

Six Building Blocks Of Healthy Relationships

Healthy, secure, loving, confident children: it's a parent's greatest hope. The path our children follow to become an adult is peppered with challenges and uncontrolled emotions. As Susan Stiffelman points out in her book Parenting Without Power Struggles, children want and need the security of a parent who is "the captain of the ship." She also describes the stages a child grows through as they move through childhood, early adolescence, and toward adulthood.

I really like Stiffelman's approach to parenting (and try to follow it with my own kids), but I feel that these six building blocks of relationships that directly correlate to a child's stages of attachment toward autonomy also pertain to adult relationships as well.

Healthy adult relationships follow a similar pattern:

1. **Proximity:** With children, proximity is really about survival in the beginning. Newborns literally need to be in the physical proximity of their parents or they won't make it. Throughout the early childhood years, being close to mom or dad is high on the priority list.

In a new relationship, we want to be around the other person all the time. This is the foundation of the bond we're building. The core of a healthy adult relationship begins with the desire to be near them, to touch and experience what it's like to be in their presence and to nurture that physical closeness. Hugging, handholding, and sex are also the first physical attachments that make couples feel connected and loved.

2. **Sameness:** What a revelation to realize all the things we have in common! In children, this shows up as recognition that we are alike in many ways. Kids love to hear how their parents were like them at their age. Parents clearly identify that they have an authentic bond, and enjoy it in different ways, depending on the child's age.

As adults form bonds, we do the same thing, pointing out that we both like the same things to eat, for example, or that we both enjoyed the football game, etc. We even go out of our way to try new things based on the other person's preferences. We might try a yoga class, or sushi for the first time if the other person enjoys it. Connecting the dots with similarities is an important step in building a bond in a relationship.

3. **Belonging:** Children need to know that their parent has their back. As they mature, this parental loyalty shows up as a support when things go wrong ("I'm right here; I understand what you're going through.") or by setting the stage for activities that you both enjoy. The family bond is strengthened when everyone feels supported and having fun.

This is the next stage in relationship building in adults, too. The first time a storm hits, partners can assess whether they are going to be going it alone, or if they have someone to lean on. Relationships that are lacking this component, or if one partner is always the one to capitulate and go along with the other's preferences, never really move toward the last three stages of a healthy bond. Belonging allows both partners to feel comfortable and supported through life's challenges, and make the happy times that much brighter. Loyalty is one of the most important adult developmental tasks in life and it often gets missed in subtle situations.

4. **Significance:** when your child leaves the home for stretches at a time, i.e. when they go to school at around age 5 or 6, they must feel that even though they are not around, they

are still important to you. Adults nurture this security by telling their kids what's special about them and to make them feel loved for their unique qualities.

Healthy adult couples consciously provide that same gift to their partners. It's not enough to assume the other knows they are significant. All people want to be told and shown. That way, when two people who love each other are not actually in proximity to each other, the bond of significance roots them both by making them feel loved at a distance.

5. **Genuine Love:** The feeling of being genuinely loved is part and parcel to growing up strong within a family's guidance and foundation. They are part of something bigger, yes, but they also have a distinct contribution to the family unit. The child who feels genuinely loved can function freely and confidently in the world without fear of "losing himself" or doing something wrong.

Loving couples mature in the same security and sense of well-being. They just know they are a part of a close bond, and are free to express themselves with genuine openness in the relationship.

6. **Being Known:** When parents begin to recognize the gifts and achievements of their children from a distance, the bond is a bi-product of the culmination of the attachments levels. Along with being known in the world, apart from the family unit, comes respect and admiration. This bond will last through a lifetime of the adult child and serves as a basis for the child's own healthy relationships.

In a similar way, a couple's relationship reaches maturity when each partner sees the whole person in the other. There is no fear of losing oneself, or an inability to stand alone. Being known by another person allows one to feel secure in their attachment to their partner, and able to go out in the world knowing that someone (their partner) intrinsically knows who they are. Freedom, comfort, and autonomy are the gifts of real, mature love.

Working with couples, I see relationships at all levels of attachment. People who are higher up on the attachment development are less likely to need counseling, because they have built a strong foundation.

The neat thing about understanding these levels is being able to see where your relationship fits with natural bonding between a parent and a child. While not identical, the progression is similar in every bond humans can form.

Please feel free to comment below, and tell me what you think about this relationship "evolution."