk and absorb the written word. As we'll learn in a post next week, music also improves mood—yours and your children's.

If you have older children, read books together or listen to books on tape. You might find that you need to start with books much "younger" than would be appropriate for the child's chronological age. Share a newspaper article or Internet news story. Look up a topic of interest and take turns reading about it aloud. Some children often leave notes for their parents. I have worked with children who slide notes of apology or love under bedroom doors. Instead of being angry that the note is not "genuine", write a note back. Writing is often an interim form of communication that leads to the capacity to communicate verbally. Order a magazine for your son or daughter and read it together when it arrives (Keck and Kupecky, 2009.) Play the billboard game in the car. Do you remember how? Find words on billboards that start with each letter of the alphabet. Start with "A" and work through to "Z." (Yes, turn off the electronic devices in the car and talk!)

If you want about 100 more nurture suggestions, then look in [\*Parenting the Hurt Child: Helping Adoptive Families Heal and Grow\*](#) by Gregory C. Keck and Regina Kupecky (see Resources). This book provides list after list of ways to nurture children, and they are applicable to *all* children. Or, read my other favorites, *Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents* by Deborah Gray or my book, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*. In Chapter 10, I discuss nurture and offer examples of ways to nurture each member of the family.