

Things to Consider About Attachment

According to attachment theory, infants and young children communicate attachment behavior to get their caregiver's attention or to be in their proximity. A caregiver's consistent response to these signals is necessary for the infant's physical survival and healthy psychological development. Insecure and secure attachment refer to specific attachment behavior patterns that the infant shows, typically when under stress.

Attachment at Different Ages & Stages

0-2 Months: When the infant is between 0-8 weeks of age, the stage for developing secure attachment is being set. The infant may distinguish between caregivers but in general displays little preference. Baby separation anxiety in relation to the mother has not kicked in yet. *Attachment Behaviours at this age can include...* **Crying, smiling, babbling and sucking to achieve and maintain the attention and proximity of the mother.**

2-6 Months: Towards the latter part of the first half year, the child starts to distinguish more clearly between known and unknown figures. The child starts to get a sense of how their caregiver will react when they are anxious or distressed. The infant's early expectation of responsiveness lays the ground for the specific attachment behavior the infant will develop in half a year's time. *Attachment Behaviours at this age can include...* **Reaching out for, grasping hold of and clinging to the caregiver.**

6-11 Months: the baby has developed a clear understanding as to who his/her primary caregiver is. Attachment *symptoms* are triggered by... **strangers** are not yet perceived as a real threat but they may make the baby uncomfortable and wary...some infants show the beginning of baby separation anxiety while others have it full throttle by now.

11-24 Months: The child's attachment behavior is very clear. The child is very conscious of good strategies for reaching the desired proximity of his or her caregiver. *Attachment Strategies include....* **Clinging to, crawling and walking towards the caregiver** if the child feels his or her security is threatened by either strangers or the caregiver's leaving.

2-4 Years: The child starts to see the caregiver as an independent person with his/her own agenda and goals. The child **realizes that other people have feelings** and goals and starts to navigate this. When approaching 3 years, the child doesn't see physical separation as such a threat anymore. With the development of mental consciousness the child starts to enter a phase where negotiation and compromise can be successfully applied. The child may avoid separation distress if there is a plan for the caregiver's departure and arrival.

4-5 Years: The child's need for independence and further exploration is growing in tune with his or her ability to cope with separation. However, the child still faces many new skills to be acquired in a world that may still occasionally seem threatening, so the child may still want to stay close to their caregiver for protection, comfort and a sense of togetherness.

School Age: Attachment issues are less physical and more psychological. The character of the need for attachment has changed into awareness of availability rather than direct physical proximity: The child doesn't need to be near their caregiver as long as they know that the caregiver is available if needed. The child also starts to see the parents as partners with whom they will strive to have a fulfilling relationship and are more willing to make compromises that satisfy all needs and not just their own.

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Questions to Ask Yourself About Attachment

- Is the child showing behavioural indicators of distress?
- Is the child having difficulty with regulation? (Incessant crying, temper tantrums, difficulty soothing, etc.)
- Can the parent recognize the child has a mind and feelings? Is the parent sensitive to the child's views and feelings? Is the parent able to empathize with the child?
- How do the parent and child interact? How does the child respond to the parent?
- How does the child react when you arrive? How do they interact with you?
- How does the child show distress? Do they seek out their caregiver?
- How does the parent act on separation from the child? How does the child react?
- How does the parent act on reunion with the child? How does the child react?
- Does the parent comfort the child when they cry? How so?
- Have parents experienced any significant losses or traumas?
- Is there any history of domestic violence? Mental health problems? Substance Use?
- What is the parent's experience of care? Who was their go-to caregiver and how did that caregiver respond when they were sick/scared/hurt?
- What do the caregiver's adult relationships look like? Who do they trust?
- What is your biggest worry regarding the attachment relationship?
- What impresses you most about the child's relationship with their parent?
- Where do the child and parent appear to be having the biggest struggles in their relationship?

Questions to ask the Caregiver About Attachment

- What strategies does the child use to get attention when in distress?
- How do you know when your child is distressed?
- What does your child do to communicate they are sad/scared/hurt? How does your child know that you are there to help?
- When you think about your relationship with your child, what makes you feel most proud? What would your child say is the best part about their relationship with you?
- What would your child say is the best thing about how you respond? What would your child say is the worst part about the way you respond?
- Has there ever been a time when you've felt rejected by your child? Would your child say there are times they feel rejected by you? Tell me more about those times
- Has there ever been a time when you've felt frightened by your child? Would your child say there are times they feel frightened by you? Tell me more
- How do you think your relationship with the child is shaping his/her personality?
- Do you see any similarities regarding how you respond when in distress and how your child responds? Are there any differences? Does anything worry you about those responses?
- Are there any setbacks in the child's development that you worry are your fault?
- How does child relate to other adults? How does child relate to other children?
- Who was your go-to growing up? What did they do when you were sick/scared/hurt?

- What supports do you need to better understand how to help the child learn to see you as secure?
(* * Neither list is exhaustive but are to prompt reflection and conversation on attachment!)

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