



FAST FACTS: Attachment

ORIGINS OF ATTACHMENT RESEARCH

John Bowlby, author, and early researcher of attachment theory is thought by some to be one of the three most influential theorists in modern psychology. His work moved the study of child development from a purely theoretical arena, to one of real-life early experiences and their impact on human development. He stated that the availability of a consistent, nurturing caregiver from birth through the first five years of life is essential for the formulation of good mental health (Bowlby, 1966).

That needle has changed a bit and more recent research suggests that the prenatal environment and the first three years are the most formative in a child's development. If a child experiences positive parenting and develops a secure attachment, it serves as a protective factor for the rest of their life.

Attachment is defined by, and itself defines relationship and mental health. It is the system where infant needs are met and psychological development occurs (Fahlberg 1998). How those needs are met, in quantity as well as quality, defines a child's sense of self and others, is a component of self-esteem, establishes within them a belief about whether they are worthy of protection, and promotes their sense of personal effectiveness. Children develop their sense of competence through their caregiver's response to their distress.

Attachment is a learned style of being emotionally personal. It is a brain-based process dependent upon the neurological growth and development of a child's central nervous system in response to their environment and early experiences. The attachment formation a child develops with a primary caregiver is not culture bound—all children need consistent, predictable, and positive care in their early years.

Attachment provides an inner sense of security and sustenance to an infant and young child. It is this process that ultimately creates and defines a worldview and influences how the child functions in the context of relationships, throughout life. When needs are not met survival is in the driver's seat. Fear stifles curiosity and developmental tasks may not be mastered. Unaddressed fear is the single most significant barrier to new learning for children. Development becomes scattered by both negative life experiences and unreliable or unsafe environments.

When they do not get their basic needs met in a safe and reliable way, a child's mind and body shift to survival mode! *I will do anything I need to; lie, steal, tantrum, rage –my insides are screaming, I am starving!* Think of an infant, a toddler, hungry, cold, wet ~ they cry, and nothing happens. They are terrified. Do not expect them to trust or fall in love with you – experience has taught them not to get their hopes up in terms of getting their needs met. They expect that vulnerability will result in hurt and rejection. Parents build trust by completing the call and response cycle, time and time again - in some form, perhaps for the rest of their lives.



COMPONENTS OF ATTACHMENT

Research has shown components of positive attachment formations include emotional regulation, reciprocity, attuned caregiving, empathy, consistent nurture, use of the parent as a secure base, and boundary formation (Gray; Hughes; Levy; Johnson; Erdman). While these components are not an exclusive list, they do comprise the foundation for attachment. When these features are present, a child learns to attach.

Empathy

The empathetic parent correctly reads the child's messages and interprets them in a way to provide reassurance and encouragement. It also means the parent can actually experience the emotions of the child as if they were the parent's own.

Empathy may be the least available in return from the attachment challenged child. They remain focused on their own subconscious drive to survive. Especially with their 'new' parent. Residual, internal, unconscious rage at their first mother may influence their response to the subsequent mother.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a mutual giving and receiving of love {Gray}. It demonstrates that not only can the parent meet the child's needs, but also that the child is willing to accept and receive comfort with a natural 'give and take' between the two parties.

No matter how much you give, your child may not be able to receive your comfort for some time. Their focus must be on controlling their situation and not feeling vulnerable. Their view of self has grown from feeling unworthy, unwanted, and being a burden.

Children and youth with stressed attachment may avoid eye contact or push the parent away. The intimacy of connection and caring may be too much for them. Some are more able to connect with animals than with human beings.

Attunement

Attunement to a child's developmental needs and signals facilitates secure attachment {Johnson}. Attuned caregiving means the adult can correctly interpret the child's verbal and nonverbal cues, and then attend to the child's emotional and physical needs.

Consistent and expressed attunement over time can stimulate connection of neurons in the brain, literally building attachment.

Healthy Boundaries

Positive and discriminating emotional boundaries suggest children know who they can count on and whom they prefer for comfort and care {Erdman}. It is a lifelong protective factor.

Children with attachment deficits, trauma history, and/or pre-natal exposure to alcohol and drugs may have no concept of boundaries. Again, the survival instinct will override any attempt to teach them who is safe and who isn't. They are very vulnerable due to the depth of their inner needs.

Nurture

Nurture is the component of attachment often called love. It is the caring and growing up of a child done with compassion and structure. It is tenderness.

Connection before correction - build a relationship through nurture, sensitivity, and your own emotional regulation. Through that pathway your child can grow to want to please you and to love you to the best of their ability.

Parent as a Secure Base

A secure base is determined if a child uses the parent to give them a sense of safety. When children are confident their parents will stay with them, they are free to explore the world and master life skills, while insecurely attached children always feel they may be left vulnerable and alone {Gray; Johnson}

A child with insecure attachment will always be looking for something. Searching through drawers, file cabinets, papers. Anything that will answer the lifelong question: "Why? Why me? Why did they give me away (birth parents)? When will these people kick me out? How bad do I have to be before it happens? And I know it will happen— sooner or later. I can control this. I can make it happen ."

Emotional Regulation and Parent Sensitivity

A child learns to manage their emotions through a process called co-regulation. Infants do not have the capacity to calm themselves – they must 'borrow' the calm of the caregiver. The calm, helpful parent teaches the child to be calm.

When we as parents pull back or lose our commitment, in any way, even just in our heads (or hearts), the attachment challenged child will sense it and become more and more desperate to gain our attention –positive or negative. You may be exhausted, disappointed, afraid, and angry. In that moment, try to remember: Angry parents can't heal children (Kupecky). Positive sentiment override can be your best option in some cases ~ remember how you felt when you first met your child, when you had the idea of being a parent. Let that carry you through the moments that are challenging.

When calm returns, begin again to establish connection – toss a ball back and forth, get out the bubbles, sing silly songs, laugh together. Back and forth, sensory, rhythmic, repetitive activity. The senses go a long way to creating connections, often much more so than words. Got bongo drums, modeling clay, coloring books?

IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTING

All humans are born with a capacity for attachment and attachment can form in any number of relationships. This is good news for adoptive, foster, and kinship parents!

However, it is important to know that disrupted attachments can be life changing and have long-term detrimental effects on any child. Some children develop attachments with new caregivers and some never do.

When trust and security fail to become an integral, innate inner experience for the child, it is common for children to experience any number of developmental and attachment challenges. That is often diagnosed as a mental health condition. There are various forms of attachment categories, for children who have experienced maltreatment, disrupted relationships, neglect, or prenatal exposure to violence, drugs/alcohol.

ATTACHMENT REPAIR

Feelings of worth, safety, sustenance, denied in the first 3 years of life: How do we as, foster, kinship, adoptive parents provide, rebuild, what has been missed?

Attachment trauma can be addressed; children do heal and recover. The healing process is much more complicated if the child suffered additional traumatic experiences, which is often the case. Because attachment is a relational experience and because the child was harmed in the context of a relationship, healing will only take place with a corrective experience. It is the relationship with a positive caregiver that heals the child.

This process requires a great deal from everyone. The child needs to learn how to trust. They need to learn that adults are safe and can be counted on. They need to learn they can express their needs without fear of retaliation or rejection.

The adult does much of the work. It is akin to being tested every day, all day, to demonstrate to the child that the adult will not leave, hurt them, lose their temper, or give up. The child may attempt to control the situation by continually providing the parent with opportunities to 'kick them out'. Examples would be lying, stealing, swearing, running away, using alcohol or drugs, teen pregnancy, and of course, disrespectful behavior of all kinds. That is one big job for the grown-up – to remain regulated and unconditional.

To make the commitment and keep the promise. Adoption is all about consistently providing a corrective experience to the child, youth, and even adult child. The parent truly claims the child for a lifetime.

"The biggest challenge was the challenge of simply being there." -Nasdiff, adoptive parent

"The greatest experience is changing someone else's experience of life." -Andre Agassi

"I'm not telling you it is going to be easy; I'm telling you it's going to be worth it". -Adoptive parent

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Books & Videos:

The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family, Karyn B Purvis

YouTube videos with Purvis, good tips.

The Power of Showing Up: How Parental Presence Shapes Who Our Kids Become and How Their Brains Get Wired,

Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson

YouTube and TED Talks

Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Troubled Children, Daniel A. Hughes

<http://www.danielhughes.org/treatment---parenting-model.html>

<http://www.danielhughes.org/books--dvds---digital-media.html>

Games and Activities for Attaching with Your Child, Deborah D. Grey

Attaching Through Love, Hugs and Play: Simple Strategies to Help Build Connections with Your Child Deborah D. Grey

Wounded Children, Healing Homes: How Traumatized Children Impact Adoptive and Foster Families, Jayne

Schooler, Betsy Keefer Smalley

Caring Together: A Guide for Parents, foster parents and adoptive parents of children who are in care, Mary-Jo Land,

<https://maryjoland.ca>

Websites:

www.attach.org

www.mnadopt.org: Go to Education/Webinar Library for pre-recorded webinars on attachment

www.nacac.org: Parent support groups

Information presented by:



Deena McMahon, LICSW, McMahon Counseling & Consultation, provides statewide forensic consultation, attachment assessments, and has more than 25 years' experience counseling adoptive and foster parents and youth. She is a renowned and sought-after provider of training on trauma and attachment, through the United States & internationally.



Wendylee Raun, M.A., began her tenure at MN ADOPT in 2001 as the Post-Adoption Training Coordinator. Over the years her role has evolved. Currently she brings her skills full circle to her new role with the Education team, focusing on planning and facilitating training opportunities for adoptive, foster and kinship families as well as the professionals that serve them. As MN ADOPT's longest standing team-member, she brings a vast amount of knowledge, experience and wisdom to the MN ADOPT team and Minnesota adoption community as a whole!

"Throughout my time at MN ADOPT my drive has been to educate people in many arenas on adoption- related topics. Through helping families be the best they can be, we help children heal. I have seen through my personal experience as an adoptive parent the miraculous effect a safe and loving home has on children who have experienced trauma. That makes the challenges more than worthwhile. Many Minnesota children need families. Whatever I can do to facilitate that is what I strive to accomplish."

To learn more about Foster Adopt Minnesota and our efforts to ensure each child will have a permanent family,
call 612-861-7115 or visit www.fosteradoptmn.org.