



# The Parent Page

Winter 2014



## Why Relationships Matter:

### Attachment Parenting in the 21st Century

By Dr. Deborah MacNamara

As a new parent I thought I just needed to love my child enough and attachment would take care of itself. I soon realized it wasn't this simple. I started wondering how I could cultivate and protect my relationship at every turn - from sleep issues to temper tantrums? As I waded through the parenting and professional literature on attachment I was dismayed - while there was agreement as to its importance, there was a lack of depth in explaining its overall purpose, how to cultivate it, and how it played a role in the development of a child. It was ironic to me that attachment could be so detached from any roots making sense of it.

In the middle of the 20th century John Bowlby coined the term 'attachment' but is clear as we head into the next century there is a need to reflect and deepen our understanding. Advances in neuroscience are helping affirm the physiological and chemical underpinnings of attachment, reaffirming what Grandmothers have always known—children need strong connections with adults. While we seem to intuitively understand the importance of attachment, the definition varies and often focuses exclusively on babies—not considering the rest of childhood and adolescence not to mention adult relationships! Attachment is the name given to the science of human relationships and there is a plethora of research on this subject. Despite all this, I sometimes see parents roll their eyes when you say attachment, as if it were a fad or new buzzword instead of being at the heart of our most basic human need.

One of the leading neuroscientists in this area, Dr. Jaak Panskeep, has called attachment behaviour the 'seeking instinct'. We seek out people and things we are attached to. In fact, a large part of

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the brain is geared towards this seeking behaviour. Dr. Gordon Neufeld (*Hold Onto Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*) provides a deeper and more integrated understanding of attachment in terms of human development. We are driven to pursue or preserve relationships with whatever we are attached to—we keep things close that matter. When thinking of the panic created in losing our possessions such as keys, mobile phone or wallet, we start to get an inkling of what human relationships might mean to our children.

It still begs the question of why attachment is so important and what purpose it serves in raising children. From the Neufeld paradigm the purpose of attachment is clear—it is what renders our children dependent on us and gives us the capacity to care for them. It is the glue in our human relationships, the chemicals that bond us to one another, and the space in between that connects and creates a sense of home. I remember one Dad asking me why any child would follow and obey their parent—this is just one of the many fruits of attachment. I still remember when I first heard Dr. Gordon Neufeld state it wasn't just how much we love our children that mattered but how much they actually loved us too. Their attachment to us is at the heart of what gives us the power to parent them. It isn't about being their friend and preventing upset, it is about leading them and inspiring them, demonstrating we really are their best bet. While we give birth to our children they give birth to the parent inside of us and it is from this place we must lead them into maturity.

Another way to understand attachment is that it is like a dance between children and adults. If you have ever danced with someone there is one thing you quickly discover as you try to move in tandem—someone needs to lead. If there are two leaders and no followers there is misstepping and nothing works. The big issue that gets eclipsed in today's understanding of attachment is that it is actually hierarchical in nature. Someone needs to lead and someone needs to follow—if we are to grow our children up we need to be in the alpha position. Today we are seeing a huge increase in the number of children that are in the alpha position—they think it is their job to call the dance moves. When this happens taking care of a child becomes incredibly difficult because they don't understand why you expect them to follow as if you were in charge? Children with alpha complexes are full of frustration because they can't meet their own attachment needs, are full of resistance for any one who tries to direct them, and can be full of anxiety. Alpha children are often bossy and prescriptive with independence masking their desperate need to depend on adults to take care of their attachment needs. You can't make sense or headway with an alpha child if you don't understand the purpose of attachment and it's hierarchical nature.

Our children are losing faith in their providers at an alarming rate. Our relationships are being dismantled and upended by separation-based disciplines that use children's attachments against them, e.g., time-outs or feigning leaving when they don't heed. Many well-intentioned parenting practices put children in the lead by turning the home into a democracy where everyone gets a vote—in my house that would mean eating lollies for breakfast! Parents aren't meant to be their child's friend and many decisions we make may upset them—like no lollies for breakfast! Parents need to lead from the alpha position and children need to attach in the dependent position. When it turns upside down nothing can feel natural or instinctual anymore in parenting—in fact it can often feel like a nightmare.

So how can we cultivate strong attachments with our children? Attachment research suggests three things are critical in this respect—the expression of delight, enjoyment and warmth. I still remember how my grandfather's eyes twinkled when I came to visit. He was the only one who seemed to find the patience and time to play board games with me. He often toured me around his

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garden revealing its many treasures and put up with many of my practical jokes. For me it was never about how much money he had, how much quality time he spent with me, the presents he gave me but how I know I mattered to him. He told me I was his first grandchild—I was special. There was a sense of delight whenever I visited and a sense of sadness in saying goodbye. It wasn't what he did but rather how I felt around him—I could rest in his care assured his attention for me would always outweigh my needs. When you have this type of invitation to exist the only thing left to work at is in discovering, playing, and becoming your own person. I grew much in his garden, exploring and creating worlds that could only exist in my imagination. The real gift of attachment is that it provides a child with a sense they can rest in someone's care. The child can take for granted someone will be there through the good, the bad, and the ugly. With strong attachments you have second, third and fourth chances to get things right with the sense of invitation unwavering despite infractions.

If we are to lead our children into the next century a deeper understanding of attachment is more important than ever. Never before have we faced so many things that compete or get in the way of our relationship with them—from too much peer interaction to technological devices and screen time, all within a context that doesn't understand the importance of attachment for children. We need to hang onto our children, be their best bet, and find a way to inspire them to depend on us. When we take care of their attachment needs they can rest in our care and grow into the people they were meant to become.

*Dr. Deborah MacNamara is a Counsellor and Educator in private practice, on Faculty at the Neufeld Institute, and the parent of two children. Please see [www.macnamara.ca](http://www.macnamara.ca), Facebook: KidsBestBet or [www.neufelminstitute.com](http://www.neufelminstitute.com) for more information.*

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## NewToBC

### The Library Link for Newcomers

NewToBC unites 10 public library systems in Metro Vancouver to help connect newcomers with programs and services in their community. Families can visit <http://newtobc.ca/> for addition information.

*Spirit of the Children Society*

## Family Drop-in Sessions

Free for families with children birth to 6 years old. Through games and activities the focus is on traditional teachings, such as the medicine Wheel and the Seven Sacred Teachings. An elder will also be onsite to share storytelling with the children.

Mondays

1:00 - 4:00 pm

Forest Grove Elementary School  
825 Forest Grove Drive, Burnaby

Wednesdays

1:30 - 4:30 pm

TriCities East Neighbourhood House  
2062 Manning Avenue, Port Coquitlam

Thursdays

1:30 - 4:30 pm

Spirit of the children  
201 - 768 Columbia Street, New Westminster

Fridays

9:00 - 12:00 pm

Spirit of the Children  
201 - 768 Columbia Street, New Westminster

The Early Childhood Development teachers will have planned activities for parents and children. For more information, please contact the ECD staff at 604.524.9113 or email [ecdprograms@sotcs.ca](mailto:ecdprograms@sotcs.ca).

*Information Children Simon Fraser University offers*

## Free Parent Helpline

**Parenting help when you need it!**

Parents and caregivers, are you...

- Puzzled by your child's behaviour?
- Doubting your parenting abilities?
- Feeling overwhelmed, frustrated or angry?
- Feeling like you are all alone dealing with the challenges of parenting?

If you have a parenting question please call 778.782.3548 or visit [www.informationchildren.com](http://www.informationchildren.com).

# Family Fun!

## 2013 Santa Claus Parade

**Saturday, December 7**  
**11:00 am**

**Downtown New Westminster**

The Santa Claus Parade will run along historic Columbia Street. Festive fun will continue at:

- **Shops at New West**  
Photos with Santa, from 12 - 4 pm
- **Fraser River Discovery Centre**  
Merry *Fishmas*, from 12 - 4 pm
- **River Market**  
Royal City Farmers Holiday Market Edition from 12 - 3 pm
- **Interactive Christmas Craft Workshop** from 11 am - 3 pm

[www.newwestcity.ca](http://www.newwestcity.ca)

## Brighten Up! A Lantern Affair

**Saturday, December 7, 2013**  
**4:30 - 7:30 pm**

**Place des Arts, Coquitlam**

*Come celebrate the things that make us unique  
but together form a cultural mosaic!*

A free holiday event for all ages featuring live music and song, arts activities, a visit with Father Christmas and heritage goodies. Make your own lantern, choosing from designs particular to different cultures and then participate in the festive lantern ceremony. Also enjoy an original performance by Place des Arts new Theatre Company.

For additional information visit [www.placedesarts.ca](http://www.placedesarts.ca)

## Fraser River Explorers Wanted!

**Fraser River Discovery Centre**  
**New Westminster**

Just in the neighbourhood? Enjoying a stroll along the boardwalk with the family? Why not pop in for a self-guided tour?

Families will discover interesting facts about the Mighty Fraser River through fun, hands-on, interactive exhibits and programs. No matter what the age, there is something for everyone.

Visit [www.fraserriverdiscovery.org](http://www.fraserriverdiscovery.org) for details

## Family Day Loonie Skates in Burnaby

**February 10, 2014**  
**Bill Copeland Sports Centre,**  
**10:00 am-1:15 pm**  
**Kensington Complex**  
**6:30-8:00 pm**

Admission is only \$1.00 per person; free for children three years and younger. Skates and helmets are included in the admission fee.

For additional information for the Kensington Complex skate call 604.297.4535, for Bill Copeland Sports Centre call 604.297.4521.

[www.burnaby.ca](http://www.burnaby.ca)

## Camridge House Heritage Day

**Sunday, February 23**  
**1:00 - 4:00 pm**

**Boundary Bay Regional Park**

Visit Camridge House for a free family event and enjoy an exhibit of Delta's heritage houses and neighbourhoods. Antique cars and tractors will also be on display. Have tea and baked goods served by volunteers in period dress.

[www.metrovancouver.org](http://www.metrovancouver.org)

