

The story of attachments (relationships)

Attachment is the deep connection established between a child and you, their primary caregiver. It profoundly affects and influences your child's development and their ability to express/manage emotions and build meaningful relationships throughout their life. If you're a parent or carer of a child who has, for whatever reason, experienced prolonged exposure to adverse experiences (or who has experienced a significant traumatic event), you may feel exhausted and overwhelmed by the parenting task due to some of the unusual and challenging behaviours displayed by your child that you find hard to make sense of. Exhausted that is from trying to connect with a child that either rejects all of your attempts to afford care and love or who goes to great lengths to control their environment (and those in it) and often displays challenging behaviour that is hard to manage and understand.

When children express themselves in a challenging way (over and above what we would normally expect from a child – all kids are challenging) families can unwittingly get into negative patterns of interaction where after some time the child becomes the focus of blame for the family distress when actually it is the behaviour that is the issue (and there is ALWAYS something driving this behaviour). This behaviour, however, is not consciously chosen by the child to inflict distress on the family unit no matter how much we want to believe that to be true. Instead, it is a learnt pattern (all be it problematic) that is used to ensure that their basic needs are met (connectivity and safety). Through a deeper understanding of the function of the behaviour and a healthy dose of patience and love, it is possible to repair attachment challenges, bond with your child, and shape the success of their future development, physically, emotionally and socially. But it won't be an easy journey and things will likely feel worse before they feel better which is why so very often the journey of change appears to fail (we just don't stick at it because things don't change quick enough). Behaviour doesn't appear overnight nor will it disappear and at times of greatest perceived threat (these threats might seem ridiculous to us but we have no right to tell a child that they cannot feel what they are feeling – it is their experience) your child will almost certainly revert back to old patterns of behaviour (but this doesn't equal a fail it's just what they have come to know so stick with it and eventually new patterns WILL emerge). The hard work here is for the grownups not the child.

No matter how detached or insecure your child seems, or how frustrated or exhausted you feel from trying to connect, it is possible to reorder negative patterns

of attachment behaviour. With patience and perseverance, you can help your child feel safe and secure and able to develop healthy, meaningful, and loving relationships—starting with their relationship with you. Trust is the key and this trust can be lost for many unintentional reasons that are often beyond our control.

What causes it?

Attachment related difficulties occur when a child has been unable to consistently connect with a parent or primary caregiver. If a young child repeatedly feels abandoned, isolated, powerless, or uncared for—whatever the reason—they will learn that they can't depend on others and that the world is a dangerous and frightening place. Then they develop behaviours that for them ensure survival.

This can happen for many reasons:

- A baby cries and no one responds or offers comfort (or the primary caregiver is prevented from doing so perhaps due to their own mental health difficulties, substance misuse or domestic abuse from another party).
- A baby is hungry or wet, and they aren't attended to for hours (for the same reasons as above).
- No one looks at, talks to, or smiles at the baby, so the baby feels alone (mobile phones beginning to affect this kind of interaction).
- A young child gets attention only by acting out or displaying other extreme behaviours (makes no difference if its positive or negative as long as it is predictable and creates connection).
- A young child or baby is mistreated or abused.
- Sometimes the child's needs are met and sometimes they aren't. The child never knows what to expect (perhaps the most detrimental type of parenting a child can receive).
- The infant or young child is hospitalized or separated from their parents.
- A baby or young child is moved from one caregiver to another (the result of adoption, foster care, or the loss of a parent, for example).
- The parent is emotionally unavailable because of mental health, illness, or substance abuse, domestic violence.
- The child has a disability or disorder that makes the ability to indicate their needs difficult.

Sometimes the circumstances that cause attachment problems are unavoidable, but the child is too young to understand what has happened and why. To a young child, it just feels like no one cares. They lose trust in others and the world becomes an unsafe place. Or they experience love in a negative way. Children are born expecting to be loved and cared for. No matter what the quality of care, they equate

the interactions to love and it is this pattern of response that they then continue to seek throughout their lifespan within relationships.

Signs and symptoms of attachment issues in your infant/child:

- Avoids eye contact
- Doesn't smile
- Doesn't reach out to be picked up (ignores, doesn't matter if you are there or not)
- Rejects your efforts to calm, soothe, and connect
- Doesn't seem to notice or care when you leave them alone
- Desire to control environment (and people within that environment) and needs predictability
- Struggles with change
- Rigid thinking styles
- Carefully adapts behaviour to fit the environment to what they believe is expected (or the opposite-completely out of control and cannot adapt behaviour)
- Cries inconsolably (over the top reactions to situations)
- Doesn't coo or make sounds
- Doesn't follow you with their eyes
- Isn't interested in playing interactive games or playing with toys
- Spends a lot of time rocking or comforting themselves
- Frequent difficulties within peer relationships
- Sabotage of potential safe nurturing placements
- Hoarding/collecting
- Lying/exaggerating

(this list is not exhaustive)

It's important to note that the symptoms of attachment disorders are similar to symptoms of other issues such as ADHD and Autism but the underlying unmet need driving the symptoms is very different and so must be thought about and managed differently. As you can see assessment and formulation is a very complex process and this is why we ask so many questions. Without an accurate history we may not get it right and therefore may not seem that helpful to you and your family.

Further Common signs and symptoms in young children include:

An aversion to touch and physical affection. Children may often flinch, laugh, or even say “ouch” when touched. Rather than producing positive feelings, touch and affection are perceived as a threat.

Control issues. Most children with an attachment disorder go to great lengths to remain in control and avoid feeling helpless. They are often overly independent, disobedient, defiant, and argumentative (but can be the complete opposite and display passiveness but it is the externalizers who display challenging behaviour that usually get noticed first as the behaviour is deemed more challenging to contain).

Anger problems. Anger may be expressed directly, in tantrums or acting out, or through what many describe as manipulative, passive-aggressive behaviour. Children may hide their anger in socially acceptable actions, like giving a high five that hurts or hugging someone too hard. They may appear to lack empathy for others (ego centric – self-preservation).

Difficulty showing genuine care and affection. For example, children may act inappropriately affectionate with strangers while displaying little or no affection towards their parents/caregivers.

An underdeveloped conscience. Children may act like they don’t have a conscience and fail to show guilt, regret, or remorse after behaving badly. They cannot easily see things from the other side as they must ensure their own safety (emotionally and sometimes physically) before anything else.

As children with attachment difficulties grow older, they often develop either inhibited or disinhibited pattern of symptoms:

Inhibited symptoms

The child is extremely withdrawn, emotionally detached, and resistant to comforting. The child is aware of what’s going on around them—hypervigilant even—but doesn’t react or respond. They may push others away, ignore them, or even act out displaying aggression when others try to get close. These children may be

vulnerable to exploitation because they have little care for themselves or others and therefore may partake in risk activities without care of consequences.

Disinhibited symptoms

The child doesn't seem to prefer their parents over other people, even strangers. The child seeks comfort and attention from virtually anyone, without distinction. They are extremely dependent, act much younger than their age, and may appear chronically anxious. These children can be vulnerable to being exploited due to wanting too much to be loved and accepted by anyone.

As we have said, you can see why the job of assessing symptoms is complex! It is essential to always look beyond the behaviour and establish the underlying unmet need if we want to support these children better. It's not their fault. Understanding the family story is essential.

Parenting a child with attachment difficulties

Parenting a child with relationship/attachment difficulties can be exhausting, frustrating, and emotionally trying. It is hard to put your best parenting foot forward without the reassurance of a loving connection with your child. Sometimes you may wonder if your efforts are worth it, but be assured that they are. With time, patience, and concerted effort, negative attachment patterns can be repaired. The key is to remain calm, yet firm as you interact with your child. This will teach your child that they are safe and can trust you no matter what they throw at you. It is a basic human desire to aim to please others and seek acceptance from those around us.

A child with an attachment difficulty is already experiencing a great deal of stress, so it is imperative that you evaluate and manage your own stress levels before trying to help your child with theirs. [Help Guide's Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#) can teach you valuable skills for managing stress and dealing with overwhelming emotions, leaving you to focus on your child's needs.

To help a child with attachment issues, it's also important to:

Have realistic expectations. Helping your child may be a long road. Focus on making small steps forward and celebrate every sign of success.

Stay patient. The process may not be as rapid as you'd like, and you can expect bumps along the way. But by remaining patient and focusing on small improvements, you create an atmosphere of safety for your child.

Foster a sense of humour. [Joy and laughter](#) go a long way toward repairing attachment problems and energizing you even in the midst of hard work. Find at least a couple of people or activities that help you laugh and feel good.

Take care of yourself. Reduce other demands on your time, make time for yourself, and [manage stress](#). Rest, good nutrition, and parenting breaks help you relax and recharge your batteries so you can give your attention to your child.

Find support. Rely on friends, family, community resources, and respite care (if available). Try to ask for help before you really need it to avoid [getting stressed to breaking point](#). You may also want to consider joining a support group for parents.

Stay positive and hopeful. Be sensitive to the fact that children pick up on feelings. If they sense that you're discouraged, it will be discouraging to them (they will know they have disappointed you but they do not know how to make it better so revert to old negative patterns that ensure a response that they know). When you are feeling down, turn to others for reassurance. When children don't know what we want from them or if what we ask of them is not achievable they will sink into a negative and chaotic pattern of interaction whilst searching for a response that makes them feel emotionally safe until eventually they lose the desire to try.

GOOD LUCK AND DEVELOP THAT CONNECTION.