

Attachment Patterns: How Early Bonds Shape Your Future

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There is an extensive body of research demonstrating a significant association between attachment organisations and children's functioning across multiple domains. Early insecure attachment does not necessarily predict difficulties, but it is a liability for the child, particularly if similar parental behaviours continue throughout childhood. Compared to that of securely attached children, the adjustment of insecure children in many spheres of life is not as soundly based, putting their future relationships in jeopardy. Although the link is not fully established by research and there are other influences besides attachment, secure infants are more likely to become socially competent than their insecure peers. Relationships formed with peers influence the acquisition of social skills, intellectual development and the formation of social identity. Classification of children's peer status (popular, neglected or rejected) has been found to predict subsequent adjustment. Insecure children, particularly avoidant children, are especially vulnerable to family risk. Their social and behavioural problems increase or decline with deterioration or improvement in parenting. However, an early secure attachment appears to have a lasting protective function. As with attachment to parental figures, subsequent experiences may alter the course of development.

The most concerning pattern is disorganized attachment. About 80% of maltreated infants are likely to be classified as disorganized, as opposed to about 12% found in non-maltreated samples. Only about 15% of maltreated infants are likely to be classified as secure. Children with a

disorganized pattern in infancy tend to show markedly disturbed patterns of relationships. Subsequently their relationships with peers can often be characterised by a "fight or flight" pattern of alternate aggression and withdrawal. Affected maltreated children are also more likely to become maltreating parents. A minority of maltreated children do not, instead achieving secure attachments, good relationships with peers and non-abusive parenting styles. The link between insecure attachment, particularly the disorganized classification, and the emergence of childhood psychopathology is well-established, although it is a non-specific risk factor for future problems, not a pathology or a direct cause of pathology in itself. In the classroom, it appears that ambivalent children are at an elevated risk for internalising disorders, and avoidant and disorganized children, for externalising disorders.

One explanation for the effects of early attachment classifications may lie in the internal working model mechanism. Internal models are not just "pictures" but refer to the feelings aroused. They enable a person to anticipate and interpret another's behaviour and plan a response. If an infant experiences their caregiver as a source of security and support, they are more likely to develop a positive self-image and expect positive reactions from others. Conversely, a child from an abusive relationship with the caregiver may internalise a negative self-image and generalise negative expectations into other relationships. The internal working models on which attachment behaviour is based show a degree of continuity and stability. Children are likely to fall into the same categories as their primary caregivers indicating that the caregivers' internal working models affect the way they relate to their child. This effect has been observed to continue across three generations. Bowlby believed that the earliest models formed were the most likely to persist because they existed in the subconscious. Such models are not, however, impervious to change given further relationship experiences; a minority of children have different attachment classifications with different caregivers.

There is some evidence that gender differences in attachment patterns of adaptive significance begin to emerge in middle childhood. Insecure attachment and early psychosocial stress indicate the presence of environmental risk (for example poverty, mental illness, instability, minority status, violence). This can tend to favour the development of strategies for earlier reproduction. However, different patterns have different adaptive values for males and females. Insecure males tend to adopt avoidant strategies, whereas insecure females tend to adopt anxious/ambivalent strategies, unless they are in a very high risk environment. Adrenarche is proposed as the endocrine mechanism underlying the reorganisation of insecure attachment in middle childhood.