Attachment Trauma: The Importance of Healing Relationships

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What Is Attachment?
A reciprocal, enduring, emotional, and physical affiliation (*relationship*) between a child and a caregiver.

It is the psychological connection between people that permits them to have significance to each other.
How Does Attachment Occur?

• A cycle of attachment/bonding occurs between an infant and mother/caregiver.

• The infant engages in certain instinctual behaviors such as sucking, crying, cooing, eye contact, smiling, clinging, etc.

• The caregiver responds by smiling, talking, holding, soothing, feeding, etc. to reciprocate the attachment.
Cycle of Attachment

It all starts with a child’s need.

Child’s needs are unmet.

Arousal Expression
Child cries, yells, etc.

Response Gratification
Parent meets the child’s need.

Child relaxes and begins to learn that parents can & will meet needs and soothe.

No Response Gratification
Child learns that parent can’t or won’t meet their needs, and begins to expect needs will not be met.
CIRCLE OF SECURITY
PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD’S NEEDS

SECURE BASE
- Protect me
- Comfort me
- Delight in me
- Organize my feelings

SAFE HAVEN

Support My Exploration
- Watch over me
- Delight in me
- Help me
- Enjoy with me

Welcome My Coming To You
- I need you to...
- I need you to...

Always: be BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER, and KIND.
Whenever possible: follow my child’s need.
Whenever necessary: take charge.

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CIRCLE OF TRUST
How to Help Your Child Feel Safe When Your Own World is Turned Upside Down

Mom and Dad,
All this chaos feels too big for me. Sometimes I might feel OK. But sometimes I don’t. When I feel sad or scared I might cling or get real quiet or act out of control. At those times I’m telling you I don’t know what to do with how I’m feeling.

I need you to:
* Talk with other adults and let them help you trust in the future
* Be in Charge
* Be kind
* Give me predictable daily routines
* Sit down with me often, offer soothing reassurance, and let me know it’s still OK to be afraid

I’m really saying please help me. I need you because I’m often still scared and confused. You may not realize how much you help me just by being with me.

The Circle of Trust applies to children of all ages
See: www.circleofsecurity.org

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Stages of Attachment Formation

Stage 1: Pre-attachment (birth to 3 months)
The infant does participate in the bonding process. She orients towards the sound of the female voice, she tracks moving objects with her eyes, reaches out to be held, and cries.
Stage 2: Recognition/Discrimination (3 to 8 months)

The infant begins to differentiate visually between his primary caregiver and others.
Stage 3: Active Attachment (8 months to 3 years)

• Child shows clear preferences for the primary caregiver. Stranger reaction occurs where child is “scared” of strangers (stranger anxiety is normal).

• As child begins to explore his world, he moves away from primary caregiver but seeks periodically to reunite with her and remains aware of her presence or absence.
Stage 3: Active Attachment, cont. (8 months to 3 years)

• When child reunites/touches base with mother, he is able to return to his exploring and separating. Child is much more active in the attachment process with verbal communications and physical mobility.

• Verbal interchanges and distance contact between child and caregiver may increasingly replace physical contact, proximity seeking, and other more primitive attachment behaviors.
Stage 4: Partnership
(36 months/3 years and beyond)

- The child solidifies attachment relationships and becomes further sophisticated in the verbal communication of needs and in the verbal negotiation of differences with caregivers.
- Development of friendships of varying closeness
- Development of romantic relationships
- Parenting their own children
Types of Attachment

- Secure
- Avoidant
- Ambivalent
- Disorganized
Secure Attachment

• Sense of “felt safety”
• Feel confident that their parent/attachment figure will be able to meet their need
Traits of a Securely Attached Child

• Well formed conscience with a sense of right and wrong.

• Wants to please attachment figure.

• Range of GENUINE emotion

• Shows fear and anger freely

• Relates with empathy to others

• Has the ability to self soothe
Traits of a Securely Attached Child

• Positive working model of self and the world

• Believes that they are loveable, worthwhile, capable, responsible and safe.

• Has trust

• Believes his caregivers are available, responsive, and will meet his needs.

• Can build relationships with others

• Wary of strangers and leaving caregiver
Parent/Caregiver’s Role In Attachment

• Accessibility
• Responsiveness
• Attunement (a feeling of being "at one" with another being)
• Humility (being humble)
• Insight/self awareness
• Must span first **3-5 years** for attachment to mature and solidify
• Research shows that 55% of us have a Secure attachment from our childhoods.

• This means that 45% of us have an insecure attachment from our childhoods.

• Fortunately, for that 45% of us, we can develop an Earned Secure attachment (more in a few minutes!)
Reasons why Positive Attachment may not occur

• Mental Illness of caregiver
• Substance Abuse of caregiver
• Neglect by caregiver
• Physical Abuse by caregiver
• Attachment trauma of the parent
• Death, illness, absence of caregiver
• Children with disabilities that make it difficult to respond to the caregiver
• Children with health issues at birth/early childhood that impair their ability to feel soothed by parent.
• Frequent moves and/or placements in foster care
Developmental Risk Factors

1. Difficult Pregnancy
2. Difficult Birth
3. Early Hospitalization
4. Abuse
5. Neglect
6. Trauma

-TBRI resources (Purvis and Cross, 1999-2012)
Insecure Attachment

• Avoidant
• Ambivalent
• Disorganized
Avoidant

- Negative working model of the world
- Does not respond when parent leaves or returns
- High level of motor activity
- Poor eye contact
- Disconnected from own emotions and those of others
- Self-centered (narcissism)
- Lack of spontaneous emotional expression
- Lack of insight
- Seen as aloof
- Minimal physical contact
Ambivalent

- Fearful and anxious
- Clingy
- Inconsolable when parent leaves or returns
- Approach strangers for affection
- Indiscriminate with affection
- Negative working model of the world
- Night fears

- Moderately controlling
- Fear of being alone
- Might avoid school or separation from caregiver
- Obsessed about losing a parent
- Worries about sickness, injury, or death
- Ambivalent, love-hate feelings for caregivers
Disorganized

- Unable to trust or be close
- Behavior has no pattern, seems to not make sense
- Aggressive in gaining control
- Both avoidant and anxious
- More extreme behaviors

- Child attempts to punish parent or possibly humiliate parent
- Superficial and “charming”
- An active, shifting emotional state
- No organized way to deal with stress
The Attachment “Double Bind”
Our Attachment Style from early childhood becomes the Blueprint that we use for all future relationships.
Why is this such a big deal?

- **Long term effects include:**
  - An inability to stay in relationship with anyone - future spouse, children, neighbors, etc.
  - Lack/impaired cause and effect thinking
  - Cognitive development
  - Unable to accept responsibility
  - Antisocial Behavior

- **Social/behavioral development**
- **Emotional development**
How foster/adoptive parents react to unattached kids...

• Get frustrated! Get scared!
• Take it all personally and see themselves as a failure.
• Get told by professionals that they are “making it up.”
• Become dysregulated.
• Eventually, give up—child goes back or the child stays there, but the parent gives up on trying to develop an attachment.

We need to support our foster and adoptive parents!
Four Adult Attachment Styles

- Secure
- Dismissing
- Entangled
- Unresolved

-TCU Institute of Child Development
Secure Adult

• Secure baby ➔ Secure Adult
• Ability to give care
• Ability to receive care
• Know the autonomous self
• Capacity to negotiate needs
• Can explore all aspects of the attachment relationship

as developed by Jude Cassidy
Dismissing Adult

• Avoidant baby → Dismissing Adult
• Learn to mask the internal state of fear and anxiety
• Lack of attunement between behavior and internal state
• Would rather be alone
• Find things more satisfying that human interaction (materialism)
• Idealization of parents (parents are an idea, not a relationship)
Entangled Adult (Preoccupied)

• Ambivalent baby ➔ Entangled Adult
• Send their children mixed signals (push-pull relationships)
• Ambivalent state of being afraid of being both too close to or too distant from others
• Attempt to keep their feelings at bay but are unable to
Unresolved Adult (Fearful)

- Disorganized baby ➔ Unresolved Adult
- Relationships are confused and chaotic
- Have trouble recognizing emotions in children
- Less responsive to children’s anger, sadness
- High risk for dissociative disorders and other emotional disorders
Breaking the Cycle

The process of making sense of your past is the SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT thing you can do to improve your relationship with your child.

“It may not be my fault, but it is my responsibility.”

– Dan Siegel
“Earned Secure” Adult

• Those that come from “hard places”, but are able to make sense of the past.
• Having a healing relationship can help us to heal.

“When we make sense of our past... we become free to construct a new future for ourselves and for how we parent our children. Research is clear: If we make sense of our lives, we free ourselves from the prison of the past.” – Dan Siegel
Self Examination (Being Humble)

Unless WE (the adults) learn to be secure, we cannot lead our children to a secure attachment style.

“You cannot give what you don’t have” – Juli Alvarado

What are my own triggers?
Adult Assessments

• Online Attachment Questionnaire

www.yourpersonality.net/relstructures
Making Sense of the Past

• Get to know our “critical inner voice,” an internal coach that monitors this filter through which we see the world.

• Our critical inner voice is the language of these internal working models of relationships and our social world. It encourages us to recreate our early lives through our behavior, both by evoking responses from others and projecting our past on to people in our present lives.

-Firestone (2014)
Making Sense of the Past

• The purpose of both psychotherapy and mindfulness practice is to provide an internalized secure base.

• Attunement, whether it is internal in mindfulness, or interpersonal in attachment, is what leads to a sense of secure base.

• The adult learns bodily and affective self-regulation, attuned communication with others, insight, and empathy.
Making Sense of the Past

• Creating a narrative of the past.
  • This can be done in therapy or through guided homework exercises.
  • When you create a coherent narrative, you actually rewire your brain to cultivate security within yourself and your relationships.
• A narrative can help identify your own triggers and see patterns of behavior.
Resources for Adults

• EmpoweredToConnect.org: 
  *Looking at Ourselves to Help our Children Heal (Trust-based Relational Intervention)*

• *Parenting from the Inside Out*  
  Dan Siegel

• *The Connected Child*  
  Karyn Purvis & David Cross
How to Heal an Insecure Attachment

• When we have been hurt in a relationship, we need to *heal in a relationship*
• The adults need to focus on our own attachment & emotional regulation.
• Soothing the brain through calming sensory input.
• Mindfulness
• Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI): *Connecting before Correcting*
• Time In & Re-do’s vs. Time out
• Remembering: *Rules without Relationship equals Rebellion.*
Rupture and Repair

• Rupture = a break in the nurturing relationship with a child

• Critical to “repair the rupture” in the relationship by coming back into relationship with the child (apologizing for mistake, reconnecting in a nurturing way)
Mom/Dad, when I get upset (frustrated, withdrawn, whiney, demanding, out of control):

My behavior actually means that I need you.

I need you to:
- Be calm
- Take Charge
- Be kind
- Stay with me until we both understand this feeling that seems too much for me alone
- Help me return to what I was doing, with a new option

"I don't know what to do with how I'm feeling."

CIRCLE OF REPAIR
Helping My Child Trust that Our Relationship Will (Almost) Always Set Things Right

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Where do big behaviors come from?
The Take-Away Message

• Attachment in early childhood sets the foundation for future relationships.
• When we have been hurt in a relationship, we need a safe relationship in which we can heal.
• While my child (or me personally) had a tough start to life, we can help the child (or me) to heal.
• Healing attachment takes a particular set of skills.
• Parenting my child with attachment trauma requires me to be mindful, purposeful, and intentional. I cannot just raise my child how I was raised.
Book list for families

**Parents**
- Parenting from the Inside Out
- I Love You Rituals
- Attachment Focused Parenting
- The Out of Sync Child
- How to Talk So Kids Will Listen
- The Connected Child

**Kids**
- In My Heart
- Mother for Choco
- Double Dip Feelings
- My Many Colored Days
- The Kissing Hand
- You Are My I Love You
- I Love You All Day Long
Resources

• Attachment Therapists: Theraplay.org

• Attached-Focused Therapy: Children’s Bureau, Inc.
  (855) 677-5437, Nancy Fisher, Director of Adoption
  (nfisher@childrensbureau.org)

• Presenter:
  Terrence Lovejoy, MSW, LCSW, Children’s Bureau, Inc.
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