



Understanding Attachment in Young Children

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Why do babies cry when their mother leaves the room? Why do young children seek out a parent for a hug when they get hurt? Why do infants want so insistently to be fed on a regular schedule? These and other questions relate to the key interactions that build a relationship between adults and young children – the **attachment relationship**.

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The quality of the relationship between parents and young children is one of the most powerful factors in a child's growth and development. Understanding this relationship has changed our understanding of what is important in parenting young children. The term **attachment** often is used to describe the nature of this relationship.

Terms such as "attachment" and "bonding" often are used interchangeably. However, the meanings can be quite different.

Attachment is the word used to refer to the relationship developed between an infant and a parent or primary caregiver during the first two to three years of life. How this relationship forms is dependent on how a parent responds to a child's needs for care, comfort and security. It develops gradually and goes through a variety of phases. Note that this attachment refers to a *child's* feelings and actions in the relationship and not to the parent's feelings about the child.

Bonding often is the word used to refer to a parent's tie to an infant and typically occurs in the first hours and days of a child's life. Strong feelings of love and care that a mother or father feels toward a child help cement this bond. The "bonding experience" can help some parents develop a more permanent bond with their young children, although children need continuing care and sensitivity to form strong attachments.

Types of Attachment Relationships

The attachment relationship that a young child forms during the first two years of life takes time to develop. Typically, infants will develop this relationship with the parent(s) or person who provides the most direct, responsive care to their needs. This type of attachment with one to two significant adults is the **primary attachment relationship**.

Then children will form supporting relationships with other caring adults, which fall into the category

of **secondary attachment relationships**. Ideally, a child will be able to form one to two strong and positive attachment relationships with parents, and then have a supportive web of secondary attachments with siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, close friends, caregivers, etc. This is the most positive environment for a young child.

Attachment styles

Scientific research on parent-child relationships suggests that two primary types of attachments form: **secure attachments** and **insecure attachments**. Remember that this refers to a child's quality of connection to an adult caregiver, not the parent's feelings about the child. The following characteristics highlight each attachment type:

- **Secure attachment** – Characterized by children who respond happily to interaction or reunion with parents, greet parents actively, explore the environment around them while knowing where the parents are, seek contact with parents when distressed and exhibit trust in their parents' responses to them.
- **Insecure attachment – resistant/ambivalent** – Characterized by children who become anxious and seek parents but then struggle to get away, are reluctant to explore the environment, become upset easily and exhibit frustration with their parents' responses to them.
- **Insecure attachment – avoidant** – Characterized by children who avoid or ignore a parent's presence, show little response when parents are close by, display few strong emotional outbursts, and may avoid or ignore a parent's responses toward them.
- **Insecure attachment – disorganized** – Characterized by children who are not predictable in their behavior, seem unable to cope easily or be comforted when stressed, and show evidence of fear or confusion around a caregiver.

Attachment Quiz – True or False?

Scientists who study parent-child interactions have learned much about what builds a strong attachment relationship. Answer to yourself whether the following statements are **True** or **False**.

1. Young children bond easily with a wide variety of caregivers in the first two years of life.
2. The type of attachment relationship a parent forms with a young child has little effect on how the child's brain forms.
3. Infants in the first six months who cry for food or comfort should not be picked up every time because they'll be "spoiled."
4. Young children really enjoy interaction but parents need to be careful not to "overstimulate" them.
5. Young children who have not formed healthy attachments often can overcome this challenge through intensive and caring attention.

The answer to the first three statements is FALSE; the answer to the last two statements is TRUE.

From research we know that:

1. Young children normally form strong attachments with one or two primary caregivers during the first two years of life, rather than many people.
2. The type of attachment relationship a child forms actually helps shape trillions of connections related to language, thinking, motor control and emotions in a baby's brain.
3. During the first six months of a child's life, children respond best to immediate and consistent attention and comfort and cannot be "spoiled" by it.
4. Children need a stimulating environment, but overstimulation can be stressful and have negative side effects on children at times.
5. Many programs exist to help children form strong, secure attachments if this has been lacking in their early development.

About 55 percent to 65 percent of children tend to fall into the "secure" attachment category, while about 10 percent to 15 percent tend to show an "insecure-resistant/ambivalent" pattern, 20 percent to 25 percent show an "insecure-avoidant" pattern and 15 percent to 20 percent show an "insecure-disorganized" pattern.

What do these patterns mean? In general, these patterns or types of attachment suggest the quality

of the relationship a child feels toward a particular person (parent, grandparent, caregiver, etc.). They represent children's felt sense of security and comfort level with the person's responsiveness to their needs. They are important because children often show different outcomes in their well-being based on attachment style. Some of the important aspects of a child's growth affected by attachment quality include the following:

- Children who are secure in their attachments more freely explore their environment and are able to learn with confidence, while children who are insecure are more likely to struggle in being confident and learning about their surroundings.
- Children who are secure tend to be more popular with peers and exhibit more positive social interaction with other kids, while children who are insecure seem more at risk for hostile, anti-social or difficult relationships with other children.
- Children who are secure tend to be more emotionally stable and able to express and manage their feelings well, while children who are insecure are more likely to be emotionally unstable and have difficulty in expressing and managing feelings.
- Children who are secure demonstrate greater ability to handle stress and help others handle stress, while children who are insecure are more likely to struggle when stressed, act out in unhealthy ways and be insensitive to others who are stressed.

The importance of attachment quality can be significant. How do such attachments develop?

Development of attachment styles

Several key factors can affect the quality of a child's attachment. These can include the child's temperament (more active and outgoing, etc.), the context of the situation (stranger present, familiar room, etc.), early history (traumatic experience, etc.) and other things. But *the way in which a parent responds to and interacts with a young child is the key factor in how an attachment develops.*

A child's attachment style generally develops based on the child's perception or understanding of the caregiver's reliability in providing comfort, support and security. Behaviors that promote attachment and provide the opportunity for meaningful interaction include:

- Smiling
- Looking at each other
- Vocalizing to each other
- Following
- Clinging
- Physical touch and hugging
- Exploring the surroundings
- Feeding interactions
- Crying
- Playing

Parents and other caregivers should seek to understand the importance of healthy attachments with young children and work toward the formation of strong, secure attachments with children.

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My Child's Attachments: A Personal Assessment

What do you think about the quality of your child's attachments to you and others?

With whom are those attachments? Might they be improved?

Use this exercise as a personal assessment to consider your own child's attachment relationships.

Section 1. Attachments to Whom?

Fill in the names of the people (you or others) with whom you feel your child has a primary (main) attachment relationship. Then fill in those you identify as important secondary (supportive) attachment relationships for your child. This represents your child's "attachment web" of support for growth and development.

The diagram consists of a central starburst shape with eight points. Four rectangular boxes are arranged around it, each with a label and three horizontal lines for text. The top-left and top-right boxes are labeled 'PRIMARY'. The bottom-left and bottom-right boxes are labeled 'SECONDARY'.

Section 2. Type of Attachment

Think of attachment quality as occurring on a continuum from insecure to secure. Place yourself and your child somewhere on this continuum based on what you understand about attachment types.

Insecure-Resistant/Ambivalent

_____ Secure

_____ Insecure-Avoidant or Disorganized

This is not a scientific evaluation; it is merely a tool to help you think about your own parent-child relationships. Attachment quality may be different for your relationships with different children. Additional examples that you may use are below.

Relationship 1 - _____

Insecure-Resistant/Ambivalent

_____ Secure

_____ Insecure-Avoidant or Disorganized

Relationship 2 - _____

Insecure-Resistant/Ambivalent

_____ Secure

_____ Insecure-Avoidant or Disorganized

Relationship 3 - _____

Insecure-Resistant/Ambivalent

_____ Secure

_____ Insecure-Avoidant or Disorganized

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