

ATTACHMENT DISORDER: WHAT IS IT?

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There is a current concern about children's ability to bond and attach to significant figures in their environment, primarily to their parents. If attachment does not take place, then the resulting Attachment Disorder has a profound impact upon the child's life. In a nutshell, attachment is the emotional hook up between the child and his environment and the hook up starts with the parents. Children who have been abused and neglected in the early years, particularly within the first two years of life are highly susceptible to an Attachment Disorder. Children with Attachment Disorders often get depressed and withdrawn and fail to thrive. As they grow up their emotional investment in other people and in pleasing them is poor at best.

An example is *M.F.* a three-year-old boy who, during his first two years of life, was left with a series of different care givers. These ranged from mother's friends to people she had casually met in a bar. On one occasion she simply did not come back for the child. The caregiver who had him called the Department of Human Services and he was placed in foster care. At the time I saw him, he was virtually a little animal. He would throw chairs across the room and lash out indiscriminately at the frustration. He would bite a chair or his own arm if it got in his way. If not frustrated and coaxed he turned out to have a normal intelligence and was not psychotic. He simply had no frustration tolerance and no investment in people or in pleasing them. After a year in foster care he was making a fragile and brittle attachment to the foster family but his foster mother was suffering from "battle fatigue" and was on the verge of giving up.

In extreme cases these youngsters are very difficult to parent because they seem to take and not give anything back. There is very little gratification in parenting them and when they do seem to show some gratitude for nurturance they quickly snatch it back. What causes attachment to take place? A child's natural drive is to attach and the process must be actively interfered with to be stopped. Basically, the child sends signals such as sucking, rooting, touching, crying, smiling, etc. The mother in turn responds to these signals with nurturance, smiling, cuddling, mutual gaze and mutual babbling that encourages attachment. We think a mother begins attaching to her child about the fourth month of pregnancy when she first feels movement. To the best of our knowledge attachment for the child starts at birth and the best bonding takes place in the first months of life. Although no one can say for sure, it is thought that attachment during the first two years is the most significant.

As the child begins to move away from the mother and explore his or her environment, the attachment issue is very important. The more secure the attachment the freer the child is to be creative and curious. A good attachment within the first two years of life sets up several systems in the child. It lays down a basic level of trust that the child's needs will be met. The child gets a sense that grown ups can be counted on to keep him or her safe and that the world is a predictable place. Attachment and the parents' response to the child's effort to attach are also the basis for the child learning cause and effect. If one time the child cries when he is hungry and he gets fed, the next time he gets ignored, the third time he gets slapped around, he will not make a connection between his

behavior and how the environment responds because it has never responded predictably. The result is a child who makes no connection between what he or she does and the consequences or punishment. The only thing the child feels is wrong is that they were caught and punished. These youngsters are indiscriminate in terms of their relationships with other people and will go to strangers for attention as much as they go to family. They tend to exploit people around them rather than develop relationships. They tend to have very little empathy with other people and can be very cruel and at the same time not understand the importance of what they have done to others.

While Attachment Disorders are not very frequent in the general population, they are considerably more frequent in children who are placed in foster homes as well as adoptive homes. Many of these children come out of abusive, neglectful homes which have produced the Attachment Disorder in the first place. When a child is removed from the home or the birth family they are often placed in foster care. To the extent they can, the child may be able to make an attachment to the foster family and then be moved into an adoptive home. Often the child feels re-abused because they feel abandoned one more time or they are convinced that adults are of no help. In either case the adoptive family must move cautiously in their efforts to engage the child and should not expect the child to blend right in. While there may be "honeymoon" period for the child in which they seem to get along fine, the family cannot afford to honeymoon. Rather the rules and structure should be in place from day one and the child should not be allowed to get away with anything that the family will not want to have to live with later on.

Since these children have lived with a great deal of unpredictability, predictability is very important. The family must be prepared to follow through on any promises or expectations. Immediate response to behavior will enhance the child's ability to make the connection between their behavior and the environment's response to it. These children need their territory and need to have their boundaries respected. Thus, being overwhelmed with affection is terrifying for them. The family must be willing to hang in and maintain the structure as the child fights any efforts at attachment. This may be difficult at times, but it is important to remember that however tenuous the attachment the child may be able to make (if a bond can be made between an adoptive family and the child) the chain of Attachment Disorder has been broken and the child is less likely to pass Attachment Disorders on to their own children.