

Top 10 Attachment-Informed Do-Ables for Lawyers and Judges

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“Successful parenting is a principal key to the mental health of the next generation.” – John Bowlby

1. Understand attachment

The relational experiences of a child in the first 3 years of their life (the attachment period) have a direct impact on the development of their brain which sets the stage for how the child experiences future relationships. During this period the child needs a safe, secure, consistent, and supportive base from which to explore their world and develop healthy autonomy. Parents help their children develop secure attachment and therefore promote healthy neurobiological development by being attuned to their child. This means being fully present to and interacting consistently and warmly with their child (for example having a predictable bedtime routine) as well as consistently meeting the child’s physical and emotional needs. Better attachments are built when the child is relaxed and calm.

Understanding this crucial period of development helps you make child-oriented decisions that will best serve children’s needs.

“My guiding philosophy is that when babies experiences an interpersonally rich environment where they are consistently honored, nurtured, included, mirrored accurately, and responded to by an emotionally sensitive and empathic primary attachment figure, they will internalize a secure sense of self and safety in the world” – TheAttunedParent.com

2. Consider attachment-informed parenting-time guidelines

Spokane County, Minnesota, Indiana, and Arizona provide excellent guidelines. An example of attachment-informed parenting-time would be frequent and shorter visits for children under 18 months. These visits should maintain those things with which the child is familiar (daily routine, environment, day care, and so on). Overnights with the non-primary parent should generally be discouraged for this age. Overnights can be implemented and then increased after the child develops language skills and familiarity with the non-primary parent.

It is difficult to create two safe and secure bases for an infant. In a divorce situation (two homes), help parents understand that the child will very likely establish one primary safe base and one primary attachment figure. This will allow the child to have the ability to develop additional attachments later. Allowing the infant to start with one secure base ameliorates the stress and vulnerability inherent at night time for infants.

3. Make both parents matter

Educate parents about the importance of the child having a relationship with each of them. Help them understand that each provides a unique and necessary contribution to their child’s healthy development. Encourage each parent to support the relationship the child has with the other parent. At the very least, inform them that it’s damaging to their child to speak negatively about the other parent. When parents do this, it results in the child not feeling safe which thwarts optimal brain growth and neural development. Set the expectation and normalize that both parents will be involved regardless of the feelings either parent has for the other.

Both parents can provide consistent interactions that their child can rely on each day. These interactions can be soothing routines (mirroring, naming, and regulating emotions), cuddling, feeding, and play. Even better, have the parents discuss and create similar routines to help maintain familiarity for the child.

4. Create stability with a home-base focus

As much as possible, center visitation around the child's home-base and all things familiar. For example, have the visit in the child's primary home, neighborhood, city, or geographic region (as opposed to 4-day visits on the other side of the state in a long distance situation). Ensure the visits are consistent and predictable. Encourage parents to help their children understand the "rhythm" behind the visits. "It's Wednesday, that's the day we visit Daddy/Mommy." or "Daddy's coming to spend time with you today." Give special attention to long-term-absence cases and chaotic early environments where safety and stability are even more important.

5. Promote attachment-focused parenting-education

Urge the parents to take a parenting class. Look for programs that focus on teaching parents to attune to their child (consistently and warmly meet physical and emotional needs) by developing parental empathy and responsiveness. Programs should also include education about the importance of predictable routines for young children, such as a stable bedtime and a bedtime ritual, as well as children's developmental stages. Attachment-informed parenting methods are not innate and as a result, insecure attachments often get passed on generationally. Promoting education will normalize it and reduce the stigma surrounding it. If classes are limited, offer some book suggestions and ask for a report.

6. Promote transition rituals and objects

Rituals provide consistent interactions for the parent and child to connect. Parents can create all kinds of rituals (for example, hello/goodbye, bedtime, and silly games). Transition rituals help ease transfer anxiety, which is normal for infants and toddlers. If needed, involve other protective adults to facilitate transfers, for example, long term day care providers, neutral child-focused family members, or a child-oriented location such as a playground. The visiting parent can institute longer-term ongoing and interactive projects the child can return to, such as large puzzles, craft projects, gardening.

Transitional objects (such as blankets, stuffed animals, pacifiers) provide a concrete and consistent physical reminder of the absent attachment figure and provide a sense of consistency and safety for the child. Require that parents send and return the child with a object of the child's choosing from home. Smell is a primal sense, so an item that smells like a baby's primary caregiver is soothing (hence the ratty-blanket syndrome 😊).

7. Model and investigate appropriate parenting skills

From your bench or desk, you have the opportunity to model remaining calm, respectful, and sensitive to the parents' feelings and needs. Display and promote flexible thinking, attentive listening, and eye contact. Avoid harsh criticisms and make a point of offering choices rather than telling people what to do. Watch the parties for signs of distress (flushed face, increased breathing, stuttering, and so on) and help them identify their feelings by naming them ("name it to tame it" from Dr. Daniel Siegel). "You look frustrated, take a couple breaths, we'll figure this out."

Early in the process it is critical to develop parental focus on children's needs. Ask parents about parenting skills. Quiz parties on specific parenting techniques (consider using the Baris and Garrity parenting checklist). Judges can request declarations in which parents state what they learned in class or from reading and provide positive statements about the other parent.

In criminal cases, judges sometimes take the worst offender first so they can demonstrate the consequences and set an example. In family court, a judge could make the first case one in which the parents took a class and provide an update of what they learned. The judge can provide praise and make

them a positive example. This in turn may promote discussions about parent skills within the safety of the law office setting. Lawyers can consider if they are providing a safe base for their client in the unknown world of law.

For example:

To a parent in one case: "That's very nice you have taken so much parenting education. Thank you." "Can you tell me what you learned from that class?" "Can you tell me what you learned about building relationship and how it has impacted your parenting?" To a parent in another case: "You haven't taken a parenting class? Ever? Hmm... Can you? (or) "Would you be willing to?"

8. Build a village

The primary caregiver relationship is not the only relationship that will help shape children's neurobiological development. Encourage parents to allow consistent involvement of extended family, maintain consistent day care and pre-school providers, and provide social opportunities. Sports/arts/music (SAM) is an important factor in neurobiological development and should be promoted as early as possible, even at age two. The presence of predictable and consistent others and SAM involvement is a protective factor for at-risk children.

9. Resolve conflict quickly

Parental conflict leads the child to learn that relationships are not safe or trustworthy. Early efforts to resolve conflict are more important with infant cases. Recommend parent coaching, joint parenting classes (if possible), mediation, or co-parent psychotherapy. Consider early final plans that are modifiable.

Notice the parents' behaviors and consider rigid, parent-focused thinking and persistent blaming as an important clue to possible parenting challenges. Give more thought to the case and possibly impose more restrictions/consequences. A respectful Judicial demeanor can go a long way to calming parents' stress. Likewise for client counseling that gives parents the opportunity to fully express their feelings, be heard and respected, and offered choices.

10. Consider parallel parenting

Cooperative parenting cannot be forced. If parents don't get along, parallel parenting is an alternative, and may eventually lead to cooperative parenting. Angry parents increase levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol which can negatively impact how the child's brain develops. Promote similar household routines and at least consistent routines within each house. Encourage parents to communicate through email. Promote flexible thinking, a focus on the future, and discourage blame to keep conflicts from escalating. Require parents to identify three positive aspects of the other parent before they say anything negative. Encourage and acknowledge positive statements about the other parent.