

Parent-Child Attachment Relationships and Divorce

*Kim Leon, Ph.D., Human Development and Family Studies
College of Human Environmental Sciences, University of Missouri-Columbia*

Over the first three years of life, children develop attachment relationships with the people who care for them. How does divorce affect the child's attachment relationship with each parent? Young children can have secure attachments with both parents even though both parents don't live in the home. Parents can help their child develop a secure attachment by:

- Responding to the child's needs in predictable, sensitive, and affectionate ways. This is the most important thing a parent can do to help his or her child form a secure attachment. When parents quickly respond to their infants' needs, by picking them up when they want to be held, feeding them when they are hungry, etc., infants learn to trust their parents. This sense of trust is the foundation for forming a secure attachment. Having a secure attachment to the parent is very important. Secure attachment fosters good social relationships and healthy emotional development.
- Giving the child enough time with each parent on a regular basis. It is best if young children can see both parents often. Frequent contact helps young children remember both parents and develop attachment relationships with both parents. However, it is not always possible for children to see both of their parents often. In some cases, such as when a parent is abusive or neglecting, it may not be best for children to see a parent. When children can't see both of their parents, a friend or relative can help with some of the things that the other parent would do. For example, a friend or relative

can be a source of security for the child. Children can form secure attachments with adults other than their parents. Also, a friend or relative can play with and talk to the child, which helps the child learn.

- Working together to help the child develop a secure relationship with each parent. When parents cooperate and have less conflict, their child is more likely to develop secure attachment relationships with each parent. Even young children are affected by conflict between their parents. They may not understand what the conflicts are about, but they do pick up on the negative emotions. Young children are likely to feel scared and confused when their parents fight in front of them. It is best to discuss issues with the child's other parent when the child is not around and cannot hear the discussion.
- Allowing the child time to get used to new adults. It is normal for young children to be fearful or anxious around people they don't know well. Allow your child time to get used to new people. It helps young children to see their parent acting warmly and positively toward the new adult. They learn to trust adults who their parents trust. If an infant doesn't want to be held by someone, don't force the infant to be held by that person. Wait until the infant feels comfortable and trusts the person. Young children often feel more comfortable when adults get down on their level, so kneeling or sitting when you talk to the child can help. Watching a child play for a while, then casually joining in the child's play, or talking about the play can help break the ice.

