

TUESDAY 21ST APRIL 2020 SESSION 11

STAYING CONNECTED AND CURIOUS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Knowledge and understanding of attachment and trauma

Opening activity: Attachment Quiz

Are the following statements or True or False.

1. Young children bond easily with a wide variety of caregivers in the first two years of life.
2. The type of attachment relationship a parent forms with a young child has little effect on how the child's brain forms.
3. Infants in the first year who cry for food or comfort should not be picked up every time because they'll be "spoiled."
4. Young children really enjoy interaction but parents, carers need to be careful not to overstimulate them.
5. Young children who have not formed healthy attachments often can overcome this challenge through intensive and caring attention.

Attachment Theory was first proposed by John Bowlby in the 1960s, and he defined attachment as "*a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings*" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). It is *lasting*, 'cradle to grave' (Bowlby 1969, p.208). Whether it is secure or insecure, it provides the architecture and framework for later expectations of relationships and has impact throughout the lifespan. It is *psychological*, not only about 'cupboard love', that is getting food and other physiological needs met. The classic experiments of Harlow & Zimmerman with infant monkeys and their mothers showed conclusively that the cupboard love theory cannot usefully nor accurately describe the complexity of the attachment relationship, even in primates. (See <https://exploringyourmind.com/harlows-experiments-on-attachment-theory/> if you'd like to know more about the studies, but be aware that the videos make painful watching.) Studies with humans provide evidence that infants do indeed become attached to people who do not perform caregiving activities, including the delivery of food (e.g. the Glasgow Mothers, Schaffer and Emerson, 1964). Attachment is a *connectedness*, a bond, a relationship, that is reciprocal in nature. Although the child's *needs* are central, attachment cannot by its very nature be 'child centred', because attachment is about two people, an intimate dyad, and the needs and expectations of both are met (or not, as the case may be) within the connection. These three characteristics – *lasting; psychological; connectedness* - will be of vital importance to us later in the Staying Curious and Connected series, when we consider the role of schools in providing safe environments where the lengthy work of repair and trust-building can begin for those children who have not experienced healthy secure attachments at home.

Attachment theory emphasises the importance of children making secure, rewarding relationships with their main caregivers, particularly the primary caregiver, who is usually, but not necessarily, the child's mother, in the first three years of life.

Human infants are very vulnerable for a long time and need the presence and protection of carers who can support and safeguard survival for many years. They are dependent on both the physical and emotional availability of the adults who take care of them.

Quiz Reveal

The answer to the first three statements is FALSE; the answer to the last two statements is TRUE.

From research we know that:

1. Young children normally form strong attachments with one or two primary caregivers during the first two to three years of life, rather than many people. The primary care giver is normally, but not of necessity, the birth mother. The secondary caregivers form a strong support network around the primary care giver and baby, freeing up mother to spend as much time as possible with the baby. Without this network of support, the attachment bond can be compromised, as caring for a new baby is a full-time job.
2. The type of attachment relationship a child forms actually helps shape trillions of connections related to language, thinking, motor control and emotions in a baby's brain. In the context of positive, nurturing caregiving, there are up to two million new connections per second made between the cells in the baby's brain. We call this period the exuberant period, and we never see such high levels of connectivity again. The neural pathways are hardwired, sculpted, scaffolded, through repeated positive relational experiences. At one year, baby's brain more resembles an adult brain than a newborn's brain.
3. In the first year of life, babies respond best to immediate and consistent attention and comfort, and cannot be "spoiled" by it, or 'manipulate' their parents. Children who have been left to cry in infancy produce high levels of cortisol, which is toxic to the developing brain. They are quick to give up, often lack resilience and suffer from high anxiety.
4. Children need a stimulating environment, but overstimulation can be stressful and have negative side effects on children at times. It's really important to create downtime for just being, for all babies and children, and particularly for those who are quick to dysregulate.
5. Many interventions exist to help children form strong, secure attachments if this has been lacking in their early development. However, it's more appropriate to talk about 'moving beyond' trauma, rather than 'getting over' trauma. In addition to caring and intensive attention, children who have experienced early trauma need therapeutic environments, where healthy relationships flourish and thrive, and the lengthy work of repair can begin.

Questions for reflection

1. Who is the 'primary caregiver' for the child who does not have a secure attachment figure at home?
2. How can schools accommodate and support children who have overdeveloped survival responses and poor connections/inactivity in the thinking/conscious regions of the brain?

3. Children who have been left to cry in infancy produce high levels of cortisol, which is toxic to the developing brain. They are quick to give up, often lack resilience and suffer from high anxiety. How can schools recognise and respond to such children?
4. How can schools develop calming spaces and 'islands of intimacy' inside and outside the classroom for overstimulated children?
5. What challenges are there to schools in providing intensive and caring attention and therapeutic environments.
6. **Covid-19 relevance** Many mothers giving birth during the pandemic will not have the strong network of secondary caregivers around them when their baby arrives. Many are already reporting intense feelings of isolation, particularly if they live at a distance from their own parents and family. It has been suggested that post-partum depression may increase during the pandemic, which can contribute to insecure attachment. Consider how you and others in your setting can support new parents throughout the pandemic and what protective factors you can put in place to support parents and babies/toddlers whose attachment bond may have been disrupted through anxiety, loneliness, fear etc. during the pandemic?

On a positive note, conversely, many new parents are reporting that they are really enjoying having the time to be alone, in their own home with their baby. For some, this may even facilitate the development of a strong attachment bond. A friend of mine, who runs her own very successful business gave birth to a gorgeous little boy two weeks ago. She told me 'We are all good here. One thing that is a huge positive for me is I have no worries about work and potentially, I will now have a lot more time off than my planned eight weeks.' Another friend who gave birth three weeks ago told me that she'd had lots of plans for being out and about with other new parents and had signed up to various clubs and groups. 'What a relief', she said, 'that we can do everything in our own time and own pace. It's much better this way. And I don't need to worry about nails, hair, makeup – the whole 'Yummy Mummy' thing!' I should add that both girls have very supportive, hands on partners. Single mums might tell a very different story.

This may be enough for you for today. If not see

https://www.ucy.ac.cy/nursery/documents/attachement_3.pdf

Don't forget your self-care today, how can you pamper yourself? Enjoy the blue skies and be sure to walk in a green space. Have a good day, keep safe and healthy and ring or email me to chat if that would help. **Jenny x**