

Attachment Theory

What is Attachment?

Attachment is, in nutshell, a special human connection. Some say attachment is the cornerstone of human emotional and social development. How we connect with our fellow human beings and how we interrelate is shaped in our first relationships, that is, the ones we make as infants and young children. The earliest meaningful relationships that infants and young children form set the stage for how they interact with others.

Why Is Attachment Important?

Attachment between infant and caregiver is absolutely critical; first, for physical survival and, second, for the emotional health of the child. An infant's or toddler's attachment behaviors (clinging, crawling after, crying) help keep the caregivers close and ministering to her; thus assuring the child's survival. Over time and through thousands of interactions with a caregiver who is reliable and responsive, the infant or young child starts to develop an expectation that she can count on the presence and availability of the parent. Emotionally the child feels secure; a good sign of healthy attachment.

When in the care of a reliable and responsible caregiver, an infant or young child proceeds through predictable stages of attachment development. This results in secure, mature attachment. However, when significant disruptions or substandard parenting mar the attachment process, a pattern of abnormal attachment may emerge. The child can form an insecure attachment and may develop negative expectations about caregivers as being unavailable or insensitive and may adopt some unusual strategies for keeping caregivers close.

Who Developed Attachment Theory?

By 1958 John Bowlby, the founding father of attachment theory, had developed and applied his theory of attachment to an understanding of the child's relationship to the mother. He asserted that: (1) the infant's need for his parent resembles his need for food, and (2) significant separation from or loss of the parent results in psychological trauma to the child. Research has documented the fact that children who suffer chronic separations, without intervention, may be placed on a pathway toward serious problems and unfortunate outcomes (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000).

Do Foster Parenting and Attachment Relate?

Yes. Given the common and often tragic history of attachment development of many foster children, there is a critical connection between foster parenting and attachment. Foster parents frequently deal with attachment-related issues and behavior problems. It is important, then, to keep in mind that many foster children have developed unhealthy attachments. Past experiences with caregivers may strongly influence a foster child's relationship with his current foster parents. Expectations formed in the past may affect what a child anticipates from foster parents, often causing him to react inappropriately to normal parental behaviors.

Attachment and Conduct Problems

Conduct problems or behavior difficulties in foster children are often rooted in attachment issues. It is beyond the scope of this handout to address all possible functions of problem behavior. It is important to note that from an attachment theory point of view, conduct problems serve several perhaps overlapping and interrelating purposes. The following are common:

1. *Keeping parents close by.* Misbehavior requiring increased supervision and monitoring can keep the parent focused on the child. This attention may be reassuring to the child, but unfortunately the child is gaining increased parent time through negative behavior.
2. *Re-engaging the parent.* Challenging behaviors may serve to engage parents who have turned their attention elsewhere or who have been absent. Children, for example, often act out when their caregivers are busy or when they have been away.
3. *Reducing fears about loss of the parent.* The older child who shadows a parent constantly may do so to diminish apprehension, decrease feelings of insecurity, and reduce separation anxiety related to past losses.
4. *Expressing the need to be taken care of.* Children sometimes use misbehavior as a general "wake-up call" to parent figures. They may be trying to say they need to be reassured. Rather than asking for this directly in words, the older child lets the behavior do the talking.

Note: Some behavior problems may be related to one or more of the functions or purposes described above. Ironically, ongoing negative behaviors often result in a decrease in caregiver sensitivity and nurturance, not in the increased engagement and attention sought. These misbehaviors frequently put foster parents in the role of having to constantly discipline the child. Thus a child who resorts to problem behaviors to gain attention and reassurance and reduce anxiety has adopted a sometimes desperate strategy that often achieves the opposite, resulting in negative attention from the care-giver.

Resources

Jonson-Reid, M. & Barth, R. (2000). From placement to prison: The path to adolescent incarceration from child welfare supervised foster or group care. Children and Youth Services review 22 (7), 493-516.

