

Understanding Healthy Relationships

Children need healthy relationships with parents (or other adult caregivers) while their brains and bodies are growing. Without healthy relationships, children may have difficulty learning, regulating their emotions, and engaging in positive social interactions. They are also at greater risk of health problems. Recognizing both the influence and the importance of healthy relationships is key to figuring out how parents can help children grow into healthy adults.

Four Pillars for Healthy Relationships

Four pillars provide the structure necessary for healthy relationships at home. In combination, these establish a bond or **attachment** between parent and child. That bond is critical for helping the child to navigate the challenges of life.

1. Create safe places

- Creating a safe place for children to grow and thrive starts with **physical safety**, like taking precautions to prevent injuries.
- It is equally important to create **psychological or emotional safety**, meaning children feel like they can say what they are thinking or feeling, that they have choices, and that they can learn from their mistakes without being afraid of the consequences.
- A sense of safety is also created by establishing predictable **daily routines**, including regular times for eating, exercising, playing and sleeping.

2. Listen

- Start with **noticing your own feelings and needs** in that moment. If needed, take care of yourself so that you are feeling calm before you respond to your child.
- Next, **identify and name your child's feelings**. This will help your child develop an emotional language. For example, you might say "You seem really mad right now."
- **Reflect** what your child says to you. That means that you say back to them what you heard them say. For example, if your child tells you about the swing being taken away, you might say "It sounds like you thought it was your turn on the swing." This shows that you are listening.
- Finally, **show empathy** by what you say and do. For example, a gentle hand on the shoulder or saying kindly "I'm sorry that happened."

3. Show love

- You know that you love your child, but does your child feel loved, important and special? Some general ways to show love include **physical touch** (hugs, kisses, "high fives"), praise (specific **praise** such as, "How wonderful that you shared your doll with your sister"), **quality time** (for example, reading a story together), **acts of service** (for example, if your child asks for a cup of water then bringing a cup of water), and **gifts**.

4. Make time to play

- At all ages it is important to include unstructured play where there are no rules to follow, you are letting your child take the lead, you are having fun together, and there is a back and forth ("serve and return") between you and your child.
- Playing also provides an opportunity to teach by **noticing, describing and praising** positive behaviors. This attention to positive behaviors promotes positive behaviors.

Resources

- **The Whole Brain Child Workbook** by DJ Siegel and TP Bryson
- **The 5 Love Languages of Children** by G. Chapman and R. Campbell
- **Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings** by K.R. Ginsburg
- **Nurturing Parenting Workshops**, <https://www.nurturingparenting.com/>