



# Infant Bonding and Adult Behavior

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Babies have needs. They need food, water, and shelter. They need protection. But once these basic survival needs are met, the most important thing in children's lives is the emotional bond they develop with their parents or caregivers.

The research proves it.

For fifty years, psychologists have studied the significance of emotional attachment in infants. According to Dr. Vicky Kelly, former Clinical Director at Upper Bay Counseling and expert in attachment issues, "Based on this research, the evidence is clear. What happens in the first nine months of life is critical."

"During this time, we develop three main characteristics—trust, empathy, and the ability to deal with stress," she says, "and all three of these depend on the parent-child bond."

Trust – Does the baby feel safe? Babies learn trust from how well their parents have met their needs. If the parents were there for them, children develop a sense of security.

Empathy – People show empathy when they can identify and care about the emotions of others. Babies learn empathy through the early emotional bond they have with their parents.

Ability to deal with stress – When distressed, we cannot function well. Parents who soothe their babies when their babies are in stress actually teach them how to deal with it on their own. From the experience of parental soothing, babies learn ways to comfort themselves and to calm down.

There are four patterns of attachment. Each is based on how well our parents or caregivers met the above three attachment needs:

- 1) Secure Pattern – These individuals feel good about themselves. They relate to others fairly well and feel the world is generally predictable and safe.
- 2) Ambivalent Pattern – People with this pattern didn't get adequate amounts of trust, empathy or soothing. They experience frequent distress and are preoccupied about their own security. They have trouble calming down.
- 3) Avoidant Pattern – This happens often in children who have been neglected. People with this pattern have learned they can't count on others to protect them. They're insecure. They feel disconnected from their feelings and may experience anxiety or occasional panic.
- 4) Disorganized Pattern – This typically occurs in children who have been severely abused or who come from extremely chaotic families. These individuals show contradictory behaviors. They want to be close to others but are fearful. They feel deeply insecure but

they can be aggressive or unmanageable and exhibit a whole range of disruptive behaviors.

Among people living in the United States, about 60% exhibit the secure pattern while about 10% have the ambivalent pattern, about 20% the avoidant pattern, and about 10% the disorganized pattern. Additional studies among high-risk populations, such as in child welfare programs, child mental health, and family violence programs, show that somewhere between 50% and 90% have the disorganized pattern.

In addition, the patterns developed in the first nine months of life appear to be long-lasting. Experts can easily identify these four patterns in children between the ages of nine months and three years. Then, studies show, the patterns continue with great consistency through childhood and persist throughout our lives. The characteristics appear deeply ingrained and largely unconscious.

Indeed each pattern has a classification in the adult.

- 1) Those with the Secure Pattern become “autonomous” adults. These individuals are capable of intimacy, can act interdependently with others, and know how to calm themselves.
- 2) Those with the Ambivalent Pattern become “preoccupied” adults. They tend to have anxiety disorders. They often develop dependent relationships with others and may play people against each other.
- 3) Those with the Avoidant Pattern develop into “dismissing” adults. These individuals are uncomfortable with their feelings and have trouble with personal intimacy. They often feel lonely and tend to experience depression.
- 4) Those with the Disorganized Pattern become “fearful” adults. They struggle with emotional pain due to their unresolved trauma issues (the deeply ingrained memories of abuse or repressed memories of abuse). They’re often impulsive or aggressive, and may hurt others. In addition, many of them have learning disabilities. Basically these individuals live their lives in chronic distress.

“As a society,” Kelly notes, “we’ve become keen at spotting the problems caused by physical abuse. That’s a positive step over the past fifty years. But we remain largely unaware of the damage caused by neglect or lack of soothing in early life.” She hopes, through education, to see this change in the future. She also recommends therapy for persons of all ages to help alleviate any symptoms of emotional or mental distress.

You cannot go back and change your early attachments. But, it is possible to learn to understand and recognize how your current life is impacted by the past. Understanding gives you the capacity to make significant changes in how you think and act in key situations.

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