

# ATTACHMENT THROUGH THE SENSES

By Margaret A. Creek, MFT, ATR-BC and Laura Ornelas, MSW, LCSW

Article reprinted from  
*Fostering Families Today, July/August 2007*

Many foster and adoptive parents come to our clinics, asking for the specific, perhaps magical therapy that is going to fully “attach” their foster or adopted child to them. What they frequently do not realize is that they are already holding the key. The power of their relationship is far and away the most meaningful tool to counteract the child’s painful past, and to build his/her future. This relationship can actually change the way children think, feel and behave. One key to building this relationship is to use nonverbal interactions rather than words. Often children are operating at a primitive level in which words are “tuned out.” But they are continually absorbing information all around them, through the use of emotions and their bodies, including their five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The focus of this article is to provide “hands-on” techniques using the power of the five senses to increase attachment.

## Sight

Eye contact is the most powerful communication tool we possess. Children respond to body language they see far more than any words. We all remember our mothers giving us “the eye” when we had done something wrong and it worked, didn’t it? Keep eye contact primary in your activities with your child, especially in your communication, so that they can feel your connection with them. You might get to the child’s eye level, hold hands and say, “Look at me and breathe with me,” as a form of teaching them how to self regulate, or “My eyes need to see you do it” for a child telling tall tales about following a direction. Sadly, for children who have been traumatized, their minds’ eye has stored a tremendous amount of painful memories. This means that those memories are extremely easy to access, causing the child to react to a safe situation as if it were a traumatic one, or to hold onto the traumatic memory as if it happened yesterday. For traumatized children, especially those who seem anxious and/or have problems sleeping, guiding them in visual relaxations can be particularly helpful to wind down. For example, use a soft, soothing voice to teach relaxation techniques at bedtime.

## Hearing

Our sense of hearing develops early in the attachment process. Research shows that newborns recognize the sound of their mother’s voice immediately. It is so important to pay attention to tone of voice. As with body language, children listen more to how the words are said than the words themselves. Music is a terrific way to harness the powerful sense of hearing. Sing or hum lullabies to your little ones. Even if you can’t carry a tune, you will create a nurturing ritual

### ATTACHMENT

for them. Identify or create “family songs.” Anybody who ever goes to summer camp probably remembers a camp song, no matter how silly it is. Perhaps you can choose a genre of music for dinner time or house-cleaning time. Remember the motto of the Seven Dwarfs and “whistle while you work.” Consider using music when you transition a child from one family to another. Listening to familiar sounds will help the child to feel comfortable and accepted. If a child is separated from siblings, perhaps they can create a “remix” of favorite tunes they have shared together. Music is especially important to teenagers. If you try to understand a teen’s favorite music, you are, in essence, sending the message to your teen that you want to know more about him or her. Even if you really can’t stand rap or heavy metal, listen to the lyrics for clues to how a teen is feeling. Music can also be a very powerful way to maintain ties with one’s culture. Foster and adoptive parents can help a child understand his or her heritage by exploring its music.

## Taste

We often take our sense of taste for granted. Sure, we know if we like the taste of something and we avoid eating the things we don’t like. But food is an integral part of any family, any culture. Do you have a “comfort” food? Most people do. Finding out what your child considers a comfort food can go a long way in building attachments. A transitioning child will surely (probably without saying so) appreciate having some familiar flavors, so find out as much as possible about his favorite foods. Cultural foods can provide comfort and a sense of identity. It’s important to realize that a familiar food that is comforting to a child could be unpleasant to an adult, but diet is not the battle to choose in trust-building, especially early in placement. If possible, enhance the nonverbal experience of eating. The following idea comes from Sharon Roszia, the former manager of the Special Needs Adoption Program at Kinship Center, who used it when her children were younger. “Every so often,” she explains, “We would have a silent meal of finger foods.” Here’s how it worked: If a person wanted something to eat, she would have to ask for it by making eye contact with another family member. Then she would look at the food she wanted to eat and make eye contact again. She would repeat this process until the family member understood her request, picked up the food and fed it to her. Sharon says, “The reciprocity of this exercise creates attachment. We laughed and had an experience of intimacy that the children still speak of as adults.”

## Smell

While most people can distinguish seven to eight distinct types of taste, the nose can distinguish among hundreds of odors, even in minute quantities. More importantly, this information is easily stored in our long-term memory and has strong connections to our emotional memory. These emotional memories elicit powerful, unconscious physiological reactions. For example, your heart might beat faster at the smell of mothballs if the odor reminds you of a scary incident in grandmother’s attic. So, when transitioning a child, ask to have products with scents that the child is used to, sent with him or her. Products such as shampoo, bath soap, laundry detergent, fabric softener and cleaning supplies all provide lingering scents that could comfort a child. If a

### ATTACHMENT

child is new to your home, it is best not to rush to wash the child's things/clothes from previous home even if they are dirty or stinky. This way you reduce the number of changes the child experiences. Also, be consistent with any scents (perfume, after shave, etc) that you might wear. That way, if your child is having a difficult time with separations, you can tuck something with your scent on it into his backpack or pillow so she will "sense" your nearness.

## Touch

All human beings require touch in order to thrive. Research shows that babies who are rarely touched can have brains that are 20% smaller from those who are touched a lot. Many children who were neglected in their early years missed a lot of nurturing touch. Nurturing touch is another way to build attachment. Nurturing touch can be as simple as a pat on the back or a quick hug. Hold hands, just for the fun of it. Do things cheek-to-cheek or back-to-back. Include games that involve a bit of touch throughout the day. Try to walk across the room, side by side, with a pillow between you. Bed or bath time is a great time to do a "body check" looking for "owies" to kiss or rub. Wrap a child in a towel or blanket to create a "baby burrito." Take time to rub lotion on busy hands or feet. Older children may enjoy grooming routines such as hair brushing or nail painting. If you face a mirror together, you get the added benefit of eye-contact and you can read each other's faces. It is important to tune in to your child's comfort level with touch. Some children have sensory integration difficulties and may be sensitive to certain kinds of touch.

As you see, the use of the five senses can be very powerful in building attachment. It allows our children to experience and store new muscle memories. Then a child can release old painful memories that have been stored in the mind and body, and replace them with healthy, loving experiences. So activate the 5 senses as much as possible, and experience the deepening attachment between you.