

Secure attachment

Secure attachment in a consistent and reliable relationship with a loving, attuned and empathic parent or carer in the early years of life sets up an inner template within the child of trust in themselves in other people and in life. They carry a sense of themselves as lovable and loved; they know it is safe to ask for and make use of help, when needed, but also enjoy independence. They are able to be open to curiosity, exploring, learning, and making the most of their worlds. At the same time, securely attached children are most likely to grow up as empathic and responsive adults.

Conversely, children who do not experience consistent, reliable, loving and empathic parenting may grow up with an insecure attachment, an inner template of distrust in life, other people and themselves. They carry a sense of themselves as either partially or wholly unlovable, and unloved; they are anxious about asking for help and may not be able to make use of it, if offered. They may be compulsively help-seeking, or strive to retain control and resist assistance if offered. Their capacity for curiosity, exploring and learning may all be hampered, and they are unable to make the most of their worlds. Whilst many such children growing up do eventually find a secure attachment somewhere in their lives, which can help to modify the original 'inner template' in a positive direction, some do not, and their capacity for empathy and responsiveness may remain inhibited.

The term 'attachment' was coined by John Bowlby, a paediatrician and analyst in the early 1960's. His belief that mothers and babies were best able to bond if they were not separated after birth affected maternity care for every generation thereafter.

Further reading

Why Love Matters (2014) Gerhardt, S. (Routledge)

Brain Based Parenting (2012) Baylin, J. and Hughes, D. (Norton)

Attachment in the Classroom (2005) Geddes, H. (Worth Publishing)