

Australasian Association of Parenting & Child Health

RESPONSIVE PARENTING

AAPCH

The Australian Association of Parenting and Child Health (AAPCH) is an international organisation of key agencies in Australia and New Zealand providing early parenting education, guidance and support for professionals working with families and young children. AAPCH is committed to optimising the physical, social and emotional health and wellbeing of children.

AIM

This position paper seeks to provide guidance on the importance of responsive parenting in the early years of life which is a sensitive period in biological and social development. To ensure the best outcomes for children AAPCH strongly believes that all clinical interventions, parental education and/or guidance should be informed by evidence based studies to enhance the development of positive parent-child relationships.

DEFINITION

A newborn communicates needs in many ways and crying is one of the most effective forms of communication. Crying is the survival mechanism intended to create a response from parents to ensure that the child is protected and nurtured. Excess stress [e.g. crying, trauma] bathes the brain in stress hormonesⁱ. When the parent responds sensitively e.g. comforts the crying child, hormones such as dopamine flood the brain, helping the infant become calm and enhancing the bond between the infant and parentⁱⁱ.

'The security of knowing that someone is on his side, watching out for him, is what allows a child to risk bumps, scrapes, and disappointment – in other words, to learn, grow, and develop resilience. When children feel securely connected to us, they learn to love themselves and to love others' (Markham, 2014 pp 39)¹³.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR RESPONSIVE PARENTING

During the early years of life while the brain is undergoing rapid development the trajectory of the child's health and wellbeing is being shapedⁱⁱⁱ. Neuroscience evidence and best practice frameworks have provided a strong base for parenting support services to invest in the early years. A parenting style that is high in warmth and responsiveness has been positively associated with the best outcomes for children^{iv}.

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The impact of positive parental investment of accessible, responsive caregiving from early infancy is linked to outcomes that include^v.

- good mental and physical health
- healthy lifestyles
- the ability to confidently engage with others
- the development of self-esteem and a positive sense of self.

PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

Parental influence on a child's well-being and development is greater than any other single socio-environmental factor^{vi}. A strong foundation for a child's physical, social and emotional well-being requires responsive environments and supportive relationships to facilitate emerging capabilities, and strengthen the development of physical and mental health^{vii}. From birth children seek to communicate their needs and develop a relationship with their parents. A fundamental task for any child is to work out how to get their needs met. Early sensitive caregiving; warmth, and attunement to cues, sets in motion the ongoing development of neurological pathways for emotional modulation^{viii}.

THE PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The process of parenting is complex and Brookes (1991) defined "the process or state of being a parent includes nourishing, protecting, and guiding the child through the course of development^{ix}". Responsive parenting refers to the development of a nurturing, responsive, reliable and trusting relationship with their child^x.

The ability of parents to observe and interpret their child's behaviour from their child's perspective is fundamental to providing sensitive and responsive care giving. The relationship that builds through the process of a child communicating their needs and a parent responding appropriately leads the child to feel secure with the parent. Responsive parenting can therefore be viewed as having the capacity to respond appropriately to their child's needs, the ability to respond sensitively and contingently in order to provide timely, effective, nurturing care. Responsive, sensitive parenting is achieved by recognising the signals and body language of the child and responding contingently, to meet the child's needs^{xi}.

'Responsiveness, a mother's/caregiver's prompt, contingent and appropriate interaction with the child, is a vital parenting tool with wide-ranging benefits for the child, from better cognitive and psychosocial development to protection from disease and mortality' (WHO 2006 pp.996)^{xii}.

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