



Attachment Parenting 101

By Judy Arnall, President of Attachment Parenting Canada Association

“The attachment parenting philosophy is based on empathetically responding immediately to a child’s direct and indirect needs. Attachment parenting is about treating children with dignity and respect afforded any adult.”

These words were written by Ellen Percival and Sherry Kerr in the October/November 1996 issue of Calgary’s Child magazine after speaking with Judy Arnall, currently President of Attachment Parenting Canada. Attachment parenting has been the latest media buzzword due to the recent Time magazine cover of a model breastfeeding her three-year-old son, and the newly released book, “Beyond the Sling,” by Mayim Bialik. However, confusion abounds as to what attachment parenting really is.

When did attachment parenting become fashionable?

In its most basic sense, attachment parenting has been around since humans first began having babies. No early human has ever put their young offspring to bed in the bush 50 meters away and ignored their screams so that they would learn to “self soothe” and go to sleep.

Modern attachment parenting has its roots in the 1950’s when John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth compiled studies on the effect of attachment between children and their primary caregivers. They were the pioneers in attachment theory, which explained the bonds developed in relationships. The results of this research, which still holds true today, show that when a child’s needs for security and emotional and physical comfort are met by a nurturing and warm parent or caregiver, they grow up to become emotionally and socially healthy adults capable of forming close, trusting, caring relationships with other people. They also become more independent because they have had their security needs filled.

In the 1980’s, Dr. William Sears wrote a book called “Creative parenting,” which extolled the benefits of practicing attachment parenting. He became most widely known in the early 1990’s with the publication of “The Baby Book.” He, together with his wife, Martha Sears, raised 8 children and wrote over 40 books on child rearing. Dr. Sears coined the term “attachment parenting,” which became synonymous with the practices of attachment parenting, such as co-sleeping, baby-wearing and child-led weaning from extended breastfeeding.

In 1994, Attachment Parenting International was formed by founders Lysa Parker and Barbara Nicholson. Attachment Parenting Canada, Attachment Parenting Europe and similar groups formed two years later, when the birth of the Internet helped publicize and unite like-minded parents and professionals.

What is attachment parenting?

Attachment parenting is a parenting style and philosophy of nurturing and empathically responding to a child's needs, especially when the child is sick, hurt or upset. When a child trips, scrapes his knee and begins to cry, many parents would respond with saying, "You're okay, it's only a little scrape. Now get up and let's go." An attachment parent would say, "That wound really hurts, doesn't it? Here, come for a cuddle until you feel better." Many people confuse the attachment philosophy with the tools or practices of attachment parenting, which although they may be used, many parents are unable to or choose not to use them because of familial circumstances.

The tools of attachment parenting are co-sleeping, extended breastfeeding and child-carrying. Parents with back problems will not consider baby carrying. Many mothers choose not to breastfeed. Some parents simply can't sleep well with a baby in their bed. They are still nurturing parents who are responsive to their children, and they find ways to meet those needs that are comfortable for both parent and child. Many parents find that the tools of attachment parenting enable them to feel closer to their children, especially during the early years when children equate love with physical proximity.

Other tools often associated with attachment parenting are tenets of a healthy, natural lifestyle, such as eating organically, refusing vaccinations and avoiding the purchase of toxic, chemical-laden products. Homeschooling is also popular due to the closeness of family bonds.

Can a parent who lets their baby sleep in a crib, ride in a stroller, bottle-feed, eat meat, get vaccinated, use plastic toys and go to public school be an attachment parent? Yes! If they consistently respond to their children when their children need them and are willing to be influenced by their child's needs, then they are practicing attachment parenting. This is outlined by the 8 Ideals of attachment parenting. Parker and Nicholson, who spearheaded a committee that designated the 8 ideals, made sure that the wording avoided exclusion and captured the true essence of attachment parenting.

8 ideals of attachment parenting:

1. Prepare for Pregnancy, Birth and Parenting

Every parent needs to be informed about the options and issues available in parenting and child development as their child grows.

2. Feed with Love and Respect

Feeding practices need to encompass the best practices in nutrition (breastfeeding) and socialization (bottle-feeding).

3. Respond with Sensitivity

Parents need to respond to their child's needs with love, empathy, comfort, promptness and respect.

4. Use Nurturing Touch

Parents need to respond with loving, non-sexual, appropriate touch daily, and especially when their child is hurt, sick or upset.

5. Ensure Safe Sleep, Physically and Emotionally

Parents need to respond with empathy and respect to their child's night time parenting needs.

6. Provide Consistent and Loving Care

Parents need to provide consistent love, nurturing, empathy, warmth and firm expectations of age-appropriate behaviour to produce the most favourable outcome for their child.

7. Practice Positive Discipline

Parents need to provide respectful, non-punitive discipline and guidance that focuses on teaching and problem-solving.

8. Strive for Balance in Personal and Family Life

Parents need to provide balance in their lives and self-care so that they can be the optimal parent that also respects their own needs.

What is not attachment parenting?

Two important differences in parenting practices separate attachment parenting from mainstream parents: sleep training and punitive discipline.

Ideal #5 states “ensure safe sleep, emotionally and physically.” It doesn’t mention that co-sleeping or bed sharing is a necessity, although many attachment parents do co-sleep with their babies and children. There is a lot of information available on how to do it safely and decrease the risk of suffocation. Sleep training and letting babies “cry it out” is a definite no-no because babies and children suffer emotionally when left uncomforted. Many babies can’t “self-soothe,” and it produces anxiety and stress for mothers to listen to their babies cry. These mothers can go to extraordinary means to restrain themselves from going in to comfort and hold their babies, no matter how tired they are.

Science has recently caught up to what many mothers feel instinctually when letting their babies cry. Crying is a natural survival mechanism of infants, and hundreds of thousands of years of instinct can’t be wrong. Research in the past five years on brain development has yielded studies showing how the stress-responding hormone cortisol can damage neurons in the developing brain. This is reason enough to convince parents that it is beneficial to comfort your child’s emotional turmoil in the middle of the night.

Unfortunately, health organizations are slow to make recommendations and still adhere to advice popularized by Dr. Richard Ferber in the 1985 book, “Solve Your Child’s Sleep Problems,” which advocates letting babies cry, because it “works” in that some babies eventually give up and go to sleep. Twenty-seven years later, research is just beginning to uncover the emotional damage that could result from ignoring children’s emotional needs.

A common argument is that if parents provide loving care during the day, children can learn to be independent during the night. Ideal #7, providing consistent and loving care, does not make exceptions based on whether it is night or day. Toddlers and preschoolers often experience extreme separation anxiety and fears at night, and they need parental support, proximity and comfort. Ignoring a child at night can make separation anxiety worse during the day. As a result, the child becomes clingier to their safe haven, the parent, and also becomes less likely to want to explore their environment. Bowlby’s research shows that the more secure a child feels with attachment theory, the more independent he becomes as he grows.

In the area of discipline, mutual respect is the key. Parents should not do anything to their child that they would not do to another significant adult. Teaching, modeling, time-in (a practice where parents actively help a child calm down), problem-solving, redirection, communication, child-proofing, and natural consequences are respectful ways to teach desired behaviour, and would normally be used in

an adult-to-adult situation. Spanking, time-outs, consequences and withdrawal of privileges are not respectful to adults or children and most attachment parents do not use them.

How does attachment parenting align with mainstream parenting?

Attachment parenting grows more and more close to today's mainstream democratic parenting style, which is promoted by most of Canada's health organizations. For example, Canada's national and provincial health organizations have adopted the WHO's (World Health Organization) recommendations for mothers to breastfeed their children up to age two and beyond. Breast milk contains anti-bodies, enzymes, and hormones that continue to provide benefits to children who eat table food. As well, the benefits continue for moms in that every year breastfeeding continues the lifetime risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer is lessened. Weaning is a personal choice between mother and child, regardless of the age of the latter.

Baby wearing is extremely fashionable right now and the sales of slings, wraps and carriers are large for both moms and dads. Most health organizations advocate a non-punitive approach to discipline as well.

The only attachment parenting practice not supported by health organizations is bed-sharing with babies under the age of one, due to the risk of suffocation and trapping. After the age of one year, no health organization will make recommendations on whether toddlers and older children should co-sleep with parents. There is no research to support a stop to the practice and families make their sleep choices based on cultural, family and society values.

Past the breastfeeding, baby wearing, and co-sleeping stage of babies, toddlers and preschoolers, attachment parenting is indistinguishable from most of the parenting best-practice recommendations from Health Canada, Public Health Agency and provincial health organizations.

Common myths of attachment parenting:

It's too draining on parents.

Ideal #8 says to strive for balance. Meeting both the child's needs and the parent's needs is essential, and in most situations it can be accomplished with a little creative problem-solving.

AP stifles children's natural drive to be independent.

Research shows that children who are comforted predictably and consistently form trusting relationships with their parents and have the confidence to explore their environment. Children who are raised trusting their parents learn to trust other people in their relationships. When children feel secure then they are more likely to become interdependent and grow up equipped to handle difficult situations.

Due to various combinations of temperament and personality, all children are different. Children set their own individual timetables for independence. Attachment parenting is not the same as "helicopter parenting." Attachment parents observe when their child sets the lead, and they don't hold them back for their own needs. Parents are the soft landing pad when a child truly needs them and the launchers when they don't. In contrast, helicopter parents meet their own needs in spite of protests from their child. Perhaps it is the parenting practices of not meeting early needs for attachment that is one of the reasons our society has a high proportion of adults over 25 years of age, living and playing video games in their parents' basement?

AP is more for the mom than the dad.

Dads can be attachment parents too, and so can caregivers and grandparents.

It's meeting the mom's needs and not the child's.

In my parenting groups, I've talked to many moms who try to escape their toddler who wants to breastfeed, despite that their child is running after them screaming, crying and demanding to nurse. You can't force a child to breastfeed and it's even harder to stop them. Often, the moms want to stop before the child does. The La Leche League approach of "don't offer, don't refuse" can help wean nursing toddlers and preschoolers when mom wants to stop and the child doesn't. Many breastfeeding toddlers and preschoolers eat and drink table food throughout the day but find it hard to drop that last comforting nursing before bed. Like a bedtime story, it's a way to reconnect after a busy day apart.

If a child can drink from a cup, they are too old to breastfeed.

The toddler and preschooler stage is still a very oral stage. Children put items in their mouths to taste and explore the item's properties. This is why health organizations advise to continue child-proofing environments until the child is four years old. Sucking is still very much a comfort and many toddlers and preschoolers rely on their soothers, bottles and breasts. If there is no issue regarding teeth alignment as outlined by a dental health specialist, breastfeeding, pacifiers and bottles meet a child's basic needs.

Parents who work full time can't be attachment parents.

Many parents work full time and breastfeed and co-sleep at night. Again physical and emotional reconnection keeps them close.

Attachment parenting is over after the toddler stage

Attachment parenting doesn't end when the child stops breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and being carried. All throughout a child's school and teen years, attachment parenting beliefs and philosophies help build the important parent-child connection through empathetic listening, support, mutually-set rules, loving discipline, child-led independence, quantity of focused and unfocused time together, and most of all, mutual respect. Over fifty years of research shows that children who have their security and dependence needs fulfilled and supported early and consistently grow into emotionally healthy and independent adults.

Judy Arnall is an international award-winning peaceful parenting speaker, and bestselling author of ***"Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery"*** and the new DVD ***"Plugged-In Parenting: Connecting with the Digital Generation for Health, Safety and Love."*** She is also author of the new book, ***"The Last Word on Parenting Advice."*** www.professionalparenting.ca 403-714-6766 or jarnall@shaw.ca Judy is also co-founder and president of Attachment Parenting Canada Association www.attachmentparenting.ca



Copyright permission granted for “reproduction without permission” of this article in whole or part, if the above credit is included in its entirety.