

What is Attachment and Attachment Problems in Children?

Children, like other living beings, are born with a drive to survive. Infants do this by staying close to parents to get safety and be comforted when they are distressed. When parents are protective and responsive children feel secure and develop a secure “attachment style.” Parents become a “secure base” from which children can explore their environment and learn to handle separation without serious distress.

Children are believed to develop “working models” for relationships from these early experiences that influence how they think about themselves and about other people. For example, children whose parents are protective and responsive learn that they are worthy (positive self) and that other people can be counted on (positive other).

Sometimes children have early experiences with parents that lead them to develop an insecure attachment style.

Inconsistent Parent

Children experience these parents as sometimes being there for them and sometimes not being there. This causes intense anxiety in children. Children may react by being whiney, clingy, and demanding or have angry outbursts. These children are trying to get their needs for comforting met and express their distress.

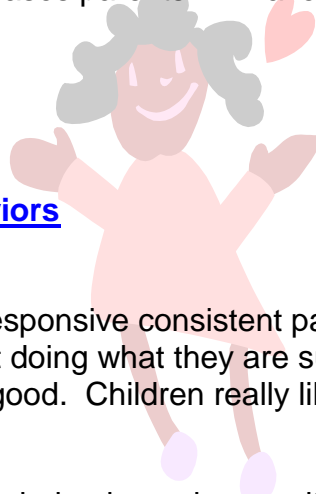
Unresponsive Parent

Children experience these parents as not being there for them. They handle their anxiety by suppressing or mastering it. The children may react by being aloof, distant, unusually independent, unaffectionate and showing indiscriminate friendliness to strangers. These children are learning not to rely on others to meet their needs.

Violent/Abusive/Unpredictable Parent

Children experience these parents as frightening and dangerous as well as sometimes a source of comfort. They may respond by being manipulative, sneaky, deceptive and showing superficial emotionality or fake sweetness. The children are trying to control and influence their parents to avoid being harmed, but also get their needs met. The children may appear to be driven primarily by meeting their own needs, even at the expense of others.

Children adapt to their situations and learn ways of relating for survival. There may be mixtures of styles in a particular child. Abused and neglected children are much more likely to have insecure attachment styles than other children, although there can be other causes. These ways of relating can persist even when the parent improves or children can transfer the style to new parents (e.g., relative, foster or adoptive parents). Although the behaviors can cause aggravation, frustration, disappointment or even anger, that is not the intent of the children. It is important to realize that it may take a long time for children's style to change and in some cases parents will have to make adjustments to the children's style.



Dealing with Difficult Behaviors

All children respond best to responsive consistent parenting. Being praised for good behavior even if it is just doing what they are supposed to makes children more likely to keep on being good. Children really like attention from parents or other caregivers.

Ignoring irritating or obnoxious behavior as long as it isn't harmful or dangerous is one of the best ways to eliminate it. Sometimes this is hard, but responding is a way of giving attention. Because children crave attention, negative attention is as good as positive if that is easier to get.

It is really important to be clear about what is expected and follow through on consequences when children disobey or act up. Being firm and calm when dealing with problem behavior helps a lot. Harsh reactions or punishment tend to make things worse

One way to cut down on negative interactions with children is to try to cut down on asking questions or giving instructions as the main way of interacting with them. When there are problems in a parent-child relationship, questions and instructions are an opportunity for a child to be disobedient or defiant.

Some of the ways to do this are to get in the habit of just commenting on what a child is doing (e.g., I see you are drawing a picture) and repeating what a child says (e.g., you said you played at school today). Or when a child is talking to say, "tell me more about that" and then wait and listen.

Parenting Tips for Children with Attachment Problems

Anxious style

Children who have an anxious style need extra reassurance. Giving constant reinforcement even when it doesn't seem like it should be necessary can help. Telling them many times every day that they are loved or cared for, and giving lots of praise whenever they are being good will build up a sense of security over time.

Avoidant style

Children who are avoidant may be standoffish or not be very responsive at first. Being respectful of why they have learned to be this way by not pushing them into emotional closeness or being too physically affectionate is a good way to start. A more gradual approach to getting close and not taking it as a personal rejection gives children a chance to learn that other people can be counted on. Unfortunately in some cases parents may have to adjust their own expectations or desires to accept the level of connection that these children can give.

Disorganized style

Children with this relationship style are tough to handle because they may behave in ways that are very upsetting or even a little bit scary. Sometimes it seems like they are trying to provoke parents on purpose or that they don't really care about hurting other people. They have probably learned that adults can hurt children or don't really care about them.

It is important to be firm and clear about expectations and follow through on consequences when they misbehave. The children may act like they don't care and this can lead parents to increase the consequences to get a reaction. This won't help and it can make things worse. It is especially important not to get forceful because the children will only get madder.

At the same time it may be especially helpful to let these children feel like they can have some control over their lives. Giving them choices after spelling out the options and consequences lets them know that they can make a difference in what happens. These children may respond best to seeing what the benefits are for them in behaving well, as opposed to doing it because it is the right thing to do.

Dealing with Your Own Reactions

Don't take it personally; keep reminding yourself that the children learned how to survive in a bad situation. They now need to learn how to survive in a family where adults will meet their needs.

Keep to the basic principles of being responsive and consistent. Don't be harsh or forceful.

Come up with a plan for how to handle the specific attachment problems and stick to it.

Be patient. The attachment style was learned over time and will take time to change. Try to focus on what you are offering the children and celebrate the "little successes."

Have supports to help with hurt feelings, frustrations, and disappointment.

