



What is Attachment?

As infants, we learn a great deal from the interactions we have with our parents.

A lot has been written about **attachment theory**, but the gist of it is that babies and children use their early experiences with caregivers to set-up expectations about themselves and their relationships with others.

Secure attachment

If a parent responds in a consistent and sensitive manner, a baby will learn that their parents/carers will comfort them when they are distressed. In turn, developing a sense that they are worthy of being loved and supported. Children who develop a secure attachment (or bond) with their parents are then better able to manage their emotions and form meaningful relationships with others in later life.

Dr Daniel J. Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry, proposes that to foster secure attachment, children need to be:

- **Seen** – perceived deeply and empathetically, using what Dr Siegal calls “mindsight” to attempt to understand the mind behind their behaviour.
- **Safe** – avoid actions and responses that frighten or hurt them.
- **Soothed** – help them cope with any difficult emotions and/or situations.
- **Secure** – help them develop an internalised sense of wellbeing.

With a secure base, children are better able to explore their interests and develop their sense of self-worth. In turn, allowing them to cope better with life’s challenges.

Insecure attachment

If a parent’s response is inconsistent and unreliable, a child may develop an insecure attachment style of which there are three subtypes:

- **Anxious-ambivalent.** Known as *anxious* or *anxious-preoccupied* attachment in adulthood, a child learns that their caregiver's behaviour is unpredictable. When crying out for attention, their caregiver only sometimes responds and so the child may become distrustful. They desperately want affection and are happy and content when they receive it, so cling to their caregiver, becoming very distressed when they try to leave. In adulthood, this attachment style is associated with a fear of abandonment.
- **Anxious-avoidant.** Known as *avoidant* or *avoidant-dismissive* attachment in adulthood, a child will develop this attachment style when a caregiver regularly disregards or rejects their emotional needs. This style of parenting tends to encourage a premature sense of independence in children. For example, shaming a child for showing emotion, using phrases like "stop crying" or "grow up", becoming irritated when their child is upset or afraid or ignoring their child's cries of distress. As a result, the child learns to suppress their emotional needs as they have learnt that outward displays of emotion are met with rejection, irritability, or punishment.
- **Fearful-avoidant.** Known as *disorganised* attachment, this form of attachment is often observed in children who have experienced trauma or abuse. During infancy, a child's caregiver may have acted chaotically, and perhaps even aggressively towards them, causing a child to see them as "scary". The parent may be incredibly loving at times but then quite harmful at others. The child learns to fear for their own safety as they are unable to predict their caregiver's behaviour.

It is important to note that caregivers may not intentionally neglect their child's needs. Parenting is an incredibly hard job and people typically parent in the way they themselves were parented.

Attachment networks

It is not just our early childhood experiences that dictate our attachment style and ability to form and sustain relationships. Our friends and partners play an important role too. We can have different attachment styles in different types of relationships and so it is important to develop strong attachment networks.

According to psychologists, we have multiple different attachment figures, or people we look to for support. In fact, the average person has between 5-7 "figures" in their attachment network or close support group. This network may comprise of parents, close friends, and partners and each relationship is important for different reasons.

Positive friendships are an important part of the journey to adulthood. They help young people learn important social and emotional skills, developing their sensitivity to other people's thoughts and feelings. Having a good support network of friends provides:

- A sense of belonging
- Confidence, acceptance, and support
- A safe space to discuss growing up and the changes that come with puberty
- Experience managing tensions and difficult situations with others
- A chance to experience early romantic and sexual relationships
- A social group within which they can develop their interests and experiment with identities and ideas.

It is never too late to develop healthy relationships whether that's with a parent, child, friend, or partner.

The first step is to develop reflection skills. Daniel A. Hughes Ph.D., the founder of Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) emphasises the importance of reflection within a context of safety and exploration, Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy (PACE). By reflecting on past experiences using the principles of PACE, young people can grow and build strong, meaningful, and *secure* relationships that support them in maintaining good mental wellbeing.

Further reading and information

- For more information on attachment theory: <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-attachment-theory-2795337>.
- Visit Daniel A. Hughes' website for more information about his work on attachment: <http://www.danielhughes.org/home.html>.
- Dr Daniel J. Siegel, has a series of YouTube videos explaining attachment: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDCtwyPSjhINEz4xuzxt6Tdsnyt2vChiB>
- Dr Daniel J. Siegel, 4 "S" s explained with strategies for promoting each: <https://drdansiegel.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/POSU-Refrigerator-Sheet.pdf>