

## **The Significance of Early Bonding**

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From Judeo-Christian imagery of Mother Earth and God the Father to early philosophers including Locke and Rousseau, the parent-child bond has been viewed as the most significant of all human interaction. Freud (1917) portrayed the infant-mother relationship as the prototype of all later love relations and later Erickson (1963) argued that the first psychosocial crisis of “basic trust versus mistrust” could only be resolved in the sense of security and confidence achieved by the infant with his or her caregiver. Today, such assertions can be observed in our everyday family experiences, as in the young toddler who hides timidly behind his protective mother’s leg or the child who falls calmly asleep in her trusted father’s arms.

Classic works by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), Ainsworth (1963, 1967), and Blatz (1966) brought our attention to the significance of parental bonding to children’s cognitive, physical, and socioemotional adjustment and interaction. Empirical evidence suggested that security, comfort, sensitivity, and a sense of safety and support from a primary caregiver paved the way into the later growing years. Today we know, for example, that parental behaviors influence the physical growth (e.g., weight, head circumference) of their infants (DeWitt, Sparks, Swank, Smith, Denson, & Landry, 1997) and that parent’s actions and support are critical components for children to be able to accomplish and attain new behavioral and motor skills (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), expressions and understandings of emotion (e.g., Maccoby, 1980), effective self-regulation and relationships with the social world (e.g., Stern, 1985). Such achievements will allow the child to eventually maintain his or her own physical and emotional health independent of their caregivers, setting the path that leads into adulthood.

As originally defined by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1973), attachment is an enduring affective bond characterized by a tendency to seek and maintain proximity to the primary caregiver. This is especially true when the child is frightened, ill, tired, or otherwise under stress and in need of care and protection. This behavioral tendency to seek proximity and contact from a caregiving figure when under stress is an evolutionary, instinctive, and biological function that ensures the survival of the child, and in turn, of the species (Bowlby, 1969). The behaviors used to seek proximity, such as crying, can be seen as a set of strategies used to communicate and signal need. Parental anticipation of infant needs and sensitivity to infant signals are therefore critical. How responsive and tolerant the parent is to the child’s needs is said to predispose the child to an attachment pattern, broadly defined as secure or insecure. Children whose primary caregiver is accessible, sensitive, and accepting of his or her desire to seek contact are more likely to have “felt security”. Children with this secure parent-child bond have, as a result, an internalized sense of being worthy of care, of being effective in eliciting care when required, and a sense of personal efficacy in dealing with most stressors. Children who have poor parent-child bonds, or whose parental figures are unresponsive or intolerant of a child’s distress, or who are absent, can experience insecure attachment and inadequate coping mechanisms.

Bowlby also considered the parent-child bond to be a critical component across the life span. More recent research has considered the longer-term effects of impaired attachment on the emotional and physical well-being beyond infancy. Studies show that a lack of parental availability, cohesiveness, and warmth, as well as feelings of detachment and a lack of acceptance by children, are associated with a broad array of mental health risks, including depression, anxiety, and hostility (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Kaslow, Deering, & Racusin, 1994), as well as a greater prevalence of physical health problems across childhood. For example, toddlers with certain chronic illnesses, such as asthma (Carson & Schauer, 1992) have a higher prevalence of insecure attachment as characterized by high levels of rejection by parents. Adolescents with low parental involvement or who report poor emotional attachment to their parent(s) are more likely to use substances such as marijuana and alcohol (Aro & Palosaari, 1992; Doherty & Needle, 1991).

While the above information is powerful, it is also important to note that as we grow older, we form other relationships, including those with siblings, teachers, and significant, close others. This is an important consideration given the fact that while parents are usually the most meaningful source of social support in early life, the support and influence from other people become salient as children's social worlds broaden. As such, it becomes critical that we hug our children tightly, but also teach them how to seek out love and emotional support from those around them. In today's busy world, it really does "Take a Village" to raise healthy children.

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