

Secure attachments

From their earliest days, children thrive on a strong connection with their parents or caregivers. This special attachment may be crucial to their future progress says **Dr Nicola Davies**



As long ago as the late 1960s, psychoanalyst John Bowlby was expounding the enormous impact of early connection between children and their mothers. He described it as 'a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space.'

He coined the term 'attachment' defining it as 'an infant's strong disposition to seek proximity to and contact with a specific figure and to do so in certain situations, notably when he is frightened, tired or ill.'

In the early 1970s, psychologist Mary Ainsworth expanded on Bowlby's work with experiments that revealed three attachment styles, based on the reactions of children between 12 and 18 months when they were briefly removed from, and then reunited with their mothers.

Love is all you need

According to the theory of attachment, the more available and responsive a mother is to the needs of her child, the more effectively she serves as a safe haven when the child feels threatened. The more solid the base she provides from which to explore the world, the better the chances are that the child will develop a healthy sense of security.

It also follows that when a mother's availability and responsiveness is lacking or dysfunctional – when she does not provide a sanctuary – this will result in a distressed and unsettled child. Precisely how powerful such influences are on children is a point of contention.

In her book *Why Love Matters* psychotherapist Sue Gerhardt explains her research on brain development in babies and its links to psychological disturbance in adults.

According to Gerhardt, the foundations of future behaviour

are laid during pregnancy and the first two years of life. 'This is when the social brain is shaped and when an individual's emotional style and emotional resources are established,' she explains.

Gerhardt warns: 'Parental misinformation or lack of ability to cope with caring for an infant child may set up lifelong handicaps in their offspring that would inevitably harm others too.'

The more responsive a mother is to her child's needs, the more effectively she serves as a safe haven when the child feels threatened

Fortunately, she also adds: 'If the will and resources are available, the harm done to one generation need not be transmitted to the next: a damaged child need not inevitably become a damaged parent.'

Bowlby believed that the attachment relationship between a child and their primary caregiver acts as a template for all future social relationships. He also believed that the critical period for developing attachment is from birth to five years and if attachment has not developed during this time-frame, the child may suffer from irreversible developmental consequences such as aggression and reduced intelligence.

But Cape Town clinical psychologist, Michelle Schlotter, doesn't believe the process is irreversible. 'I've seen a mother who found it difficult to bond with her child at birth owing to post-partum depression,' she says. The mother and child were treated simultaneously and, according to Schlotter, the child's status shifted from avoidant to securely attached within the space of a year.

Sharon Ettrick struggled with postnatal depression when she gave birth to her daughter, Victoria, now an ▶



SECURE

When separated from their primary caregivers, securely attached children show a sense of distress but are happy and easily soothed when the caregiver returns. They see the adult as a secure base from which to explore the world. When frightened or in need, they look to their parents for comfort. They will display an initial wariness of strangers but will accept them if reassured by their caregiver.

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AVOIDANT

These children tend to avoid caregivers and indulge only in a superficial exploration of their environment. They avoid seeking help and act like mini grown-ups who rely only on themselves.

When offered a choice, they show no preference between a caregiver and a stranger. They are often indifferent to a caregiver's departure and will not seek comfort at their return.

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AMBIVALENT

Ambivalent children become agitated and distressed at a parent's departure and will continue to cry even when they return. They may feel distrustful and suspicious of their caregivers while simultaneously appearing clingy. They will display a fear of strangers and a tendency to stay close to their parents in new situations.



- ▶ adult. 'Lack of attachment between baby and mother, due to postnatal depression, does not have to affect their relationship later in life. There are far worse things than that to scar a child, such as abuse or divorce,' she says.

'Victoria does not even remember me having postnatal depression. According to doctors I have spoken to, our memory part of the brain doesn't develop until the age of three to five years, so new mothers need not worry that postnatal depression, although terrible at the time, will affect their relationship with their child later in life.'

Children who are securely attached in childhood, says writer and educator Kendra Cherry, 'tend to have good self-esteem, strong romantic relationships and the ability to self-disclose to others. As adults, they tend to have healthy, happy and lasting relationships.'

There is always that old chestnut to consider: how much a child's attachment style can be attributed to the influence of parents, and how much to the innate nature of the child. 'The old nature nurture issue will never be solved,' says Schlodder. 'But research involving children brought up by wolves suggests that environment contributes considerably.'

What attachment style is my child?

DOES YOUR CHILD...

1. Protest when separated from you?
2. Steer clear of your presence and avoid engaging with you?
3. Get anxious and seek you out, but then struggle to get away?
4. Display positive emotions when returned to you after separation?
5. Ignore questions you ask?
6. Seem hesitant to check out their surroundings?
7. Seek your comfort when stressed, frightened or unsure?
8. Rarely display emotion?
9. Become frustrated with how you respond to their actions?
10. Seem happy to be around you most of the time?
11. Seem to explore the environment only superficially?
12. Display exceptional clinginess and anxiety with you?
13. Greet you actively after a separation?
14. Seem indifferent to your departure?
15. Become distressed at your departure and remain so after your return?
16. Prefer your company to that of strangers?
17. Fail to seek comfort on your return after being separated?
18. Seem scared of strangers?
19. Tend to stay close to you in new situations?

If you have answered YES to questions:

1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16 – your child is probably Securely Attached.

2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17 – your child leans towards being Avoidant Attached.

3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 19 – your child could be Ambivalent Attached.

Children can develop attachment problems for various reasons so parents shouldn't blame themselves. A professional counsellor can help.

THERAPLAY... with or without a counsellor's help, you can apply the four principles of Theraplay to help your child develop a secure attachment



NURTURE: You can often improve your child's attachment by just turning up your 'nurture meter'. Tactile displays of affection such as hugs and kisses will help to make your child feel loved and appreciated.

Effective with: Overactive or aggressive children.

STRUCTURE: Instill a sense of security in your child by introducing a predictable daily routine. Allocate specific places for your child to perform certain tasks such as drawing, playing and looking after pets.

Effective with: Resistant or over-stimulated children.

ENGAGEMENT: Group-games such as Snakes and Ladders or Twister will help you spend fun, quality time interacting with your child.

Effective with: Withdrawn or avoidant attachment styles.

CHALLENGE: Entice your children to engage socially with challenging activities that encourage them to become natural explorers and risk-takers. Although you don't want children leaping from second floor windows, encourage them to take age-appropriate risks such as approaching another child to play or exploring the environment more freely.

Effective with: Shy or avoidant children.

