

Playing Matchmaker: Cultivating Relationships with Teachers and Adults Who Care for Our Kids

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

When we give birth to a child, we also need to cultivate the village of adults that will help us raise them. This community may consist of daycare workers, teachers, coaches, instructors, to extended family. This is critical as children flourish in environments where there is a seamless connection or invisible matrix of adults surrounding them. The challenge is parents can't leave this formation to chance, they must introduce and matchmake one's children to the adults who are responsible for them.

Matchmakers are *agents of attachment* who are not afraid to take the lead in fostering human connection. While the word matchmaker is usually associated with romantic relationships or business partnerships, it serves another role when it comes to caring for kids. Matchmakers connect two people who are unknown to each other and foster a sense of relatedness.

Why is matchmaking so important? Children have natural shyness instincts that move them to resist contact and closeness with people they are not attached to. As an attachment instinct, shyness ensures that a child follows, obeys, listens, and shares the same values as the people they are closest to. Children should naturally shy away from people who have not been sanctioned by their closest attachments.

When we look for people who will help us care for our children we consider many things such as their background, training, facilities, and demeanour but one of the most important thing to consider is whether we can foster a caring relationship between them and our child. If a child, especially young ones, do not feel at home in their adult relationships, they will be difficult to care for and may turn to their peers over their adults in terms of connection.

5 Ways to Play Matchmaker

The essence of matchmaking is being able to introduce a child and adult in a way that engages their attachment instincts and desire for contact and closeness. There are a number of strategies one can employ as a matchmaker; yet, it is as much about the science of attachment as it is the art of cultivating relationships.

1. Take the lead

To be a matchmaker a parent needs to feel empowered in this role and be a little arrogant that they are the answer to ensuring two people have a relationship. For example, at a dentist or doctors office a parent needs to take the lead in introducing their child. When we have the attachment lead with a child, we need to guide them to other caring adults and show them we approve of the connection. We can't assume that adults will collect our kids and start building a relationship with them. If we allow others to do the introductions for us, we are not in the lead. We were meant to point out to our children the people we believe to be their best bet for leaning upon.

2. Look for sameness and similarities

One of the ways children feel connected to adults is through sameness, meaning they feel they have something in common with them. Being the same as someone is not as vulnerable as having to share your secrets or heart. As a matchmaker, parents need to work to prime the relationship, pointing out similarities and working hard to highlight areas of likeness. For example, one mother said her four year was having a hard time settling into kindergarten so she approached his teacher for help.

"I spoke with the teacher the other day about bringing my son in early so he could settle in when there was no one else around. He seems to be anxious when things are busy so we left early to get him there before all of the kids started trickling in. We then packed his dinosaurs to bring to school and spoke about how wonderful it was to bring things to share with his teacher and friends. His teacher noticed his tote when he walked in the class and asked questions about it and that seemed to make him super happy! And then they walked to the carpet and set up his toys. I gave him a high 5 and said his teacher and friends were going to be super happy to see what he brought! He then turned to me and waved goodbye!!! No tears, no fuss!"

There are many ways to draw out similarities, from similar interests, experiences, to desires. When kids feel that they have something in common with people that care for them, they are more likely to be more receptive to their care. The challenge is that a sense of sameness is often easier with their same aged peers which could come at the expense of their adult ones. This can lead to a host of problems including peer orientation where they are more influenced and take direction from their friends rather than adults.

3. Foster a sense of approval and connection between the adults

When a parent demonstrates that they like another adult, a child will often follow their lead. On an instinctive level the child's brain says, "If you like this person then I will like them too." When they see us expressing warmth, delight and enjoyment to another person, they are likely to follow our lead. This requires us to be thoughtful in our conversations regarding the adults in their life and ensure what they hear preserves these relationships. For example, when a child has a new teacher it will be important to express approval and interest in this person, encouraging a child to share their daily experiences with them. It is important to not judge what these adults do in front of the child as we will run the risk of thwarting their relationship. If conversations are required regarding the child, then it is often best done without them being present.

4. Create routines and rituals to foster connection

Creating a culture of attachment is best done through routines and rituals. Routines are great at orienting kids to the transition between their adults such as at drop off and pick up. This could include a standard hello as well as some simple conversation about everyday events like the weather or plans for the day. When a parent feels the child has connected to the adult they can say their goodbyes and leave swiftly. Hanging around to talk or prolonged goodbye often agitates young children as they don't know who they should orient too.

One father told me his drop off included pretending he was a knight and telling his 4 year old that, "The warm hearted maiden, Angela, will care for you in my absence. You are in good stead with her my son." With a bow to Angela and his son he left promptly. His son looked forward to each morning's goodbye and Angela felt empowered in her caretaking role.

Rituals foster connection and a sense of community – from celebrating holidays to special occasions. When children see adults sharing food, eating meals together, gathering, playing games or going on outings, the sense of being cared for by a village is further highlighted. For young children gradual entry and school orientations are also important rituals which allow a child to warm up to a teacher or daycare provider and feel comfortable with them.

5. Maintain a hierarchy of attachments

It is fine to introduce children to many adults as long as we keep their attachment hierarchy in place. The parent(s) need to be at the top of the hierarchy with all other adults falling under them. To ensure this, a parent needs to explain to whom a child should go to for help when needed.

If a child sees a parent being reprimanded, dismissed, or treated poorly by other adults, it can threaten their attachment hierarchy with the parent at the helm. If a parent needs support then it is best to do it in a way that preserves the parent role in the eyes of a child. Admonishing parents in front of their child can hurt a child in the long run. They need to feel and believe their parents know how to care for them, even if the parent needs support in being able to do this.

Hello and goodbyes can be provocative for kids but they are made less so when kids feel connected to adults at each of these junctures. We can't blame our kids for missing their favourite people but we can help them feel at home with other caring adults. What children need most is a network of caring adults. If we devote even half of our energy to this instead of focussing on peer to peer relationships, we could build a seamless attachment matrix around them.

Parents need to play matchmaker and introduce one's children to the supporting cast of adults that will help raise them. Children shouldn't have to question who is caring for them. They need to be free to play and focus on learning about who they are and what they can do.

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