

# Don't push me!

## Does the child in your care pull you close just to push you away again? Carol Lozier takes a look at the push/pull relationship of Ambivalent Attachment

In a parent-child relationship, the purpose of attachment is to make the child feel safe, secure and protected. Attachment is categorized as either **secure** (healthy) or **insecure** (damaged).

The three types of insecure attachment are: **ambivalent**, **avoidant** and **disorganised**.

In this article we'll focus specifically on the ambivalent style.

### Ambivalent attachment

This develops when a caregiver is emotionally unpredictable - sometimes she is available and at other times she is unavailable. Because the child can't predict when her parent will be available, the child tries various ways to gain her

attention, such as fussy or clingy behaviour.

Ambivalent attachment can be described as a '**push/pull**' relationship between the parent and child. The child initially wants closeness with her parent, but also fears closeness so will act up or shut down to distance her caregiver. For most parents this behaviour is confusing and frustrating.

### Wade and Kimberly's story

Wade and Kimberly are first time parents. After much consideration, they schedule a therapy appointment to discuss concerns about their three year old son, Luis.

Kimberly begins, "We brought Luis home from Colombia when he was 16 months old. We thought he had a good foster home. We don't understand it... we thought we were doing well."

Wade and Kimberly notice Luis' behaviours but aren't sure if this is average three year old or adoption related behaviours.

### Problematic Behaviours:

Kimberly says, "Luis won't accept 'no' from us. Time-outs don't work. If I get upset he says, 'Mum, your hair looks nice. I like you very much.' It makes me wonder if he's manipulating me." Wade adds, "He runs into his room, hides and screams, 'Don't touch me!' Then, he'll scream for one of us

### Secure versus Insecure Attachment: The Four Attachment Styles

**Secure attachment** develops when a caregiver provides consistent caregiving. In a secure relationship, the child seeks comfort from her caregiver and prefers her over strangers.

### Three Types of Insecure Attachment

**1. Ambivalent attachment** develops when a caregiver shifts between adequate and preoccupied caregiving. Children in an ambivalent relationship are: clingy and directly or indirectly aggressive toward their caregiver.

**2. Avoidant attachment** develops when a caregiver is neglectful and rejects the child. Children in an avoidant relationship avoid their caregiver and at times show a preference to strangers.

**3. Disorganized attachment** develops when a caregiver is inconsistent with the child, and wavers between frightening and comforting him. Children in disorganized relationships seem to control or attempt to be a caregiver to their parent.

and as soon as we get there, he'll yell, 'Get out! Leave me alone!' Sometimes he sits on my lap and drinks from his cup like a bottle - I just don't know if we should encourage all this."

### Push and pull behaviours:

**Push:** Luis won't accept "No" from mum and dad, then **Pull:** Luis tells mum her hair looks nice and he loves her.

**Push:** Luis runs to his room and screams not to touch him, then **Pull:** He yells for them, then **Push:** He yells at them to get out of his room.

### Luis' History

Luis was placed with his foster mum,



Photo: (Flickr) Gabriel S. Delgado C.

It sometimes feels like you need a key to unlock the answer

Veronica, when he was two days old. She was a married woman in her thirties with a six year old daughter and three foster kids, including Luis, under the age of one. Kimberly visited Luis before his adoption. She remembers when she gave Luis back to Veronica, "He didn't want to leave me and go back to her."

As we continue our conversation, Wade recollects Luis had a flat area on his head from lying down all the time.

He also remembers Veronica propped bottles to feed the babies instead of holding them. They begin to identify connections from Luis' past hurts to his current difficulties.

Luis was neglected and even with good intention Veronica could not adequately take care of three babies. While this was an emotional pain for them, it helped to make sense of Luis' behaviour.

Now they understand Luis is not manipulating them - he is asking the best way he can to have his needs met.

### Practical Strategies

Children require their parent's assistance to reduce distancing behaviours and increase authentic closeness. Some strategies are listed below with examples from Luis'

family:

**1 Quiet time**  
Find a quiet time to share with your child. The repetition of this loving experience builds a connection between you and your child.

**Luis' Family:** Mum or dad have snuggle time with Luis. He sits on their lap, and he rocks and drinks milk from his

## "It helped to make sense of Luis' behaviour"

beaker. This is a calm, intimate time to talk with Luis about his feelings and thoughts.

**2 Help your child identify thoughts and feelings**  
Find opportunities to ask your child to share his thoughts and feelings. Your goal is to know your child in an intimate way.

**Luis' Family:** Wade and Kimberly discuss situations with Luis so that they can understand his emotional viewpoint. "This morning when you told me 'No', you were pushing my love away - what kind of feelings were you having?"

**3 Allow your child to be vulnerable**  
Allow your child to be needy, it will make him a stronger person. Children are born to be dependent

and become independent as they grow and mature. But if they missed the developmental period of dependency, they still need to experience reliable, sensitive caregiving.

**Luis' Family:** Kimberly appreciates Luis needs time right next to her. He requires consistent emotional reassurance: hugs, affection, loving words, and reminders,

"Mummy's heart is always connected to your heart, even when you can't see me."

**4 Point out when your child is using distance**  
When you notice your child is engaging in distancing behaviour, use kind honesty to point it out to him. "I think right now you are pushing my love away."

**Luis' Family:** At a calm time, Kimberly shares with Luis, "Sweetie, when I come to your room and you yell at me to get out, I feel your heart isn't open for my love to come in."

As she talks, Kimberly uses hand gestures to demonstrate an open or closed heart, like the nursery rhyme, "Open, shut them."

**5 Self-Care**  
Adoptive parents have a rigorous job - taking care of their emotional, physical, and spiritual needs are highly important.

**Luis' Family:** In order to meet Luis' demands, his parents must be rested, well nourished and emotionally balanced. They must take care of their own well-being. Kimberly, in particular, enjoys exercise classes at the YMCA but had stopped attending. After our discussion, she realised exercise is part of her self care plan and resumed her classes.

**Keep in mind:** Children don't have insight into the reasons behind their push/pull behaviour. They are merely displaying what they have experienced from past caregivers. With an understanding of this attachment interaction parents can begin to form new patterns of attachment with sensitive and consistent caregiving. □

Carol Lozier, MSW, LCSW is a psychotherapist in private practice. Carol specialises in working with adopted and foster children and their families.

She writes a weekly blog, [www.fosteradoptchildtherapist.typepad.com](http://www.fosteradoptchildtherapist.typepad.com) and is currently writing a book to help foster and adoptive families.

You can contact Carol on twitter, Facebook or by emailing [carollozier@aol.com](mailto:carollozier@aol.com)



Carol shows how quiet time together is important