Attachment Play
also by Aletha J. Solter, ph.d.

The Aware Baby
Helping Young Children Flourish
Tears and Tantrums
Raising Drug-Free Kids
Attachment Play

How to solve children’s behavior problems with play, laughter, and connection

Aletha J. Solter, PH.D.
I tried to teach my child with books.
He gave me only puzzled looks.
I used clear words to discipline,
But I never seemed to win.
Despairingly, I turned aside.
“How shall I reach this child?” I cried.
Into my hand he put the key:
“Come,” he said, “Play with me.”

—Author unknown
(adapted by Aletha Solter)
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Finally, I would like to acknowledge my colleague, Dr. Mary Galbraith, who first coined the term “attachment play.”
## Contents

Introduction ........................................ 3

**PART 1**
**Getting Started**
1. Introduction to Attachment Play .................... 9
2. The Nine Forms of Attachment Play .................. 13
3. General Guidelines .................................. 30
4. When You Find It Hard to Play ..................... 39

**PART 2**
**Using Attachment Play to Solve Discipline Problems**
1. Introduction to Non-Punitive Discipline .............. 47
2. Eliciting Cooperation ................................ 51
3. Setting Limits ...................................... 61
4. Toilet Training ..................................... 68
5. Use of “Bad” Language .............................. 72
6. Anger and Aggression ................................. 77
7. Sibling Rivalry ..................................... 86
8. Lying, Cheating, and Stealing ......................... 94
9. Homework .......................................... 100
10. Bedtime ......................................... 108

**PART 3**
**Using Attachment Play to Help Your Child Through Difficult Times**
1. Birth Trauma ....................................... 115
2. Birth of a Sibling .................................. 120
3. Parental Divorce ................................... 125
4. Natural Disasters and Terrorism ....................... 131
5. Illnesses, Accidents, and Hospitalization .......... 135
6. Separation Trauma .................................. 142
7. School Stress ...................................... 148
8. Phobias and Anxieties ................................................. 153
9. Preparation for Difficult Events ................................. 162
10. Parental Anger ....................................................... 167

Appendix A
  Summary Charts of the Nine Forms of Attachment Play ........ 173

Appendix B
  Research Basis for Attachment Play ............................. 179
  References Cited in Appendix B ................................. 191

Recommended Books for Parents ................................. 199
About the Author ................................................... 201
What Is Aware Parenting? ........................................... 203
Warning/Disclaimer

As an educational resource for parents, this book offers suggestions for helpful ways to play with your child. These suggestions may not be appropriate for children suffering from certain physical, emotional, or behavioral problems. This book is not intended to replace psychotherapy or medical help from competent professionals. If your child is suffering from physical, emotional, or behavioral problems, it is recommended that you obtain professional advice and treatment.

The mention of specific therapies in this book is for informational purposes only and does not entail endorsement by the author. Some forms of therapy can be dangerous if carried out by improperly trained practitioners. If you are considering choosing a therapist for yourself or your child, it is important to carefully review the therapist’s credentials and references.

Some traumas can overwhelm children and families, and the suggestions in this book may be inappropriate or insufficient to help children heal, especially in cases of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, medical trauma, the death of a family member, natural disasters, and terrorism or war.

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Attachment Play
Introduction

DID YOU KNOW that discipline doesn’t always have to be serious, stressful, tedious, or frustrating and that you can solve many of your children’s behavior problems with certain kinds of playful activities? That’s what this book is all about. Maybe you don’t want to use a punitive approach but are at a loss to know how to change your children’s behavior. Or perhaps you vacillate between an authoritarian approach and an overly permissive one, wondering how to find a middle ground.

This book will describe playful activities that can reduce stress, strengthen attachment, and solve behavior problems while bringing laughter and joy to you and your children. Whether you have a toddler or a pre-teen, you will be delighted to discover how easy it can be to change your child’s behavior without the use of punishment. Through specific kinds of playful activities, you can “win” your children over and resolve discipline problems, sometimes quite effortlessly. The approach to discipline described in the book is neither authoritarian nor permissive. You will learn how to set necessary limits in ways that inspire your children to cooperate rather than rebel.

The book delves beneath the surface of typical discipline problems by addressing some of the sources of stress that lie at the root of challenging behaviors. Your children’s behavior may become more difficult when they are stressed by factors such as the birth of a sibling, medical procedures, or school. The play-based suggestions in the book will empower you with tools to help your children through these difficult times. As your children work through these stresses and release tensions, their behavior will improve.
The theoretical rationale for this book is attachment theory. In the 1950’s, the famous British doctor and psychoanalyst, John Bowlby, first used the term attachment to refer to a child’s bond with his parents. Since then, a large body of knowledge has accumulated about the importance of parent-child attachment. Social interaction, beginning in infancy, is at the root of healthy attachment. When children lack a responsive, joyful relationship with their parents, or when they have been traumatized in some way, their attachment weakens, and this can lead to a host of behavioral and emotional problems.

During the past 25 years, I have developed a unique synthesis of highly effective and enjoyable parent-child play activities, which I call attachment play. These activities are supported by research in the fields of attachment, therapy, and neuroscience.

Did you know that positive social interaction stimulates the production of oxytocin, a “feel-good” chemical that reduces stress and promotes growth and healing while enhancing your children’s brain development? Cooperative play stimulates areas of the brain involved in the control of aggressive behavior, and laughter resolves anger and anxiety by reducing stress hormones. Following traumatic experiences, you can literally “rewire” your children’s brains through specific kinds of play that help them recover from trauma.

I have found that these activities work well with children of all ages and with families of many different cultures. Parents around the world are often amazed at the beneficial changes they see in their children after engaging them in these unique forms of play.

Attachment play has several distinctive characteristics, which differentiate it from traditional games or sports. It is child centered, often involves laughter, does not require any special equipment, and it can take place anywhere, at any time. In addition, it is non-competitive and has no set rules.

Children love attachment play and often initiate it. In fact, you may already be practicing some forms of attachment play but may not realize the deeper significance or usefulness of these activities. This book will explain the deeper meaning of these familiar activities (such as the game of hide-and-seek). It will also describe the
value of engaging children in these forms of play to resolve specific kinds of conflicts. Sometimes children’s invitations to play take the form of annoying behaviors, which you may interpret as silliness, rudeness, or a waste of time. This book will help you interpret these behaviors differently and respond in ways that foster connection and cooperation.

I structured the book around typical discipline issues as well as specific sources of stress, so each chapter can stand on its own. You can therefore easily find relevant information and practical suggestions for your particular family situation without having to read the entire book. However, reading the whole book is useful because you might discover underlying reasons for your children’s behavior that you had not considered.

To illustrate the various forms of play, I have included numerous real-life examples from interviews with parents and from my experience as a consultant, parent-child play coach, workshop leader, mother, and grandmother. I hope that these examples and anecdotes will inspire and entertain you and that you will be eager to try attachment play with your own children.

The age range of the book is from birth to age twelve. Most of the techniques can be adapted to different ages even though the specific examples that inspire you might describe children that are younger (or older) than yours.

My wish for all parents is that you will enjoy many moments of playful connection with your children. Are you ready for the giggles?

**Organization of the book**

In Part 1 (Getting Started), you will find a description of nine basic forms of attachment play as well as some guidelines for getting started with this approach. I recommend reading all of this section because the rest of the book is based on it. Furthermore, it will provide you with ideas for immediate, concrete activities that you can try with your children. The last chapter in this section explores some of the barriers you might have to playing with your children, and it includes a series of personal exercises to explore these difficulties.
Part 2 (Using Attachment Play to Solve Discipline Problems) describes a complete, play-based approach to non-punitive discipline, organized according to typical behavior problems. Each chapter describes a variety of playful approaches for resolving that specific conflict. These approaches are based on the nine forms of play described in Part 1.

Part 3 (Using Attachment Play to Help Your Child Through Difficult Times) describes how to help children heal from stress or trauma through play. As in Part 2, each chapter addresses a specific topic, so you can easily find useful tips for your personal family situation. You will learn which of the nine forms of play are particularly effective for each specific kind of stress or trauma.

In the first appendix, you will find summary charts describing each kind of play for easy reference. The second appendix provides a brief overview of the theoretical rationale for the various forms of attachment play. I have summarized some of the research findings showing their effectiveness in transforming children’s challenging behaviors and emotions. A list of scientific references follows this appendix.
“PLAY WITH ME, Mommy! Play with me, Daddy!” How often have you heard your children make this request? Children love to play, and they especially enjoy playing with their parents. When you play with your children, you meet their need for connection and help them feel loved. In fact play is one of the best ways to charge up your children's emotional batteries.

This section describes nine specific kinds of activities that are especially effective in strengthening the parent-child bond. I call these activities attachment play. Many of these forms of play also lie at the root of effective discipline as well as emotional healing. These are the forms of play that I recommend most frequently to parents who are struggling with their children's challenging behaviors or emotions.
Chapter 1

Introduction to Attachment Play

HEALTHY PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT is vital for children's emotional health, and parent-child social interaction plays a major role in promoting healthy attachment. When our children are babies, we connect with them through silly little activities such as peek-a-boo or pat-a-cake, and we playfully imitate their sounds, blow bubbles on their tummies, play with their toes, rock them to music, and bounce them on our knees. These daily mutual interactions help babies acquire a sense of confidence, trust, security, reciprocity, humor, and joy. When we engage babies in these playful activities while remaining sensitive and responsive to them, they learn to communicate and connect with us.

If you continue to interact playfully with your children as they grow older, you can maintain a healthy attachment with them. When they say “play with me,” they will feel truly loved and valued if you sit on the floor to join them in their fantasy play with dolls, trains, or blocks. You will find endless opportunities for connecting playfully with your children by playing board games or just being silly together.

If your family is stressed by factors such as work, illness, divorce, financial difficulties, the birth of a baby, or a move to a new home, the connection between you and your children may suffer. The attachment may weaken during these difficult times because you might (understandably) run out of patience or lack sufficient time to spend with your children. When this disconnection occurs, your children may begin to feel insecure, anxious, lonely, and powerless,
and their behavior may become more difficult. In fact, most discipline problems occur when children feel disconnected, powerless, insecure, or frightened.

Attachment play can be a powerful healing factor for these difficult times. Unfortunately, your children may need to play with you the most when you least feel like playing with them! However, if you can manage just 20 to 30 minutes of play per day, your children will benefit immensely. Remember, too, that it is never too late to engage your children in these forms of therapeutic play. You can play with your children at a later time to restore your connection and help them heal.

Laughter is an especially beneficial component of play. Research has shown that laughter can reduce tension, anxiety, and anger. By playing and laughing with your children, you can resolve many discipline problems and also help your children heal from stress or trauma. So laughing with your children or acting silly with them is never a waste of time!

Attachment play has a solid basis in scientific research. Findings from research studies support the effectiveness of these nine kinds of activities with children suffering from specific emotional and behavioral problems. (See Appendix B for a description of these studies.) However, attachment play can benefit all children, even those who are emotionally healthy and well behaved.

Attachment play has a unique set of characteristics, which differ from traditional games or sports. The following list describes these basic characteristics.
Characteristics of attachment play

*What it is*

- **Attachment play is interactive play that strengthens your connection to your children.**
  You will feel closer to your children after doing the activities in this book, and you will bring out the best in each other.

- **Attachment play often involves laughter.**
  You will laugh with your children, not at them. Laughter reduces tension, anxiety, and anger.

- **Attachment play can be either child initiated or adult initiated.**
  Your children may initiate attachment play themselves, and this book will help you recognize their invitations to play. You can also initiate these activities yourself to resolve specific discipline problems or help your children through difficult times.

- **Attachment play does not require any special equipment.**
  A major advantage of attachment play is that it’s free! Many of the activities do not require any equipment at all, whereas others involve toys or objects that you probably already have in your home (such as dolls and pillows).

- **Attachment play can take place anywhere, at any time.**
  You can do these activities in the bathroom, in your car, on the playground, at the doctor’s office, or at bedtime.

- **Attachment play includes many familiar activities.**
  If you play peek-a-boo with your baby, pretend to be frightened when your child growls like a lion, or find playful ways to deal with sibling rivalry, then you are already practicing attachment play.
What it isn’t

• **Attachment play is not permissive discipline.**
  Attachment play can help you set limits and resolve common discipline problems. Your children will become more willing to cooperate, but they will not become “spoiled” or think that everything in life has to be fun.

• **Attachment play does not teach children to be aggressive.**
  Some of the forms of play described in this book encourage children to be physically active, but they will not cause your children to become more aggressive or hyperactive. On the contrary, they will make your children calmer, gentler, more compassionate, and more cooperative.

• **Attachment play is not a form of teasing.**
  These forms of play respect children and their feelings. They do not belittle children or make them feel incapable or inferior in any way. Instead, they will enhance your children’s self-esteem and self-confidence.

• **Attachment play does not involve competition.**
  Contrary to most traditional games and sports, these activities have no winners or losers. The essential point is that everyone has a good time, and nobody feels like a loser. Everybody wins during attachment play.

• **Attachment play does not have any set rules.**
  These activities can change from one day to the next. You and your children may enjoy creating your own versions, which may differ from the descriptions in this book. Your invented games may even become your own unique family traditions.