

Different Types of Parent-Child Relationships

There are different kinds of **attachment relationships** that can be put into different categories. These categories can describe children's relationships with both parents and childcare providers. Research has found that there are at least four attachment categories. The categories describe the ways that children act and the ways that adults act with the children. The strongest kind of attachment is called 'secure.' The way a parent or provider responds a child may lead to one of the four types of attachment categories. The way a child is attached to her parents also affects how she will behave around others when her parent is not around.

Sidebar: Children with ADHD, ODD, and other behavioral disorders are particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem. They frequently experience school problems, have difficulty making friends, and lag behind their peers in psychosocial development. They are more likely than other children to bully and to be bullied. Parents of children with behavior problems experience highly elevated levels of child-rearing stress, and this may make it more difficult for them to respond to their children in positive, consistent, and supportive ways.

1. Secure relationships. This is the strongest type of attachment. A child in this category feels he can depend on his parent or provider. He knows that person will be there when he needs support. He knows what to expect.

- The secure child usually plays well with other children his age.
- He may cry when his mother leaves. He will usually settle down if a friendly adult is there to comfort him.
- When parents pick him up from childcare, he is usually very happy to see them.
- He may have a hard time leaving childcare, though. This can be confusing if the child was upset when the parents left at the beginning of the day. It does not mean that the child is not happy to see the parents.

How do adults build secure attachment relationships?

- Adults are consistent when they respond to the child's needs.
- When a child cries, the adult responds in a lovingly or caring way.
- When a child is hungry, the adult feeds her fairly soon.
- When a child is afraid, the adult is there to take care of her.
- When the child is excited about something, the adults are excited about it, too.

Over time, a securely attached child has learned that he can rely on special adults to be there for him. He knows that, if he ever needs something, someone will be there to help. A child who believes this can then learn other things. He will use special adults as a secure base. He will smile at the adult and come to her to get a hug. Then he will move out and explore his world.

Note about different cultures: Parents and other caregivers show love in different ways in different cultures. In any culture, though, children can have good relationships with parents and providers. In all cultures, adults can build secure attachments if they are sensitive and respond to children's signals. The way they respond will be very different from one culture to another, however. Providers who work with children from different cultures should watch for differences. Ask parents and other people from that culture how they care for children.

2. Avoidant relationships. This is one category of attachment that is not secure. Avoidant children have learned that depending on parents won't get them that secure feeling they want, so they learn to take care of themselves.

- Avoidant children may seem too independent.
- They do not often ask for help, but they get frustrated easily.
- They may have difficulty playing with other children their age. They may be aggressive at times.
- Biting, hitting, pushing, and screaming are common for many children, but avoidant children do those things more than other children.
- Avoidant children usually do not build strong relationships with providers in their childcare setting.
- They don't complain when the parents leave them, and they usually do not greet them when the parents return. They know that the parents have returned, but it is almost like they want to punish them by ignoring them.
- They seem to try to care for themselves.

What kind of parent behavior is linked to this category of attachment?

- Parents respond to their children's needs, but it usually takes a while.
- When a child is hungry, the child will be fed, but probably after she's been waiting for a long time.
- When a child is frightened, she is usually left to deal with it on her own.
- When a child is excited about something, the parent may turn away or ignore her.
- The child gets used to not having her needs met, so she learns to take care of herself.

There are different reasons why parents might act this way. Some parents just don't know when their baby or child needs something. Other parents might think that it will make their child more independent if the parents do not give in to the child. Providers who have an avoidant child in their care may be able to help parents recognize and understand their children's needs.

3. Ambivalent relationships. Ambivalence (not being completely sure of something) is another way a child may be insecurely attached to his parents. Children who are ambivalent have learned that sometimes their needs are met, and sometimes they are not. They notice what behavior got their parents' attention in the past and use it over and over. They are always looking for that feeling of security that they sometimes get.

- Ambivalent children are often very clingy.
- They tend to act younger than they really are and may seem over-emotional.
- When older preschoolers or early-elementary children want an adult's attention, they might use baby talk or act like a baby.
- Ambivalent children often cry, get frustrated easily, and love to be the center of attention.
- They get upset if people aren't paying attention to them and have a hard time doing things on their own.
- Ambivalent children seem to latch onto everyone for short periods of time.
- They have a very hard time letting parents go at the beginning of the day, and the crying may last a long time.

What kind of parent behavior is linked to this category of attachment?

- When an infant is crying, these parents sometimes respond; sometimes they don't.
- When a child is hungry, she might be fed, but it is more likely that she will be fed when she's not hungry.
- When a child is frightened, she is ignored sometimes and overly comforted at other times.
- When a child is excited about something, a parent doesn't understand the child's excitement or responds to her in a way that does not fit.

4. Disorganized relationships. Disorganized children don't know what to expect from their parents. Children with relationships in the other categories have organized attachments. This means that they have all learned ways to get what they need, even if it is not the best way. This happens because a child learns to predict how his parent will react, whether it is positive or negative. They also learn that doing certain things will make their parents do certain things.

- Disorganized children will do things that seem to make no sense.
- Sometimes these children will speak really fast and will be hard to understand.
- Very young children might freeze in their footsteps for no apparent reason.
- Most disorganized children have a hard time understanding the feelings of other children.
- Disorganized children who are playing with dolls might act out scenes that are confusing and scary.
- Disorganized children may be very hard to understand. They may seem very different from day to day.

There are two types of disorganized attachments:

1. Controlling-Disorganized. Children who are controlling tend to be extremely bossy with their friends.
2. Caregiving-Disorganized. Children who are caregiving might treat other children in a childish way, acting like a parent.

What kind of parent behavior is linked to this category of attachment?

- The parents rarely respond to their needs when they are infants.
- If the parent does respond, the response usually does not fit.
- It is common for disorganized children to come from families in which some form of neglect or maltreatment is happening.
- It is also possible that these children may have one or more parents suffering from depression.

Source: Provider-Parent Partnerships
<http://www.ces.purdue.edu/providerparent/index.htm>
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