

Learning
Starts Early!

Attachment



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Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre

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Learning Starts Early! Attachment

“Secure attachment to a caregiver is important for infants to grow into emotionally and psychologically healthy children and adults.”

During infancy, it is critically important that children bond with and come to treat their caregivers as safe havens. This core process in child development is known as *attachment*, and it develops through the pattern of behavioural and emotional interaction that occurs over time between infants and their caregivers.¹

Children who fail to attach securely to their caregivers may face significant challenges in their development. Thus, early on, caregivers must receive the information, guidance, and support they need to foster secure attachments with their children.^{2,3}

TYPES OF ATTACHMENT

There are four basic types of infant-caregiver attachment. These can be observed by exposing infants about one year of age to the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), during which infants are briefly separated from their primary caregiver in an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar person.

When the caregiver returns:

- Children with *secure* attachment will seek their caregivers, openly expressing their feelings of distress. They will be calmed by contact with their caregivers and will then return to exploring their environment. Secure attachment is promoted when caregivers respond appropriately and sensitively to their children’s needs and emotional cues.
- Children with *insecure-resistant* attachment will alternately seek and resist contact with their caregivers or remain inconsolable and be unable to return to their previous activity, even with their caregivers present.³ This pattern is associated with caregivers who are inconsistent and unpredictable in the face of their infants’ distress.
- Children with *insecure-avoidant* attachment will not openly express distress (although physical signs are present) and will ignore or avoid their caregivers upon their return. This pattern develops when caregivers consistently respond to infants’ distress in a way that is rejecting.
- Children with *insecure-disorganized* attachment are often unable to work out a coherent strategy for eliciting comfort from their caregivers and may therefore behave in any number of different ways. They may respond just like a child who is securely attached to their caregiver, or they may behave oddly or ambivalently, making abrupt changes to their efforts to obtain comfort.⁴ Disorganized attachment is associated with caregivers who display unusual or frightening behaviours.⁵

Importance of Attachment

Secure attachment to a caregiver is important for infants to grow into emotionally and psychologically healthy children and adults. Securely attached children view their caregivers as a home base from which they can safely explore, learn, and play.⁴ Infants’ relationship with their primary caregivers provides the basis from which they learn to trust and bond with others as well as see themselves as worthy of nurturing care. It guides their behaviour and expectations in their future relationships.¹

Secure attachment has been linked with the development of self-reliance, self-efficacy, empathy, and social competence starting in the toddler years and continuing right through to adolescence.²

Children who are insecurely attached are at increased risk for developing difficulties that include conduct disorder, problems with aggression, depression, and antisocial behaviour.² The attachment pattern with the most potential to do harm is insecure-disorganized. Children who display this attachment pattern early in life are at high risk for developing significant social and emotional problems and pathologies.



“Reliable, enduring, sensitive, and supportive care fosters a secure bond between child and caregiver.”⁶”

Antecedents of Attachment

Reliable, enduring, sensitive, and supportive care fosters a secure bond between child and caregiver.⁶ In particular, caregiver sensitivity, defined as the ability to perceive and interpret children’s emotional signals correctly and to respond to these signals promptly and adequately, is crucial to the development of a secure attachment.³ An important component of being a sensitive parent is called “mind-mindedness”, or the ability to think of children as having mental states of their own as well as being able to accurately assess what these mental states are.⁷

There are several reasons why caregivers are unable or unwilling to provide the kind of care that fosters secure attachment. They may simply treat their children the way their parents treated them or parent based on their interpretations of what they have read, heard, or seen. They may also be responding, consciously or unconsciously, to their own, possibly conflicted, attitudes toward being a caregiver.⁷ Other times, factors in their own lives, such as spousal abuse, poverty, or a mental illness, interfere with their ability to care for their children.¹

Insecure-disorganized attachment patterns frequently occur with caregivers suffering psychopathology or unresolved states of mind (related to loss or trauma) that compromise their ability to parent appropriately. Caregiver behaviours that have been linked with disorganized attachment patterns include withdrawal, intrusiveness, behaviours that confuse or reverse the caregiver-child relationship, disoriented responses, or frightening and

frightened behaviours. Disorganized patterns can also emerge when caregivers fail to communicate emotionally with their children, misinterpreting their emotional signals and responding inappropriately or not at all.⁴

At particular risk for the development of insecure attachment patterns are families where several of these problems – poverty, abuse, neglect, mental illness – are present all at once.¹

There is scant evidence that placing young children in the care of someone other than the parent puts them at increased risk for developing insecure attachment patterns. While excessively long hours in daycare and poor quality or constantly changing daycare environments can place attachment patterns at risk, these influences are far less important than how caregivers themselves behave.^{8,9}

Preventing and Remediating Insecure Attachment Patterns

Clearly, parenting has a profound effect on young children’s socio-emotional development. As a result, it is crucial to provide early support and guidance to families at risk for developing insecure patterns of attachment.

Most intervention programs designed to foster positive attachment are geared toward helping caregivers be more sensitive to their children’s cues or/and change their representations of how they were cared for by their own parents. A few others focus on improving their social support or well-being.¹

Generally, the interventions that are most effective target specific caregiver issues, particularly sensitivity, and start only after the child is at least six months of age, when patterns of attachment have begun to emerge. In general, longer interventions have not been found to be any more effective than shorter ones.¹⁰ While interventions can improve parenting behaviours and well-being as well as parent-child relationships, they are not always sufficient to shift the attachment pattern from insecure to secure.¹

For families with disorganized attachment patterns, interventions are often aimed at reducing or stopping unusual or frightening caregiver behaviours.⁶ The most effective interventions focus on children at risk, rather than caregivers at risk, and are conducted by professionals, rather than nonprofessionals.⁴

Caregivers may require aid and support in:

- Obtaining accurate information about child development.
- Understanding their children’s emotional signals and responding to them appropriately (particularly for families with special needs children).
- Organizing sufficient time with their children for sensitive interactions.
- Finding good substitute care for when they cannot care for their children themselves.⁶

Recommendations

For Prevention

To help prevent the development of insecure attachment patterns, at risk families require *early* support — before the children start on a path of psychopathology that can be difficult and expensive to reverse. Identification of at risk families should be tied in with other social services, and these families' specific needs must be addressed. Such needs may include education about parenting and child development as well as social and financial support, including affordable, high quality daycare.⁴

Investing in social policies and programs that provide assessments and necessary interventions while children are still in their infancy is a far more cost effective and efficient approach than waiting until negative patterns of behaviour have already begun to emerge.^{2,4}

For Intervention

In most cases, attachment-directed programs should be of relatively short duration and should begin after the infant is six months of age (but before negative patterns are established), as these interventions have been found to be most effective.¹⁰ They should focus on improving caregivers' sensitivity to their children's emotional cues, rather than changing their own beliefs about attachment.^{1,10}

Once problematic attachment patterns have become established, particularly insecure-disorganized attachment, interventions need to be longer and more intensive to be effective.¹¹ Studies of successful interventions have required as many as 29 to 47 home visits over a year or more.⁴ They should address not only the early childhood period but also the maintenance of a positive child-rearing environment throughout children's growth.¹¹ As children grow and develop, continuing interventions should target their specific, evolving needs.²



“To help prevent the development of insecure attachment patterns, at risk families require early support.”

EXAMPLES OF INTERVENTIONS

A few examples of intervention designed to improve attachment patterns that are being used in Canada and elsewhere include:

- **The Leiden Video-Feedback Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting (VIPP):** Originally designed for and shown to be effective with adoptive parents, this program offers up to four sessions of video feedback that allows caregivers to obtain professional feedback and guidance about how they interact with their children.¹²
- **Steps Toward Effective Enjoyable Parenting (STEEP):** Designed to change caregivers' inner working models and enhance their sensitivity to their children's emotional needs and cues, it involves both home visits and group sessions that start before the child is born and continue for up to two years. STEEP has been shown to improve parental sensitivity and well-being, but it has not yet been shown to specifically improve attachment.¹
- **Healthy Families New York (HFNY):** A home-visiting program for expectant parents and new families.
- **Right from the Start:** An eight-week course for parents with children under age 2 designed to help caregivers connect with their children.

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