

When Attachment Issues Come to School: Understanding and Applying Attachment Principles to Reach and Teach Difficult Youth

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Questions we will explore today

- How can we understand behavior as communication?
- What is secure attachment? How does it relate to future pupil behavior and performance?
- What are the core concepts of attachment theory?

Questions we will explore today

- What is the “Learning Triangle,” and how does security of attachment relate to a healthy balance between its three components?
- How are the patterns of attachment seen in the classroom?
- What are some internal struggles faced by youth with anxious attachment?

Questions we will explore today

- Which teaching strategies work best with each attachment style?
- What can we do to promote schools as a “secure base” for troubled students?

Understanding behavior as communication

- When emotional/social needs are not met at home/community, students may not be able to put aside preoccupations/worries enough to learn
- Often expressed in behavior that interferes
- Need to know possible meaning of behavior as a communication about preoccupations, past experiences

Behavior has meaning

- Identifying the meaning of behavior, making it explicit can remove block on learning
- Problem behaviors/difficulty learning can result from:
 - Performance fears (child unable to do work)
 - Preoccupations about separations- urges to leave classroom a possible expression re external concern, issues at home

Behavior has meaning

- Problem behaviors and difficulties in learning can result from:
- The impact of loss
- The effects of traumatic experiences
- Early relationships which affect responses at school, e.g., secure vs. insecure attachment

What is secure attachment?

- John Bowlby (1969) defined attachment as the strong, reciprocal affectional ties with people we care most about “from the cradle to the grave”
- Secure attachment: infant-caregiver bond in which the child welcomes contact with the caregiver & uses that person as a secure base from which to explore the environment
- About 65% of North American infants

What is secure attachment characterized by?

- Young children explore while alone with mother, but visibly upset by separations
- Warmly greet mother when she returns- seek comfort to alleviate distress
- Children outgoing with strangers with mother present
- Mother is warm, sensitively attuned, consistent, responds quickly to child's distress

Long-term outcomes: The Minnesota studies

- Longitudinal studies by Sroufe and Egeland at U of Minnesota during 1970s/1980s
- Used the attachment classifications developed by Ainsworth and Main to distinguish differences between children with secure vs. insecure attachment styles
- Very revealing as to the impact of attachment security on children's ongoing development

The Minnesota studies

- In preschool: securely attached children more likely to be leaders, to suggest activities, to be more sympathetic to peers' distress, more popular, and to enjoy learning
- Insecure preschoolers more withdrawn, hesitant to join in, spaced out, aggressive, acting out, noncompliant, dependent, attention-seeking and less curious, attentive

The Minnesota studies

- In school-age children, securely attached kids had more stable friendships, self-assurance, competence
- Insecure more dependent, shy, withdrawn or aggressive, bullying, defiant, destructive, etc.
- By adolescence, secure teens more popular, socially competent, responsible, assertive, better at handling conflict/stress, less aggressive than insecure teens

Patterns of children who resist attachment (Hughes, 2009)

- Pervasive urge to control people/events in their lives
- Chronic hypervigilance
- Emotionally volatile- intense anger, fear, despair, shame
- Difficulty anticipating consequences of actions of self and others
- Pervasive sense of shame, being unlovable, worthless, bad

Patterns of children who resist attachment (Hughes, 2009)

- Difficulty experiencing empathy for others
- Difficulty perceiving inner lives of self/others
- Difficulties with speech/language, sensorimotor, self-care development
- Difficulty experiencing self/others as continuous, coherent- experience often disjointed

The core concepts of attachment theory

- The “secure base” - as infants learn to explore the world, they return to mother for reassurance, enabling them to confidently explore their surroundings
- Secure base has a “containing” quality: helps child co-regulate anxiety, how to think/ talk about fears, cope with them, & believe that others will help if the challenge is too great

The core concepts of attachment theory

- “Safe haven”- child returns to the caregiver for comfort/safety in face of fear or threat
- Proximity maintenance- the desire to be near people we are attached to, with physical proximity slowly replaced by psychological proximity, i.e., felt security
- “Wilson, I’m sorry!” (“Cast-away”)

The core concepts of attachment theory

- Attunement- the sharing of an affective state
- When two people are attuned, they are in synch, share a similar degree of intensity in present experience
- Matching of affect creates feelings of being understood, helps child regulate emotions
- Secure attachment is “the effective dyadic regulation of emotion in infancy” (Sroufe)

Attunement- continued

- An infant's communications are "translated" by caregiver's responsive facial, verbal gestures and actual responses- comes to learn about self by being understood by other
- "Still face" experiment- how infants come to feel recognized, understood, "mirrored," and develop sense of personal agency
- Video example

Still Face Experiment: Dr. Edward Tronick

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8ZTx1AEup4>

The core concepts of attachment theory

- Internal working models: Bowlby's concept of inner representational models of attachment figure and of self
- A child with secure attachment has model of attachment figure as available, responsive, helpful, and of self as worthwhile, lovable, etc
- A child with insecure attachment lacks these
- Influences relational choices throughout life

The core concepts of attachment theory

- Attachment patterns- result of work by Mary Ainsworth using the “Strange Situation”
- Found 3 main patterns/styles: Secure, Avoidant and Ambivalent
- Mary Main and colleagues added a 4th: Disorganized/Disoriented
- Video example

Secure, Insecure, Avoidant & Ambivalent Attachment

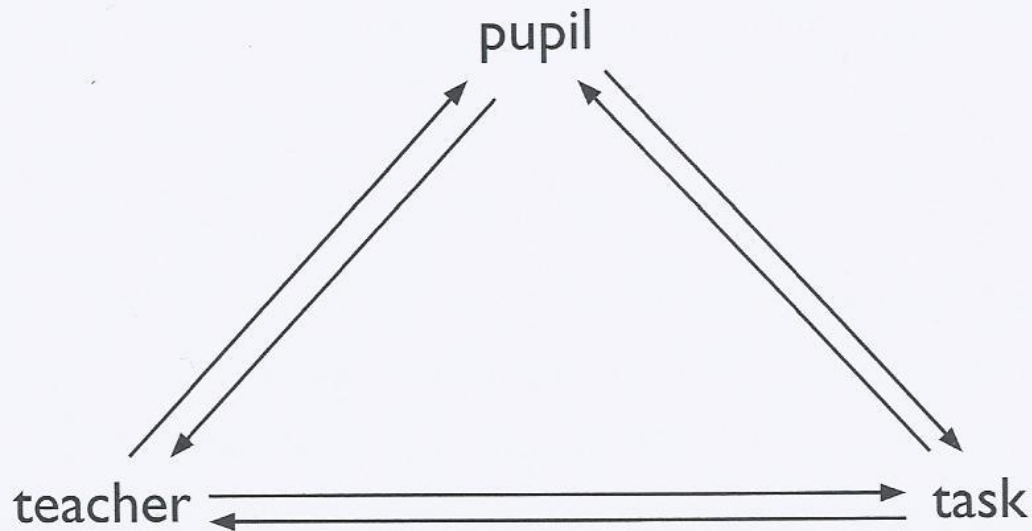
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH1m_ZMO7GU

What is the Learning Triangle ?

- Consists of 3 components: the pupil, the teacher, and the learning task, all each impacting and being impacted by one another and being in balance (Geddes, 2012)
- For the securely attached child, there is a fluid dynamic between engagement and support with teacher and involvement with the task

The Learning Triangle of the Securely Attached Student (Geddes, 2012)

The Learning Triangle of the Securely Attached Pupil



What does the securely attached child bring to the Learning Triangle?

- Capacity to explore objects in the immediate world with curiosity & creativity within the secure base
- Can tolerate frustration & uncertainty of not knowing
- Secure base provides source of containment of anxiety during exploration
- Brings confidence, sense of agency to task & to engaging with teacher

The Learning Triangle of the securely attached student

- Result for student is sense of personal agency, self-worth & mastery orientation
- Success with task enhances resiliency and growing self-sufficiency
- Insecure attachment patterns distort the Learning Triangle

Students who can't ask for help - Avoidant Attachment (20% of population)

- Strange Situation: when anxiety was aroused, avoidant children would avoid contact with mother, not seek contact
- Mothers/caregivers dislike neediness, favor precocious autonomy
- Inwardly want reassurance, but avoid closeness due to past rejection

Avoidant Attachment in the classroom

- Students often cannot ask for help, deny need for support, don't like the teacher to stand too close
- Ignore teacher, avoid eye contact, seem indifferent, passive/bored, say they don't care, shrug
- Or controlling and cope with anxiety with omnipotence, bossiness, fearlessness

Avoidant Attachment in the classroom

- Take refuge in same kind of repeated task, avoid or give up on new, open-ended tasks
- Avoid creative, communicative activities which run risk of failure/criticism
- Unprepared to engage, discuss a problem-inhibit feelings/action to avoid criticism
- Rip up their work, calling it trash, before teacher can comment on it

Avoidant Attachment in the classroom

- Show underlying anger they have not learned to direct toward its source, i.e., the mother
- Their anger often directed at objects or others & at provoking anger in others, e.g., teachers
- Want to do tasks autonomously, even if don't know how to
- Excessively pre-occupied with cell phones, iPods
- Their work often not as good as they want, but can't accept teacher input or help

The Learning Triangle of the student with Avoidant Attachment

- Both the pupil and teacher need to focus on the task
- Helps to moderate the student's experience of relationship with teacher- one often full of doubt about availability, acceptance, support

Problems in the Learning Triangle of the student with Avoidant Attachment

- Student experiences relationship and teacher's questions as intrusive, dangerous
- Teacher may feel ignored by student and be very annoyed, provoked into over-reacting
- Teacher may try too hard to help, triggering student's avoidance even more
- Teacher may feel helpless, give up, ignore them, decide someone else needs to help them- results in colluding with the pattern of rejection

Teaching strategies

- Allow student to have some control or choice over activities when possible
- Use language such as “You know you can do this,” not “I know you can do this”
- Tasks are the key- comment on the task itself instead of trying to build the relationship directly (make comments about how the student is doing task, be curious about it, avoid direct suggestions)
- Find tasks they enjoy doing, can be fairly self-directed on

Teaching strategies

- Organize group projects- they sometimes will work better with peers
- The type of group task still important, e.g., writing the answers on a worksheet, keeping score in game, etc- little interaction
- Tasks that involve a product rather than a process, e.g., design a poster, with achievable results- can show results without much interaction in relationships

Teaching strategies

- Use of metaphors and stories, drawing, writing, etc, to explore themes in books and movies which is safer than talking about themselves
- Left-brain, concrete, mechanical tasks, e.g., sorting, organizing, categorizing, building, cleaning up, help with classroom routine
- Staff must avoid “splitting” with avoidant kids, who present differently according to subject

Students who fear separation- Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment (10% of population)

- Strange Situation: child with this style is anxious in mother's presence and very upset when separated
- Will exhibit reunion behavior that is a mix of contact-seeking and angry resistance
- Mothers often inconsistent, out of synch with child, hyper-alert to fear in child, may role reverse with child re seeking comfort due to own unresolved dependency issues

Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

- Thus, child lacks confidence in mother's responsiveness
- Learns to expect to be frustrated instead of comforted- anger is directed at mother
- Has difficulty separating, has separation anxiety, tries to control by clinging, misses a lot of school

Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

- Child experiences attachment relationship as one in which separation/autonomy are denied in favor of anxious involvement with mother/caregiver
- Ambivalence expressed by both clinging and controlling behavior
- Can be overtly hostile and verbally/physically attack mother

Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment in the classroom

- Older children become coercive
- Mixture of immature, demanding, bossy, pushy, intrusive, needy and helpless
- More intense than avoidant kids, easier to engage, but set up “tests” to prove you care
- Lots of posturing, angry energy pervading relationships- often “in your face”
- Mix of intimacy-seeking and anger- teachers & counselors feel punished and provoked

Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment in the classroom

- Difficulty with personal boundaries- may want to exchange personal information, will feel rejected if teacher does not reciprocate
- May try to get very close relationship, tell all their problems to you
- Unable to focus on the task if they lose teacher's attention- in need of constant reassurance

Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment in the classroom

- Quick to become abusive/rude if feeling frustrated or ignored
- May demand more help and expect you to do it for them- can be labeled manipulative, immature, attention-seeking
- Peer problems may result, as peers get irritated by their constant attention-seeking and apparent persecution complexes

The Learning Triangle of the student with Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

- Reflects the tension between the student and teacher/adult at the expense of the task
- Reflects unresolved conflict which does not allow “another,” i.e., the task, to come between the child and mother
- The child is preoccupied with the relationship with the teacher at the expense of the task

Teaching strategies

- Break task into small steps, use turn-taking to model experience of 2 separate people
- “Try the first 3 questions on your own, and then I will come back and check”
- Use timer to moderate anxiety during short, timed tasks, which they can check on watch/timer

Teaching strategies

- Gradually increase duration of task
- Avoid temptation to over-help: these students need to learn to experience some frustration in order to develop problem-solving abilities
- Board games create turn-taking/separation
- Curriculum can include stories about journeys, separations, identity, independence

Teaching strategies

- Can be given responsibility for tasks, rather than for controlling others
- Need to plan ahead of time for beginnings, separations, endings: transition from elementary to middle school often difficult
- Awareness of separation anxiety problems
- Reliable, consistent adult support that does not collude with dependency, but can stand in as alternative attachment figures

Students who worry us the most- Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment (5% of population)

- The most distressing, impaired
- Severe, challenging behavior in school
- Bang head when frustrated, abusive to other students and teacher, run around uncontrollably, run out of class, sudden shifts in mood, unexplainable rages, truant and bully others
- Parents are often difficult to engage

Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment

- Unlike Avoidant & Resistant/Ambivalent infants in Strange Situation, these children had no consistent patterns of response for dealing with stress
- Disoriented behaviors in Strange Situation included freezing, contradictory behavior (e.g., approaching with head averted), and mixture of proximity seeking & avoidance

Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment

- These children more likely to have experienced neglect, abuse, witnessing domestic violence or having unresolved grief from maternal deprivation or abandonment
- Hyper-vigilant for danger, anxious, fight or flight easily triggered
- Very controlling toward parents and other adult caregivers, little self-awareness or sensitivity toward others- lack of empathy

Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment

- Perceive self as unworthy of and very sensitive to any form of perceived disrespect
- Internal Working Model is one of undeserving child of little value and world as unsafe, uncaring
- Thus, anything they do not know or understand is perceived as a threat or humiliation

Teaching strategies

- Early identification is key, as the longer children go without adequate containment, the harder it becomes to change reactive patterns serving as defense to extreme anxieties
- Reliable, safe, predictable routines- school may be the first place experienced with predictable activities, rituals
- Reliable rules help regulate brain pathways

Teaching strategies

- A physical container, eg, box, heavy quilt, etc., can provide symbolic “secure base” as precursor to emotional containment
- Residential school may be needed for those needing high level of physical containment long enough to be able to look toward relationships for containment

Teaching strategies

- Need to understand the meaning of the communication behind the behavior is key to child's feeling understood, "held in mind"
- Frequent positive feedback to reinforce positive responses when possible
- Use of agreed-upon procedures helps contain student reactivity & protect the teacher

Teaching strategies

- Teachers working with these students experience high levels of stress, reactivity and uncertainty
- Easy to feel angry & rejecting toward them
- System becomes at risk for becoming reactive, punitive, replicating student's past experiences of rejection, abandonment
- Need for reflective, supportive network

Teaching strategies

- The nature of the task can be experienced as humiliating reminder of inadequacy
- Concrete, mechanical, rhythmic activities engage the left brain to soothe distressed right brain
- Counting, coloring, drawing, sorting, building structures, copying, sequencing pictures/objects
- Rhythmical exercise, music helps regulate right brain
- Re emergencies, step back and try to see the unregulated fear that may fuel aggression, and removal to quiet, safe, place with trusted adult, with some concrete activities to focus on

How schools can become a “secure base”

- By teachers and others developing an awareness of principles of attachment theory & secure attachment
- Learn ways of being attuned with students in order to better understand and respond to them, e.g., Dan Hughes’ “PACE” (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) helps co-regulate affect
- By teachers and others seeking to respond to meaning of behavior rather than reacting to difficult feelings provoked by students’ IWM

How schools can become a “secure base”

- By schools having ongoing supportive networks to help contain anxiety for staff and students, to turn reaction into reflective interventions
- By focusing on early identification and intervention
- By believing in the capacity and potential of teachers and related professionals to promote and maintain student well-being
- By becoming “Attachment aware”

Becoming attachment aware in school

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFmqKGEcidg>

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Videos on You Tube

- Marie Delaney: “The effects of loss and trauma on learning and behavior”
- Marie Delaney: “Dealing with students with challenging behavior”