



ATTACHMENT PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN

A Resource for Parents & Caregivers

Children, like other living beings, are born with a drive to survive. Infants do this by staying close to parents to find safety and seek comfort when 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. They learn to handle separation without serious distress.

Children are believed to develop “working models” for relationships from these early experiences. These 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. These may include:

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 clingy and demanding. They may whine 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 or unaffectionate. They may show indiscriminate friendliness to strangers. These children are learning not to rely on others to meet their needs.

ABUSIVE/ UNPREDICTABLE PARENT:

Children experience these parents as scary and dangerous, and at times, a source of comfort. They may respond by being manipulative, sneaky, or deceptive. They may show superficial emotionality or fake sweetness. The children are trying to influence their parents to avoid being harmed and to get their needs met. A child may appear to be motivated by only 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 an individual child. Abused and neglected children are much more likely to have insecure attachment styles than other children. However, there can be other causes. These ways of relating can remain even when the parent improves. Children can also transfer the style to new parents (relatives, foster or adoptive parents). Although the behaviors can cause frustration, disappointment or even anger, that is not the intent of the child. It may take a long time for a child's style to change. Sometimes, parents need to make adjustments to the child's style.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS

All children respond best to responsive and 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.** Then **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.

CAREGIVER TIPS FOR CHILDREN WITH ATTACHMENT PROBLEMS

- **Anxious Style:** Children who have an anxious style need extra reassurance. Giving frequent 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 can help. It 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 may have learned that adults can hurt children or don't really care about them.

CAREGIVER TIPS (cont'd)

- **Disorganized style (continued):** 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.
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COPING WITH YOUR OWN REACTIONS

- **Don't take it personally.** Keep reminding yourself that **the children have 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.** Try to avoid being harsh or forceful.
 - Come up with a plan for how to handle the specific attachment problems and **stick to the plan.**
 - 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."
 - **Seek support** to help with hurt feelings, frustrations, and disappointment.
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WE ARE HERE TO HELP

- For more information about the **Foster Care Assessment Program (FCAP)**, visit the website at www.fcaponline.org. Or contact the FCAP Coordinator at 206-744-1600.
 - The **Harborview Abuse & Trauma Center** provides trauma therapy and parenting support. Call us at 206-744-1600 to speak with a social worker.
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