

Building a Relationship

Move at the Child's Pace

- Use physical behaviours or words that create a feeling of closeness with him.
- Using fun play activities that you might use with a younger child, like “Round and round the garden like a teddy bear, one step two step tickle you under there” (use your finger to make a circle on his tummy and walk your fingers up to tickle under his arms).

Show Your Concern

- Respond to him in situations where you feel he may be hurt. Even if he does not look for support when he hurts himself, ask him questions, “Are you okay? Does it hurt?” You want to let him know you are concerned and care about what happens to him.
- Let him look for comfort in a way a younger child might, if that is what he needs at this time.
- Make sure your words and actions are giving the same message.

Plan Activities

An activity that is very useful in building relationships with children and helping them feel good about themselves is child-led play. See the pamphlet on *Child-Led Play* to learn how to set this up with your child.

Managing Behaviour

Children with reactive attachment disorder often do not respond to the usual behaviour management strategies.

It is important to:

- have an organized environment and regular routines
- show interest in, and focus attention on, your child
- focus on building a relationship first
- don't show fear if he is showing strong emotional behaviour

Early support can help you learn ways to help your child learn ways to deal with these difficulties.

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.

health information

Reactive Attachment Disorder: Helping the Young Child

What is reactive attachment disorder?

Children with reactive attachment disorder have a **very hard time** making and keeping relationships. It is related to a history of poor parenting behaviours, especially when the children were less than two years of age.

Parenting behaviours that are known to lead to possible problems for the child are:

- not providing the child's basic emotional needs for comfort, stimulation, and affection
- constant neglect of the child's basic physical needs
- repeated changes in who cares for the young infant, preventing the child from forming a stable attachment (e.g., changing foster homes often)

Sometimes there are things going on in the family that make it hard for the parents to meet their child's basic needs. These could be:

- mental illness in one or both parent that is not managed well
- substance abuse by the parents
- family poverty
- child or parent in the hospital for a long time
- family violence or poor anger control
- inexperience in parenting
- no community support (e.g., family, friends, community resources)

What features might I see in my child?

- Not able to start or respond to social interactions in a way that is expected for his age.
- Very watchful.
- Confusion in his response to the need for nurturing (e.g., seeking comfort, but then resisting closeness).
- Does not seek out the parent when upset or hurt.
- May be very clingy.
- Overly friendly with strangers and adults he doesn't know.
- Not growing and developing as expected.
- Poor eye contact—doesn't look at the person who is talking to him.
- Aggressive behaviour.
- Trouble responding to limits. Needs to "run the show".
- Trouble with changes or new situations.

Other features may include:

- developmental delays
- problems with feeding
- problems with sleeping
- weak cry or crying a lot
- little interest in his surroundings
- trouble doing physical activities that you feel a child of his age should be able to do
- aggressive behaviours or behaviour that is hard to manage
- trouble playing with other children

What can I do as a parent to help my child?

Children's attachment experience affects their relationships later on. They may not be able to have the problems go away completely but may learn ways to deal with their challenges.

The most important thing for these children is to have a consistent parent and family who offer comfort, stimulation, affection, and basic physical needs.

Patience and Understanding

- Keep a positive focus and build on success.
- Try to understand why your child is behaving the way he does and what he really needs at this time.
- Think of how your child may feel if you respond in a certain way to him.
- Think of as many ways as possible that you can help your child to feel sure that someone will be there to take care of his needs.

Sensitive and Caring

- Respond quickly to your child when he is physically hurt, sick, or emotionally upset.
- Provide parent behaviours that are warm and nurturing.
- Respond to the child at his emotional level—you may need to think younger than his actual age.