Attachment

**Why do babies cry when their mother leaves the room?**

**Why do young children seek out a parent for a hug when they get hurt?**

**Why do infants want so insistently to be fed on a regular schedule?**

These and other questions relate to the key interactions that build a relationship

between adults and young children – the attachment relationship.

**Understanding Attachment**

The quality of the relationship between parents and young children is one of the most powerful factors in a child’s growth and development.

Understanding this relationship has changed our understanding of what is important in parenting young children. The term **attachment** often is used to describe the nature of this relationship. Terms such as “attachment” and “bonding” often are used interchangeably. However, the meanings can be quite different.

**Attachment** is the word used to refer to the relationship developed between an infant and a parent or primary caregiver during the first two to three years of life. How this relationship forms is dependent on how a parent responds to a child’s needs for care, comfort and security. It develops gradually and goes through a variety of phases. Note that this attachment refers to a *child’s* feelings and actions in the relationship and not to the parent’s feelings about the child.

**Bonding** is the word used to refer to a parent’s tie to an infant and typically occurs in the first hours and days of a child’s life. Strong feelings of love and care that a mother or father feels toward a child help cement this bond. The “bonding experience” can help some parents develop a more permanent bond with their young children, although children need continuing care and sensitivity to form strong

attachments.

**Types of Attachment Relationships**

The attachment relationship that a young child forms during the first two years of life takes time to develop.

Typically, infants will develop this relationship with the parent(s) or person who provides the most direct, responsive care to their needs. This type of attachment with one to two significant adults is the **primary attachment relationship.** Then children will form supporting relationships with other caring adults, which fall into the category of **secondary attachment relationships**. Ideally, a child will be able to form one to two strong and positive attachment relationships with parents, and then have a supportive web of secondary attachments with siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, close friends, caregivers, etc. This is the most positive environment for a young child.

**Attachment styles**

Scientific research on parent-child relationships suggests that two primary types of attachments form: **secure attachments** and **insecure attachments**. Remember

that this refers to a child’s quality of connection to an adult caregiver, not the parent’s feelings about the child. The following characteristics highlight each attachment type:

• **Secure attachment** – Characterized by children who respond happily to interaction or reunion with parents, greet parents actively, explore the environment around them while knowing where the parents are, seek contact with parents when distressed and exhibit trust in their parents’ responses to them.

• **Insecure attachment** – **resistant/ambivalent** – Characterized by children who become anxious and seek parents but then struggle to get away, are reluctant to explore the environment, become upset easily and exhibit frustration with their parents’ responses to them.

• **Insecure attachment** – **avoidant** – Characterized by children who avoid or ignore

a parent’s presence, show little response when parents are close by, display few strong emotional outbursts, and may avoid or ignore a parent’s responses toward them.

• **Insecure attachment** – **disorganized** – Characterized by children who are not predictable in their behaviour, seem unable to cope easily or be comforted when stressed, and show evidence of fear or confusion around a caregiver.

About 55% to 65% of children tend to fall into the “secure” attachment category, while about 10% to 15% tend to show an “insecure-resistant/ambivalent” pattern,

20% to 25% show an “insecure-avoidant” pattern and 15% to 20% show an “insecure disorganized” pattern.

**What do these patterns mean?**

In general, these patterns or types of attachment suggest the quality of the relationship a child feels toward a particular person (parent, grandparent, caregiver,

etc.). They represent children’s felt sense of security and comfort level with the person’s responsiveness to their needs. They are important because children often show different outcomes in their well-being based on attachment style. Some of the important aspects of a child’s growth affected by attachment quality include the following:

• Children who are secure in their attachments more freely explore their environment and are able to learn with confidence, while children who are insecure are more likely to struggle in being confident and learning about their surroundings.

• Children who are secure tend to be more popular with peers and exhibit more positive social interaction with other children, while children who are insecure seem more at risk for hostile, anti-social or difficult relationships with other children.

• Children who are secure tend to be more emotionally stable and able to express and manage their feelings well, while children who are insecure are more likely to be emotionally unstable and have difficulty in expressing and managing feelings.

• Children who are secure demonstrate greater ability to handle stress and help others handle stress, while children who are insecure are more likely to struggle when stressed, act out in unhealthy ways and be insensitive to others who are stressed.

**The importance of attachment quality can be significant. How do such attachments develop?**

Several key factors can affect the quality of a child’s attachment. These can include the child’s temperament (more active and outgoing, etc.), the context of the situation (stranger present, familiar room, etc.), early history (traumatic experience, etc.) and other things. But ***the way in which a parent responds to and interacts with a young child is the key factor in how an attachment develops***.

A child’s attachment style generally develops based on the child’s perception or

understanding of the caregiver’s reliability in providing comfort, support and security. Behaviours that promote attachment and provide the opportunity for meaningful interaction include:

• Smiling

• Looking at each other

• Vocalizing to each other

• Following

• Clinging

• Physical touch and hugging

• Exploring the surroundings

• Feeding interactions

• Crying

• Playing

Parents and other caregivers should seek to understand the importance of

healthy attachments with young children and work toward the formation of strong,

secure attachments with children.