

CREATING NEW ATTACHMENT EXPERIENCES

What is the skill?

Creating new attachment experiences means providing repeated interactions that allow children to develop more flexible expectations of caregivers and relationships. Earlier attachment experiences influence development. New relationships can provide additional experiences that gradually reshape what the child expects when they are distressed, dependent, uncertain, or emotionally close.

Normal development

Attachment expectations continue to develop as children encounter new relationships and gain more complex ways of understanding themselves and others. Sensitive caregiving, reflective functioning, emotional availability, and repair can support greater security over time. A child may trust the caregiver in ordinary situations but return to earlier protective strategies during transitions, loss, conflict, or heightened stress.

How neglect interferes

A child who has experienced neglect may not immediately recognize a safe response as trustworthy. Comfort may feel unfamiliar. Predictability may initially be tested. Closeness may activate memories or expectations of disappointment. The child may need many consistent experiences before relying on the caregiver in vulnerable moments. This does not mean the relationship is failing. It reflects the strength and persistence of previously learned expectations.

What it might look like

Over time, the child may begin to:

- Show distress more openly.
- Accept help with less resistance.
- Recover more readily after conflict.
- Seek the caregiver during uncertainty.
- Talk about mixed or complicated feelings.
- Trust that mistakes do not automatically end the relationship.

Parenting implications

Caregivers can provide new attachment experiences by:

- Remaining emotionally available during distress.
- Responding sensitively without forcing closeness.
- Following predictable routines.
- Preparing the child for separations and transitions.
- Acknowledging mistakes and repairing ruptures.
- Maintaining appropriate limits without threatening the relationship.

Avoid demanding gratitude, affection, eye contact, physical closeness, or particular words as evidence of attachment. Security is better reflected in the child's growing ability to use the caregiver for support while developing confidence to explore.

From Understanding to Attunement

New attachment expectations develop when children repeatedly experience, "My caregiver is trying to understand me, remains available when things are difficult, and helps me return to the relationship after we lose connection."

