



Understanding the parent-child relationship

Jenny, a 25-year old mum, complains that her daughter, Mary, aged 4, is “never satisfied” with the attention she gives her. “It doesn’t matter what I do, it’s never enough”, she says. Mary demands Jenny’s undivided attention and yet, when Jenny tries to provide this, something goes wrong. Mary wants it all her way, is easily frustrated and even pushes Jenny away. Jenny tries hard to be patient but finds herself wanting to withdraw from Mary because she feels herself getting angry at Mary’s confusing demands. Jenny compares Mary somewhat unfavourably with her brother, Nathan, who is 7. Nathan is described as “laid back and easy-going” and Jenny says that she had a second child because he was “such a pleasure” to parent. Jenny feels a little shocked and disappointed in her parenting experience with Mary, and has begun to wonder if she is a failure as a mother.

Jenny is also worried about Mary’s general non-compliance and her difficult-to-satisfy, demanding, and clingy behaviour. Mary is soon to start school and common sense behaviour management strategies have yielded limited success. Jenny is very concerned that Mary’s behaviour will cause problems at school and that the school may have difficulty coping with this. She looks forward to having more free time once Mary is at school, but she is fearful of what others will think of Mary and how Mary will cope with the demands of school. In order to understand the stressful interaction pattern between Jenny and her daughter, we could ask a number of questions. For example, how do Mary and Jenny’s personalities contribute to the difficulties; what is happening in their lives to make their relationship more difficult; and how do all of these factors work together to result in the difficulties?

The child herself enters the world with her own personality or temperament. This may be such that her nervous system is easily stimulated and so she has difficulty finding and feeling comfort. This means that she may be difficult to soothe or calm. When she is unwell, tired, hungry or physically uncomfortable, she may become more irritable or “wound up”, or aroused, than a child whose nervous system isn’t so sensitive. Once aroused, she may take longer to calm down than another child. So, she may become irritable easily, and physical attempts to soothe her may make her even more irritable.

Jenny herself values independence and finds it difficult to tolerate Mary’s clingy, whiny and irritable behaviour. She has always needed a reasonable degree of personal freedom within which to explore her own interests. Currently, she has chosen to put a satisfying career on hold until Mary goes to school, but misses the stimulation of her work and colleagues. She has felt a bit miserable for some time but has not disclosed this to others as she feels she should be happy in this maternal role. For a period after Mary was born, Jenny wondered whether she’d made a mistake in having another baby and felt quite low, struggling to make a strong, positive connection with her daughter. Jenny’s parental leave has resulted in increased financial stress for the family. Jenny’s partner, Greg, is busy developing his career and works long hours. Consequently, Jenny has limited physical and emotional support from him. These financial and time pressures mean that Jenny doesn’t have many resources for time out or recreation for herself. Without an opportunity to take care of herself with rest and pleasurable activities, she may have become worn out and

resentful of Mary's demands. She may also be at risk for developing mood or anxiety problems.

There is an interaction between Mary's temperament, Jenny's temperament, and the circumstances they find themselves in. Mary requires a high level of calm, patient and firm parenting in order to learn to manage her own volatile nature. These demands are draining Jenny's diminishing resources, and the situation is worsening as Jenny's negative emotions are activated. Jenny has come to feel constantly on edge – anticipating difficulties with Mary. She perceives Mary's behaviour as having malicious intent and being a personal threat. This means she reacts strongly to even small incidents and may inadvertently increase Mary's distress. It feels as though Mary sometimes does things deliberately to upset her. The stress generated by the difficulties between Jenny and Mary are also taking their toll on the rest of the family.

The problems described here occur in the context of the interaction between Mary and Jenny and may be referred to as attachment difficulties. The relationship between parent and child is often described as an attachment relationship, in which the parent provides a "safe haven" and secure base" for the infant. The child needs to be sure that the parent will be available and responsive when the child needs her comfort, nurturance or protection. However, the parent-child relationship is reciprocal (the child affects the parent as well as the parent affecting the child) from the very beginning, and when relationship problems arise, the parent-child interaction needs attention.

Jenny needs to increase her sensitivity to Mary – becoming more aware and responsive to Mary's attempts to interact with her. This is hard work, and, in order to meet Mary's attachment needs, Jenny's own needs must also be met. This may involve time away from parenting, support from other adults or addressing any health problems. Mary requires calm, firm handling that will contain her more explosive emotions, and her whininess and oppositionality. Her mother's ability to interpret Mary's signals for assistance by being tuned to the child and satisfy her needs promptly and appropriately will help to foster the development of a healthy relationship in which Mary is securely attached to her mum. Opportunities for sensitive responding occur many times in the course of daily life – each time they interact.

Jenny's challenge is to provide a "safe haven" for Mary to retreat to when anxious, and a "secure base" from which to go out and explore the world. In play sessions, Jenny needs to let Mary take the lead, and to become the "attentive follower", not directing or instructing Mary, but watching and describing what she is doing in a warm and interested way. A time set aside each day in which Jenny practices this "watch and wonder" technique with Mary will help to develop her sensitivity to Mary's bids for attention and her needs for closeness. As the attachment relationship strengthens, it is likely that those clingy, whiny, oppositional behaviors will decrease.

If Mary's needs for a safe haven and secure base are not met consistently and predictably within her relationship with her mother (or her father), she will become more insecure in her interactions with Jenny and the difficult behaviors may escalate as she struggles to manage herself without assistance. These patterns, which develop in childhood, may be repeated in the child's later relationships. Thus, addressing these issues early will have lasting benefits for the child and her carers.