

# Attachment

Attachment is a term that we use to describe the relationship or bond that develops between an infant and their caregiver. Babies and young children rely upon adults to meet their needs including: food, safety, physical care, social interactions and emotional security. They have an inbuilt impulse to develop and build a connection with a parent or carer so they can have these needs met. Attachment behaviours are most easily seen when children are sick, injured, tired, anxious, hungry or thirsty.

## *What does Attachment Behaviour Look Like?*

Attachment starts to form during preverbal stages of development, before a baby has language to express their needs. Observing the behaviour of babies and children has formed the basis of understanding and learning about early attachment. In children attachment behaviours can include:

- Eye-to-eye gaze
- Reaching
- Smiling
- Signalling or calling to
- Holding, clinging or protesting separation
- Seeking to be picked up
- Following
- Sitting with
- Searching
- Verbal engagement

*Adapted from Pearce, 2009.*

*“ Attachment is one of the most critical developmental tasks of infancy ”*

*Dr Joy Osafsky*

## How Does Attachment Form?

During the first year of life babies develop a primary attachment with their main carer (usually from around 3 months). This is often their mother but it can be another person who provides primary care to a baby. Babies also develop secondary attachments with other regular carers or extended family members. People whom a baby forms an attachment relationship with are described as 'attachment figures'.

The way a baby and carer interact, during the early years, will shape a particular style to the way a baby behaves and tries to have their needs met by their primary carer. For example, when a baby feels frightened or threatened they will seek comfort and safety by staying close to their attachment figures. Even as the baby develops independence (from around age two) they will maintain a tendency to seek comfort and protection from their attachment figures.

In summary, attachment is basically about the physical (my caregiver is nearby), emotional (my caregiver understands my feelings) and cognitive (my caregiver is aware of me) connections that form between the child and the caregiver (Pearce, 2009).

## Attachment Styles

How attachment figures respond to a baby's behaviour and needs (over time) is important in establishing a particular *attachment style*. When carers are able to understand a child's cues and respond to the child's physical and social needs in a caring and consistent way this establishes a style of attachment that is called *secure*.

A secure attachment style generally involves babies displaying a strong preference for contact with their primary carer. Secure attachment also has the beginning of displays of independence. In particular babies who have developed a secure attachment can use their carer as a safe base from which to explore their world.

Of course, having a secure attachment and a sense of independence does not mean that a child will not become upset at separation from their primary carer. They may show distress when left with unfamiliar carers. However these children will generally be able to adapt readily and be comforted more easily. Over time they will be able to develop a sense of security and build secondary attachments to new carers, such as children's services staff.

At the heart of a secure attachment style are these key elements:

- **trust that their carer will be there when needed (physical needs)**
- **developing a sense of safety, security, reliability, and predictability (emotional and cognitive needs)**
- **developing a good balance of autonomy and returning to their carer for comfort when needed.**



## *Insecure Attachment*

Not all babies experience consistent and caring responses from their primary carer to their cues and needs. When this happens babies can develop an attachment style we call *insecure*. In this style the baby lacks a strong emotional connection to primary carer and is unsure how to get their needs met.

This weak connection is often displayed in two different ways:

- 1. The child can appear to be self-reliant or self absorbed. They can avoid or ignore others and seem to cope with separations from primary carer**
- 2. The child appears clingy and distressed during separation. When the carer returns the child moves between closeness and anger with the carer.**



Insecure attachment styles can form when the child is unsure if the carer will respond to a call for comfort. This could be a reflection of a parent's or carer's preferred style of caring. It could also be as a result of the adult not always being available, physically or emotionally, for the child.

## *Disorganised Attachment*

In contrast, children who experience carers who are consistently rejecting, threatening and unresponsive to the baby's needs are at risk of developing a *disorganised* attachment. As with the other attachment styles, the type of caregiving the child experiences child shapes their understanding of themselves and their carers. Overtime expose to a hostile or disorganised relationship forms a pattern of disorganised behaviours.

Children with a disorganised attachment style may not have a consistent way of expressing their needs and feelings to carers. When comfort is offered they can be difficult to settle. Children experiencing a disorganised attachment style may shift between insecurity and anger or their interactions may be detached from their carers and families.

## *The Impact of Attachment on Mental Health and Wellbeing*

Early attachment experiences form an important foundation for our social and emotional development and future mental health. The attachment style that a person develops in early childhood often remains with them into adulthood becoming a model for adult social interactions. Attachment experiences help us to shape how we see ourselves and the expectations we have of others.

By actively building secure attachments primary and secondary carers can provide children with the best foundation for social and emotional wellbeing.

Secure attachments foster the positive development of:

- **the ability to manage feelings**
- **autonomy**
- **coping skills in stressful situations**
- **self-esteem**
- **trust**
- **relationships.**



An insecure attachment style does not necessarily increase the risk of a disorder however it can present challenges to people's wellbeing later in life. This may include low self-esteem, difficulty in trusting others and managing their feelings. On the other hand a disorganised attachment style increases the risk of children displaying behaviour problems and the development of mental illness later in life.

### *Fostering Secure Attachments*

Children's services staff, families and carers can all contribute positively to the mental health and wellbeing of babies and children by integrating the principles of secure attachment into their daily practice and routines, particularly during the first few years of life. Primarily this involves reading and understanding children's cues and responding to their needs in a consistent manner.

Family members or carers can also provide useful information about the child, their routines, relationships and communication methods. By collecting as much information about the child's routine and by getting to know the child, family and or carers well the better you will be able to understand the baby and respond in a consistent way.

Children's services staff can watch babies and children to look for signals about their needs and feelings. Babies and young children may express their needs and feelings using non-verbal communication including:

- body language
- facial expressions
- crying
- babbling
- making/or avoiding eye contact
- gestures



Older children may use words as well as non-verbal cues to express their needs and emotions.

Children's services staff can adjust their practices to suit individual children and their attachment styles helping them to feel safe and supported in the service. As children grow developing language and an understanding of others' actions and feelings, assessing their attachment style becomes more complex.

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