

Young Children and Attachment

Providing a secure Base for your young person



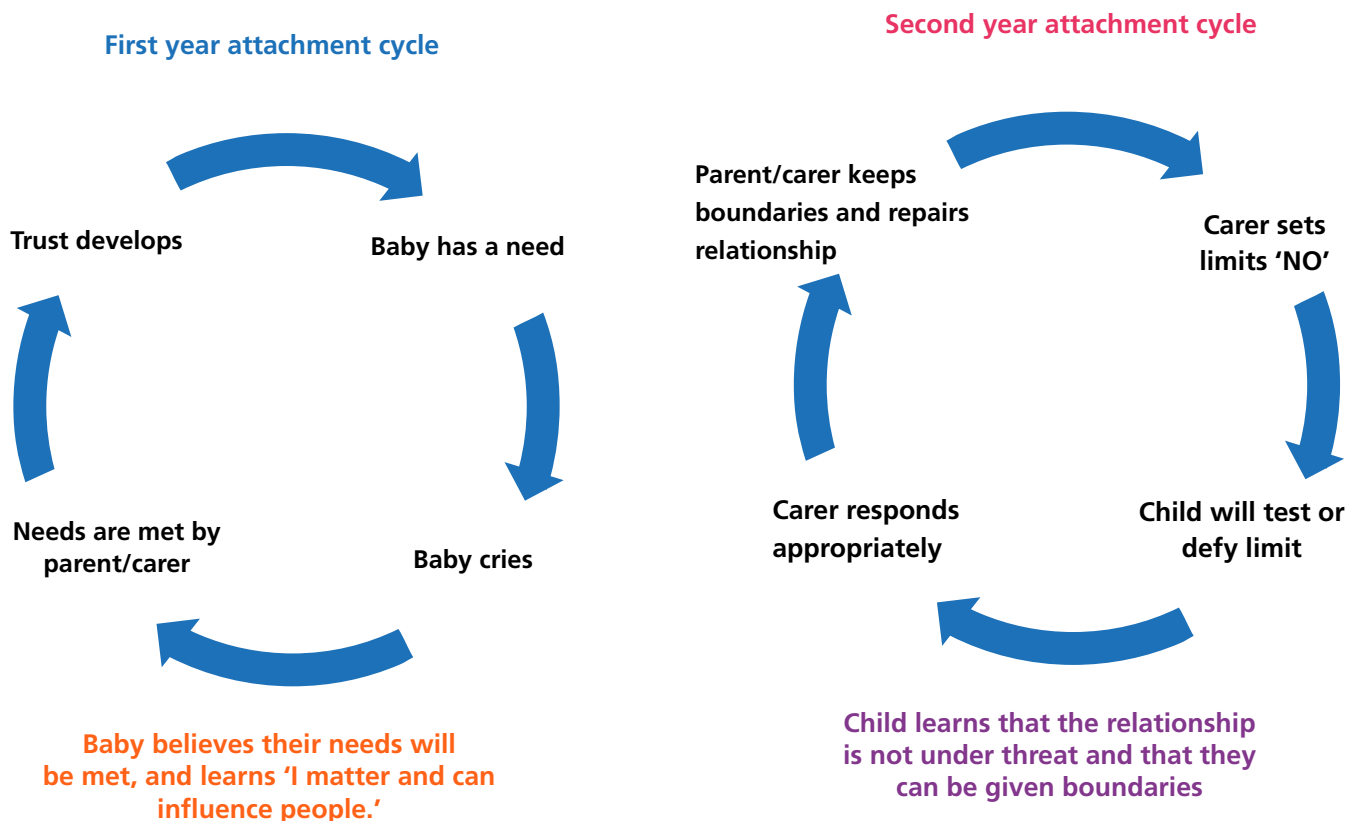
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What is attachment?

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 caregivers. 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.



Children with attachment difficulties need their caregivers to provide a secure base that require an environment that helps reduce anxiety and build security, confidence and resilience. This booklet looks at ways that you can do this.

Providing a secure base involves:

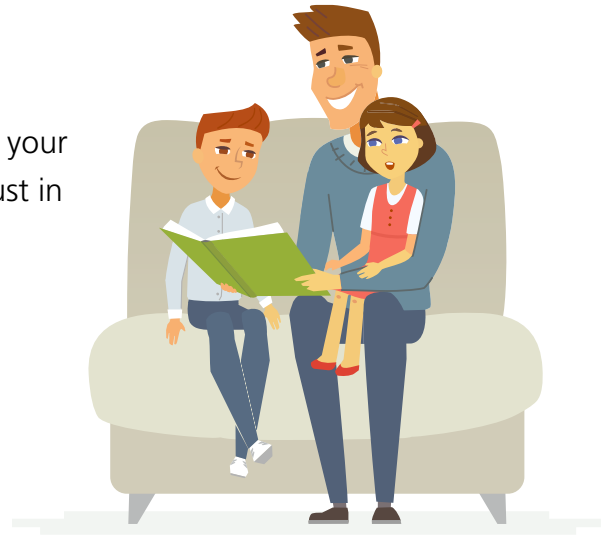
- Being Available – helping children to trust
- Being Sensitive – helping children to understand and manage feelings
- Nurturing – helping to soothe and comfort children
- Building Self-esteem – creating opportunities for success
- Managing the Environment– helping children to reduce stimulation
- Co-operation – helping children to feel effective

Helpful ideas and activities 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 child 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 child 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 child always knows where to find you when you are apart.

It can be helpful to communicate to your child 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'.

Helpful activities and games

Only choose activities that you and your child are likely to accept and enjoy

Activities that help children to **think** about trust

Ask your child to draw a castle or make one in clay or sand.

They may choose miniature toys or animals to stand for the main people in their life. Ask them to show and talk about which ones they would let into their castle and which ones they would keep out and why.

Ask your child to draw a bridge with themselves on one side and someone they trust on the other.

Ask them to draw a speech bubble coming out of their mouth and write in it what they are thinking or saying. Do the same with the other person.

Activities that help to **build** trust when child and caregiver are **together**

Hand holding games such as 'ring a roses'.

Clapping games like 'Patty-cake'.

Read stories with your child on your lap or sitting close.

Lead each other blindfolded/with eyes closed or play 'follow the leader'.

Teach a new skill or learn one together.

Three-legged walk.

Use "inside, outside" to lead and coordinate the movement.

Throw a ball or beanbag to each other.

Play a game of tug of war.

Blow bubbles.

Ask the child to pop them with a certain body part, e.g. finger, nose etc.

Gently hold your child and sing or rock them.

Activities that help to **build** trust when child and caregiver are **apart**

Give 'sensory' reminders of home when your child is at school.

E.g. Photo of Mum/Dad or a dab of Mum/Dad's fragrance on a school tie.

Allow your child to use a mobile phone or text them.

This will help your child know that you are thinking of them.

Keep a 'goodies tub' or leave a surprise on your child's bed whilst they are away.

This lets your child know you've been thinking of them.

Being sensitive

Children with attachment difficulties often display challenging behaviour when they are unable to understand or manage their feelings.

Children need help to manage their feelings before they can learn to do it for themselves. A child who cannot do this often feels a lot of shame about themselves. Being curious and sensitive to what your child may be thinking/feeling can help them to understand their own feelings as well as those of others.



Helpful ideas

Try giving “time-in” instead of “time-out” when your child is distressed. If a child does not feel safe and secure then separation at times of distress (e.g. time out) is likely to increase their distress. ‘Time in’ keeps the child in line of sight at times of distress. Communicate – ‘I think it’s hard for you at the moment and I think you need me close’.

Try not to withdraw affection for negative behaviour or use discipline that involves anger, separation or loss. For example, don’t remove a favourite toy or refuse to talk to your child.

Try to create opportunities for repair following a difficult time between you and your child. 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 child 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 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. E.g. ‘I can see you’re upset about what your teacher said, that would hurt my feelings too’.

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

Helpful activities and games

Only choose activities that you and your child are likely to accept and enjoy

Activities that help your child to **understand** and **share** their feelings

Express feelings with clay, paint and crayons. Use colours to help children think about different feelings.

e.g. 'I feel red' (angry)
'I am green' (calm).

Make something together and comment on feelings.

e.g. 'I feel excited about the cakes rising' "I feel upset about the bread burning'.

Share an 'adventure' or new experience together.

Provide a feelings commentary
e.g. 'you look like you're enjoying that'.

Play a game that involves a shared experience of both winning and losing.

e.g. Pictionary.

Use activities that promote shared expressions of feelings.

e.g. Simple action rhymes and songs or clapping games for younger children.

Build up a memory box and photo album.

Make an 'experiences book' with pictures, leaflets, stickers, etc.

This can help your child to remember and reflect on positive events.

Play 'sensory' games (involving touch, sound, smell, observation).

Encourage your child to reflect on their feelings about these experiences.

Use practical examples to describe feelings.

e.g. describe feeling 'mixed up' like 'washing in the machine'.

Activities that help your child to **develop empathy**

Use television.

This can help focus on why people feel different things and how they can feel.

Use stories or puppets.

Name and discuss feelings in everyday situations.

Nuturing

Nurturing involves soothing, comforting and caring for your child. This helps children to feel worthy of care. This can increase their feelings of self-worth and trust in their caregiver

Soothing and comforting your child is one of the most helpful ways to care for a child with attachment difficulties. Attachment difficulties are often a result of not having had enough soothing/comfort in the past. Children with attachment difficulties often find it hard to ask for comfort appropriately.



Helpful ideas

For children who are not comfortable seeking comfort or being touched, try doing it in small steps so they become familiar with comfort, for example, if they are not comfortable with being hugged you could start by sitting next to them, when they are comfortable with that you could move on to placing a hand on their shoulder for comfort before progressing to a hug.

Try to ensure that your child feels especially cared for and nurtured when ill, hurt or sad. Make a fuss of minor cuts and injuries. You may not be able to see the tiny scratch on their finger but if your child feels it then it needs attention.

Choose a time when your child is relaxed to check their arms and legs for bumps and bruises. Try massaging in cream while showing your sympathy.

Try offering a cosy sweater on a cold day or removing wet clothes when they get soaked coming home from school, and offer warm and cuddly alternatives.

Try to be there in times of need and nurture, nurture, nurture. Our children need to depend on us before they can become appropriately independent.

Helpful activities and games

Only choose activities that you and your child are likely to accept and enjoy

Activities that help to soothe and comfort

Massage cream/lotion into each other's hands using a firm comforting pressure.

You could also make a cream/lotion "print" of your child's hand on a dark piece of paper.

Give special kisses.

E.g. Butterfly kisses (flutter your eyelashes against your child's eyelashes) and Eskimo kisses (rub noses together).

Trace messages or pretend to make a pizza on the child's back.

Knead their back and draw on the pizza toppings with your finger, talk about how tasty it will be.

Manicure and pedicure.

Soak your child's hands/feet in warm water, massage in lotion and paint their nails. Remember to remove the varnish afterwards if the child isn't comfortable having it remain.

Spend time brushing hair.

You could sing a favourite soothing song as you brush.

Fan after energetic activity or on a hot day.

Rest with the child in your arms and fan with a large pillow, a fan or a newspaper.

Cotton ball/feather guessing game.

Have the child close their eyes and guess whether they have been touched by the cotton ball or the feather.

Cotton ball soothe.

Gently stroke the child's face arms and hands with a cotton ball and describe the child's positive features as you go along.

Feather match game.

Decorate your child with feathers, e.g. tucked behind ears, in hair, on shoulder etc. Have your child place feathers in the same places on you and spend time admiring each other.

Building self-esteem

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

Creating opportunities for success can help children 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 our children 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 child that they are great when they feel like a bad person can feel uncomfortable for the child and could lead to an outburst. Aim to build a history of successes so success feels normal. If your child can swim 100m, let them swim 25m, 50m and 75m and reward them for that several times before pushing for 150m.

Try to be specific when giving praise. Praise what has been done well, for example, 'your reading has really improved'.

Try to look for success even in negative situations, for example, if your child normally hits you when they lose their temper but this time just thumps the door, tell them how proud you are that they stayed more calm. Or if you are telling your child off and they are roaring at you, you can congratulate them on what a powerful outdoor voice they have!

Give praise for effort not just for achievement, for example, "you might not have passed the maths test but I'm proud of you for doing your best."

Ask your child 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.

Helpful activities and games

Only choose activities that you and your child are likely to accept and enjoy

Activities that help to **build** self-esteem

As a family we could all write down one good thing about each person so everyone will end up with a list of positive things about themselves.

Teach me that it's OK to not be perfect, no one is good at everything but everyone is good at something.

Model a sense of pride in yourself and your surroundings, if I see you doing it I will find it easier to do.

Use positive language, e.g. 'hold the cup tight – good, well done', rather than 'don't drop the cup.'

We could take part in an activity which has a result we can see, like baking.

How about I lie on the floor and you draw around me; then encourage me to make positive statements about different parts of my body, e.g. "I have nice shiny brown hair".

You could help me to list and think about all the things that I've done that I feel proud about or list the things I've done that make you feel proud.

Together we could use art or music in a way that shows how it feels when we feel good about ourselves. For example, create a painting with bright colours to represent feeling good.

Activities that help to **lighten-up**

Hide and seek, peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake.

These games also encourage good eye contact.

'Simon says' or 'follow the leader'.

This allows children to do as they are told in a fun way.

Mutual face painting.

This can lead to laughter and promote positive physical contact.

Staring competitions.

Use lots of funny faces.

Laugh at your own difficulties.

e.g. when you get sent down a snake in snakes and ladders.

Managing the environment

Children can become overstimulated when they have more experiences, and activity than they can cope with.

Keeping life low-key and calm can help to reduce the amount of stimulation your child experiences. This is important because children with attachment difficulties are easily overstimulated which can result in difficult behaviour. When there is too much going on they often find it hard to manage their emotions, even when those emotions are positive.



Helpful ideas

If your child is upset or displaying difficult behaviour you could ask yourself, “was he/she overstimulated?” A big birthday party, a trip to a theme park or too many presents at Christmas can sometimes cause as much distress as a quarrel with siblings or a problem at school.

Sometimes children can become overstimulated when they have too many toys / activities to choose from. If you notice this is happening it might be helpful to limit the selection of toys available in your child’s environment.

Try to keep televisions and electrical equipment out of bedrooms to reduce stimulation at night time. You could try spending time with your child in a quieter room before bed or read a relaxing story to encourage your child to unwind.

At the first sign of your child becoming agitated, try using simple physical activities to channel that energy. Bouncing on the bed, tumbling on the trampoline or a quick game of penalty shots can work wonders to reduce agitation.

Relaxation exercises can help to calm and focus your child if they do become overstimulated. It is a good idea to practice these exercises first when your child feels calm so that they already know how to do them during difficult times.

Helpful activities and games

Only choose activities that you and your child are likely to accept and enjoy

Activities that help children to **stop** and **think**

Play 'Simon Says'.

Sing a waiting rhyme together.

e.g. 'Count to eight, it helps me wait: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8!'.

Play 'Heads Down, Thumbs Up'.

Play 'Red Light-Green Light'.

This is a good game to play when your child is with a group of children, e.g. at parties.

Activities that help children to feel **calm**

Belly balloons.

Favourite smell breathing.

Ask your child to pretend to blow up a balloon in their belly; ask them to take a deep breath in as though inflating a balloon and then let their breath out like letting the air out of a balloon.

Tell your child to imagine breathing in their favourite smell and then slowly blow out an imaginary candle.

My special relaxing place.

Sensory exercise with a food item.

Encourage your child to think of a detailed image of a special place, real or imaginary, that they find relaxing. Ask them to focus on the image using all of their senses, e.g. the smell of the pine trees, the sound of the leaves rustling or the splash of the ocean waves.

Ask your child to focus carefully on a raisin (or jelly bean, chocolate button etc.) as if they have never seen one before. Let them pay attention to the colours, shape, textures and feel of the raisin. Let them smell it and chew it slowly, focusing carefully on the flavour.

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 child 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, for example, 'we can't feed the dog chocolate as it will make him poorly' instead of "don't feed the dog chocolate, because I told you not to".

If your child 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 your child 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 child to help them feel more effective. Try offering choices for things that don't matter much to you but do matter to your child, for example, which breakfast cereal to eat.

When giving choice try restricting it to two options, for example, 'you can have this one or that one'. Too much choice can be stressful and overwhelming for some children. Try to avoid open-ended questions such as, "what would you like for dinner?"

Helpful activities and games

Only choose activities that you and your child are likely to accept and enjoy

Activities that use **co-operation** to help children feel effective

Play ball games together.

Let your child throw a ball so you have to run and catch it.

Play together with cause and effect toys, e.g. pop up toys.

e.g. 'Count to eight, it helps me wait: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8!'

Play hide and seek..

Let your child be the 'seeker' and emphasize 'you found me!'

Play games that involve your child giving you instructions.

E.g. pour water into a container and ask your child to shout 'stop!' whilst doing the dishes or let your child be 'Simon' in 'Simon says'.

Activities that use **supervision** to help children feel effective

Share experiences together and make them fun.

E.g. dress up as 'Mrs. Mop' and clean to music together.

Set yourselves a checklist of fun tasks to do together.

Let your child tick them off when each is completed.

Help your child with an new activity they will enjoy.

e.g., give your child a disposable camera and help to get the photos developed and put them in an album together.

Create a 'free play' area at home.

This is an area where your child has free choice to play away from any 'out of bounds' areas. It will help avoid confusion about the things your child can and cannot touch as well as keep hazards away.

Additional resources

- Principles of Attachment-Focused Parenting: Effective Strategies to Care for Children – written by Daniel Hughes
- Therapeutic Parenting in a Nutshell – written by Sarah Naish
- The Connected Child – written by Karyn B. Purvis and Wendy Lyons Sunshine
- Cleo the Crocodile Activity Book for Children Who Are Afraid to Get Close – written by Dr Karen Treisman
- Creating Loving Attachments: Parenting with PACE to Nurture Confidence and Security in the Troubled Child – written by Kim S. Golding and Daniel A. Hughes
- The PACE Approach – the key to this approach is a respect for the child's own experiences and their inner life.
 - Playful
 - Accepting
 - Curious
 - Empathic.

Playful

Look for times when they may respond well to humour and a playful approach rather than a serious or stern approach.

Accepting

Accepting where they are at in that moment - they find it really hard to manage their emotions and it is a very scary place to be. Accept that they cannot regulate their emotions independently and consider how this relates to their history.

Curious

Be interested in them and ask what is going on for them. Guess at what they might be feeling. Even when maintaining a boundary, calmly wonder or ask them about things will help. E.g. 'I wonder if you are starting to get giddy because it is bed time...'

Empathy

Responding to them with genuine empathy for their feeling;
Examples of empathic responses are:

- No wonder you are worried!
- You look really upset about.....
- I think you're mad at me because.....
- It must be really hard for you; I would find it hard not to get angry if...