



Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

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Attachment: What Works?



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Marla, a 9-month-old, reached for her teacher when a parent and her infant entered the room.

Her teacher held her and comforted her. “You are wondering who that person is,” the teacher explained.

“She’s Terrance’s mother. Let’s go say hi to Terrance.” Marla, hanging onto her teacher’s neck, looked at Terrance and began to smile.

After falling off a low bench, Devon, an 18-month-old, ran across the playground at top speed into the arms of his teacher. “Oh, did that scare you when you fell?” Asked his teacher. Devon nodded his head yes. “Do you want to sit on the bench together?” Devon nodded his head yes again.

What is Attachment?

Attachment refers to the continuing and lasting relationships that young children form with one or more adults. Attachment refers especially to one aspect of the adult-child relationship, the child’s sense of security and safety when in the company of a particular adult. The importance of infants and toddlers experiencing secure attachment relationships with the key adults in their lives is well-known. In the examples above, both Marla and Devon feel secure and safe with their caregivers. Within their secure attachment relationships, they are learning how to manage their strong emotions and reactions and develop their identity as persons who are competent at being in relationships.

Infants and toddlers can have more than one secure attachment. Often, when professionals discuss attachment, they refer to the parent-child relationship, but it is important that infants and toddlers who attend group care programs are securely attached to teachers as well. Infants and toddlers can feel secure within one relationship while feeling insecure within another, but they thrive when most or all of their relationships with the adults in their lives are secure. When infants and toddlers who attend group care programs experience secure attachments with their teacher(s), they can focus more on learning, they are more affectionate with peers, and they have more empathy for both adults and peers.

Why is Attachment Important?

Attachment security makes a difference in young children’s immediate and long-term behavior. When infants and toddlers *continually* feel secure or insecure in their relationships, there are lasting effects, which can even impact how they will parent when they are older. Children learn important lessons about how to interact with other adults and peers in relationships. They learn how to communicate effectively, how to negotiate and cooperate with others, and how others will treat them. Secure children play more harmoniously with their peers as they develop, and they score higher than insecure children on language and cognitive measures. Secure attachments also help children who have more fearful, inhibited temperaments become less fearful.

Attachment influences how the brain is structured and how many stress hormones young children experience. Infants and toddlers who *consistently* do not feel safe may begin to perceive adults and peers as threats and the world as a dangerous place. They may expect others to hurt them, so they react defensively. Children who are securely attached to their teachers exhibit decreased levels of the stress hormone cortisol, while children who are insecurely attached, especially those who have a more fearful temperament, exhibit increased levels of cortisol throughout the day.

Secure and Insecure Attachment

Children’s behavior tells us whether they are experiencing secure attachments or insecure attachments. Their actions tell us what they think about themselves, others, and relationships.

Children with secure attachment relationships:

- Trust that their physical needs will be met by adults. This feeling of security allows children to focus on learning new skills and building relationships with others (adults and other children).
- Trust that adults will be emotionally available to them. They learn that they can be intimate—close and cherished—with another person and still be safe. They can explore their environment and return to their special adults when they need a hug, a pat, or encouragement.
- Learn to communicate in a variety of ways. When adults respect, respond to, and engage with infants’ attempts to communicate, the children’s use of language develops into more complex and sophisticated forms.
- Begin to manage (self-regulate) their strong reactions and emotions with the help of adults. Adults can help children manage and express their emotions in healthy ways and help them learn that strong feelings are ok feelings.

Children with insecure attachment relationships may:

- Behave as if they know that adults are inconsistently or seldom available.
- Stay close to an adult to get their needs met, inhibiting their exploration as a mobile infant or toddler.
- Become distressed, but do not seek an adult to help them deal with their emotions. If adults are frequently angry with or intrusive toward young children, they may initially avoid adults, but as they develop, they may show anger and frustration with adults and peers.
- Hide their strong feelings and withdraw to avoid distressing events or to organize their emotions. When they withdraw, they miss opportunities to learn how to handle distress or express feelings in a healthy way.
- Seem disorganized and confused about how to behave in relationships.

Cultural Differences in Attachment

Individual children, and children from different cultures and family backgrounds, may show secure or insecure attachment differently. Adults should observe children to see how they express whether they feel secure or not, but recognize that in some cultures and families, feelings may not be expressed as openly as in other cultures. In addition, some cultures encourage their children to be independent, so for these children, playing independently may not mean that they are withdrawing from relationships.

Teachers and Caregivers Make a Difference.

The following are some strategies that teachers and caregivers might use to promote children's secure attachments.

To support the parent-child relationship:

- Help parents feel competent and confident in their parenting. Notice and describe when parents are warm, responsive, and nurturing with their child. Help parents to identify their own strengths as parents and to recognize when they are enjoying time with their child. In most cases, the ultimate goal should always be to strengthen the bond between parents and their children.
- Provide extra support to parents when needed. Sometimes a child's temperament, illness, behavior, or disability may be challenging for parents (and teachers) and they may need extra support to create strong, positive child-family attachment relationships. Use home visits and individual time with the family to provide resources and information to match the unique needs of the family.

To foster a secure relationship with the child:

- Be warm, responsive, and affectionate with all children. Caregivers and teachers' affection helps children feel worthwhile and teaches them how to show affection. Reading and responding to cues given by children is critical (e.g., smiling or reaching to indicate they want to interact, pulling away or arching their back to indicate they need a break from the interaction, or showing sadness or distress).
- Engage in meaningful conversational interactions with children. Reciprocity, taking turns in interactions, helps young children feel competent.
- Be physically and emotionally available when a mobile infant or toddler explores his/her environment. Mobile infants and toddlers explore their environment and return to their special adults when they need a hug, a pat, or encouragement. Toddlers balance closeness to an adult and exploration; they focus on accomplishing tasks, yet will seek adult help when they need it.
- Comfort children when they are distressed. Infants and toddlers learn to organize and manage their emotions when adults consistently respond to their communication cues and comfort them when they are distressed. When children feel insecure, stressed, or have experienced trauma, neglect, abuse, or maltreatment, teachers and caregivers need to provide consistent emotional support to help children feel safe and to help them trust adults again.

- Be an enthusiastic learning partner. When adults are unintrusive, follow a child's lead during play, and provide help that supports problem-solving, the child's confidence and motivation to learn grows. Share a child's excitement about learning and remember that each moment during the day has the potential for relationship building.
- Let children know that you will provide safe behavior boundaries, keeping them, their peers, and their things safe. Adults who demonstrate and teach infants and toddlers how to behave in a social way by example, rather than telling children what not to do, are not only keeping children safe, but also teaching them how to behave with others. For example, showing a child how to touch a peer gently instead of simply telling them to stop demonstrates the suitable behavior.
- Provide small groups, low adult-child ratios, and primary care. An environment that allows for consistency in personnel, substantial time, and adequate space to build 1:1 relationships is a key ingredient in forming strong, healthy attachments between children and adults.
- Move caregivers and teachers with a group of children to a new room as children develop. Consistency is critical for infants and toddlers as they transition to new environments. Allowing for a way to let adults move with some of the children to a new environment (infant care to a toddler classroom) will help children feel secure as they face changes and new challenges in the environment.
- Develop program policies to refer families who need additional mental health support to the right resources. Families who experience stress need ongoing social support, so that they can be warm, responsive, and affectionate with their children. Programs can help by providing families information and access to materials and other resources. Programs can also serve as a bridge between families and services available in their communities.

Who are the children and families who have participated in research on attachment?

Researchers have studied attachment for approximately 50 years. Typically developing children, and children with disabilities, including children from low- and middle-income families, have been observed with their mothers, fathers, and teachers. Children from a variety of cultures have been observed to determine cultural differences in attachment to their parents. ☀

Resources for Parents

Brazelton, T.B., & Sparrow, J.D. (2006). *Touchpoints. Birth to 3: Your child's emotional and behavioral development* (2nd ed.). New York: Da Capo Press.

Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ (10th anniversary edition)*. New York: Bantam.

Lerner, C., & Dombro, A.L. (2006). *What's best for my baby and me: A three-step guide for parents*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.

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We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel>) or call us at (866) 433-1966 to offer suggestions.

Where do I Find More Information on Attachment?

See the CSEFEL Web site (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/CSEFEL>) for additional resources. There are many books, articles, manuals, and pamphlets available that describe the use of this strategy. These include:

- Honig, A.S. (2002). *Secure relationships. Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care setting*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- Karen, R (1998). *Becoming attached: First relationships and how they shape our capacity to love*. England: Oxford University Press.
- Lally, R.J., Mangione, P.L., & Greenwald, D. (2006). *Concepts for care*. Sausalito, Ca: WestEd.
- Rutter, M. (2008). Implications of attachment theory and research for child care policies. In J. Cassidy, & P.R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 958–974). New York: Guilford Press.
- Thompson, R.A. (2000). The legacy of early attachments. *Child Development*, 71(1), 145-152.

What is the Scientific Evidence on the Importance of Secure Attachments?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following resources may prove valuable.

- Belsky, J. & Fearon, R.M.P. (2002). Early attachment security, subsequent maternal sensitivity, and later child development: Does continuity in development depend upon continuity of caregiving? *Attachment and Human Development*, 4, 361-387.
- Carter, A. S., Garrity-Rokous, F.E., Chazan-Cohen, R., Little, C., & Briggs-Gowan, M.J. (2001). Maternal depression and comorbidity: Predicting early parenting, attachment security, and toddler social-emotional problems and competencies. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40 (1), 18-26.
- Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P.R. (2008). *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research and clinical applications* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Donovan, W., Leavitt, L., Taylor, N., & Broder, J. (2007). Maternal sensory sensitivity, mother–infant 9-month interaction, infant attachment status: Predictors of mother–toddler interaction at 24 months. *Infant Behavior & Development*, 30 (2), 336-352.
- Dozier, M., & Rutter, M. (2008). Challenges to the development of attachment relationships faced by young children in foster and adoptive care. In J. Cassidy, & P.R. Shaver, (Eds), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 698–717). New York: Guilford Press.
- Mills-Koonce, W. R., W., Jean-Louis, G., Propper, C., Sutton, K., Calkins, S., Moore, G., Cox, M. (2007). Infant and parent factors associated with early maternal sensitivity: A caregiver-attachment systems approach. *Infant Behavior & Development*, 30 (1) 114-126.

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. In-service providers and others who conduct staff development activities should find them especially useful in sharing information with professionals and parents. The Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

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Attachment

☀ Ensuring that infants and toddlers have strong attachments and safe, affectionate, and enduring relationships with family members and teachers is important because:

HANDOUT 24



- Children learn important lessons about themselves and others from their attachment relationship experiences.
- Infants and toddlers who feel securely attached (safe and protected) with their caregivers are able to interact more positively with adults and peers and focus on learning.
- Mobile infants and toddlers feel safe to explore their environment when they feel securely attached to their caregivers.
- Infants and toddlers learn to organize and manage their emotions when adults are consistently responsive to their communication cues and comfort them when they are distressed.
- Infants and toddlers who do not feel safe within warm relationships may begin to perceive adults and peers as threats and the world as a dangerous place.

Remember:

- Infants and toddlers develop secure attachments with special caregivers (family members and teachers) over time because of responsive, affectionate, emotionally available interactions.
- Infants and toddlers can be securely attached to more than one person. Secure attachments to both family members and teachers provide children with emotional support, build children's sense of self-worth, and help them value relationships.
- Families who experience stress need ongoing social support, so that parents can be warm, responsive, and affectionate with their children.
- When caregivers are inconsistent in their responses, infants and toddlers may become more dependent on their caregivers in order to be protected. Alternately, when caregivers are frequently angry with children, children may learn to avoid adults, but may become angry with adults and peers because their emotional needs are not met.
- Secure attachments become insecure attachments when caregivers become less responsive. Insecure attachments can become secure when caregivers become more responsive and affectionate.

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