

Teens and Attachment

Providing a secure base for your young person



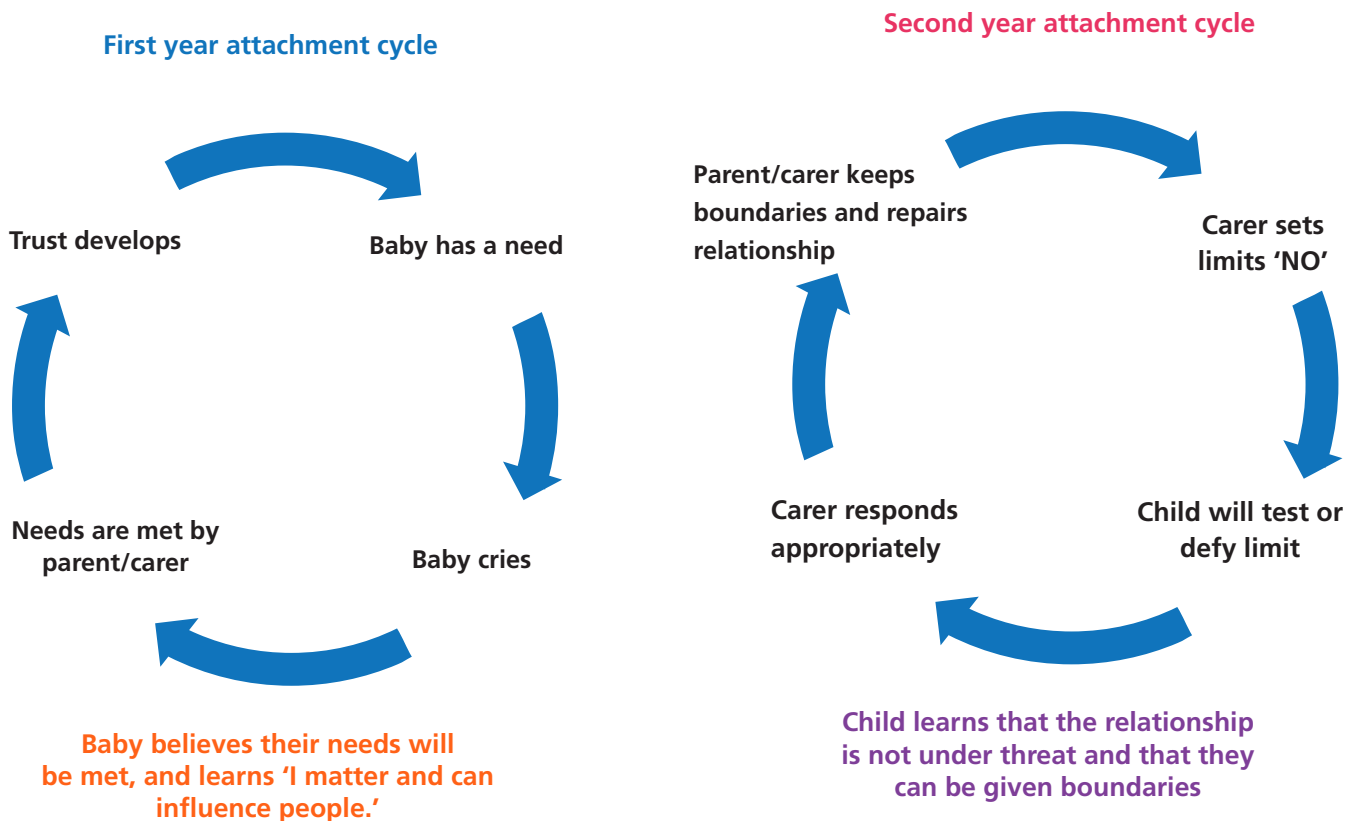
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What is attachment?

Attachment Cycles

Attachment theory suggests that infants are biologically predisposed to form attachment relationships from which they can experience security and comfort. Here is the typical cycle of attachment:



There are often many reasons for early attachment problems: difficult pregnancy and births, parental physical/mental health difficulties, separations or changes in care givers. Any of these factors and many more may result in the initial cycle of care being disrupted, particularly within the early stages of a child's life. If a child experiences disruption or breaks within the early attachment cycle, their behaviour may change in order for them to feel safe or feel that their care needs are being met, for example, the child may 'up the ante' with their behaviour and act 'naughty', they may become 'clingy' or anxious or they may struggle with identifying and managing their own emotions.

It can sometimes seem difficult to connect past disruptions in the attachment cycle to a child's current difficulties, and parents sometimes state they feel 'blamed' or 'confused' as they feel they have a 'strong relationship' with their child or their other children do not have similar difficulties, but this is fairly common. It is important to remember that the attachment between a caregiver and a child is an individual relationship, as all children are individuals, and children respond to situations in different ways. For example, it may be that one child was able to cope but another child may have been more sensitive to, for example, a separation from the main caregiver.

Providing a secure base

A secure base is at the heart of attachment theory and at the heart of any successful parent/carer – child relationship.



Young people with attachment difficulties haven that reduces anxiety and builds security, confidence and resilience. This booklet looks at ways that you can do this.

Providing a secure base involves:

- Being Available – helping teenagers to trust
- Being Sensitive – helping teenagers to understand and manage feelings
- Building Self-esteem – creating opportunities for success
- Co-operation – helping teenagers to feel effective.

Helpful ideas will be provided under each of these headings.

Being available

It is important to be physically and emotionally there for your teen so that your teen feels safe. This is important not just in the early days, but throughout family life.

Structure helps children to feel safe because it is predictable and reliable. Attempt to stick to a routine and keep life simple but fun. Try to say and do the same things over and over.



Building trust when caregiver and teen are apart is important. There will be times when it is necessary for you to be separated from your child, e.g. when they are at school. It is important to continue to build trust during these times. Your child is likely to cope better with separations if they know that you will be there for them when they need you.

Helpful ideas

Establish predictable routines
Use a calendar, diary or chart to help your teenager remember what is going to happen next and look forward to events.
Try to always keep your word, be where you say you will be and do what you promise to do.
If your teen finds it hard to talk or accept comfort you can be there for them in a 'low key' way, for example, you could suggest a ride in the car.
Ensure that your teen always knows where to find you when you are apart.
It can be helpful to communicate to your teen that you have been thinking of them while you were apart.
Try to manage separations carefully by talking about why the separation is happening. Explain how long it will be for and use clear 'goodbyes' and 'hellos'.

Being sensitive

Teens may display challenging behaviour when they are unable to understand or manage their feelings.

Teens may need help to manage their feelings particularly at times of distress. A teen who cannot do this often feels a lot of shame about themselves. Being curious and sensitive to what your teen may be thinking or feeling can help them to understand their own feelings as well as those of others



Helpful ideas

Try not to withdraw affection for negative behaviour or use discipline that involves anger, separation or loss.

Try to create opportunities for repair following a difficult time between you and your teen. Discipline should be brief, relevant and happen straight away. Where possible this should be followed by an opportunity for repair - make clear the relationship is not 'broken' as a consequence of what happened. This helps the child to develop a healthy sense of guilt about certain behaviours without reducing self-esteem.

Modelling good emotional control can help a child to manage their own feelings. The presence of a calm adult communicates to your teen that you can manage the situation and can help them to calm down. Try to use calm, positive and clear facial expressions.

Try to avoid using threatening words, shouting, swearing and name calling. Anger from parents confirms a child's belief that they are bad.

Help your child to recover from the situation and make things better after they have lost control of their feelings and be sure to praise them for doing this.

Try to accept what your child is feeling without attempting to shut them down or fix them.

Showing some empathy can be comforting even when you can't change the situation..

Try to make sure your tone of voice, facial expression and body language are sincere/honest when discussing feelings otherwise it could sound sarcastic.

Building self-esteem

It is important to help people feel good about themselves for who they are.

Creating opportunities for success can help teens with attachment difficulties as they tend to have poor self-esteem and often expect to fail.

Lightening-up involves keeping a light-hearted atmosphere in your home. It can help to teach your teen that life can be fun. Most people want to spend time with others who are fun to be with. Laughter reduces stress and increases our feel-good hormones. You don't have to turn into a comedian, just try not to make every mistake or mishap into a disaster.



Helpful ideas

Discover interests that your child enjoys and can be successful in. Praise your child for achieving small tasks and responsibilities, try to keep your expectations low and take small steps.

Telling a teen that they are great when they feel like a bad person can feel uncomfortable. Aim to build a history of successes so success feels normal.

Try to be specific when giving praise. Praise what has been done well.

Try to look for success even in negative situations.

Give praise for effort not just for achievement, e.g. "you might not have got top grades but I'm proud of you for doing your best".

Ask your teen to teach you something that they are good at – such as a sport, a computer game or a joke. This can give them a sense of pride and let them feel in charge in a positive way.

Co-operation

Children need to feel that they are effective. They need to know that what they do has an impact. Working co-operatively with your child can help them to do this.

Supervising closely can be hard but it is a great opportunity to work together with your child. A child with attachment difficulties is likely to need to be supervised as if they were a much younger child.



Helpful ideas

A teen is more likely to work better when working alongside you rather than being sent off to do a task on their own.

If possible supervision should be proactive rather than reactive. For example, it is less likely that you'll need to tell your child they've done something wrong (reactive) if you work together to begin with to show them how to do it right (proactive).

When setting boundaries it can be helpful to explain why they are in place.

If your teen asks for your help but you are not able to assist at that moment, try giving reassurance that you want to help but need to finish what you are doing first. Maybe you could ask them to help you with what you are doing so that you can finish quicker together.

Using choice is another way you can work co-operatively with your teen to help them feel more effective.

Additional resources

It is important to remember to:

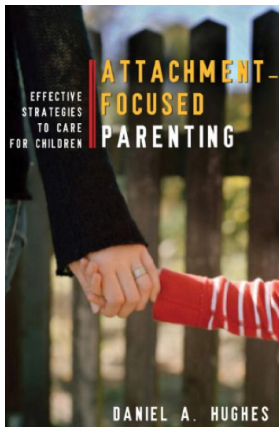
- Use a non-judgmental approach with your teen
- Actively and attentively listen to your teen
- Provide your teen with opportunities for 1:1 attention

One of the most important things to do with your teen is to spend time together and do activities together. These activities can include:

- Cooking
- Playing video games
- Creating something together
- Hobbies such as cycling, running, model building, dancing, and many more.

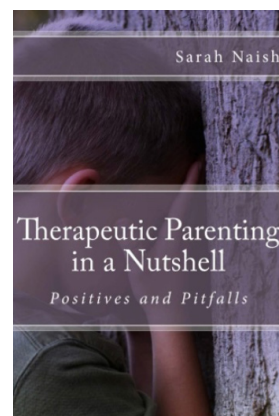
Principles of Attachment-Focused Parenting: Effective Strategies to Care for Children

– Written by Daniel Hughes



Therapeutic Parenting in a Nutshell

– Written by Sarah Naish



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