

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time Podcast: The Importance of Attachment. I'm your host April Dinwoodie. The National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster Adoptive Parents or NTDC is a five year cooperative agreement from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Family's Children's Bureau. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom based training, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom on the importance of attachment. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as their children transition through different developmental stages. As you listen to this conversation, it will be helpful to have the cycle of attachment and the cycle of disrupted attachment graphics for your reference. Both can be found on the NTDC portal. This episode is all about understanding the importance of attachment and we have with us Laura Ornelas, a licensed clinical social worker with 25 years of experience in child welfare and adoption. Laura is currently a national trainer, curriculum developer, and clinical consultant. Welcome, Laura.

Laura Ornelas: Thank you, April. Great to be with you.

April Dinwoodie: Great. Attachment seems to be the latest trend in parenting these days. Can you speak to why it's actually critically important and not just a buzz?

Laura Ornelas: Yes, April, I'm happy to. We now understand how important attachment in early relationships are to children and how healthy attachments contribute to our ability to build our identities and secure connections. While attachment is absolutely a trending topic and that attention in essence is a good thing, beyond that, we want to be sure we all of the most useful and practical information out there about how to help encourage secure attachments. And this information is especially useful to parents who are fostering or adopting. The thing is while we didn't always realize it in the past, parents and caregivers have the most powerful opportunity to affect their child's future simply by the way they interact with and care for their children. We thought children were adaptable as long as their basic needs were met or that it didn't matter who raised them or how they were being interacted with. Now the science tells us differently and that hugely impacts how children can develop and thrive.

April Dinwoodie: Right. Now can you help us understand just the basic process of attachment in human beings as a starting place?

Laura Ornelas: Sure. As you heard about in the Developing a New Parenting Paradigm, the attachment process can be described as a cycle. And one quick note, the cycle of attachment is also known as the arousal-relaxation cycle for those of you who might have seen it before. Okay. Looking at your graphic, in infancy, all babies express needs and they're totally reliant on their parents or caregivers to meet those needs for survival. The baby cries out to express that need and the parent comes to meet that need. And this happens over and over, all day long, every single day and night. And that's why new parents are so exhausted. When the parent comes regularly to meet the need, the baby's brain and body relaxes,

and the effort pays off. This regular action and attention teaches the baby that their needs will be met and that the world as they know it is predictable and therefore safe.

April Dinwoodie: Isn't this so foundational. Laura, explain a little bit more about what you mean by meeting the needs of a baby.

Laura Ornelas: In infancy, that means identifying what the need is, which can sometimes be tricky, but parents get the hang of it. The baby's hungry. They're sleepy. They need a diaper change. They're too hot or cold, things like that. And then parents respond by doing things like feeding the baby, changing the baby, rocking the baby, taking the baby for a walk, soothing, cooing, adjusting the temperature environment. That makes sense, right?

April Dinwoodie: Oh, it makes perfect sense.

Laura Ornelas: Okay. Now in older children, we can still be referring to the cycle. Older children need to have physical and emotional needs and parents and caregivers are still hugely instrumental in meeting those needs, especially when children didn't get enough of their needs met in their earliest days. Older children still express their needs, however, it may or may not be through crying or other different forms of behavior as they get older. At the same time, it's still important to help their brains and bodies get back to being fully relaxed through meeting their needs.

April Dinwoodie: I see. Okay. What happens when that healthy cycle of attachment does not occur?

Laura Ornelas: In this cycle, the baby expresses themselves just as before, but unfortunately the parent or the caregiver doesn't come, or at least not very frequently, or when they do come, they don't respond by soothing or meeting the needs of the child. And that's when we say the cycle has become disrupted. The child's still learning from the cycle, but sadly, the message is that caregivers are not reliable. And because my survival depends on them, I, as the child, now proceed of the world is actually quite scary and unsafe. It becomes first nature then not to relax. Later, I'll play out this belief through survival kinds of behavior with whoever parents me, because I've learned to protect and defend myself rather than accept and embrace what my parent or caregiver has to offer as in the healthy cycle of attachment. I'll be off putting in whatever way makes sense to me at that moment to keep myself safe. That could mean something like screaming out of nowhere, physically intruding on other people when I'm not even provoked, or even completely shutting down. These are primal survival tendencies really.

April Dinwoodie: Laura, it's so important that we understand this. And I really appreciate the way you break it all down, making it easier to connect all of these dots. What else do we need to know here?

Laura Ornelas: It's important to remember that these kinds of behaviors will probably not make sense if you look at them out of context, but they actually make perfect sense given what children have been taught over and over again if they've had unstable caregiving. The patterns of that pass will be more powerful and continue to be repeated until children have the opportunity for even more positive experiences with a stable and nurturing parent.

April Dinwoodie: Laura, this is so helpful in terms of practically understanding complicated behaviors connected to attachment as babies begin to develop. Now, can you share a bit more about how the cycle of disrupted attachment might have an impact on children as they age and go through different developmental stages?

Laura Ornelas: Yeah, April, I'm so glad you asked me that because as we've been discussing when needs aren't met for babies, it does play out as they develop, but it can be counterintuitive for us as adults to be thinking of these unmet needs when we're not looking at the faces and bodies of babies. We expect children to typically become more independent over time and return back to their parent when they need support. But for kids who've not had their needs for attachment met, they haven't learned this dance yet. They may stay super close or way too far from parents during their early childhood or elementary years, which is when we would usually see them somewhere in between. And then if parents still haven't been able to meet their needs for attachment, as they become teenagers, they'll likely stay too close or way too far in relationships with both family and friends. And then once they start coupling in romantic relationships that push pull is likely going to continue.

April Dinwoodie: With all of this in mind, what can a parent do?

Laura Ornelas: The parenting trick in meeting the needs of kids as they get older is identifying what the need is because even though they're older, they're not clearly expressing their needs, maybe even understanding their own needs much less able to verbalize them. One of the roles of parents who are fostering or adopting is to be a good detective and figuring out that complicated or pushing away kinds of behaviors may actually mean that a parent needs to get closer, soothe, and meet the need of the child. Some of those responses may actually be similar to what the parent would've done with a baby, because developmentally the child really is crying out for a need to be met in those moments.

Laura Ornelas: Even though the child is older, they need the parent to come to comfort and soothe them, maybe even to rock or walk or to change environments with them. And often, no matter what the child's age is, the comforting messages are sent most from the nonverbal interactions, like a soothing tone of voice, thoughtful use of eye contact, and comforting touch. Now, to be clear, this is not the same as babying or belittling a child. It's also the parent's job to adapt this in an age appropriate way to each individual child. And that's going to be addressed more in class.

April Dinwoodie: Wow. Laura, this is so profoundly important. Thank you for all this. Let's take it a little bit further now. If a child or youth spent any time in institutional care, like a group home, residential care, orphanage in another country, how might attachment considerations look the same or different?

Laura Ornelas: Children who spent time living in institutions at critical developmental periods are often the most vulnerable of all. You see, there can be a protective factor of the same caregiver for children in foster care, unless they've had a significant number of moves, but children growing up in institutions of any kind have had rotating caregivers, which means they're radically different interactions of one to the next. Unless a primary caregiver has been identified or parent is in regular contact, these primal messages will be profoundly confusing to a child's development because children learn to make sense of the world and relationships through other people, right? Even more significantly, if children were quite young when they lived in places like orphanages or long term shelters, the cycle of attachment may not have even been completed, which leaves children with a painful gap about what relationships represent at all.

April Dinwoodie: Wow. How long might it take to improve attachment in children or youth and will all this focus really, really help?

Laura Ornelas: Absolutely. The focus on the parent child relationship will not only help, it's central to healing because it's precisely what the child did not get enough of before. Just as with infants, the cycle needs to happen over and over, every day, many times at first. This will take time. It won't happen overnight, or even in the first weeks of the child living with stable parents. But as the child developmentally grows up and is able to emotionally mature from responsive parenting, then they will gradually, gradually become increasingly independent, just like other securely attached children and young people.

April Dinwoodie: Oh, that is so hopeful, Laura. Thank you. What are some concrete strategies that parents can utilize to develop healthy attachment with children and youth moving into their new homes?

Laura Ornelas: The more you're able to learn your child's cues and signals about their internal states, just like you would with a new baby, the more you'll be able to respond and complete a healthy cycle of attachment. Interacting and playing with your child no matter their age will be really important too. They're lovely activities like cuddling up and reading with your child that go a long and activities where you move together and have fun together, go super far way in re-experiencing comfort and joy in a new way for the child. And the last thing I want to say to parents is to have patience and self-compassion and hope. Redoing the cycle of attachment takes time and dedication, but it doesn't require perfect parenting. It is possible and incredibly heartening, healing, and hopeful.

April Dinwoodie: Well, Laura, I can't think of a better way to end than with a real spirit of hope. And we thank you so much for your expertise. It's so valuable. And thank you for

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