

# EARTH MOTHER

**Claire Ashbourne** muses  
on attachment parenting  
vs. attachment theory

I ALWAYS ASSUMED ATTACHMENT parenting and attachment theory were pretty close relatives. The basis of attachment parenting practices; those that spring from Jean Liedloff's The Continuum Concept, in particular the rise in popularity of the 'in arms' phase of infancy is a definite part of the continuous relationship between mother and child that is necessary to bonding and good 'attachment' between the duo. However after in depth study of the theory of attachment and its massive and lifelong implications for both secure and insecure attachment I have come to re-read The Continuum Concept with fresh eyes.

18 years ago and pregnant with baby number one it was a book I read reverently as a sort of bible towards good parenting practice. I nodded 'yes!' to each page and was keen to implement everything in as pure and unadulterated a way as possible. And I did. Although the hard slog of constantly being alone with an infant jarred with the community of support the Yequana mothers bathed in. This was the main point of frustration for me as a young mother; aside from my own mother I had very little in the way of support from other mothers, friends, relatives or neighbours. I didn't really have any friends. I was 21 and fresh from uni with zero of my cohorts also bearing children and in the area I found myself living I had nothing, I felt, in common with other young mothers.

I had ideas and theories about raising children and if other mums were not in agreement, they were either ignorant or neglectful(!). Talk about uncompromising – I truly was; raising children was something that couldn't be compromised on. It was such an important task, one that I was dedicated to doing well! I was passionate about breastfeeding into toddlerhood, championed co-sleeping, held in high esteem the values of infant led weaning. I threw away the vile TV and didn't allow plastic into our home in the form of toys. I had 'treasure baskets' and valued heuristic play. When other mums didn't want passionate discussions about how to find a shoe with a bendy



*"NEUROSCIENCE TELLS US BY BEING RESPONSIVE AND LOVING OUR BABIES THEIR BRAINS ARE SHAPED AND DEVELOPED"*

sole, one that would allow as natural a relationship with the earth as possible... Well I was disappointed. I ordered my hand made baby shoes from half way around the world in quiet, because there was no one else interested enough to tell.

What I now feel in comparison to that intensity of my younger self is vastly mellowed. I feel a certain amount of empathy to my young intense and dedicated self, and I want to laugh too at the extremes of often unnecessary passions.

Because what I now feel secure attachment truly is has none of the parental choices or practices I so held aloft as being the gold standard of living with an infant. Secure attachment in its true form is the gentle attentiveness, the responsive, sensitive and timely interactions between a parent and child. Shoes, wooden toys or TV don't factor in any way shape or form. Head space is vital. By that I mean that a mother is able to hold space for her baby

at every moment. Is able to know that he or she needs holding and rocking, needs changing, is ready to eat, to be taken outside, is overwhelmed by a situation and needs to be calmed. A responsive parent recognises these things in their baby and regulates the often high or intense emotions of their child by responding with just what they need, moment by moment. Even if they get it wrong they are curious as to how they can help, they feel deep empathy and they keep on trying. Neuroscience tells us now that by being responsive and loving our babies their brains are shaped and developed. The more we love and the more we meet their needs the feedback loop of these positive interactions compels us to continue this satisfying endeavour. Babies who are securely attached in this way know that their needs are met, the world is a good place to be. Their brains are chock-full of cortisol receptors nurtured by their parent's sensitive responses and they are able to move into childhood able to mop up excess cortisol and manage, in time, their own emotions.

This is the basis of attachment theory and it has little specific in the way of practice other than having the emotional space and capacity to nurture and connect with your infant. It is reciprocal and satisfying. What does this mean in practice? Well, you can really chill out a bit about the screens and the sugar. You can relax and buy clothes that are not always natural fibres. You can puree baby food if that is what is needed for you and your baby. You don't have to co-sleep to be a responsive mother.

But wait, I really do still search out the wide toed children's shoes... And hey! Look! 18 years later I'm still researching and writing about attachment! How did that happen? I hope I'm not totally as annoying as I once was. I ask my long suffering husband. He says he can't possibly answer. I'll interpret his sensitive response as a no.

■ Claire is a home maker, home educator, sometimes even home birther. Urban dwelling mother of four seeks sanity by writing about daily life. Beauty, mud and dog hair included.

ILLUSTRATION JESSICA RAE GORDON