

Children's attachments

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Abstract

The quality of parental attachments has profound, far-reaching implications. Children's immaturity makes them dependant on these to progress safely towards independence. Attachment develops through parental attunement to infants' needs, establishing their preconceptions of relationships and foundations of verbal and non-verbal communication. In giving meaning to feelings and body signals, attuned parenting builds self-awareness. By regulating stress, it contributes to programming of the stress systems, with life-long implications for adjustment, behaviour and physical and psychological health, including major causes of morbidity and mortality. Suboptimal attachment falls on a spectrum ranging from mildly insecure to profoundly dysfunctional. Quality of attachment is relevant to symptom presentation, illness behaviour and service use, and to optimal paediatric care. It is an important consideration in all safeguarding decisions and their implementation; unsatisfactory childhood attachment frequently underlies intergenerational parenting problems. Enabling children to achieve adequate parental attachment is an overriding concern in working with children in care and in adoptive homes, and is a priority for every child.

Keywords adoption; attachment; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; attunement; autism; behaviour; children in care; parenting; stress regulation

Definition

Attachment is the enduring emotional closeness which binds families, to protect children and prepare them for independence and parenthood. Because immaturity makes children dependent, the quality of their parental attachments underpins their physical and psychological wellbeing, growth and development. The length of childhood reflects the complexity of the task and the far-reaching implications of dysfunctional parenting. Early attachment establishes children's intuitive preconceptions of the value, reliability, safety and use of relationships, with life-long implications for the extent of emotional self-sufficiency, and for behaviour in relation to others. The responses of attached parents give meaning to a child's 'inner world', and facilitate safety, stress regulation and resilience.

Inadequate attachment can be highly costly to individuals, to public services, and to wider society. Suboptimal attachment falls on a spectrum, ranging from mildly suboptimal to seriously dysfunctional – a problem if it is a problem. 35–40% of non-clinical populations show some degree of insecurity of attachment. This sometimes has value for society – a need for approval or attention being channelled into, for example, caring

or performance, a tendency to 'avoidance' of relationships into abstract skills such as computing or mathematics, for example. Secure attachment is, however, associated with easier relationships and greater self-esteem. The 'adverse childhood experiences' studies show an association between dysfunctional early attachment and adult physical and psychological ill-health including major causes of morbidity and mortality.

The more prolonged and extreme the dysfunctional parenting, the greater the secondary adverse consequences. These characteristically interrelate into vicious circles of which poor self-esteem is integral. Difficulties with peer relationships, emotional dysregulation, impulsivity and inattention are typical, compounded by perceived failure at home and school.

While resilience varies markedly, children in care whose attachments are particularly vulnerable are at increased risk of:

- mental health problems
- early parenthood
- substance abuse
- lack of qualification
- unemployment
- homelessness
- involvement in crime as victims or perpetrators.

The birth parents of most children adopted from care have experienced inadequate early attachment as, frequently, have their own parents.

Foundations of attachment

Attachments form at every age. However, clinical and neurobiological evidence supports Bowlby's view that assumptions deriving from the earliest experiences of close relationships are particularly important, establishing foundations which underpin whatever relationships follow. Neural plasticity allows moulding by subsequent experiences, but these build on, rather than replacing, preconceptions derived from the first relationship: these preconceptions resurface most prominently under stress.

Attunement to the needs and feelings of others is the route to building and sustaining attachments at any age [Box 1]. Stern demonstrated by video studies subtle maternal attunement to babies' overtures, involving tone, pitch and rhythm of voice, posture, facial expression, movement and touch, providing a mirror in which their 'inner world' is reflected, given meaning and regulated, moulding development of the right pre-frontal cortex. Synchronisation of infants' and mothers' physiological states during sensitively attuned interactions is demonstrable in coordination of heart rhythm, vagal tone and oxytocin levels.

The process of attunement requires the baby to show their needs and the parent to respond, in a two-way, mutually reinforcing process. As in any relationship, fatigue, stress, distraction and inadequate one-to-one time adversely affect parental attunement. Mental health problems, drugs and alcohol also affect it, and poor parental foundations of attachment potently so.

Babies learn through sensitively attuned parenting that others can recognize and respond to their needs, that their behaviour influences others, and that moderate expression of need elicits a response. Foundations are established of preconceptions of the value and reliability of relationships, of verbal and non-verbal communication, of understanding the 'inner world' of

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Basics of attachment

- Attachment forms and is sustained by parental attunement to the baby's overtures, through tone, pitch, speed of voice, facial expression, touch and movement
- Attunement provides a mirror reflecting the baby's feelings and body signals
- Early attachment establishes foundations for:
 - Preconceptions of relationships
 - Perceptions of the safety of relinquishing attention and control
 - Preconceptions of self
 - Behaviour
 - Verbal and non-verbal communication
 - Emotional awareness
 - Stress system programming
- Attunement is affected by stress, fatigue, drugs, alcohol, learning difficulties, poor early parenting
- Preconceptions deriving from initial relationships remain the most intuitive

Box 1

emotions, body signals and thought, and of trust. Assumptions develop of the extent to which it is safe to relinquish attention and control. These assumptions colour the extent to which children learn to use behaviours, desirable or not, which hold or reclaim attention.

Protection is a central evolutionary role of parental attachment. Attachment allows physical and emotional safety, and the experience that these are achievable through relationships. It is the anchor which underpins confident separation. It is relevant to both involuntary and cognitive means of stress regulation, and influences immunity, healing and the intestinal mucosal barrier.

Stress regulation depends, for infants, on parents' ability to recognize and respond sensitively to their needs. Their effectiveness in doing so contributes to programming the hypothalamus–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) and autonomic systems of stress regulation – a process which is thought to start in utero, with life-long implications, albeit modified by subsequent experience. Regulation of stress matters for exploration, learning, independence and effective relationships. Unregulated stress affects concentration, and 'reading' of relationships. It predisposes to:

- anxiety and depression
- conduct disorder
- emotional dysregulation, including aggression
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- sensory hypersensitivity/'sensory processing disorder'
- post traumatic stress disorder
- 'psychosomatic' illness
- chronic pain

While suboptimal attunement frequently generates exaggerated stress responses, serious abuse sometimes suppresses them, leading to fearlessness, and autonomic underarousal [e.g.

relative bradycardia], correlating sometimes with 'avoidant' infant attachment behaviour. Neuronal plasticity, developing cognition and experience modulate stress responses during childhood around a baseline influenced by the first relationship.

Breaks in attunement: inevitable breaks in the immediate 'availability' of sensitively attuned parents allow controlled exposure to stress, and trust. Children develop confidence that separation from their parents is safe, initially maintaining contact visually, then through language as mobility develops. Attachment provides the secure base which, paradoxically, facilitates increasing distancing from parents with maturation and underpins safe adolescent separation. It enables children to handle the emotional 'separation' of discipline, accept authority and develop self-worth.

Poorly or inconsistently attuned parenting results in poorly regulated stress, potentially reinforcing dysfunctional intrauterine programming of stress systems driven by poorly regulated maternal stress. Well attuned parenting can mollify the impact of intrauterine stress.

Patterns of attachment

Terminology used to describe patterns of relationships, or 'attachment styles', varies. Patterns merge on a spectrum, and are not entirely fixed although tendencies persist. Understanding and describing from first principles how children use relationships, and the implications, facilitates practical application and reduces the risk of erroneous label-related assumptions. Recognition of patterns associated with 'attachment styles' help the interpretation of observations.

Secure attachment – depends on infants' ability to elicit a response and parents' ability to respond sensitively and consistently (Box 1). Relationships are experienced as valuable, reliable and safe, and attention as readily gained when needed, so safely relinquished.

Anxious attachment – arises if, for example, fatigue, stress, conflicting demands, mental health problems or substance abuse interrupt parents' otherwise good attunement. Children learn that, although valuable, relationships are unreliable. They become insecure in their ability to hold and regain attention, so are liable to learn to use any behaviour, desirable or otherwise, which achieves it. This can range from smiling or over-compliance to disruptiveness, soiling, food refusal, or endangerment – whatever works. They struggle with sharing attention and handling the emotional 'separation' of discipline. Fear of rejection may colour relationships. Stress is poorly regulated, often managed by seeking control and resisting change.

Ambivalence – about the value or safety of relationships is learnt through parenting which is, for example, variably adequately attuned and aggressive. Closeness is wanted but is also a source of fear. Children's resulting ambivalence produces confusing behaviour. Confrontation tends to be focused on those to whom they are closest. They may crave attention but, having achieved it, reject it. They variably seek and avoid closeness. Hypervigilance to parental mood affects concentration and causes over-reading of disapproval. Fear of intimacy may persist into adult relationships.

Avoidance – of relationships may be learnt from parenting which is consistently unresponsive to the child's needs – for

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