

Parent, Family Functioning and Parent–Child Relationships Attachment Theory

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Workshop Overview

- Fundamental concepts in attachment theory
- The attachment tool box: Patterns of attachment
 - Organized patterns of attachment
 - Disorganized attachment
- Questions for infant mental health

Fundamental Concepts in Attachment Theory

It's in our genes

Why is attachment so important?

- Becoming attached to her parents is part of the baby's biology.
- Attachment Behavioral System
 - Primary motivational system
 - Human primate inheritance
 - Relationships
 - Emotion regulation
 - Neurological underpinnings
 - Evolutionary function = protection
- Infant or child's goal
 - Physical, psychological proximity to consistently available attachment figures

What is attachment?

- Attachment relationship
 - Child and attachment figure
 - Endures over space and time
 - Tendency for stability, but can be changed
- Caregiving system
 - Attachment figure has her/his own built-in biologically based behavioral system
 - To protect and provide care for the child

Attachment Figure

- Caregiving system separate from attachment system
 - Reciprocal to attachment
- “Haven of safety”
- “Felt security”
- Anticipate & buffer

Can nonbiological parents be attachment figures?

- Yes, when they are placed in a consistent or regular caregiving role – like a parent
 - Sensitive
 - Attuned
- Who can be alternative attachment figures?
 - Grandmother/grandfather
 - Other adult family members
 - Foster mother/father
 - Adoptive mother
 - Day care caregiver
 - Nanny or au pair

How do I know a child is attached?

- ▶ 6/8–12 months: The infant shows us that she prefers the parent
 - Signals (cry, smile, babble, call, reach)
 - Wants to get close to the parent (follow, walk/run toward)
 - Notices the parent's return following absence
- ▶ When? (I.e., what activates attachment)
 - **SEPARATION**
 - Parent departs
 - Parent discourages proximity
 - **FRIGHTENED**
 - Pain
 - Sick
 - Tired
 - Hunger
 - Strangers or strangeness
 - Rebuff

Does attachment behavior change?

- Children need attachment figures throughout their lives, so what changes?
- Children ages 12–36 months all respond intensely to attachment situations.
- Situations become less intense when children are 4 and 5 years old. They should not need to be as close or to be held as much as babies.
- Separation and frightening situations activate attachment at every age.

How does attachment influence development?

- Sense of self
- Affective experience, emotion regulation
- Influences the child's ability to
 - Explore and learn
 - Autonomy
 - Cooperation with others
 - Interact with peers and make friends
 - Developmental and psychiatric risk
 - Internalizing behavior
 - Externalizing behavior
 - Ability to buffer and cope with stress and life trauma

Patterns of Attachment

Organized Attachment

Security

- Feelings of being free from harm, not apprehensive about danger (Bowlby, 1975)
- Confidence in attachment figures
 - less susceptible to chronic or intense fear
 - Available and accessible
 - Accurate reflection of real experience with attachment figures
- Buffer child from risk

Secure

Child – Attachment System

- I am worthy of care.
- I can be direct and persistent in telling you when I am tense or frightened.
- You are prompt, sensitive and flexible and not intrusive.
- I can adjust my needs too (goal-corrected).
- We enjoy being together (synchrony).

Mother – Caregiving System

- You are worthy of care.
- I am confident that I know when you are tense or frightened.
- I am confident that I know what to do.
- I think hard about your safety and security and can try to buffer you in the future, even if I wasn't as successful as I would like this time.
- I am prompt and not intrusive.
- We enjoy being together.

What happens when attachment figure does not provide security?

- Question: How can be close to my attachment figure even though she is not sensitive to my signals and does not anticipate my needs very well ?
- I have a backup strategy that gets me close enough. I'm okay.

Insecurity

- Apprehensive about danger, separation, attachment figure accessibility
- Risk factor: Cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, stress response (HPA axis response, Gunnar & Cheatham, 2003)
- Two organized strategies/dimensions
 - 1) Deactivation = distance in the service of attachment
 - 2) Disconnection = overly close hoping for care

Deactivation

- Keep my distance
- Cool down how upset I look to others, especially my mother
- Ignore, avoid my mother while I get in control of my upset and anger
- Focus on exploration instead of attachment needs

Avoidant

Child-Attachment System

- I am not worthy of care.
- I don't want to be too close.
- I am anxious and cannot show you because you want me to be strong and independent.
- Pushing me away makes me angry.
- I'll stay close to you for my own good, but I have to avoid and ignore you when I am angry.
- I divert my attachment needs to exploration.

Mother-Caregiving System

- You deserve the basic care that keeps you healthy and safe.
- I want you to be strong and independent.
- I am uncomfortable with closeness, fear and anger.
- I rely on social rules or trained professionals for the rules of child care and interaction.
- I am a good teacher and our best times together are learning and exploring.

Cognitive Disconnection

- Stay close
- I cannot tell you why I'm upset
- So I'm
 - Confused
 - Worried
 - Angry
- I flip back and forth between being happy and distressed

Ambivalent–Preoccupied

Child–Attachment system

- I am uncertain about if I am worthy of care or not. You confuse me.
- I want to be close but cannot predict when you will let me. I'm worried. But I am also really happy when we can get close.
- I have to amplify my distress so you will notice.
- Your unpredictability and off the wall responses make me angry.
- You don't like it when I tell you I am angry.
- I am too anxious to explore because I feel unsafe when I am away from you.

Mother–Caregiving system

- I am not confident and don't know what you are trying to tell me or what you need.
- Staying close to me is enough to keep you safe.
- I'm confused and anxious a lot of the time and relieved when I can shift my attention away from your care.
- Our relationship is warm and cuddly. I enjoy it best when we are “nesting.”

Patterns of Attachment

Disorganized Attachment

Why Disorganized?

- Organized attachment behavior (establishing proximity to the attachment figure)
 - *Blocked*
 - *Disrupted*
- The attachment system is dysregulated. I can't seek or get the protection, care and comfort I need.
 - *Shut down*
 - *Dysregulated, out of control*

What disorganizes attachment?

Family Factors

- Unresolved loss from past or present
- Maltreatment
- Drugs or alcohol
- Depression
- High conflict divorce, overnight visitation
- Foster care or adoption

Look at these families through an “attachment lens,” what fundamental experience do children in these families have in common?

What disorganizes attachment?

Child factors

- Temperament
 - No consistent contribution
- Developmental Status
 - Age
 - No contribution
 - Disability
 - May heighten parental helplessness and abdication of care
 - Especially neurological deficits
 - Severe separation experience
 - Poor foster or institutional care

Mother's Caregiving System

Helpless, Cannot protect child

Mother's past

Representation

- ❖ Unresolved AAI
- ❖ Role Reversal
- ❖ Hostile Helpless
 - identification with aggressor
- ❖ No protection from parental rage/ cumulative trauma

Current loss, trauma
Marital conflict

Mother's Behavior

- ❖ Frightened
- ❖ Frightening
- ❖ Interaction & communication failure

Adverse separation
Biological diathesis?

Child
Disorganization
**Failed protection, Vulnerable, Helpless,
Out of control**

Attachment and Caregiving “Breakdown”

- Attachment becomes disorganized when the child repeatedly experiences
 - Parental abdication of care
 - Parental helplessness and profound inability to provide care

At exactly those moments when

- The attachment system is strongly activated
- And the child is frightened and distressed.

Attachment-caregiving breaks down.

The child’s subjective experience is “abdication of care”

The child feels alone, unprotected, abandoned, and left to fend for herself.

Major Indices of Disorganization

- Disorganization and disorientation when attachment is activated (Main & Solomon, 1990)
 - Contradictory displays
 - Sequential or simultaneous approach/avoidance
 - Odd, misdirected, asymmetrical behavior
 - Frightened
 - Standstill
 - Freezing, stilling, lethargic, depressed, dissociative
- Controlling (Main & Cassidy, 1988; Cassidy, Marvin et al., 1987)
 - Punitive
 - Caregiving

Disorganized

Child – Attachment System

- I am not worthy of care because you abandon me.
- It frightens me to feel so unprotected by the only person in the world who can save me.
- I act very afraid or I hide it.
- I am helpless and out of control.
- You're out of control and scary.
- I have to protect myself since you don't protect me.
- I have to take care of you so you don't disappear.

Mother – Caregiving System

- I am frightened, out of control and helpless.
- You are the devil incarnate. I am enraged. You are punitive and out of control. I'll fight to control you.
- You are the angel who is going to save me. You are perfect and make me so happy.

Questions for Infant Mental Health

Questions
Conclusions

Questions for Infant Mental Health

- Why is attachment important?
- What are the fundamental differences between secure and insecure infants and young children (organized insecure, disorganized)?
- What kinds of tools do we have to observe attachment “in action” when we are not using a formal assessment such as the Strange Situation?
- How can we help parents foster security in their young children?

Conclusions

- Organized attachment is essential for normative development
- Security is a buffer against developmental risk
- Factors that contribute to insecurity, including disorganization, can include both characteristics of the parents, parent life style and the situation in which the family lives.
- Understanding the tools for observing different patterns of attachment can help us better understand how to support parents' caregiving.