Unattached Child

Bridge Between School and Family

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What is Attachment?

“Attachment system is a regulatory system within the child interacting with the complementary caregiving system in the parent.”
(Brisch, 2002)
Healthy Attachment Cycle (Gray, 2002)

- Secure attachments form during the first year of life.
- Repeatedly meeting the child’s needs comforts and validates the child.
- They learn to trust the parent and that their world is a safe place.
What Are the Benefits of Secure Attachment? (Moretti, & Peled, 2004)

• Adolescents are less likely to drink, try drugs or have ‘risky’ sexual behavior.

• Fewer mental health problems in adolescence.

• Fewer eating disorders and teenage pregnancies.

• More constructive coping and social skills.

• Smoother transitions to middle and high school, and stronger peer relationships.
What Interrupts Attachment?
(Gray, 2002)

- Early separation from parents (foster care moves)
- Adoption after attachment to another parent figure has occurred.
- Prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol.
- Traumas like abuse or domestic violence
- Major depression, schizophrenia, or manic-depressive illness in the parent figure.
- Drug or alcohol addiction in the parent figure.
- Orphanage care.
- Hospitalization of the parent or child, during which children lose access to parent.
- Neglect.

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Four Attachment Styles (Brisch, 2002)

• Secure Attachment
  – Toddlers will look and cry for mother when she leaves the room then reach for her and want to be consoled upon her return.
  – “In the classroom, secure attachments to teachers and other students optimize the ability to learn.” (Cozolino, 2014)
  – Securely attached students internalize the comfort of their mothers and are more secure in school settings.
  – Students ask for help when they need it, and form bonds with classmates and teacher.

• Avoidant Attachment
  – Toddlers will not protest when mother leaves, continued play
  – Avoidance reaction when she returns, not wanting to be held.
  – Students will seem very self-sufficient.
  – Not asking for help or reassurance.
  – May seem frustrated at times but will not seek comfort or help.
  – May fly under the radar and not get noticed.

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Four Attachment Styles

- **Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment**
  - Intense crying when mother leaves, can not be consoled upon her return.
  - Children want the physical closeness but also act with aggression toward her.
  - Less Secure Learners
  - May require more comfort and support to take risks in the classroom.

- **Insecure-Disorganized Attachment**
  -- Moving toward mother to be consoled, but stopping before reaching her and turning around.
  - Even some securely attached children show signs of disorganized attachment.
  - “May do everything possible to avoid attention, including behaviors such as keeping still and hiding in the back of the classroom.” (Cozolino, 2014)
  - Odd and unpredictable behavior
  - Driven by anxiety and fear

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Why Do Insecurely Attached Children Need Empathy? (Cozolino, 2014)

• **Securely Attached Children**
  – Do not produce adrenaline or stress hormones in response to stress.
  – Attachment is a coping strategy
  – They feel safe.

• **Insecurely Attached Children**
  – DO show a hormonal stress response.
    • Arousal, anxiety and fear
  – Anger and disagreement are experienced as fear.

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What Are the Risks of Insecure Attachments? (Moretti & Peled, 2004)

• Higher incidence of:
  – Suicide
  – Drug use
  – Delinquent behavior (Moretti, 2004)
What Happens When There is No Attachment? (DSM-V, 2013)

- Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)
- Cognitive Delays
- Language Delays
- Severe Malnutrition from neglect.
- Other disorders may co-occur.
  - Depression
  - Sensory issues
  - Auditory processing problems/disorder
What Can We Do in the School?
Characteristics of Students with Weak Attachments:
(Hughes, 1997)

1. Compulsive need for control
2. Intense lying

- 3. Poor response to discipline: aggressive or oppositional-defiant;
- 4. Not comfortable with eye contact unless lying
- 5. Physical contact: too much or too little
- 6. Interactions lack mutual enjoyment and spontaneity;
- 7. Problems eating, sleeping, urinating
- 8. Will resist increased attachment attempts
Characteristics Continued  (Hughes, 1997)

• 9. Indiscriminately friendly, charming; easily replaced relationships;

• 10. Poor communications: many nonsense questions and chatter;

• 11. Difficulty learning cause/effect, poor planning and/or problem solving;

• 12. Lack of empathy; little guilt and remorse for others;

• 13. All or nothing thinking, no grey areas;

• 14. Habitual dissociation or habitual hypervigilance and

• 15. Pervasive shame, with extreme difficulty reestablishing a bond following conflict.
Classroom Interventions (Cozolino, 2014)

• Allow room for children to be able to express negative feelings and have them be heard and accepted.

• Demonstrate the conflict can lead to resolution and reconnection through friendly “debates”. Give them the opportunity to ‘switch sides’ and present the opposite position.

• Normalize conflict and negative feelings and establish a way to process them.

• Consider ‘Tribal Classroom’ in which the class functions as family or community to help and encourage each other.
Classroom Interventions (Gray, 2002)

• Routine, structure and consistent rules
• Steady and upbeat reinforcement of rules helps children to make good choices.
• Immediate consequences
• “Catch” the child following the rules (PBIS)
• Stay out of the control battle; sometimes these children do better with commands
• Don’t shame the child as a means of control.
• Keep the child front and center of the class in a calm, structured classroom.

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Classroom Interventions (Gray, 2002)

- Use other sensory modalities than auditory (write instructions on board, photo board)
- Keep positive to negative comments to child in 7:1 ratio.
- If possible, meet the teacher before school and ‘practice’ the routine and correct behavior with no one else around.
- Help the child to feel as safe and comfortable as possible.
- Maintaining a structure, but safe and nurturing connection with children is essential to their learning when they have marked, underlying fear.
When Talking With Parents: (Gray, 2002)

• Listen empathically.
• Start and end with positives!
• Ask about other methods they have tried and why they didn’t work
• Give examples of successes at school
• Remember the parents are working hard at home (and are most likely exhausted)
• Ask which part of the school day might need more structure for their child
• Ask which tactics used at home can/should be used at school.
• Ask about the emotional age of the child. (recognizing that the child is doing the best they can for their emotional age is important and can take the emotional charge out of most situations)
• Ask how to best calm and focus the child.

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Could a child have attachment issues?

**Red flag issues to listen for:** (Gray, 2002)

- High structure parenting, talk of trauma, abuse (parent who knows attachment is issue)
- Extreme need for control by the child
- Hoarding food, wetting or soiling after toilet training has been established
- Insomnia
- Fascination with horror, persistent fear of being alone
- Cruelty to animals or people
- Rage that seems to come out of nowhere, rage that seems out of proportion to the circumstances
- History of physical or sexual abuse or extreme deprivation. (even if the child can not remember the abuse)
- Child witnessing violence

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References


