

What is Attachment?

by Kathleen G. Moss, LCSW, ACSW

Attachment is a reciprocal process by which an emotional connection develops between an infant and his/her primary caregiver. It influences the child's physical, neurological, cognitive, and psychological development. It becomes the basis for development of basic trust or mistrust, and shapes how the child will relate to the world, learn, and form relationships throughout life. Healthy attachment occurs when the infant experiences a primary caregiver as consistently providing emotional essentials such as touch, movement, eye contact and smiles, in addition to the basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing.

If this process is disrupted, the child may not develop the secure base necessary to support future healthy development. Factors which may impair healthy attachment include: multiple caregivers, invasive or painful medical procedures, sudden or traumatic separation from the mother, hospitalization at critical developmental periods, neglect, sexual or physical abuse, prenatal alcohol or drug exposure, and neurological problems.

Children with attachment disturbance often project an image of self-sufficiency and charm while masking inner feelings of insecurity and self hate. Infantile fear, hurt and anger are expressed in disturbing behaviors that serve to keep caregivers at a distance and perpetuate the child's belief that s/he is unlovable. These children have difficulty giving and receiving affection on their parents' terms, are overly demanding and clingy, and may annoy parents with endless chatter. They attempt to control by engaging adults in frequent power struggles and seeking attention in negative ways. Additional behaviors may include: poor eye contact, abnormal eating patterns, poor impulse control, poor conscience development, chronic, "crazy" lying, stealing, destructiveness to self, others, and property, cruelty to animals and preoccupation with fire, blood, and gore.

Such children often do not respond well to traditional parenting or therapy since both rely on the child's ability to form relationships, and to internalize the parents and their values. Therapy and parenting that utilize the elements of basic attachment have been found to be more helpful. A more directive approach using nurturing touch, eye contact, and physical and emotional closeness can provide

a corrective emotional experience and create a foundation for a healthier attachment between child and parent.

Common Causes of Attachment Problems (Highest risk if these occur in first two years of life.)

- Sudden or traumatic separation from primary caretaker (through death, illness, hospitalization of caretaker, or removal of child)
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Neglect (of physical or emotional needs)
- Illness or pain which cannot be alleviated by caretaker
- Frequent moves and/or placements
- Inconsistent or inadequate care at home or in day care (care must include holding, talking, nurturing, as well as meeting basic physical needs)
- Chronic depression of primary caretaker
- Neurological problem in child which interferes with perception of or ability to receive nurturing (i.e. babies exposed to crack cocaine in utero)

Behaviors Associated with Problematic Attachment

A. Unable to engage in satisfying reciprocal relationship:

1. Superficially engaging, charming (not genuine)
2. Lack of eye contact
3. Indiscriminately affectionate with strangers
4. Lack of ability to give and receive affection on parents' terms (not cuddly)
5. Inappropriately demanding and clingy
6. Persistent nonsense questions and incessant chatter
7. Poor peer relationships
8. Low self esteem
9. Extreme control problems - may attempt to control overtly, or in sneaky ways

B. Poor cause and effect thinking:

1. Difficulty learning from mistakes
2. Learning problems - disabilities, delays
3. Poor impulse control

C. Emotional development disturbed: child shows traits of young child in "oral stage"

1. Abnormal speech patterns
2. Abnormal eating patterns

D. Infantile fear and rage. Poor conscience development.

1. Chronic "crazy" lying
2. Stealing
3. Destructive to self, others, property
4. Cruel to animals
5. Preoccupied with fire, blood, and gore

E. "Negative attachment cycle" in family

1. Child engages in negative behaviors which can't be ignored
2. Parent reacts with strong emotion, creating intense but unsatisfying connection
3. Both parent and child distance and connection is severed

Thanks for Kathy Moss and ATTACH for allowing me to include this information.