

Attachment Hunger

by Pamela Whyte

Dr. Neufeld frequently compares our need for food with our need for relationship; the more I think about this the more it makes sense. It is easy for us to understand the importance of food for the healthy development of our children; we know they need sleep and safe shelter in order to grow. It is harder for us to grasp the vital importance of right relationship in determining the well being, and even the behaviour of our children.

If my child had to work to secure food, had to search for shelter and grab sleep wherever she could, there would be no energy for creativity, for exploration, for aspirations; my child would be preoccupied with security and stability. She might crave distractions to take her mind off her troubles, she would be agitated and restless, and might chase after any stranger who seemed like they might be able to help.

Compare this to the child who has to work to secure relationships, search for acceptance, and grab affection wherever she can. Surprisingly, these children act just like children who have to scramble for sustenance. They too have no energy for creativity, for exploration, for aspirations, they too are preoccupied with security and stability — they are clingy and demanding, or charming and delightful in an attempt to secure our care and love. They, too, crave distractions to take their minds off their troubles, are agitated and restless, and are likely to chase after any stranger who seems like they might be able to help.

So many of our children, even those who are truly loved, are starving for deep secure relationships — we understand that a child must eat quite frequently in order to stay healthy, we know that when they are hungry their behaviour is likely to fall apart, we know that one good meal at breakfast will not last all day, yet we do not see their attachment needs as equally legitimate. We act like there is something wrong with a child who needs us.

We think that one attachment meal at breakfast will last all day; when a child is demanding or clingy we instruct others to “ignore him, he just wants attention,” as if somehow ignoring him will make the hunger go away. We withhold ourselves from them or send them to their rooms when they misbehave in order to “starve” them into submission.

The more I think about it, the more parallels I can see, and the more I long for each child to have a full belly of food, and a deep meal of attachment, both as frequently as needed. Let us invite them to our table, and provide there a feast.