



Attachment Theory

David Belford, LISW, IMH-E

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NMAIMH competencies addressed

Theoretical Foundations

- During observations and assessments, identifies emerging competencies of the infant and young child within a relationship context
- Supports and reinforces each parent's strengths, emerging parenting competencies, and positive parent-infant/young child interactions and relationships

Direct Service Skills

- Establishes trusting relationship that supports the parent(s) and infant/young child in their relationship with each other, and that facilitates needed change
- Formally and informally observes the parent(s) or caregiver(s) and infant/young child to understand the nature of their relationship, developmental strengths, and capacities for change

Thinking

- Sees and can explain the "big picture" when analyzing situations
- Sees and can explain the interactions of various factors

You need to have an experience with someone first – then you can reproduce it.

Gerhardt (2004)

Attachment theory is founded on the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. In its simplest form, attachment can be understood as an emotional bond that develops between an infant and her primary caregiver. It is a process that is dependent on the ability of the primary caregiver to read and respond to the infant's cues reasonably consistently and predictably over time. The process begins at least in infancy, and continues throughout the early years and beyond, though the attachment behaviors change over time as the infant (and often the primary caregiver) proceed through different developmental stages.

When an infant's primary caregiver repeatedly responds to her infant's cues in a nurturing way, neurochemicals are released that assist in building and reinforcing those neurological pathways that lead to self-regulation (such as the ability to self-calm), a sense of safety in the world, the ability to later engage in healthy relationships, and in general, the social-emotional well-being of the child. This type of responsiveness leads to a secure attachment, which is central to the ability of the developing child to learn how to cope with stressful situations in the future. This is the foundation for resilience.

As infants become more mobile, they are driven to explore the world around them. At first, this exploration might involve simply leaving a caregiver's lap. As the infant becomes more confident in her explorations, she ventures further and further away. An infant's confidence in exploration depends in large part on the ability of the infant's parent to keep their child in mind as they explore, and be ready to welcome them when they come back. Coming back (the attachment system) is triggered by some type of stress, often because it is a bit too novel and therefore, frightening. A toy that makes sudden motions or loud noises that the child hasn't encountered before, getting hurt or the approach of a stranger are some examples.

In a secure attachment, the parent or primary caregiver becomes a secure base from which the child can explore and a safe haven to return as needed. Infants and toddlers seek out their primary caregiver and want to be close to them, both physically and emotionally, for comfort. This is because, again, in a secure attachment, the primary caregiver helps the child to regulate her emotional state. When she becomes distressed, she looks to a parent to help her calm down and to feel safe and protected.

There are many reasons why children may not form a secure attachment to their primary caregiver, even though they are hardwired to do so. When parents are stressed themselves, it will be more challenging for them to be responsive to their children. Parents who may not have had a secure attachment to their parents may also find it more challenging to understand and respond to their child's cues. In general, the sum of our experiences in life will affect our ability to read and respond to our infant's cues in a predictable manner.

Many parents have difficulty allowing their child to explore because they want them to stay close, or find it challenging when their child needs them and would prefer that they continue to explore. The situation becomes even more complicated if parents have trouble reading their infant's or toddler's cues, setting limits, or establishing routines for their child.

As infants and toddlers come and go along what Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell call the Circle of Security[®], the parent's job is to follow their child's lead. This means letting them explore, watching over them as they do so, being ready to share in or gently encourage their discoveries, and welcoming them back when the child is ready to be close again. There are also times when parents have to take control in a loving and accepting way. We often see this when children are tired, for example, and don't seem to know what they want. A parent who is able to read their child's "tired" cue, will understand that even though the child may not seem to want to nap, the parent may need to pick up his child and rock her to sleep.

It is helpful to remember that while we want parents to consistently read and respond to their infant's cues, to do that all the time would be a challenge at best. There are times when parents are tired, preoccupied, or otherwise not completely available, and the exchanges between a child and primary caregiver are not in sync (that is, cues are misread, for example).

Dr. Ed Tronick notes that typically, a parent and their infant are in sync only around 20 to 30% of the time. This seems consistent with what Donald Winnicott coined “the good enough mother [parent]” many years ago, and speaks to the fact that parents can’t be expected to be perfect, and that good enough parenting can still lead to secure attachments.

Talking points for supervisors

Here are some questions that you can encourage the home visitors you supervise to think about during reflective supervision:

- As you observe the parent and child, where are they in relation to exploration and seeking physical closeness?
 - Do you see both exploration and seeking closeness?
 - Does the child seem equally comfortable with exploration and coming back for physical and emotional comfort?
 - Does the parent seem equally comfortable with the child’s exploration and coming back for physical and emotional comfort?
 - What happens when the child becomes distressed, shy, upset? How does the child show these behaviors, and how does the parent respond?
 - Does the parent set limits when necessary? What happens when they do?
 - Does the parent delight in the child’s explorations and what the child is showing her?
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References/Additional Resources

Bretherton, I. (1992). The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. *Developmental Psychology, 28*, 759-775.

Gerhardt, S. (2004). *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*. London, UK: Brunner-Routledge.

Tronick, E. (1986). Interactive mismatch and repair: Challenges to the coping infant. *Zero to Three, 6*, 1-6.

Winnicott, D. (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 34*, 89-97.

<http://www.circleofsecurity.org/>

“The Circle of Security® integrates over fifty years of early childhood attachment research into a video-based intervention to strengthen parents’ ability to observe and improve their caregiving capacity.” This site offers many handouts that will make it easier to visualize the process of exploration and comfort seeking that Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell call the Circle of Security®. There are also some written materials as well. Click on “Circle of Security® Project” underneath the authors’ pictures, then “Resources” in the upper right corner of the page, then “COS Downloads”. If you read and agree to the “Stipulations for Use of Circle of Security Materials”, you’ll have access to the downloads on this site.
