

Reflections on a secure attachment

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Relationship provides the grounds for our continued existence. Supportive relationships based on protection and comfort in times of distress provides optimum foundations for individuals to grow and learn. Crucial relationships in early years are usually between the child and parents and can also be between the child and other significant caregivers. John Bowlby (1969) studied and researched early relationships to formulate attachment theory. Bowlby identified four attachment styles. Progress in scientific fields has supported Bowlby’s theory. Neuroscientists have been able to observe the brain’s wiring and development. There is correlation between attachment style and brain development.

Caregivers are significant in a child’s life, it is these relationships that a child depends upon. The relationships will form the basis of the child’s growth and character. The earliest relationships are the beginnings of attachment, a theory developed by John Bowlby, and described as a “biological drive that encourages proximity to a caregiver and provides the young child with protection from danger” (Wilson, 2009, 23).

When a parent cannot be present in a child’s life for a specified period, a child will need to develop an attachment with his or her caregiver. Secure attachments are vital for healthy growth and development.

Observation

This observation was taken at a preschool between a child, identified as Tom (age 4), and myself. Tom arrived at preschool early that day; I arrived ten minutes later. The observation began when Tom noticed my arrival and our interactions lasted for 45 minutes.

Tom runs across the playground and takes hold of my hand. I squat down to his eye level and say, “Tom you’re here already.”

Tom nods and tells me that he will be running at athletics after school. I reply that Tom is a fast runner and that he should have fun. Meanwhile another child is anxious about his parent leaving. I tell Tom that I will hold his hand while I help Carl say goodbye to his mum. Tom holds my hand while I support Carl and his parent. When Carl is settled, Tom looks at me and points to the obstacle course set up in the playground.

I ask Tom if he wants to play there. Tom says that he does and I invite Carl with us. I walk to the obstacle course with Tom and Carl holding a hand each.

I sit in the middle of the square shaped course. Tom and Carl utilise the equipment and have brief conversations together. I smile as they go past; they each smile back and look occasionally to see that I am watching.

Carl moves away.

A parent approaches me and I stand up to interact. Tom stops playing and watches me. After two minutes, the parent leaves and Tom points to another activity and says, “How ‘bout we go there.” During the conversation with the parent, I offer to watch her toddler who is on the obstacle course while the parent does some business in the office. I tell Tom this and suggest that he goes to the preferred activity and that I will follow him shortly. Tom continues on the obstacle course. When the parent returns, Tom asks, “Can we go there?”

I walk with Tom to a construction activity, sit with him and initiate a conversation about Tom’s dog who visited preschool yesterday. We share this topic of conversation for three minutes and then Tom asks me, “Lynn, can we make pikelets because we didn’t make them at home?”

I reply that we can make pikelets next time that Tom comes to preschool. I tell Tom that we need eggs to make pikelets and that we don’t have any today, however, we are making fairy bread as we are having a party for our intern’s last day.

Tom continues playing with construction materials, singing to himself. Other children arrive and Tom has a brief dialogue with these children and listens to me as I talk to the others as well.

Tom then asks, “Should we play there?” meaning at gigantos blocks. I move with Tom and sit nearby talking with other children and to Tom. He enquires if morning tea is ready and I inform him that it will be ready soon. We discuss Tom’s age and birthday.

Tom pushes a child who knocked his construction over. I kneel down and ask the pushed child if they are okay. I ask Tom to use his words to the other child and model the words for him.

Tom continues to play and interact with other children. Tom sees the morning tea trolley arrive and goes to wash his hands for morning tea.

I stay behind.

Throughout the observation, Tom demonstrates a secure relationship style as “he investigates from a dependable foundation” (Thornton, 2009). My arrival at preschool coincides with the arrival of many families as it is the start of the regular preschool day. Although Tom has been playing without obvious anxiety, my arrival signals a reunion of a child/adult friendship and perhaps, at that moment, he may feel socially insecure with the influx of many people. He responds by running towards me and taking my hand.

Linden (2006) suggests that forming attachments is a process and not a single event. An infant from birth is reliant on an attachment figure to feed, soothe and comfort them. Michael Rutter’s (cited in Linden, 2006) research demonstrated that infants and children can form many attachments, the key is the development of an emotional rapport.

Tom and I have known each other for nine months. When Tom’s mother would leave Tom at preschool, I would be in their presence to support this critical time of anxiety for Tom. Our rapport is obvious as Tom goes out of his way to acknowledge my arrival and I acknowledge that he has arrived first. We also are able to link past experiences, e.g. Tom’s dog visited preschool the day before and plan new adventures e.g. fairy bread making and pikelet cooking.

Phases of attachment

Bowlby’s (cited in Berk, 2009) ethological theory of attachment is a four phase process. The phases describe the emergence of attachment relationships from birth to the child’s fourth year of life.

Tom, aged 4 years and one month, is currently at the final stage—formation of a reciprocal relationship. As evident throughout the observation, Tom has developed language skills and uses these for interactions with an adult and peers. He has developed a sense of confidence that his attachment figure will be available and attentive in times of need.

Separation occurs eventually between Tom and I when Tom chooses to leave me to go and have morning tea. He recognises that I will still be in the playground and that he can return if he needs to.

As Tom has moved through these stages, he now has, as Bowlby describes, an internal working model, which is a vital part of personality and will guide all future close relationships (Berk, 2009). The internal working model develops a set of expectations about the availability of attachment figures, the support that they will provide during times of emotional need and interactions with the carer (Kelly, Zuckerman, Sandoval, & Buehlman, 2003).

Attachment styles

Tom displays a *secure attachment* style. This is evident by his strong physical connection (holding

hands and staying close by) to the carer, and by his ability to explore the surroundings, in the caretakers presence, interact with his peers and make independent decisions as highlighted by his decision to go for morning tea.

Not all attachments are seen to be secure. Gerhardt (2004) describes an *avoidant attachment* pattern as one where the child has to suppress his feelings. The child may appear calm, however, the heart rate and automatic arousal are too high (Gerhardt, 2004). This style of attachment may develop for children whose carers have difficulty noticing and regulating their own feelings (Gerhardt, 2004). On reunion with a parent, these children may observe the parent, but stay physically away (Thornton, 2009).

Some children exhibit a *resistant or ambivalent attachment* style. This style emerges when parents are not consistent in their reactions to a child’s feelings. Gerhardt, (2004) states that these children keep their feelings close to the surface. On reunion with their parent they may cling, protest, and fail to return to exploratory play.

Children exhibiting *disorganised attachment* may be fearful, strongly avoidant and show mixed emotions on reunion with a parent (Kelly, Zuckerman, Sandoval, & Buehlman, 2003). These children may have been subjected to trauma, parental bereavement or disturbed parenting styles.

Neuroscience

Our brains are a living system that relies on interactions for survival (Cozolino, 2006).

Secure attachments, as Tom displays, are critical for our brains to develop the pathways we need to understand the social world, the rules of relationships and to gain strength from the pleasure of healthy physical interactions (Downey, 2007).

Cozolino, (2006) suggests that our brains are also capable of adapting to unhealthy environments and to inappropriate interactions. The result is, however, an impeded development later in life.

Brain growth is at its most rapid in the first months of life, up until five years. It must be nurtured by nurturing adults. Cozolino (2006) states that early relationships impact on the physiology and functioning of the brain. Emotionally stimulating interactions generate brain growth. Soothing an infant enables the child to develop a biological framework for dealing with future stress (Downey, 2007). This capacity to regulate our emotions and reactions is built in the early years and is known as ‘affect regulation’.

Attachment difficulties lead to prolonged stress and result in neural loss throughout the cortical-limbic circuits (Cozolino, 2006). This is known as ‘affect dysregulation’. Emotional states of

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hyperarousal (reactive, alarmed) and dissociation (numb, inattentive) follow which are painful and uncomfortable (Downey, 2007).

Tom displayed one instance where his behaviour may reflect hyperarousal—when he reacts quickly to push a child over. I feel, however, that he responded in this way as the words to use were not forthcoming quickly enough. Tom would have been disappointed that his work was damaged. I was able to acknowledge the problem, model a caring response to the pushed child, and support Tom in the words to use for the next time he experiences a similar situation. This technique is based on Vygotsky's model of play and learning (Berk, 2009). These strategies also support Bandura's social learning theory where children acquire knowledge and skills through observational learning (Krause, Bochner, & Duchesne, 2007).

The hypothalamic-pituitary axis in the brain modulates our reaction to stress by secreting cortisol and other hormones. The vagal system regulates the response to threat. When someone is traumatised or neglected emotionally, the chemical reactions in the body and brain can be switched on as if they have never been switched off, thus, a minor instance can cause an overreaction (Downey, 2007). It is therefore crucial that children's emotional and social development is supported from birth.

Relationships in childcare

It is essential for adults working in childcare to foster emotional rapport with children. "The most important thing, 95% of the job, is to develop warm, trusting relationships with the children and to do that you make yourself available, interested, and involved" (Lady Gowrie Child Centre, 2006, p. 4).

This happens as a reciprocal relationship throughout the observation with Tom.

To enhance attachment development, a child must feel a sense of belonging to the early childhood service they attend. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory depicts the child developing in a complex dynamic system of relationships affected by many environmental influences (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2000). Therefore, the bond between culture, community, school, family and child must be solid. Throughout the observation, Tom and I make continuous links to the environments that provide resources for Tom.

For children to prosper in an early childhood service they must feel safe and comfortable. As theory shows, children can only explore if they feel secure. This means children need to be given time to separate from parents. A warm caring adult should be present at this time. This adult should then stay

with the child for as long as the child needs. The child decides when they feel in a state of equilibrium and the child takes the initiative to move on.

Conclusion

The essential nature of relationship is asserted by Malaguzzi (cited in Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002) who believes "there is no possibility of existing without relationship. Relationship is a necessity of life" (p. 65). For optimum brain growth the relationship between carer and child must be responsive, consistent and warm, so enabling emotional and social development to prosper.

The Early Years Learning Framework of Australia (2009) supports the notion of belonging being integral to existence. The Framework states that belonging is central to being and becoming in that it shapes who children are and who they can become. Tom shows that he belongs to a service that has fostered a strong reciprocal attachment; he is flourishing in this environment.

In a responsive childcare environment, a child who is experiencing a secure relationship style with their family will have their notions of feeling good about themselves complimented. Children with attachment styles other than secure at home can still develop secure attachments with service staff. Secure attachments are paramount for the child's optimum development as this is the period of greatest growth and change. **TEACH**

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