



National Center on  
Substance Abuse and Child Welfare

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Bringing Systems Together for  
Family Recovery, Safety, and Stability

**Parent-Child Attachment:  
A review of literature & evidence-based and promising  
practices**

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## **Introduction**

Children who reside in homes characterized by parental substance abuse often experience parenting amidst considerable chaos and an unpredictable home life. These children may receive inconsistent, emotional responses, in addition to inconsistent care from the substance-using adults in their lives. Often times these parents were exposed to this same type of inconsistent emotional responses and care as children, and therefore did not have the knowledge and skills to be nurturing and responsive parents with their own children. Issues of abandonment and emotional unavailability as well as guilt, shame, and self blame are often observed in children exposed to parental substance abuse. Emotionally and developmentally, an abused or neglected child of parents with substance use disorders is likely to develop issues with trust, attachment, self esteem, and autonomy. Consequently, as parents achieve recovery, it is imperative the parent-child relationship, as well as the child's development is a focus of the treatment intervention received by the family.

For these children in out of home care, attention to developmental issues is critical. In 2000, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a policy statement, "Threats to a child's development from abuse and neglect should be understood by all participants in the child welfare system. Pediatricians have an important role in assessing the child's needs, providing comprehensive services, and advocating on the child's behalf". Furthermore, the AAP outlined the developmental issues most important for this population including: the implications and consequences of abuse, neglect, and placement in foster care on early brain development; the importance and challenges of establishing a child's attachment to caregivers; and the impact multiple placements have on the child's ability to form attachments; the importance of considering a child's changing sense of time in all aspects of the foster care experience; and the child's response to stress. In addition, topics related to parental roles and kinship care, parent-child contact, permanency decision-making, and the components of comprehensive assessment and treatment of a child's development and mental health needs were viewed as important considerations in the healing process for these children.

The following information contains a literature review, listing of practices aimed at addressing the needs of these children, strengthening parent/ child bonding and attachment and approaches to enhance parenting. A listing of available curricula with website information is included. This resource is not meant to be exhaustive; however does provide brief information on interventions that may be of interest to Program Administrators.

## Evidence-Based and Promising Practices: Models and Curricula

The following is a list of available curricula with information compiled from the various websites and literature reviewed. This list is not meant to be exhaustive; however, it provides brief information on interventions with a component that focuses on parent-child attachment or fostering parent-child bonding, as well as programs that enhance parenting skills. Several programs target families with substance use issues.

### Parenting Programs

#### *Celebrating Families*

The *Celebrating Families!*<sup>™</sup> curriculum is an evidence based cognitive behavioral, support group model written for families in which one or both parents have a serious problem with alcohol or other drugs and in which there is a high risk for domestic violence, child abuse, or neglect. *Celebrating Families!*<sup>™</sup> works with every member of the family, **from ages 3 through adult**, to strengthen recovery from alcohol and/or other drugs, break the cycle of addiction and increase successful family reunification. *Celebrating Families!*<sup>™</sup> fosters the development of safe, healthy, fulfilled, and addiction-free individuals and families by increasing resiliency factors and decreasing risk factors while incorporating addiction recovery concepts with healthy family living skills.

For more information, visit: <http://www.celebratingfamilies.net/>

#### *Incredible Years*

The Incredible Years: Parents, Teachers, and Children Training Series is a comprehensive set of curricula designed to promote social competence and prevent, reduce, and treat aggression and related conduct problems in babies, toddlers, young children, and school-aged children. The interventions that make up this series—parent training, teacher training, and child training programs are guided by developmental theory concerning the role of multiple interacting risk and protective factors (child, family, and school) in the development of conduct problem.

For more information, visit: <http://www.incredibleyears.com/>

#### *Nurturing Parenting Programs*

The Nurturing Parenting Programs are a family-centered initiative designed to build nurturing parenting skills as an alternative to abusive and neglecting parenting and child-rearing practices. The long term goals are to prevent recidivism in families receiving social services, lower the rate of multiparent teenage pregnancies, reduce the rate of juvenile delinquency and alcohol abuse, and stop the intergenerational cycle of child abuse by teaching positive parenting behaviors. The Nurturing Programs target all families at risk for abuse and neglect with children birth to 18 years.

The programs are evidenced based parenting programs that can be offered in a group setting, a home setting or in a combination of group and home settings. There are specific curricula to address families with substance abuse issues; parenting fathers; special needs; and, culturally focused programs.

For more information, visit: <http://www.nurturingparenting.com/home.php>

### *Triple P - Positive Parenting Program*

Triple P--Positive Parenting Program provides parenting and family support strategies for families with children from birth to age 12, with extensions to families with teenagers ages 13 to 16. The program can be used with families from many cultural groups and is designed to prevent social, emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems in children by enhancing their parents' knowledge, skills, and confidence. Variations of some Triple P levels are available for parents of young children with developmental disabilities (Stepping Stones Triple P) and for parents who have abused (Pathways Triple P). The program is founded on social learning theory and draws on cognitive, developmental, and public health theories.

Triple P has five intervention levels of increasing intensity to meet each family's specific needs. Each level includes and builds upon strategies used at previous levels:

- Level 1 (Universal Triple P) is a media-based information strategy designed to increase community awareness of parenting resources, encourage parents to participate in programs, and communicate solutions to common behavioral and developmental concerns.
- Level 2 (Selected Triple P) provides specific advice on how to solve common child developmental issues (e.g., toilet training) and minor child behavior problems (e.g., bedtime problems). Included are parenting tip sheets and videotapes that demonstrate specific parenting strategies. Level 2 is delivered mainly through one or two brief face-to-face 20-minute consultations.
- Level 3 (Primary Care Triple P) targets children with mild to moderate behavior difficulties (e.g., tantrums, fighting with siblings) and includes active skills training that combines advice with rehearsal and self-evaluation to teach parents how to manage these behaviors. Level 3 is delivered through brief and flexible consultation, typically in the form of four 20-minute sessions.
- Level 4 (Standard Triple P and Group Triple P), an intensive strategy for parents of children with more severe behavior difficulties (e.g., aggressive or oppositional behavior), is designed to teach positive parenting skills and their application to a range of target behaviors, settings, and children. Level 4 is delivered in 10 individual or 8 group sessions totaling about 10 hours.
- Level 5 (Enhanced Triple P) is an enhanced behavioral family strategy for families in which parenting difficulties are complicated by other sources of family distress (e.g., relationship conflict, parental depression or high levels of stress). Program modules include practice sessions to enhance parenting skills, mood management strategies, stress coping skills, and partner support skills. Enhanced Triple P extends Standard Triple P by adding three to five sessions tailored to the needs of the family.

For more information, visit: <http://www.triplep-america.com/>

### **Parent-Child Bonding and Attachment**

#### *Circle of Security*

The Circle of Security™ Project is an innovative, first-of-its-kind early intervention program designed to alter the developmental pathway of parents and their young children. The Circle of Security™ Project integrates over fifty years of attachment research into a video-based intervention to strengthen parents' ability to observe and improve their caregiving capacity. The use of a clear differential diagnosis for each parent/child dyad allows the clinician to focus on precise personal strengths and diagnostically significant ("linchpin") struggles, rather than relying on a more traditional "one-size-fits-all" approach to

intervention. Attachment theory, taught in this way, gives each parent an individualized parenting “road map,” a clear pathway to providing a secure relationship for her/his child.

For more information, visit: <http://www.circleofsecurity.org>

### *Infant Caregiver Project*

The Infant-Caregiver Project studies the effectiveness of training programs for parents and high-risk children. Through following the development of children for the past 12 years, they have identified three key issues for children who experience disruptions in care at an early age. Children who experience early adversity tend to:

- Push caregivers away emotionally when they are hurt or frustrated, acting as if they can handle things on their own.
- Are at risk for developing insecure attachments to new caregivers.
- Are often dysregulated at behavioral and biobehavioral levels.

Based on these results, they have developed a parent intervention, Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up Intervention, that addresses the special emotional and relationship needs of children who have experienced disruptions in care.

For more information, visit: <http://icp.psych.udel.edu/about.htm>

### *Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)*

PCIT is a proven parent-child treatment program that assists parents of children with behavioral problems (aggression, non-compliance, defiance, and temper tantrums). Both Federal and State policymakers recognize PCIT as a successful and effective evidence-based practice. PCIT has been adapted as an intervention for many different types of families (child welfare population, at-risk families, adoptive families, foster families, and other languages including Spanish and Chinese) but is most effective with young children and parents who want to improve their relationship with their children. Referrals are typically for children between the ages of 2-7 years who are exhibiting some challenging behavioral issues. The PCIT program has two program components.

Relationship Enhancement component: Parents are taught and coached how to decrease negative aspects of the relationship with their child and to develop consistently positive and supportive communication.

Strategies for Compliance component: Parents are taught and coached the elements of effective discipline and child management skills. Parents learn and acquire specific skills, practice these skills until mastery is achieved and the child's behavior has improved.

For more information, visit: <http://www.pcittraining.tv/default.asp>

### *Child-Parent Psychotherapy*

Child-Parent Psychotherapy is a relationship-based dyadic intervention. The focus is on safety, consistency, empathy and respect. Attention is given to the practical issues of daily living the parent and

child are facing. The approach is ecologically valid, as well as Multi-Theoretical in the considerations that guide this framework.

For additional information available references include:

Alicia F. Lieberman, et al "Don't Hit My Mommy: A Manual For Child Parent Psychotherapy With Young Witnesses Of Family Violence"(2005) Zero to Three Press

Alicia F. Lieberman, et al "Losing A Parent To Death In The Early Years: Guidelines For The Treatment Of Traumatic Bereavement In Infancy & Early Childhood"(2003) Zero to Three Press

Lieberman, A., Van Horn, P., & Ozer, E. (2005) Preschooler witnesses of marital violence: Predictors of mediators of child behavior problems, *Development and Psychopathology, 17*, 385-396.

Cicchetti, D., Toth, S.L., & Rogosch, F. (1999) The efficacy of toddler-parent psychotherapy to increase attachment security in offspring of depressed mothers. *Attachment & Human Development, 1*, 34-66.

Toth, S., Manglan, A., Manly, J., Spagnola, M., & Cicchetti, D. (2002) The relative efficacy of two interventions in altering maltreated preschool children's representational models: Implications for attachment theory. *Development and Psychopathology, 14* (4), 877-908.

#### *Promoting Positive Parenting: An Attachment-Based Intervention*

This book illuminates the successful implementations of one of the few evidence-based parenting intervention programs. More than 20 years ago the editors began experimenting with videotaping parental behavior in order to enhance parents' sensitivity to their children's signals. This new book presents the outcome of this effort.

Video-feedback Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting (VIPP) is a brief and focused parenting intervention program that has been successful in a variety of clinical and non-clinical groups and cultures. The book opens with an introduction to the VIPP program and the theoretical background of this parenting intervention, followed by a narrative and meta-analytical review of the attachment-based interventions. The book continues with detailed descriptions and case reports of several intervention studies of the program. It describes the implementation and testing of a variety of VIPP based interventions highlighting different families in a variety of childcare settings, and in various countries including the Netherlands, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Chapters present how the VIPP approach was implemented in samples of insecure mothers, mothers with eating disorders, preterm infants, adopted children, and children with early behavior problems.

## **Additional Resources**

### *ZERO TO THREE*

ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization that informs, trains and supports professionals, policymakers and parents in their efforts to improve the lives of infants and toddlers. Neuroscientists have documented that our earliest days, weeks and months of life are a period of unparalleled growth when trillions of brain cell connections are made. Research and clinical experience also demonstrate that health and development are directly influenced by the quality of care and experiences a child has with his parents and other adults.

For more information, visit: <http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=homepage>

Wittmer, D. Attachment: What Works? What Works Brief Series. No. 24. (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee) February 2011. p. 4

This brief “explores the importance of infants and toddlers experiencing secure attachment relationships with the key adults in their lives, explains secure and insecure attachment, notes cultural differences in attachment, and provides specific strategies to promote children’s secure attachments.” NECTAC eNotes (February 25, 2011.)]

Full text at: [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb\\_24.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb_24.pdf)

Other What Works Briefs at: [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/what\\_works.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/what_works.html)

Dozier, M. Intervening with Foster Parents to Enhance Biobehavioral Outcomes among Infants and Toddlers. University of Delaware. IN: Zero to Three, vol. 31, no. 3 (January 2011) pp. 17-22.

Children in foster care face a number of challenges that threaten their ability to form attachment relationships with foster parents and to regulate their behavior and biology. The authors describe the Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up (ABC) intervention, an evidence-based intervention aimed at helping foster children develop trusting relationships with foster parents and develop better biological and behavioral regulation. The authors present research that led to the development of the ABC intervention, outcome research of randomized clinical trials, and a case example of a foster parent and child who participated in the ABC intervention. Finally, issues related to the broader system of care that are likely to affect children’s adjustment (e.g., foster caregiver commitment and placement stability) are discussed.” NOTE: Intervening with Foster Parents... is available for loan.

## **Available Literature**

Avery, L., Matthews, J. D., Hoffman, K., Powell, B., & Cooper, G. (2008). Project same page: An evaluation of an attachment training seminar. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 2(4), 495-509. doi:10.1080/15548730802523232

This article describes the evaluation for Project Same Page, an intervention aimed at enhancing the knowledge of the complex issues surrounding attachment among child welfare workers and

other human service professionals. A large sample (n = 316) of service providers and other interested parties attended this two-session intervention, although a smaller number (n = 192) completed pretest and post-test evaluations. Most participants in Project Same Page were direct service providers, and the words that they used to describe a parent-child dyad were assessed before and after the instructional seminars. The words that the participants used showed improvement in three areas: more Project Same Page terms, more empathic words, and fewer punitive descriptions. All three differences were statistically significant, providing support for the effectiveness of the intervention. Future research might assess the participants' long-term implementation of these changes into their interactions with foster, adoptive, and birth families as well as focus on birth, foster, adoptive parent/child attachment. This article describes the evaluation for Project Same Page, an intervention aimed at enhancing the knowledge of the complex issues surrounding attachment among child welfare workers and other human service professionals. A large sample (n = 316) of service providers and other interested parties attended this two-session intervention, although a smaller number (n = 192) completed pretest and post-test evaluations. Most participants in Project Same Page were direct service providers, and the words that they used to describe a parent-child dyad were assessed before and after the instructional seminars. The words that the participants used showed improvement in three areas: more Project Same Page terms, more empathic words, and fewer punitive descriptions. All three differences were statistically significant, providing support for the effectiveness of the intervention. Future research might assess the participants' long-term implementation of these changes into their interactions with foster, adoptive, and birth families as well as focus on birth, foster, adoptive parent/child attachment. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Grigsby, R. K. (1994). Maintaining attachment relationships among children in foster care. *Families in Society, 75*(5), 269-276.

Frequent, regular parent-child visitation of children in foster care is crucial in maintaining the attachment relationship of the parent and child. Further, the parent-child attachment concept is crucial for permanency planning because it is the rationale behind the goal of providing children with a stable and continuous relationship with the parent or another caretaker, if that child cannot return to the care of the parent. In order to ascertain whether protective services workers recognize and emphasize the importance of maintaining parent-child or other attachment relationships, the author studied closed case records of children who had experienced foster-care placement. Results are discussed in the context of social-attachment theory. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Haight, W. L., Kagle, J. D., & Black, J. E. (2003). Understanding and supporting parent-child relationships during foster care visits: Attachment theory and research. *Social Work, 48*(2), 195-207.

Parent visitation, the scheduled, face-to-face contacts between parents and their children in foster care, is the primary intervention for maintaining and supporting the development of parent-child relationships necessary for reunification. A review of the child welfare literature, however, reveals that for some parents and children, visits are problematic. Indeed, parents and children's experiences of visits, the quality of interaction observed during visits, and outcomes for children vary widely. The parent-child attachment relationship is one important factor influencing the quality of visits. Attachment theory and research indicate that there are universal, developmental, variable, and problematic aspects of attachment relationships. These aspects of attachment relationships provide a heuristic approach for understanding, assessing, and intervening in parent-child relationships during foster care visits. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Hoffman, K, Marvin, R., Cooper, G. & Powell, B. (2006). Changing Toddlers' and Preschoolers' Attachment Classifications: The Circle of Security Intervention. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, v74 n6 p1017-1026.*

Abstract: Education and psychotherapy that is based on attachment theory. The purpose of this study was to track changes in children's attachment classifications pre- and immediately post intervention. Participants were 65 toddler- or preschooler- caregiver dyads recruited from Head Start and Early Head Start programs. As predicted, there were significant within-subject changes from disorganized to organized attachment classifications, with a majority changing to the secure classification. In addition, only 1 of the 13 pre-intervention securely attached children shifted to an insecure classification. Results suggest that the Circle of Security protocol is a promising intervention for the reduction of disorganized and insecure attachment in high-risk toddlers and preschoolers.

Lieberman, A., Ippen, C., & Vanhorn, P. (2006). Child - parent psychotherapy: 6-month follow-up of a randomized controlled trial. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 45:8.*

#### ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the durability of improvement in child and maternal symptoms 6 months after termination of Child-parent psychotherapy (CPP). Method: Seventy-five multiethnic preschool-age child-mother dyads from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds were randomly assigned to (1) CPP or (2) case management plus community referral for individual treatment. Children were 3 to 5 years old. Follow-up assessments were conducted 6 months after the end of a 1-year treatment period. Mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist and the Symptom Checklist Revised to assess Child's and mother's symptoms. Results: For treatment completers, general linear model (GLM) repeated-measures analyses support the durability of CPP with significant group \_ time interactions for children's total behavior problems and mothers' general distress. Intent-to-treat analyses revealed similar findings for children's behavior problems but were not significant for maternal symptoms. Conclusions: The findings provide additional evidence of the efficacy and durability of CPP with this population and highlight the importance of a relationship focus in the treatment of traumatized preschoolers.

Sanders, M. R. (2008). Triple P-positive parenting program as a public health approach to strengthening parenting. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22(4), 506-517.*

Parenting programs have considerable potential to improve the mental health and well-being of children, improve family relationships, and benefit the community at large. However, traditional clinical models of service delivery reach relatively few parents. A public health approach is needed to ensure that more parents benefit and that a societal-level impact is achieved. The Triple P-Positive Parenting Program is a comprehensive, multilevel system of parenting intervention that combines within a single intervention universal and more targeted interventions for high-risk children and their parents. With Triple P, the overarching goal is to enhance the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents at a whole-of-population level and, in turn, to reduce the prevalence rates of behavioral and emotional problems in children and adolescents. The distinguishing features of the intervention and variables that influence its effective implementation are discussed. Self-regulation is a unifying concept that is applied throughout the entire system (e.g., to interactions between children, parents, service providers,



and agencies involved in delivering the intervention). Challenges and future directions for the development of public health approaches to parenting are discussed. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Suchman, N. (2004). Rethinking parenting interventions for drug-dependent mothers. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 27*(3), 179-185.

Mothers who are physically and/or psychologically dependent upon alcohol and illicit drugs are at risk for a wide range of parenting deficits beginning when their children are infants and continuing as their children move through school-age and adolescent years. Behavioral parent training programs for drug-dependent mothers have had limited success in improving parent-child relationships or children's psychological adjustment. One reason behavioral parenting programs may have had limited success is the lack of attention to the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship. Research on attachment suggests that the emotional quality of mother-child relationships is an important predictor of children's psychological development through school-age and adolescent years. In this paper, we present a rationale and approach for developing attachment-based parenting interventions for drug-dependent mothers and report preliminary data on the feasibility of offering an attachment-based parenting intervention in an outpatient drug treatment program for women. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Suchman, N. (2006). Parenting interventions for drug-dependent mothers and their young children. *Family Relations, 55*(2), 211-226.

Maternal substance abuse is the most common factor involved when children come to the attention of the child welfare system. Although there is a clear need for clinical trials to evaluate parenting interventions for drug-dependent women, few studies to date have systematically examined the efficacy of interventions for this population. We first review six published reports of outpatient interventions that aimed to enhance the caregiving skills of substance-abusing mothers caring for children between birth and 5 years of age. After discussing implications of these preliminary studies, we then describe an attachment-based intervention that addresses these implications and has demonstrated preliminary feasibility in a pilot trial. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Suchman, N., DeCoste, C., Castiglioni, N., Legow, N., & Mayes, L. (2008). The Mothers and Toddlers Program: Preliminary findings from an attachment-based parenting intervention for substance-abusing mothers. *Psychoanalytic Psychology, 25*(3), 499-517.

The authors examined pilot data from an attachment-based parenting intervention for substance-abusing mothers of toddlers (ages 12-36 months). The Mothers and Toddlers Program (MTP) is a 20-week individual therapy intervention that aims to help mothers develop more balanced representations of their children and improve their capacity for reflective functioning (i.e., recognition of the intentional nature of children's behavior). The authors hypothesized that improvement in maternal representational balance and maternal capacity for reflective functioning would correspond with improvements in maternal behavior with toddlers (e.g., sensitivity to cues, responsiveness to distress, and social-emotional growth fostering) and reduction in maternal psychiatric distress and substance abuse. Eight mothers who completed MTP showed moderate improvements in representational balance and reflective functioning, and these changes corresponded with significant improvements in maternal behaviors with toddlers. The authors also compared MTP completers and noncompleters on sociodemographic and psychosocial indexes and examined the validity of the intervention's proposed mechanisms of change. Preliminary findings support the importance of attachment mechanisms and

indicate that attachment-based interventions may strengthen substance-abusing mothers' capacities to foster their toddlers' socioemotional development. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Vacca, J. J. (2001). Promoting positive infant-caregiver attachment: The role of the early interventionist and recommendations for parent training. *Infants & Young Children: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Special Care Practices*, 13(4), 1-10.

This article provides insights into the role of the early interventionist and recommendations for parent training. Included in this article are details regarding the promotion of positive infant-caregiver attachment; need of a sense of security and identity by an infant; and, a discussion of issues in parent-child attachment. Through the loving relationship that develops between infant and caregiver, the infant acquires a positive sense of security and identity. This sense of security and identity provides the infant with a stable base to develop relationships later in life. When parents recognize the connection they have with their infant, and are aware of the attachment their child has to them, they are likely to feel more confident and competent as caregivers. The article addresses issues in parent-child attachment, identifies the implications such attachment relations have for child development, and provides strategies to facilitate optimal parent-child attachment. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]