

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

An Investment in Your Child's Development

FEELING FRUSTRATED when your child goes into another phase of “clinginess”? Having a child hang on your leg or burst into tears when you’re about to leave him off at school can feel suffocating. One way of managing our own intense feelings about separation issues is to view them over a broad spectrum of ages.

The same child who cries in anguish when we depart from the preschool room will exhibit almost opposite behavior as a teenager when she prefers to be with friends. New discoveries in neuroscience reveal that the behaviors at both stages reflect what’s happening in the brain. At both ages, the way a parent responds to a child’s needs will help determine her abilities to react calmly and make good choices.

The separation-distress system, which is located in the lower brain, is genetically programmed for acute sensitivity. A toddler’s ability to express upset when he’s away from his parent turns out to be one of the ways that young children survived throughout evolution.

People often believe that separation anxiety is finished when a child stops crying at the preschool door. Not so. Even eight- and nine-year-olds exhibit high stress when a parent is away. That’s one of the reasons that teachers want to be kept in the loop when parents are traveling. Children need comforting when they’re feeling upset about being away from a parent in order to manage those difficult feelings.

Acknowledging children’s feelings and commenting on how well they are handling them helps reduce stress hormones in the child’s brain. In addition, establishing that nurturing relationship will build a foundation of trust that aids adolescent development.

Dr. Daniel Siegel’s popular new book, *Brain Boost*, explores the changes in the adolescent brain, a radical growth process that scientists say lasts from ages 12 to 24. During the teenage years, the frontal cortex, the area of the brain that allows for logic and planning, isn’t fully developed. Although teenagers may push parents away to demonstrate independence, consistent time with parents is a crucial part of achieving mature thinking over time.

With both the young child and the adolescent, a close relationship with a parent helps support the capabilities that the brain is developing. Younger children need comfort and physical contact in order to learn how to regulate their own emotions. In the case of older children, the adult actually aids the developing frontal cortex by supporting the child through problem solving and decision making. The adolescent has the capability to talk a situation through that a younger child couldn’t, and acknowledging those newly developed powers of logic bolsters them. “I notice how carefully you’re thinking about this decision, weighing both sides to see what feels right to you.”

On those days when it’s hard to handle a young child’s distress, or a 12-year-old’s push for independence, remember it’s not personal. The brain is orchestrating changes. Pat yourself on the back for staying connected to your child. You’re investing in his development.

May 7, 2014