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Understanding Attachment

As human beings we are all biologically engineered to be in relationship. Specifically, we are “wired” to have one primary relationship in which we can find comfort in times of threat and seek joy in times of celebration. The biologically based behavior which leads us to seek out another is our attachment system. A person’s attachment system is first activated in infancy. The infant has a need and seeks out another, most often the mother. How the infant’s primary caregiver responds sets the tone for how the infant experiences the other and therefore themselves. The caregiver can be responsive or unresponsive, sensitive or insensitive, predictable or unpredictable. The infant responds by adjusting his/her behavior to whatever keeps him/her in close relationship with the mother. Much research has indicated that the type of care received in infancy determines how the infant will form expectations and respond to others throughout their life span.

Attachment Styles in Children

Attachment type	Experiences parent as:	Experiences self as:	Adaptive response
Secure	Available, Sensitive, Supportive, Comforting, Attentive	Loved, Valuable, Worthy of care, Imperfect yet acceptable	Positive view of self and others, Seeks comfort when distressed and is able to be soothed, Recognizes needs and is able to care for others, Flexible, Open
Insecure Avoidant	Rejecting bids for comfort, Uncomfortable with close body contact, Unsupportive, Dismissive	Needs to be “perfect” because to be vulnerable is unsafe	Suppresses needs, Withdraws and distances self, Finds ways to self-soothe, Only seeks contact when not distressed
Insecure Ambivalent	Inconsistently available, Sometimes loving and responsive, Often preoccupied, Unable to properly interpret signals, Interpreting signals for parent’s benefit	Needs close proximity to another, Unable to relax, Fearful, Unable to distinguish between one person’s distress and their own	Exaggerates needs, Clingy, Insatiable, Becomes extremely distressed during separation, Angry, Threatened by another’s autonomy
Insecure Disorganized	Frightening, Unpredictable, Hostile, Violent, Incoherent (due to parent’s unresolved loss or trauma)	Hostile, Violent, Incoherent, Frightening	Disoriented, No adaptive response because cannot seek safety in the parent’s care

Responding to a Child with Insecure Attachment

A securely attached child’s attachment behavior represents the child’s internal feelings. However, an insecurely attached child’s behavior is not necessarily a true representation of the child’s internal feelings. This is because the avoidant attached child suppresses needs and the ambivalent attached child exaggerates needs. For a child to earn secure attachment he/she has to experience secure attachment behavior from the primary parent. To do this the primary caregiver has to validate the child’s internal experience and provide sensitive care. This becomes particularly difficult when the child’s internal feelings are unknown or difficult to determine. However, the parts of the brain that are central to early attachment processes are the most “plastic” areas of the cortex, therefore, this allows continuing reorganization throughout life. The parent does not have to “figure it all out” right away. Attunement is a “dance” between parent and child and we learn a variety of steps along the way.