

Attachment

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Attachment

Research has shown that whether our emotional needs are met or responded to in the first years of life can have a long-term effect into adulthood. This is described as having a secure or insecure attachment. In addition it has been found that attachment 'styles' can often be passed on from one generation to the next.

Attachment

It is well researched that some children's development is interrupted in their early years. This causes them great problems in forming and maintaining relationships throughout their lives.

Attachment

In most families, bonding and attachment happens naturally. From this interaction of adult and child comes a sense of trust and security.

Secure attachment

- A healthy reciprocal relationship between child and carer.
- Social interaction is characterised by fun and playfulness and the child's need for comfort when anxious or distressed is met quickly and effectively.
- The child feels able to explore the world at his/her own pace knowing that the parent or carer is a secure base to return to

Avoidant attachment

- When parents or carers actively discourage signs of either affection or distress,
- Believe that emotions are to be suppressed and feelings should be unexpressed. This means that it is difficult for the child to access a feeling of being loved and nurtured and he or she has to develop alternative coping mechanisms to survive emotionally.
- Children in this situation can become withdrawn emotionally and learn to internalise painful and difficult feelings.

Avoidant attachment

- Avoidant children grow up to be adults who find it difficult to connect with the emotional repertoire of others and find talking about their feelings a source of anxiety and distress. They find it hard to maintain relationships and mistrust intimacy.

Avoidant Attachment Learning Profile in the Classroom (Geddes 1999)

- Approach to the classroom: appear to be indifferent to uncertainty in a new situation.
- Response to the teacher: denial of the need for support or help. Sensitive to the proximity of the teacher.
- Response to the task: need to feel independent of the teacher. Focused on the task. Hostility towards teacher directed at the task or objects. Mistakes felt as self denigrating.
- Skills and difficulties: likely to be underachieving. Limited use of language and creativity.

Supporting children with an Avoidant Attachment

- Focus on the task not the teacher/pupil relationship.
- Tasks with clear outcomes are often easier for the avoidant individual to handle.
- The presence of another child. You may be able to begin to support an avoidant individual while mostly supporting another child as this can moderate the intensity of the proximity.
- For older individuals, use a mentor who can act as a intermediary.
- When planning lessons, reduce as much as possible the potential threat of 'not knowing' - clear structured tasks are important.

Ambivalent attachment

- Children experience ambivalent attachment when they are never quite sure whether their carers will meet their need for reassurance or comfort.
- The parent may sometimes respond to distress and anxiety or may sometimes ignore it.
- There is a lack of predictability in the behaviour of the carer that makes the child feel 'all over the place'.

Ambivalent attachment

- The child often feels distressed but has no confidence that his or her distress will be heard.
- This form of attachment is particularly prevalent in families where there are mental health problems or issues with alcohol or substance misuse.

Ambivalent attachment

Ambivalent attachment in children can lead them to grow up to be adults who are prone to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders. They also find it difficult to recover from traumatic life events and respond badly to stress and challenge.

Ambivalent Attachment Learning Profile in the Classroom (Geddes 1999)

- Approach to classroom: possible separation anxiety.
- Response to teacher: need to hold teacher's attention. Apparent dependence. May express hostility towards teaching staff.
- Response to the task: Difficulties attempting the task unsupported. Unable to focus on the task – concerns about loss of teacher attention.
- Skills and difficulties: Likely to be underachieving. Language may be well developed.

Supporting children with an Ambivalent Attachment

- Small steps to learning
- Turn taking indicates two separate people
- Use of a timer, short timed independent tasks eg I'll come back in 3 minutes
- Reassurance verbally and by transitional object eg I care enough about you to entrust this pen to you.

Supporting children with an Ambivalent Attachment

- Prepare for the beginning and end of school day
- Warning of changes

Strategies continued

- When possible, reducing the amount written work by using boxes to be completed, or the use of defined spaces
- Opportunities for some choice in content of work or activities
- Develop emotional literacy using characters and metaphor
- Structured games/activities with clear rules or right wrong answers. Questions that are factual and precise

Disorganised attachment

- Occurs when children send out attachment signals but these are not received or responded to appropriately by the parent or carer.
- Sometimes the parent appears unaware of the child's needs.
- This attachment style can occur when the parent has many unresolved emotional issues from his or her own past or has no emotional resources to draw on due to mental health problems or a traumatic life event which occurred during the first few years of the child's life.

Disorganised attachment

- Alternatively, and much more seriously, disorganised attachment can occur when the parent is a threat to the child through abusive behaviour.

Disorganised attachment

Children with disorganised attachment often fail to thrive and may have developmental delay. Young children will inevitably show signs of emotional and behavioural difficulties from an early age by demonstrating aggressive, disruptive or withdrawn behaviours both at home and in the early years environment.

Disorganised attachment

In adulthood there is an increased susceptibility to relationship breakdown, substance misuse, self-destructive and self-harming behaviours, eating disorders, suicide, offending behaviour and aggressive, violent and controlling behaviours.

Disorganised Attachment Learning Profile in the Classroom (Geddes 1999)

- **Approach to the classroom:** Intense anxiety which may be expressed as omnipotent control and knowing everything already.
- **Response to the teacher:** Great difficulty trusting authority. Unable to ask for help. Unable to accept not knowing and accepting the knowledge of the teacher.
- **Response to the task:** May trigger uncertainty. Difficulty accepting not knowing. Humiliated by not knowing already. Rejection of the task as stupid and irrelevant.
- **Skills and difficulties:** Likely to be underachieving. Basic knowledge may be impaired. Difficult to hold on to sequences and continuity of learning. Possibly at an immature stage of learning.

Disorganised Attachment

In the school setting, Geddes (1999) suggests:

- Such children are constantly alert and always noticing what is happening and are unable to focus on a task.
- Children display characteristics similar to those with ADHD.
- The need for safety is a priority before the learning process can begin.

Supporting children with a Disorganised Attachment

- Maintain reliable rules and practices
- Develop a physical container
- Colleague support and professional meetings with opportunities for reflection
- Start learning at emotional level rather than chronological age
- Explore the use of concrete, mechanical and rhythmic activities
- Have a clear strategy for emergencies
- Avoid confrontation

Final Words

- Secure attachment gives the child the opportunity to feel safe, to trust, to relate, to be dependent and to be independent.
- The child with attachment difficulties has not had this experience.
- These children bring their fear, their lack of trust, their difficulties with relationships, their unfulfilled dependency needs and their struggles with independence into the homes they live in and into school.
- We need to provide environments within which we can help the child to feel safe and secure enough to develop and learn.
- The starting point for this is close working together leading to a shared understanding of the child and what the child needs.