



Attachment: Key issues



NSW Department of
Community Services

Introduction

This Research to Practice Note is based on the research article, *The importance of attachment in the lives of foster children* (DoCS, 2006). It provides a brief overview of the key issues surrounding attachment. The complementary Research to Practice Note, *Attachment and the role of foster carers*, focuses more specifically on the implications for foster carers.

What is attachment?

The term attachment is most often used to refer to the relationship between an infant and their parent or carer. Infants are born with behaviours designed to promote attachment, such as crying, sucking and smiling at the sight and sound of other people. The adult response of providing food, comfort and smiling back form the basis of the reciprocal interactive relationship and defines the quality of the attachment between carer and child. The most important time for a primary attachment to develop is between the ages of about six and 18 months.

Types of attachment

Attachment is generally categorised as being either 'secure', 'insecure' or 'disorganised'.

The way a child behaves in times of emotional distress, or their display of attachment behaviour, helps to categorise the security of the attachment relationship.

Secure attachment

A secure attachment evolves when a carer provides consistent, responsive care. This attachment helps a child to develop a sense of belonging and trust which enables them to feel safe to explore and learn about their environment.

It also helps them to develop social competencies, empathy and emotional intelligence, and learn how to relate to other people and understand what to expect from them.¹

Children are better able to cope with traumatic experiences when their earlier experiences are of being safe and protected.

Signs of a secure attachment include:

- Feeling safe with their carer
- Wariness of strangers
- Seeking the carer in times of stress
- Using the carer as secure base for exploration
- Becoming more independent, based on feelings of security and self-worth.

Research is beginning to show that a secure attachment is integral in helping adolescents achieve autonomy from their parents or carers. It is important for the quality of ongoing peer relationships, social acceptance and functioning in romantic relationships. Secure attachment to parents or carers has also been associated with a range of indices of wellbeing, including high self-esteem and low anxiety.

Insecure attachment

Children who are raised by a carer who is reluctant to respond to their needs, or reacts in an angry resentful way when they express distress, experiences a different level of attachment security.

Although the emotional needs of children in insecure relationships are not met as warmly or as consistently as in secure relationships, they still involve attachment behaviour or strategies.

Insecure attachments may lead to:

- an inability to trust adults
- a lack of interest in learning
- difficulty in recognising their own feelings
- a poor understanding of why people behave the way they do
- a lack of empathy for others.

Insecure attachments are generally categorised as being either Avoidant or Ambivalent.

Avoidant attachment

Children with avoidant attachment:

- avoid intimacy and emotional closeness
- downplay their feelings of need and suppress emotion
- behave in the way they think their parent or carer wants them to behave so as not to drive them away or provoke their anger
- appear independent and self-sufficient.

Ambivalent attachment

Children with ambivalent attachment:

- try to get attention by constantly whinging, fretting, demanding attention, threatening or cajoling.
- may intensify or increase their displays of distressed behaviour to ensure their needs are not ignored and to increase the caregivers' predictability.
- are angry that they cannot rely on the carer, so refuse to accept the carer's attempts to provide comfort.

Disorganised attachment

Disorganised attachment is commonly observed in children whose carers are abusive, neglectful, addicted to drugs or alcohol, victims of domestic violence and/or who have had disrupted attachments in their own childhood.² It is generally thought to arise when a child experiences their carer as frightening (for example, due to abuse) or frightened (when a carer is 'helpless', or unable to provide reassurance and protection to the child).

Children with a disorganised attachment are left emotionally overwhelmed and distressed for long periods of time, because they do not possess a clear strategy for dealing with their distress. The urge to both approach and to run away presents a dilemma they cannot resolve.

By the time they are toddlers, children in this situation begin to take responsibility for their own protection by seeking to control the parent. They look after the parent's emotional needs as they suppress their own.

Disorganised attachment behaviour in infancy has been linked to a high risk of serious behaviour problems in later childhood.

The more secure the child feels the more energy and enthusiasm they have to be curious, to learn, to seek understanding and to try to make sense of the world.

Mental models

Children internalise attachment experiences in the form of 'mental models' of carers and of themselves. The mental models that children construct affect their later relationships. Children with secure attachments build mental models of a secure self, caring parents and a kind world.

In contrast, children with insecure or disorganised attachments come to see carers and the world as dangerous and unpredictable, and themselves as bad or unworthy of love and care. This is particularly important to consider when children are entering foster care. This issue is discussed in greater detail in the Research to Practice Note, *Attachment and the role of foster carers*.

Conclusion

Although attachment is universal to all humans, it is important to recognise that the majority of work on attachment theory has been based on Western studies. More information is needed about the applicability of attachment concepts in different cultural contexts, especially in traditional cultures where children are encouraged to form attachments with many caregivers. In the Australian context, further work involving children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds is needed to understand how Indigenous attitudes, values, and behaviours relate to attachment.

Further reading

- *The importance of attachment in the lives of foster children: Key messages from research.* NSW Department of Community Services, 2006.

Endnotes

- 1 Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and Loss: vol 1, Attachment; vol 2, Separation; vol 3, Loss, Sadness and Depression*; all New York: Basic Books. See also Crittenden, P M (1990) Internal representational models of attachment relationships, *Infant mental health journal*, 11, 3, 259-277.
- 2 Crittenden P & DiLalla D (1988) Compulsive compliance: the development of an inhibitory coping strategy in infancy, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 16, pp.585-599.

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Produced by

Centre for Parenting and Research
NSW Department of Community Services
4-6 Cavill Avenue
Ashfield NSW 2131
02 9716 2222

www.community.nsw.gov.au
researchtopractice@community.nsw.gov.au

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