



## "Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Attachment in Children

### What is attachment?

Attachment is a special emotional relationship between two people, with an expectation of protection. Usually when we talk about attachment, we're talking about the relationship between a child and his or her parents or caregivers. Sometimes we talk about attachment in romantic relationships as well. The attachment between parents and children is our focus here.

Almost every child attaches to someone. When they don't, it is usually because of unfortunate circumstances, such as being raised in an orphanage or experiencing severe abuse or neglect. Children with no attachments are very rare and may have an attachment disorder. They, along with their caregivers, usually need professional help. Attachment disorders are not our focus here. Information on attachment disorders can be found at:

[http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Attachment-Disorders-085.aspx](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Attachment-Disorders-085.aspx)

Children can attach to a small number of adults, usually those who take care of them. They don't usually attach to other children. Although children can have great relationships with lots of adults (teachers, babysitters, family friends), they don't really attach to those people. They like them and trust them because their experience in their attachment relationships tells them that it is safe to do so.

Although almost all children do develop attachments, attachments can vary in their level of "security." Psychologists, researchers, and therapists often categorize attachment relationships. The main categories are secure, insecure, and disorganized. Most children (about 60%) are securely attached. Secure attachments are the best for children's development. Disorganized attachments lead to the most difficulties in mental health and behaviour. Children can have different styles of attachments with different caregivers.

### What are the different styles of attachment?

**Securely attached** children explore what is around them when their caregiver is nearby. They also check in by looking at their caregiver regularly. If their caregiver leaves they usually stop exploring. When their caregiver returns they are happy to see them and calm down quickly if they are upset. Secure attachments have been shown to help children learn, empathize, develop relationships, cope with stress, handle fear, and be independent.

There are two types of insecure attachment. In **insecure avoidant** attachment, children don't appear to care whether their caregiver is there or not, but they actually care a lot. These children usually explore a lot. When their caregiver returns after leaving them these children often ignore them, but if we measure their stress response using physiological measures like heart rate, we find that they're actually quite upset.



Children with **resistant insecure** attachment often appear clingy. They usually stick close to their caregiver and don't explore much. They get very upset when their caregiver leaves them. They are not easily calmed when their caregiver returns.

Children with **disorganized** attachments are more unpredictable. As babies, they might do unusual things like freezing or coming to their caregiver with their head turned away. As preschoolers they tend to be bossy and controlling.

## How do attachments develop?

Attachments develop over time as a child and caregiver interact. It is innate or "hard-wired." When a child has a need, their caregiver responds. For example, if a child falls off her bike and her caregiver comes over and comforts her, the child learns to expect that. On the other hand, if the caregiver yells at her she learns to expect that. It isn't so much what happens in any one situation, so much as the pattern of reactions that matter. Over time, the child learns what will happen when they have a need. Will their caregiver respond kindly and fulfill their need? Ignore them? Yell? This pattern determines the attachment style between a child and a specific caregiver. You can't always see someone's attachment style. It is only activated (turned-on) when they're in need (e.g., stressed, sick, scared, or hurting).

Children also learn what they need to do to get their needs met. Do they need to ask, yell, or cry? Eventually, kids start to expect all relationships to be like their attachment relationships. So they start to trust people, be unsure of people, hide their feelings, or not know what to expect. They also learn how they should behave in relationships.

## When does attachment develop?

The building blocks of attachment start soon after birth. Attachment becomes clearer around 6 to 9 months of age. Each of us develops an attachment style that characterizes our approach to relationships over the course of our lifetime, but attachment styles can change based on experiences or in response to treatment.

## How do I help my child securely attach?

There are lots of things you can do to help your child securely attach. First, try to be there for them when they need you. Second, let them explore or interact with what is around them when they're ready. Here are some other things you can do:

- Be sensitive to your child's needs and emotions and try to respond in a way that is in tune with them.
- Talk about feelings: your feelings and their feelings. Label everyone's feelings and indicate that it's okay to feel whatever you feel. You can do this even when they're babies.
- Stay with your child when they're upset. Even when your child is misbehaving, you need to show them you love them. Don't send them away or threaten to leave.
- Enjoy your child: play with them, laugh with them, read with them, watch their television shows.
- Follow your child's lead. This shows them you value their ideas and thoughts.
- Take charge when needed. This helps your child feel safe.



- Be consistent, predictable, and stable. This helps kids feel safe.
- Set limits. Too much freedom makes kids feel anxious, even if they think they want it. You need to be the strong one who lets them know what are safe limits.
- Accept them for who they are. You don't need to approve of their behaviour, but you need to love them whatever they do.

## What if I make a mistake?

It's okay! Attachments are built on thousands of experiences and are always able to change. Research shows that kids need "good enough" parents not perfect parents. In fact, there's something to be said for a child facing some adversity (not too much, but a little). This teaches children that they can manage these situations and helps build resilience.

## What if my child isn't securely attached?

There are a variety of different attachment-based therapies available that are supported by research. These include Parent-Child Interaction Therapy; Circle of Security; Watch, Wait, and Wonder; Interaction Guidance, Reflective Family Play, and others. See a psychologist or talk to your child's paediatrician for appropriate evidence-based local referrals. The above-mentioned therapies and others supported by research should be favoured. There are some other therapies that indicate they are for attachment, but that are not evidence-based.

## Where can I get more information?

- The Best Start Resource Centre: <http://healthybabyhealthybrain.ca>
- The Hospital for Sick Children: <http://aboutkidshealth.ca>
- Attachment Network of Manitoba: <http://attachmentnetwork.ca/>

**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you and your child. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, please visit: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>

*This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Jen Theule, Ph.D., C.Psych., University of Manitoba.*

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

Canadian Psychological Association  
141 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 702  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J3  
Tel: 613-237-2144  
Toll free (in Canada): 1-888-472-0657