

ATTACHMENT

Synthesis

How important is it?

Attachment is the emotional bond of infant to parent or caregiver. It is described as a pattern of emotional and behavioural interaction that develops over time, especially in contexts where infants express a need for attention, comfort, support or security. Parents' ability to perceive, interpret and react promptly to their infants needs and attention, in turn influence the quality of their attachment relationships. Based on Bowlby's attachment theory, the relationship developed with primary caregivers is the most influential in children's lives. A secure relationship fosters not only positive developmental outcomes over time, but also influences the quality of future relationships with peers and partners.

Secure parent-child relationships help children to a) regulate their emotion in stressful situations, b) explore their environment with confidence, and c) foster their cognitive, emotional and language development. Furthermore, children who are securely attached are predisposed to display positive social behaviours (e.g., empathy and cooperative behaviours) helping them to develop future positive relationships. On the other hand, insecure and disorganized attachment put children at increasing risk of problem behaviours and psychopathologies. Examples include preschool and school-aged aggression, depression and emotional dysregulation.

What do we know?

Attachment develops in four phases:

1. Infant responds indiscriminately to people for contact and affection;
2. Infants' behaviours (gaze, cries, coos) are displayed to specific people;
3. Infants show active attachment behaviour with primary caregivers and become anxious when separated from them; and
4. Infants and primary caregivers influence each other's behaviours.

Parent-child attachment relationships is typically assessed with the Strange Situation Procedure, in which infants' reactions to being reunited with one of their primary caregivers following a brief separation are examined. From these interactions, patterns of attachment relationships are determined. Infants who actively seek proximity with their parents on reunion and communicate their distress are securely attached. In contrast, infants who avoid their parents or remain inconsolable on reunion are usually insecurely attached. In addition, some infants display a disorganized attachment style characterized by contradictory behaviours toward parents

(e.g., strong avoidance with strong contact-seeking, distress or anger).

These three attachment patterns have been found to be amenable to change across development and influenced by parenting factors. For example, parental support, acceptance of the child and sensitive behaviours during joint play foster a secure attachment. In contrast, domestic violence, frightening, insensitive or neglectful caregiving are important predictors in the development of attachment insecurity and disorganization. Regarding the impact of day care on parent-child attachment security, recent findings favour an indirect effect. Specifically, the impact of day care on attachment insecurity depends on the social context (familial, cultural, societal) in which day care is experienced. Indeed, its influence on attachment security has been found to vary across countries (e.g., Australia, Israel, United States) and as a function of the quality, type, timing and quantity of care provided. Although high-quality day care may buffer the negative effect of parental insensitivity in some cases, the security of child-parent attachment is primarily guided by the sensitivity of maternal care.

What can be done?

Considering the life-long consequences of child-parent relationship quality during the early years, prevention and intervention programs designed to promote secure attachment are of crucial importance. That said, there are important factors to take into consideration when implementing those programs, including their content, duration, behavioural focus and the populations targeted (at-risk vs. low-risk populations).

There is a consensus that the most effective interventions for enhancing attachment security are those targeting parental sensitivity through video-feedback. Through this procedure, parents become increasingly aware of their interactional style and the needs of their children. For best results, these interventions should be of short duration (i.e., fewer than 5 sessions) and implemented when the child is 6 months or older. Nevertheless, interventions should not only focus on increasing parental sensitivity but also on decreasing or eliminating atypical caregiver behaviours. An exclusive focus on parental sensitivity may neither be sufficient nor effective in preventing disorganized attachment. As such, sustained and intensive home-based interventions are recommended to reduce disorganized attachment. Regular weekly follow-up to promote the maintenance of what has been learned by parents should also be considered.

Finally, it is important to ensure that families at developmental risk, including single mothers, are provided with the social and financial resources necessary to provide their children with a supportive environment during infancy. Services provided during this developmental period would help to prevent the long-term developmental trajectories associated with child psychopathology.