



Understanding the patterns and relationships

Wendy Kelly examines children's attachment needs

Introduction

Attachment theory suggests that young children organise their behaviour around the way their caregiver treats them and that the forming of a close emotional bond between the child and caregiver functions to both protect the child and provide a secure base from which they can explore their world. Over 30 years ago, psychiatrist John Bowlby proposed that the way children are taken care of by their parents and caregivers, and the attachment relationships they develop with them, form the child's internal working model of relationships. In other words, the early attachment relationship a child has with their parent or caregiver becomes a template or prototype of how to relate to others (Bowlby, 1982). Children are thought to then develop mental representations, or ideas of themselves and other people, through this internal working model. If a child is moved from their parent or caregiver they continue to view themselves, and relate to others, according to the template they have developed in the past and may find it hard to respond to a different kind of care – even if this is more available or more positive than they have received in the past.

Attachment styles

Children develop different styles of attachment depending on how they adapt and adjust to the kind of care they receive. Mary Ainsworth, a student of John Bowlby, developed a method of assessing this based on how children reacted after being reunited with their parents after a brief separation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978). Her research found that children whose parents were emotionally available grew up securely attached and, for the most part, confident and resilient. This is known as secure attachment. However children can also develop an insecure attachment relationship with parents or caregivers. There are different patterns of insecure attachment: ambivalent, avoidant and disorganised.

Ambivalent attachment relationships usually develop when a parent or caregiver is unpredictable. They may only sometimes be physically and emotionally available to their child. This could be because of the parent's depression, extensive absence or other life circumstances. The child becomes unsure about whether or not the parent will be there for them. The child then reacts by trying to keep the

parent close to them by clinging or fighting with the parent. The child increases their demands on their parent in order to try to get more care, which conversely can be exhausting for the parent.

When parents reject a child, a different pattern emerges. The child's strategy is to then try to draw attention away from the relationship by being self-reliant and independent. Their internal working model is that things work well for them when they rely on themselves and become 'tough'. These children find it difficult to get close to other people and they often do well in structured environments, such as school. This type of attachment has been named avoidant attachment. Secure, ambivalent and avoidant styles of attachment are all considered to be organised strategies as they work for children in that they can adapt and adjust to the type of care available.

When children are abused or neglected by a parent or caregiver, it is almost impossible for children to adjust to the caregiving available. All children aim for a sense of safety and 'felt security', but this is difficult to achieve when the person who is meant to care for you is frightening or abusive. The majority of children who have been abused or neglected develop a pattern known as disorganised attachment (Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett and Braunwald, 1989; Howe 2005). This mainly develops when the child's parent or caregiver is frightening to the child by being either verbally or physically abusive in some way. Having a parent who is frightening creates an unsolvable dilemma for a child, resulting in inner conflict as they must decide whether to

approach their parent for longed-for comfort or to keep away from their parent for safety. It has been called 'fright without solution' (Main, 1995). The child cannot find a strategy which leads to feeling safe.

When young children have disorganised attachment, their sense of safety depends on acting as "normal" as possible, which makes it difficult for professionals to identify. In fact, this type of attachment was only discovered when researchers studied videotapes of children from adverse environments and noted subtle clues to the relationship disturbance. One such sign is when a young child might go towards a parent and then suddenly cower and appear fearful, dazed or confused, or, in some cases, freeze. This has been called 'a momentary absence of organisation of attachment behaviour' (Main and Solomon, 1986). The child shows subtle but fearful behaviour.

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A frightening parent or caregiver does not help children make sense of what is happening to them emotionally or make any efforts to calm and soothe them. To deal with this situation, the child may switch between controlling others to feel powerful, and feeling out of control and helpless in the face of overwhelming feelings of fear and anger (Howe, 2005). The child often starts to reverse roles and take on a more parental role. This may involve taking care of and looking after the parent and even taking charge of the parent (Howe, 2005). Conversely, the child may also become overly compliant as they have learned that it is unsafe to step out of line. The child does whatever is necessary to calm the parent down and avoid provoking them. While these more organised

strategies help the child to regulate their emotional state and reduces their fear, the child still views the world as chaotic and scary and the strategy breaks down under stress. The child is unable to maintain it and so the feelings can spill over into aggression, disturbed behaviour and emotional distress.

Disorganised attachment can also develop when a parent appears frightened or helpless in their parenting, and is unable to act as a buffer and reassure the child when the child is fearful, often because of their own difficult, unresolved past (Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman and Atwood, 1999). The parent may withdraw or back away from the child or may go into a trance-like state, known as dissociation, while parenting. This does not make sense to the child who may then conclude that the parent is afraid of them and that there is something wrong with them.

Links between disorganised attachment and mental health problems

Studies have now linked disorganised attachment with a history of child abuse and neglect and also with poor mental health outcomes in adulthood, including higher rates of mental health diagnoses and dissociation (Carlson, 1998). Children with disorganised attachment have been found to have increased emotional distress, poor emotional regulation, and increased behaviour problems and aggression (Lyons-Ruth, 1996). They are also more likely to be rejected by their peers and to have mild cognitive and language difficulties.

Assessing needs of children in care

Attachment theory can be used to assess how to meet children's emotional needs when they have been abused or neglected and placed in care. An understanding of the child's attachment

style and the meaning they have made of their experiences can inform us about what experiences they need to change their view of relationships. The child's mental representations of relationships may include: that no one can love them; that safety requires the child to be in charge of the parent; that relationships are about fighting and being "top dog"; or that keeping distant from people is essential. To change these views we need to start where the child is at and then very gently challenge their ideas by doing the opposite of what they expect from their internal working model. For example, a caregiver might gradually develop emotional closeness with a child who is avoidant, or not engage in fights with a child who has an ambivalent attachment style.

Even when a child is placed in a safe environment where they can be loved and cared for, they unfortunately continue to use their original ideas of relationships to guide their behaviour. This is puzzling for caregivers and social workers as the child attempts to push away and fight with caregivers who are trying to reach out to them. Professionals need to understand that children only do this in order to feel safe and able to predict adults' behaviour.

Determining a child's internal working model

In order to understand a child's emotional needs we can work out what internal working model would fit with the child's experiences and current behaviour. Doing this helps us to understand the child's behaviour and to take it less personally. Recent studies of out-of-home care have shown that if the caregiver has a theory about why the child behaves as they do, and if they can be as sensitive to angry behaviour as they are about distressed behaviour, then the child is more likely

to be securely attached to the caregiver and the placement is less likely to break down (Schofield and Beek, 2005; Lipscombe, Farmer and Moyers, 2003).

There is a simple exercise that social workers can use to work out a child's internal working model. The first step is to explore the child's history, making special note of the child's behaviour, especially any behaviour that results in people being pushed away, or changes of placement or suspension from school, and any:

- changes of caregiver, including being placed back and forth around family members
- losses of contact with significant people, including anyone who the child no longer sees, whether through death or separation
- circumstances where the child has been singled out from the sibling group or family, such as being sent away or being the only child removed from the birth family while other siblings remain with the parents.

The next step is to try and put yourself in the place of the person who has had those experiences and has this behaviour, and consider what sort of view that person might have of themselves or others. Points to consider include: if you had been through several placements, what would you conclude relationships were about, how difficulties should be solved and what to do if you didn't want to be around someone?

If you kept getting shifted, what would you think that meant about you, especially if you were the only child out of several to be shifted? Think about the function of the child's

behaviour – is it designed to push people away, get a new placement, make others feel bad, get to go home?

Once you have answered these questions, a clear view begins to emerge about what the child needs to feel more secure and begin to thrive. Usually people seeking to help a child place emphasis on the child needing a permanent loving carer, but through analysing the child's possible internal working model, we can also begin to figure out what things will meet the specific needs of the child. This can include providing the child with a mentor, joining a sports team, having contact with a grandparent or placing them in a smaller class.

Case example

The following example is a composite of several situations that social workers have described.

Simon, aged nine, and his sister Karlee, aged seven, were removed from their mother's care at the ages

of four and two respectively because of severe neglect. At the time of removal the children were malnourished, and Simon had unexplained burns on his arms and was fiercely protective of his younger sister. The children were placed in the care of their paternal grandparents until their grandfather died of a heart attack. Later, Karlee was returned to her mother's care. Their mother had a new partner and two younger children. Simon was placed with his aunt who found his behaviour too difficult to cope with. He has recently been placed with an out-of-family caregiver until a family group conference can be held. Simon's caregiver reports that he is

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rude and aggressive, spits, and calls her names, he has been found hurting the caregiver's baby and also being cruel to the family dog. Simon finds schoolwork very difficult and has few friends. He will be expelled if he continues to punch children in the playground.

From considering Simon's history we can see he has had several changes of caregiver, he has lost contact with his mother and other family members, and his grandfather has died. He was singled out as the child who was not returned home. His behaviour is aggressive and harmful to others, and is likely to result in the current placement failing and with him being expelled from school.

If we try and put ourselves in Simon's shoes, we can see that his view of himself may be that there is something wrong with him, that he is bad and nobody wants him. He may believe that he can't get things right and that he has failed at protecting his younger sister. He may think that he makes bad things happen and could feel responsible for his grandfather's heart attack.

Simon's view of others or the world may include that relationships don't last long and that people disappear on you. He may feel that the world is an unsafe place and that you don't know what's going to happen. He may believe that there is no point trying to be good or to have relationships with adults – they just get rid of you when things don't work out.

By understanding Simon's perspective and developing a theory about his behaviour, his current behaviour becomes more understandable. If we view his actions as coming from his internal working model of relationships, we can figure out that Simon's aggressive behaviour may be designed to push others

away in order not to be hurt. He may think that relationships involve violence and that adults will harm him. He may believe that by being violent his placement might break down and he could get back to his mother to make sure his sister is all right. It could also relate to his distress that nobody seems to want him and that his mother has rejected him.

Unfortunately, how people respond to Simon's aggressive behaviour brings about the very thing that Simon most fears: further abandonment. It also confirms his model of the world, and increases his sense that the world is predictable, and he feels a certain safety within that. To change Simon's behaviour, we need to gently disconfirm his model, to show him the world can be a safe place and that relationships can be rewarding. If we keep responding to his aggression by keeping distance or rejecting him then Simon won't learn that relationships can be different. We need to accept where he is at and then gently challenge it. Sometimes we need to do this with words such as saying "I don't fight with kids, you're safe here, we can have a good time without fighting" and sometimes without words such as by not letting his behaviour push people away and spoil things.

Disconfirming his view of himself and his world is very challenging but also very rewarding. Understanding what his behaviour is based on means we can have empathy with him, work out the purpose of the behaviour and ensure that his behaviour does not lead to him losing his caregivers once more.

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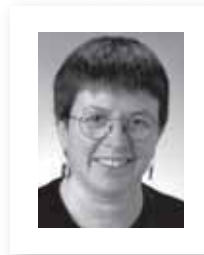
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