

Beyond Attachment to Parents: Children Need Community

Editor's Pick. Written by Peter Gray.

I'm all for natural parenting. The basic premise of such parenting, at least as I view it, is that you trust your children's instincts and judgments. For example, you recognize that a baby who is crying is a baby who needs something, and you try to figure out what that need is and satisfy it. You don't let a baby "cry it out." You recognize that throughout our evolutionary history babies and young children always slept with their mothers or other adults or older siblings, never alone, and that sleeping alone is terrifying for many young children (see post here). You recognize that babies and children, like all of us really, crave physical contact, and you provide it. You don't push it when it's not wanted, but you provide it and welcome it when it is wanted.

The key concept here is sensitivity. To understand what a child wants and needs, and especially to understand what a non-verbal baby wants and needs, you have to be in tune with that person. You have to be able to see the world from the child's point of view. That requires empathy. This isn't really any different from the requirements for any other close relationship. To have a good marriage, you must be able to empathize with your spouse. To be a good friend, you must be able to empathize with your friend. Your spouse, your friend, and your child are not you; they have different needs and wishes than you do, but to have a good relationship with them you must be sensitive to their needs and wishes.

Natural parenting is often equated with attachment parenting, and that is fine as long as we are careful about what we mean by "attachment." Children are not designed, by nature, to attach just to the mother, or just to the mother and father. They are, for good biological reasons, designed to form multiple attachments, to many of the people in a community. It is important to recognize here that the private nuclear family, living in a house apart from others in the community, is, from an evolutionary perspective, an unnatural environment.

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