

## Foundational, Beautiful, Elusive ... Attachment

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Just what is this thing called attachment? For over twenty years I've been teaching it, and I still trip over the act of simply defining it. It's confused with bonding, it's dismissed as a "fad," it's blamed for behaviors that come from other disorders, yet not given its due when it is, actually, the basis of many disturbing behaviors and psychological problems. But it is definitely real, it affects **all parts of development of all children around the world**, and it is most definitely here to stay -- increasingly -- in our conversation, understanding of development and behavior, and, for better or worse, in our parenting of our young ones.

### *So, what is Attachment?*

According to ATTACH, the Association for the Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children,

"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."

The take-home message here is "**shapes how the child will...form relationships throughout life.**"

At its core, healthy attachment grows from an infant's need to survive. But it goes way beyond food, shelter and safety. Infants need emotional connection: our brains are born with a radar-seeking mechanism that feeds on smiles, acceptance, love, nurture. So many studies now support this nurture-seeking behavior, and brain research even tentatively identifies it in infant brain function. This is such an exciting time to be in the field of learning about health – how to support its naturally beautiful development, and how to help to fix it if it's gone off track.

### **Nurture and Trust Build the Foundation**

So, attachment is a story of creating a building. To begin, this building has to have a logical, well-designed, and sound foundation, if it is to meet its goal of providing long-lasting, solid, and strong shelter for its family. Everything on top of the foundation requires that the underpinning can sustain the weight and activity of what is build underneath. Think about it: would you move into a building that had big cracks or poor material in the foundation, so that it sagged, split, and shook when you crossed the threshold? If it isn't strong, you don't trust it. And you are smart to not trust it.

It is the same with infant development. If an infant's very first relationships are not stable, predictable, and strong, infant brains are SMART to not trust them. What we say about first impressions being the most important is definitely true for babies – if their first introduction to "parent" is that parents are the people who are supposed to be there for us, and yet they don't feed us when we're hungry, calm us when we're scared, change us when we're wet, and love us – delight in us – then, as infants, our "first impression" of parents (remember, the people who are SUPPOSED to be there for us), is that parents are a waste – who needs them? We all know children of attachment trauma who come to loving

adoptive families with the attitude that, “I’m just tolerating you, ‘Mom and Dad,’ but really? I know what’s best for me, and I’m already an expert at manipulating my way to getting what I want.” These children learned early on that if they want or need something, they better not count on adults to get it for them ... they better learn really early how to get it for themselves.

They were smart to learn that in infancy. And it has become their brain’s “default” program for life. “I don’t need others, except to manipulate them into giving me what I want. When I no longer need them, or when they criticize me or try to control me, I’m **done** with them. Who needs that? I need **control** in order to stay safe – I learned that **very well** when I was a baby. So, this is my life now ... control everyone around me, by being charming, or bossy, or sneaky ... it’s just the way life is and WOW, I’m really good at it!”

Attachment, by the way, is different from love – we as humans often love people who are not reliable, don’t give us what we need, can’t be counted on. But then we are smart if we love but don’t trust them, right?

In terms of attachment, then, relationships then are “built” on what the foundation teaches. Assuming we have healthy attachment foundations means that an infant learns that the “house” of relationships within which we grow and live is built on having learned that people surround us in order to support us and interact with us in a positive, nurturing way. Moms and Dads are there to meet our needs, we can trust that, we can relax and go about our business of learning all the incredible number of things we need to learn, like how to walk, talk, distinguish shapes and colors, eat with a spoon – endless excitement! If we are afraid that we will not be fed healthy food when we need it, kept warm and dry as we require it, and are treasured and held when we seek to be valued and kept safe.

### **Picture It!**

Practically, what does this look like? Mama Bear teaching her cubs to fish ... to my mind one of nature’s most beautiful “Awww...” moments. A recent bear documentary highlighted fabulous footage and description of moms and babies. The shot of the Mama Bear showing her twin cubs how to fish emphasized this fact: the cubs had to feel safe before they could pay attention to their teacher/mom. If they were worried about their safety, they couldn’t possibly stay tuned in to the fishing lesson. If the bears were being stalked by cougars, how much would they be taking the fishing lesson? In the documentary, the cubs ran behind Mama Bear when they were threatened, because they knew their Mom would keep them safe. After Mama Bear drove off the predator, they could return their attention to the fishing lesson.

Now think: how can a babies pay attention to all of these **healthy** things they have to pay attention to, if they are afraid they will not survive? And remember, being loved is every bit a function of **healthy** survival as being fed and protected. Ever heard of hyper-vigilance, maybe even in connection with a child you know? Babies brains become hard-wired to be always scanning, always looking for trouble or attack, **even when they are in a safe situation!** This is no longer dependent on their situation, it is their learned state of functioning. In other words, they are not “on alert” when they might be in danger, as most of us are. No, they are “on alert” all of the time: that is the way their brains have learned to live. Learn to fish? Great! But not if they’re afraid that there are cougars around threatening their safety. And their brains have come to believe that there are ALWAYS cougars around.

Also, they had to trust that their Mom knew what she was doing, and that what she was teaching was valid and important. Trust, then, is the cement in the foundation. Trust develops through repeated attunement by caregiver to the infant's needs. In terms of attachment, this means that we "hear" infants' need, almost before they express them, and "attune," or "tune into" these needs.

### **So, What's the DIS-order of Attachment?**

Again, according to ATTACH definitions, "Attachment is a treatable condition in which there is a significant dysfunction in an individual's ability to trust or engage in reciprocal loving, lasting relationships. An attachment disorder occurs due to traumatic disruption or other interferences with the caregiver-child bond during the first years of life. It can distort future stages of development and impact a person's cognitive, neurological, social and emotional functioning. It may also increase risk of other serious emotional and behavioral problems." I now add "physical and medical problems" on the basis of the stunning revelations from the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser-Permanente Insurance.