

EARLY ATTACHMENT AND LATER OUTCOMES

The attachment bond – a child’s earliest relationship with his or her primary caregiver (usually mother) – affects relationships throughout life.

- *Secure* attachment occurs when the primary caregiver is attuned to the non-verbal messages sent by baby, when mother “reads” and responds appropriately to baby’s cries, joyfulness and fears.
- *Insecure* attachment results when caregiver is emotionally unavailable to infant for any reason: overly stressed, anxious or depressed, rejecting, abusive, abandoning, physically or mentally ill, alcoholic, or even unintentionally neglectful. Insecure attachment may also occur if a child is ill, hospitalized, or has a painful, undiagnosed medical problem.

The outcome of secure and insecure attachments is likely to be reflected as below.

To understand someone’s early life, look at the right hand (shaded) columns for some clues.

ATTACHMENT STYLE	PARENTAL STYLE	LATER ADULT RELATIONSHIPS	
Secure	Aligned/attuned with child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to create meaningful, trusting, lasting relationships • empathetic; comfortable sharing feelings • recognizes and maintains appropriate boundaries • self-confident; good self-esteem; feels wanted • takes responsibility for actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • resilient; copes well with stress/anxiety • has conscience and remorse • seeks and maintains social support • tends to believe that romantic love is enduring • believes life is worth living
Avoidant	Unavailable or rejecting; neglectful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • avoids closeness or emotional connection • unable or unwilling to share thoughts and feelings • shows little or no emotion or empathy • needy, yet distant; may be whiny or bullying • critical; rigid; intolerant; blaming; vengeful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feels unlovable; creates excuses to avoid intimacy • casual sex; fantasizes about others during sex • sees love as rare and temporary • little distress when relationship ends • may use alcohol to be in social situations
Anxious/ Ambivalent	Inconsistent and sometimes intrusive parent communication; unavailable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anxious and insecure; feels helpless • controlling; blaming • erratic, impulsive, unpredictable • superficially charming and engaging • falls in love often; clingy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manipulates to gain closeness; then sabotages to create distance • worries partner does not love them; frequent break-ups • distraught when relationship ends • often uses alcohol/drugs to reduce anxiety in relationship
Disorganized	Ignores or doesn’t see child’s needs; behavior is frightening or traumatizing; may be adopted or in foster care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chaotic; insensitive; explosive; abusive • untrusting even while craving security • feels worthless, unwanted and unlovable • depressed; anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • erratic – may seek relationship, cut it off, and then try to re-establish it • underachieving; lies, steals or cheats • alcohol/drugs increase negative behaviors
Reactive	Extremely unattached or dysregulated; abandonment; multiple caregivers; foster or adoptive homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cannot establish positive relationships • lacks eye contact • lacks guilt or remorse • lacks cause/effect thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • often misdiagnosed as other conditions (ADHD, Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder, etc) • may become addicted to alcohol or other drugs

INSECURE