

THE DEFINITION OF SECURE ATTACHMENT

by
Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

An important start to a life characterized by emotional well-being, interpersonal harmony, constructive behavior, and sustained motivation occurs when an infant develops a secure attachment relationship with a primary caregiver. A primary caregiver is the person, usually the mother, with whom the infant most frequently interacts. Undesirable outcomes can develop when a child forms an insecure attachment. The type of emotional attachment, established in the first four or five years after birth, usually lasts a lifetime. The pattern of early attachment experienced by a child significantly influences the quality of the love relationship that child will have as a teenager, adult, and parent with his or her own children.

An infant develops a secure emotional attachment to the caregiver when that adult consistently and continuously behaves sensitively and appropriately to meet the needs of the child. From an infant's emotional point of view, sensitive and appropriate mean that the caregiver observes and understands the needs expressed by the behavior of the young child. Sensitive and appropriate also mean that a caregiver responds to the infant's needs in ways that please and satisfy the child. A caregiver who fosters a child's secure attachment meets needs soon after the child begins to show distress or cries. The caregiver's behavior is tender and affectionate.

A secure attachment is also created when the young child's primary caregiver holds or cuddles the infant and toddler frequently in ways that are noticeably comforting to the child. When interacting with a young child, the caregiver reflects the infant's behaviors and responds in ways the child enjoys. For example, when the baby smiles, the caregiver smiles at the infant. The infant shows pleasure and interest in the caregiver's smile. Caregivers should not act in loud, abrupt, or exaggerated ways. These behaviors can scare youngsters and cause them to feel insecure.

The caregiver with whom a child develops a secure attachment is in tune with that child. The adult's behavior creates an ongoing, interactive harmony with the youngster as the adult responds to the young child's interests and needs. This harmony develops when the caregiver learns correctly to understand, interpret, and then appropriately react to the child's behavior. This adult behavior establishes within an infant and toddler a felt knowledge that the youngster's behavior is respected, interesting, and significant to the caregiver. For example, when an infant begins to babble, makes sounds or syllables, and begins to talk, a caregiver with whom the child develops a secure attachment notices that child's new verbal abilities and responds in ways that make the infant or toddler feel his or her new skills are fun and are valued by the caregiver. Caregivers desirous of forming a secure attachment with the child also evaluate their own childrearing behaviors. They do this by paying attention to the child's reactions to their caregiving.

Infants and toddlers love to explore and play. Caregivers who wish to develop a secure young child provide toys and activities that the child likes. Because infants, toddlers, and preschoolers enjoy making choices, parents who want their child to develop a secure attachment provide opportunities for their youngster to do so throughout the day. These caregivers also allow the child the playtime the youngster wants. Without interrupting, a caregiver allows the

child to focus on an activity the child finds interesting. A caregiver does not distract an infant or toddler from a play activity until the child becomes bored with it.

The childrearing behaviors described here allow an infant or toddler to feel secure. These behaviors also build a foundation of social harmony between child and caregiver. The caregiver enjoys being with the child, and the child enjoys being with the caregiver. The way an infant reacts to his or her primary caregiver reveals whether or not the child feels the adult has met his or her needs and done so in ways that are pleasing. Contrary to popular belief, a large number of research studies show that this kind of caregiving will not spoil a child. In fact, spoiled, dependent, clingy, whiney, and demanding children are created when caregivers consistently violate these childrearing practices.