

Healthy Parents and Healthy Kids: Parental Self-Care and Children's Healthy Attachment

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As a parent, it is likely you have heard someone glibly insist that you need to “put on your own oxygen mask first” regarding self-care while caring for an infant. You have also received the insistent cultural narrative that being a good parent (especially if you are a mother) requires complete and eager sacrifice of your needs in favor of your child’s. These conflicting messages can be maddening while new parents try to form their own childrearing philosophies and practices, and it can be a challenge to predict what choices will impact the children’s development and parental well-being. You may ask yourself, as a new parent, “show me what *actually* has an impact,” and you may find yourself with limited resources to answer this question.

A goal that sounds intimidating but is truly achievable is to raise children with healthy attachment styles. Children with healthy attachment grow up to be adults who navigate the world with both confidence and empathy and form satisfying relationships with other people. Much research shows attachment styles are significantly associated with early childhood experiences, and healthy attachment is accessible to almost everyone regardless of innate gifts or socioeconomic status. This means that the goal of raising children with healthy attachment is a goal that is more within the parents’ control than a lot of things others will insist are important (hello, SAT scores) and has the potential to give your children positive tools that translate to every area of their lives.

How does parental self-care impact healthy attachment in children? A meta-analysis of 42 studies by Jennifer Barnes and Jennifer Theule, published in *Infant Mental Health Journal* in 2019, examines the correlation between rates of maternal depression and nonattachment in infants. Adherents to attachment theory believe the earliest experiences an infant has impact their attachment throughout their life span, making this association theoretically significant. The

study finds that there is a significant association between depressive symptoms or diagnoses in mothers and nonattachment in infants.

The takeaway from this meta-analysis is not that your mental health struggles make you a bad or ineffective parent, but something much more promising. It shows, impactfully, that taking care of yourself and your mental *and* physical health is not a choice that only benefits you. Your children will benefit from you receiving treatment for things as serious as mental illness, but also from you taking the time to take care of yourself even when the stressors of your life do not lead to a clinically significant level of distress. Happy parents lead to happy children, and happy children have healthy attachment.

Social media wants us to believe that self-care is all about bubble baths and staycations, and those can be lovely parts of taking care of oneself. But it is crucial to remember that the backbone of a self-care practice is performing the mundane, often irritating, but essential tasks that help you live your healthiest and least stressful life. Because they are neither glamorous or directly associated with your children, it can be hard to place these tasks at the top of an endless to-do list. It can be helpful to list out the things you need to be your healthiest, and remember they are just as important as tasks directly related to your children, or the more dazzling tasks commonly associated with self-care.

To take optimal care of yourself, you may want to prioritize:

- Getting medical care, for both your physical and mental health
- Getting adequate exercise
- Meeting your finances head-on and managing them to avoid a common source of stress

- Strategically using resources you have to get help in areas you need it, whether house-cleaning or childcare, if these services are accessible to you
- Maintaining friendships, including those from before you had children
- Remaining or becoming involved in community groups or causes that speak to you

Each of these practices has a strong impact on your own health and well-being, which are impactful to you as a person and your children's development of attachment.

It is important to remember that you do not deserve self-care because it is good for your children. You deserve self-care because you are a human being with an identity that is both enriched by and independent from your role as a parent. If you need that extra push, however, to make that doctor's appointment or take that afternoon off, remember that taking care of yourself holistically is also good for your children. You deserve it, and they deserve it too.

Reference

Barnes, J., & Theule, J. (2019). Maternal depression and infant attachment security: A meta-analysis. *Infant Mental Health Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21812>

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