

## What is Attachment?

Attachment is the bond or relationship between two people. The first attachment is usually the bond between the infant and primary caregiver (usually the mother, but it can be anyone who consistently provides the care and attention the baby needs).

By the time a baby is seven days old, the attachment between the infant and primary caregiver should be developed to the point where the caregiver understands the baby's needs from its cry and non-verbal communication. The way this early relationship is formed is a blueprint for future relationships.

## What is Attachment Disorder?

Children who do not bond with a parent or caregiving adult in their early months can be significantly impacted. An infant whose basic physical and emotional needs are not met, who is moved frequently from one foster home to another, or who is abused or neglected by a parent or caretaker can develop an attachment disorder. This may be referred to as Reactive Attachment Disorder or RAD.

Any of the following conditions occurring to a baby puts him or her at risk:

- Unwanted pregnancy
- Pre-birth exposure to trauma, drugs or alcohol
- Abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
- Neglect (not answering the baby's cries for help, food, etc.)
- Separation from the primary caregiver (i.e. illness/death of mother, severe illness or hospitalization of the baby, or adoption)
- On-going pain (i.e. colic, hernia, chronic ear infections)
- Changing day cares or using providers who don't bond
- Parents/caregivers with chronic depression

- Several moves or placements (foster care, failed adoptions)
- Caring for baby only on a timed schedule or other self-centered parenting

Attachment disorders can show up as a wide range of problems and varying degrees of emotional disorder. The severity of attachment disorder seems to be related to the number of breaks in the bonding cycle, and the extent of the child's emotional vulnerability. One thing can be predicted with certainty, if an infant's needs are not met consistently, in a loving, nurturing way, attachment will not occur normally.

## Signs of Attachment Disorder in infants

- Weak crying response or constant crying
- Flinching or startling after 8 weeks of age
- Resistance to cuddling, seems stiff, doesn't hold on to the caregiver
- Poor sucking response
- Poor eye contact, lack of tracking (following)
- Developmental delays
- Does not return smiles
- Indifference to others
- No stranger anxiety after 6 months of age
- Self-abuse (head banging, etc.)

## Signs of Attachment Disorder In older children

- Act superficial and phony, especially around strangers or people they feel they can manipulate in order to be in control
- Lack of eye contact unless they are lying, or conning
- Indiscriminately affectionate with strangers; inappropriately demanding and clingy
- Lack ability to feel real caring; to give and receive affection
- Extreme control problems (worsen as the child gets older);
- Sneaky behavior

- Leave a trail of destruction with other kids, pets, material things, and even their own body
- Learning lags and disorders are created by their constant agitated emotional state
- Masters at crazy, twisted stories, outright lies and distortions of the truth; false allegations of abuse
- No impulse control; prone to stealing
- Do not understand cause and effect
- Lack of conscience
- Abnormal eating patterns
- Poor peer relationships because of their need to control and cruelty to others
- Preoccupation with destruction, fire, blood, gore and evil
- Talk to interrupt, make noise or control; to manipulate
- Very good at pitting parents against each other (triangulation)
- Presume they are entitled to control the lives of everyone around them

One form of attachment disorder is termed "dependency attachment." The child becomes attached to an abusive or adoptive parent solely out of dependency. The child seems very bonded to the parent, but elements of healthy attachment are missing from the relationship. Children who experience frequent moves may also show signs of dependency attachment.

Children with attachment disorders are likely to be "manipulative, superficial, sneaky, insincere, and users." Sometimes they are described as "all take and no give," and they play one person against another. These children are filled with rage, and have an immense need to be in control of the people and events in their lives. Inside, children with attachment disorders are filled with anxiety and they lack self-esteem. They often believe that something terrible will happen to them if they are not in total control.

## What can parents do to help?

Overcoming attachment disorder is a process which takes time and requires the commitment of the primary caregiver as the change agent. The mother must be empowered with techniques to gain the trust of the child. Attachment is based on trust, and trust develops only after repeated testing. The child will not develop trust of an adult they can control and manipulate, so the adult must be strong enough to take charge in a loving way.

Normal attachment takes a couple of years, during which children cycle through mutually positive interactions. The child learns to love and believes that he or she is loved. The child learns to trust that his/her needs will be met in a consistent and nurturing manner and that he/she "belongs" to the family – and the family "belongs" to him/her.

It can take many years for a child with attachment disorder to learn to trust, and some never do. Parents should also realize that the stress and trauma of parenting a child with attachment disorder will take time and perhaps therapy to heal. Both child and parents will have grief and post-traumatic stress issues to overcome.

If attachment problems are recognized, they can be treated with appropriate therapy and parenting techniques, but it is a long, difficult journey. Attachment Disorder cannot be cured by waiting. Waiting for a child to outgrow the behaviors associated with Attachment Disorder does not work. The condition, left uncontrolled can destroy a child and family. The behavior can become more destructive as the child gets bigger and can do more damage.

## For more information, about ATTACHMENT DISORDER

### CONTACT:



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*Disability Brochure #3*



## Characteristics and Coping Strategies

## Parent Information Center

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