

Free attachment style, associated behavioral mechanisms and long-term adjustment ...

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According to attachment theory the quality of the bonds we form early in life affects our adjustment, coping and relationship throughout the lifespan.

Secure attachment is represented by the infant's capacity to feel comfortable and safe exploring their environment using their primary caregiver as a trustworthy base from which to depart and return (Waters & Cummings, 2000). By the time infants are six month old they recognize and internalize the response of their primary caregiver to their needs and alter their behavior to fit their caregiver's response pattern. This first relationship sets up an attachment pattern in the child which affects their willingness to rely upon and trust others and the nature of their relationships (Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland 2000).

Early theorists suggested that attachment was an all or nothing phenomena whereby children either became attached or did not become attached to their primary caregiver based on early childhood experiences. However, Mary Ainsworth determined there different types of attachment that formed in children based on their early relationship with their primary caregiver. She based this conclusion on scientific research. Although Ainsworth's research has been criticized for not being generalizable as the situations used were too contrived her interpretations of the results have shown to have a high degree of validity in subsequent research conducted since that time (Waters & Cummings, 2000). Ainsworth's research examined infants' responses to being left alone by their caregiver and being left with a stranger by their caregiver. She identified three different attachment styles based on her studies using a strange situation paradigm.

The first pattern of behavior was called secure attachment which was shown

to characterize the majority of the children in Ainsworth's sample. When the primary caregiver is responsive to an infant's needs the infant will develop a sense of trust that they can depend on their primary caregiver. The securely attached infant feels confident exploring the environment and are easily soothed by their caregiver when they experience distress. Their response to their caregivers is organized in that they know that acting out their needs will result in a loving and consistent response from their caregiver. These children develop the sense that people in the world are trustworthy and though occasionally someone may prove them wrong they are more likely to remember the majority or those who proved them right. Thus, they develop strong, healthy relationships which are largely based on the nature of the interaction between them and their first caregiver. They respond to others in the ways that they were responded to when they were distressed and allow others to help them in the same way when they experience distress.

The second pattern of behavior was called insecure ambivalent/resistant attachment. Due to inconsistent responses of the caregiver to the infant's needs the child does not develop a sense of trust in their caregiver and does not know what to expect in terms of having their needs met. These parents may act in involving ways such that they expect the child to care for their needs or they escalate the child's distress when they themselves are upset. When distressed the ambivalent/resistant child may display clingy behavior while at the same time pushing against the parent or otherwise rejecting them. These infants never feel secure in their attachment to their caregiver and they therefore feel a lack of control over their environment which prevents them from active exploration.

The third pattern of behavior identified by Ainsworth was called insecure avoidant attachment. These children have caregivers who are insensitive in regards to meeting their needs and are often rejecting of the infant's attempt to engage them during stressful situations. The child responds by becoming largely independent emotionally and physically and does not rely upon the caregiver to meet their needs. They do not return to or check back with the caregiver when exploring their environment and do not seek them out for comfort when they are distressed (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Children who develop an insecure ambivalent/resistant attachment style also display an organized attachment style since they use a specific strategy to engage the caregiver. When the caregiver acts inconsistently or tries to elicit care or distress from the infant, the child displays as much negative emotion as possible to get them to notice how distressed they are. Usually the caregivers will respond eventually more out of annoyance than true caring and the child will learn that to get attention for important others they need to escalate their negative behavior. They also learn to appreciate negative attention as much as positive attention since negative attention was the only type they received when they were infants. The infant who develops an ambivalent attachment style is at increased risk for poor adjustment in later life.

Insecure avoidant attached infants also have developed an organized manner for dealing with their parents' behavior. When parents are rejecting or insensitive to the infant's needs, children learn to avoid turning to them for reassurance or comfort and downplay any negative response since they are

unsure what response they will receive from their caregiver. This is also an organized strategy since the child knows exactly what to do in response to their caregiver's behavior. This style is considered insecure because the child does not trust the caregiver or learn to trust others and begins to avoid others who have important role in their lives. This can result in long term adjustment problems as they do not go on to develop normal, healthy relationships later in life (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

The type of attachment style displayed in infancy has been shown to predict certain developmental course characterized by specific behaviors over time. The securely attached infant most often shows cooperation and compliance with parental requests before the age of two at which point they begin to show the normal non-compliance which functions as a means of attaining autonomy and independence.

A child who is securely attached will have developed adaptive coping strategies which allow them to resist peer pressure and seek out less manipulative friends. The sense of confidence and expectation that the child has the responses to be able to cope with negative experiences provides the child with resiliency and the ability to cope and adjust to both ordinary and extreme stressors in life. They have learned to regulate their emotions such that they think before they act when in emotionally laden circumstances. Normal stressors in social settings that appear as the child gets older are responded to with coherent, rational responses such that other develop a sense of how the child is likely to interact with peers.

This predictability allows children to feel more confident in forming friendships with securely attached infants. Securely attached children and

adolescents form close relationships with friends and develop the ability to take others perspectives and to respond in empathic ways. They are drawn to children who act in a similar manner which reinforces their belief that people are trustworthy and can be counted on when there are circumstances which may seem overwhelming or beyond the child's control. Later relationships are defined by similar behavior patterns such that the individual forms lasting bonds with others and is able to trust another in an intimate relationship without fear of abandonment or unexpected responses.

Children who lack a relationship with at least one predictable responsible adult, often develop a series of deficiencies throughout childhood and into adulthood. Children who have an ambivalent resistant attachment style will begin to display increasing externalizing behaviors that demand a response such as aggression, non-compliance, negativity and immature behaviors. Often this leads to punitive measures at school and in the community, sometimes resulting in involvement in the juvenile court system especially for boys. Punishment leads to resentment and the development of more severe negative behaviors since the child does not understand what they have done wrong having learned that acting out is the only way to get attention from others. These children gravitate to others like them, forming maladaptive and sometimes abusive relationships. Although generally unhappy with the quality of their friendships they are unaware that any other type of relationship exists. Romantic partners are chosen for familiarity of behavioral responses such that these relationships are characterized by emotional reactivity and escalating negative behavior. Without intervention

these individuals are unable to learn that trust in relationships is possible or how to act differently in order to elicit positive attention from others. Finally, children who have an ambivalent/resistant attachment style grow up with a low tolerance for distress or frustration resulting from the inconsistency in caregiver responses experienced in infancy. They do not feel that it is safe to explore the world have no sense that there is a trustworthy base they can rely on to ground them and keep them secure. The child grows to believe it is unlikely that others in their world will provide comfort when they become distressed. This results in one of two behavior patterns in adult relationships. The child may withdraw from others until they have no significant relationships in their life or they may become entirely dependent on others in an effort to keep them in their life. These children may appear cold and aloof or clingy and immature. They are unable to cope with negative emotions perceiving even neutral situations as stressful and retreat behind a shell or become hysterical as even low levels of stress overwhelm them (Weinfeld, Sroufe & Egeland, 2000).

References

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