

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



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The Importance of Attachment:

In the movie, *Fly Away Home*, based on a true story, a young girl adopts some baby geese. The babies are imprinted with her as their mother, and are so attached that they follow her everywhere. The girl and her father devise an ultra light aircraft so they can guide the birds south from Ontario to North Carolina for the winter. Similarly, human babies need secure attachments and trusting relationships with their parents and other caregivers in order to survive and develop into emotionally healthy adults.

Types of attachment:

Secure: children respond happily to parents, explore their environment, show trust in their parents.

Insecure/ambivalent: children are anxious; want their parents but then struggle to get away, are reluctant to explore, are easily upset and frustrated. **Insecure/avoidant:** children avoid or ignore their parents, don't respond to parents, show little emotion. **Insecure/disorganized:** children are unpredictable in their behavior, have a hard time coping, are hard to comfort, show evidence of fear in the presence of a caregiver.

Characteristics of children with secure attachment: Ability to communicate effectively • Ability to negotiate, cooperate with others, and play more happily with peers • Higher scores in language and cognitive skills • Decreased levels of fear and stress • Trust that physical and emotional needs will be met by adults • Ability to self-regulate emotions.

Long-term effects of insecure attachment: Inability to maintain relationships and mistrust of intimacy • Depression, anxiety and eating disorders • Increased risk of substance abuse and other self-harming behavior • Increased risk of aggressive, violent and controlling behavior.

Tips for encouraging healthy and secure attachment: Pay attention to cues children give and provide a quick response • Comfort children when they are distressed • Be warm, positive and caring in your interactions with children • Follow children's lead in their interactions and don't force them to follow your desires • Avoid over-stimulation • Focus on meeting 10 key emotional needs of children (attention, acceptance, appreciation, encouragement, affection, respect, support, comfort, approval, security).

Resources

- "Attachment: What Works?" Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning, February 2011, http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb_24.pdf
- "Understanding Attachment in Young Children," North Dakota State University Extension Service, <http://tinyurl.com/88g57aa>
- "Attachment: Supporting Young Children's Emotional Wellbeing," <http://tinyurl.com/aevbp9>