

2010

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Kristin (2010) "With Jesus in the Family: How Early Childhood Attachment Styles Influence Later Relationships, Both with God and in the Workplace," *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://research.avondale.edu.au/teach/vol4/iss1/9>

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With Jesus in the family

How early childhood attachment styles influence later relationships, both with God and in the workplace

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Abstract

Attachment styles profoundly influence human relationships throughout life, including aspects of religion and the workplace. Individual educators as well as educational institutions take on parental qualities in relation to those who rely on them. Depending on the degree of early parental responsiveness and later life situations, humans live with a basically secure or insecure approach to peers, partners, God, and employing institutions. This article argues that it is important for Christian educators to be aware of this, and that core concepts from attachment theory are verified by current neurobiological research. Research in the field of psychology of religion supports John Bowlby's emphasis on the importance of sensitive, long-term relationships. These relationships in turn enhance optimum functioning in all relationships, including religious and workplace relationships.

Ten years after working in a boarding school, a teacher happened to meet a former student. "Good God, you look older," said the student. "And you have grown up," responded the teacher. "I remember you very well," said the student, "I really liked you, and tried to get to see you and spend some time with you every day." "It was a pleasure for me to spend time with you, too," answered the teacher.

This exchange illustrates an attachment relationship, where there is mutual pleasure for the older and wiser, and for the younger and dependent. Secure attachments give mutual pleasure, and have a profound influence. This article will show how an inner model, secure or insecure, is projected onto peers, partners, God and workplace in later life. This provides another framework for explaining pupil behaviour, and the behaviour of self and colleagues, as well as religious expressions of attachment to God. It also offers an explanation for why some educational institutions are more comfortable workplaces than others. What follows is a brief summary of some salient points in an extensive field of study. Even these few examples will give cause

for reflection as Christian educators consider how God concepts are developed through bi-directional effects, and how this influences not only familial lives but also functioning in the workplace.

Most educators in the field today have gone through their teacher education at a time when Piaget's findings on cognition was the predominant focus. Because of the pervasive influence of Piaget's massive contribution, cognitive processes have received considerably more attention than social emotional processes (Shore, 1994). Investment in the field of cognition has, for a long time, dominated developmental psychology, with cognitive processes being viewed as quite separate to social emotional processes.

Current discoveries in neuro-behavioural and social-emotional development integrate previously disparate factors (Tronick, 2007). Berk (2009) explains that "emotional development—formerly overshadowed by cognition—is an exciting, rapidly expanding area of research" (p.399). Cognitive and social emotional domains no longer seem starkly different! Hart (2008) notes, "We have only just unearthed the Rosetta stone of neuroaffective understanding" (p. xiv). Hart goes on to say that we are moving towards a time when we will more fully understand the interdependence of nature and nurture.

Through the relatively new study of neuro-plasticity, we understand that our brains are more well-equipped for change, and more at risk from the impact of the social environment, than was previously thought (Doidge, 2007). There is a growing awareness that our emotional connectedness with others is vital to both mental and physical health (Tronick, 2007). The rapidly expanding field of neuroscience is constantly highlighting the importance of human relations. We may not yet be used to thinking of the brain as a "social organ" (Cozolino, 2006, p. 7) that is developed through our social and emotional experiences with significant others, but there is a growing understanding that social emotional experiences influence the young brain's development. Cozolino (2006, p. 7) uses the term,

“Our brains are more well-equipped for change, and more at risk from the impact of the social environment, than was previously thought”

“bidirectional causality” to describe this process. This has profound implications for educators, who are parental figures to large groups of children / students.

Rise and relevance of attachment theory

Attachment theory is a framework for understanding social emotional relationships in early childhood and consequences for development through the lifespan. A large body of research supports the concepts inherent to attachment theory. The theory includes ideas from control systems theory, cognitive psychology and learning theory, and has steadily been used by social psychologists, and in research in the field of the psychology of religion (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001).

John Bowlby’s attachment theory was developed before the recent explosion in our understanding of brain function. Nevertheless, attachment theory included an understanding of the bi-directional influences between child and caregiver through what Bowlby called “the child’s tie to his mother” (Bowlby, 1958, cited in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 7). Bowlby himself had a personal experience of what he later termed “the breaking of affectional bonds” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 126), when his long-term nanny left. Bowlby became sensitive to grieving children and, like some teachers today, was followed around at the school where he worked by a couple of lonely children (Ainsworth, 1974, cited in Bretherton, 1992, quoted in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Parents and adequate substitutes: The secure base

Bowlby argued that infants are social creatures who thrive in the company of responsive mothers or sensitive substitutes. He terms the sensitive caregivers, other than parents, “a known and trusted substitute” (Bowlby, 1980, p. 320). In short, when safe enough, infants enjoy exploring their environment. When fearful, tired or ill, they hurry back to their secure and trusted base, their attachment figure. Bowlby stressed that attachment relationships need to be permanent, sensitive and intimate. The bi-directional idea is embedded in attachment theory in that Bowlby emphasised that attachment enjoyment needs to be mutual (Berk, 2009). Excessive turnover of carers often negatively affects the child’s ability to form lasting relationships later (Lindon, 2005). Ainsworth, who worked with Bowlby at the Tavistock Clinic in London, extended the theory. She developed what is known today as the “Strange Situation”, which is an assessment tool of attachment styles for infants and young children. Attachment inventories for the assessment of adult attachment styles have also been developed and are in use, but they will not be discussed here. Ainsworth

described three main attachment styles which will be used as broad conceptualisations for discussion purposes (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Walls, 1978).

The “strange situation”

The mother and infant are in an unfamiliar environment and there are toys for the baby to play with near the mother. A stranger is present. This assessment task uses departures of the mother followed by reunions with her baby to reveal already established patterns of attachment (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2007). While the original strange situation was done with mothers, today the “quality of toddler’s play” highlights security between child and father (Diamond & Marrone, 2003, p. 73). Fathers engage in large-muscle activities, while mothers engage with more quiet activities (Clark-Stuart, 1980, cited in Harwood, Miller & Vasta 2008).

Secure attachment (secure meaning “feeling no care or apprehension” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989)

Ainsworth found that securely attached infants appeared comfortable playing in this new setting. They were unhappy when the mother left, but immediately reconnected with the mother, and were comforted when she came back (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Walls, 1978). As a result, it was argued that when the child’s clear expression to the caregiver receives a favourable response, a secure attachment style will be developed (Main, 1990 cited in Ghafoori & Hierholzer, 2007).

Anxious avoidant attachment (avoidant meaning “holding aloof from” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989)

“Attachment theory is a framework for understanding social emotional relationships in early childhood and consequences for development through the lifespan”



[Photography:
Esther Marshall]

The children who did not seem distressed when the mother left, and who avoided her when she returned, were described as having an insecure avoidant attachment style. They showed more friendliness to the stranger in the room than they did to their mother (Bowlby, 1982).

Anxious ambivalent attachment (meaning “contradictory emotions towards the same person” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989)

These infants who were very anxious and unwilling to separate from the mother, and barely able to play with the toys, were the most distressed when the mother left. They sought closeness when the mother returned, but expressed anger with her, and were slow to settle.

We need to remember that, for the infant, separation from the caregiver is the greatest threat—greater than any mistreatment—because the infant needs someone to care in order to survive (Dozier, Manni, & Lindheim, 2005). Long term, stable, sensitive care is best, but not always possible. It is important to understand that the various attachment styles are adaptive. This is not a matter of right or wrong. For example, when the avoidantly attached child turns away from the mother, it may be to avoid hostile treatment (Bowlby, 1988). Infants make these adaptations in an effort to survive in their environment. Bowlby understood the function of attachment as fundamental for the species to survive. The connection between a weak individual and one perceived as more competent and more capable is essential for survival (Suomi, 1995, cited in Wulff, 2006). Human infants even attach to carers by whom they are mistreated (Egeland & Stroufe, 1981 cited in Kirkpatrick, 2005) because “fear and distress, activate the attachment system” (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 83).

Tarabulsy and colleagues found that many parents who grew up insecurely attached were able to be sensitive and responsive in their own care of their babies, with the result that their babies grew up to be securely attached (Tarabulsy et al., 2005, cited in Harwood et al., 2008). Generally, securely attached children remain securely attached in adulthood, at least in the absence of extremely adverse life situations. Securely attached children as well as securely attached adults enjoy life more easily, and are usually more happily adjusted to their own culture (Harwood et al., 2008).

Applying attachment theory to psychology of religion

Lee Kirkpatrick, while a psychology student in America, noticed that religious behaviour was hardly mentioned in his psychology lectures. This led

to his research for his PhD and beyond. Religion is crucial to many as the foundation of a sense of meaning, and in dealing with concepts of the sacred (Pargament, 1997, cited in Park, 2005). Kirkpatrick and others have, over the years, applied the principles of attachment theory to concepts of God. Kirkpatrick argues that the function of an attachment is to place us in the presence of someone who can help and enhance our survival, for example, as adults it may be “pastors, rabbis, priests, ministers” (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 93). There is general consensus today that attachment theory can be employed in the various manifestations of religiousness (Park & Paloutzian, 2005). Since Bowlby first published, attachment theory has had a powerful influence in the study of both children’s and adults’ constructs of, and relationship to, God (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

This article does not discuss religion or theology as such, but how one’s religion can be experienced and understood through one’s attachment style. Miner (2007, p. 112) has argued that looking at God concepts through the lens of attachment theory needs a “corrective grounding in Trinitarian theology”. Miner affirms attachment theory as “a powerful account of the formation of relational bonds that provide for physical survival and psychological security...Nonetheless their [the psychologists’] theory is limited because it relies on cognitive-affective approaches to attachment, and neglects a fully-developed theological base” (p. 112). This perspective does not acknowledge that all frameworks, including theological bases, can only be understood cognitively and experienced affectively.

Religions across the world provide frameworks to explain the final separation through death (Fricchione, 2002). Death may be seen as the final “strange situation”. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) point out that not only in the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—do believers experience a safe base, but also that “a common Buddhist prayer encourages adherents to ‘take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha’—a mentally represented loving teacher, the scriptures flowing from his teachings, and the local religious community” (p. 248). Conversely, in a Swedish study of older adolescents, Granqvist and Hagekull (2001) found that an orientation to New Age religious expression “directly” correlated with insecure attachment to parents (p. 536). In New Age thinking there is no single obvious attachment figure, which allows “the insecure new ager...to switch dishes on the spiritual smorgasbord without reaching a stable point where the ingredients have potentially lasting beneficial effects” (p. 539).

“Securely attached people who perceive God as a “secure base”, are more likely to be able to consider a wider range of theological ideas”

“I have come to give them life abundantly” (John 10:10)

In the same way that the securely attached child is free to play and explore his environment, a study by Beck (2006) indicated that securely attached people with theological interests who perceived God as a “secure base”, were more likely to be able to consider a wider range of theological ideas. These securely attached people also showed greater tolerance towards Christian groups who differed from their own, which is a way of saying that they were able to play nicely with others! They also seemed to have better capacity for self-regulation, in that they experienced “more peace” and did not find their religious experience distressing. It was very unlikely that they would break their connection to God (Beck, 2006).

Studies show that people who undergo a more gradual religious change had usually experienced greater security in their attachment to their mothers (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). A secure person’s gradually deepening religious conviction is not likely to be an outcome of a crisis in their life. Instead, a significant other, who is a spiritual person, has a steady influence for change. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the attachment model is not an indicator for qualities like religious participation (Nelson, 2009). While securely attached individuals are better able to cope with negative emotion, and are less likely to develop post-traumatic stress after trauma (Siegel, 1999 cited in Ghafoori & Hierholzer, 2007), they do not necessarily have better church attendance.

Earned secure: The possibility of moving from an anxious attachment to God and others, to a secure attachment to God and others

Research suggests that attachment styles are not static, but develop complexity with maturation (Levy & Blatt, 1999, cited in Nelson, 2009). People who have had the experience of a religious conversion may outgrow an insecure attachment and no longer be insecurely attached. The ability to calmly talk about difficult childhood experiences indicates increasing security. This new state is termed ‘earned secure’. Some formerly insecure parents mature into more secure caregivers; others are extensively supported by family and friends. In situations like this, earned secure attachments are likely to arise (Berk, 2009). Also, a secure relationship with God, partner or therapist, has profound therapeutic influence. This may contribute to a shift in the internal model from insecure to secure (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2002, cited in Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004).

Insecure attachments

People with avoidant attachment are more likely, when stressed, to make use of a distancing style of interaction, and are less likely to forgive perceived wrongs (Davis et al., 2008). Christians with avoidant attachment are less likely to seek “spiritual comfort” when they experience stress (Davis et al., 2008, p.299) and are more likely to see God as controlling (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002). There are also more agnostics among people who have an avoidant attachment style (Hazan & Shaver 1987; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 1998, cited in Byrd & Boe, 2001).

Anxious ambivalent people are more likely to experience emotional fluctuations, showing greater likelihood to convert to another religion, or to turn away from spirituality (Kirkpatrick, 2005, cited in Davis et al., 2008). Although not a large percentage of the general population experience sudden conversions, those who do, have experienced greater insecurity with both mothers and fathers (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). These sudden conversions often seem reactive to a difficult life situation. In this way, a religious conversion is possibly a way of feeling better and regulating emotion (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004); this seems adaptive and helpful under the circumstances. More Christians with anxious ambivalent attachment report spiritual conflict and anger with God (Exline & Martin, 2005, cited in Davis et al., 2008). Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) also found that converts tended to report that they experienced the relationship with God as renewing; they had a new identity and a newfound sense of love and safety (cited in Paloutzian, 2005). “Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) found anxious adults to report a higher incidence of glossolalic (speaking in tongues) experiences than either avoidant or secure adults” (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 141). It is important to note that in spite of several studies trying to connect speaking in tongues with poor mental health, “very little evidence has been found” (Plog, 1965; Hine, 1969; Richardson, 1973, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2005).

“Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14)

The first “God representations” are forming in children from about two years of age (Nelson, 2009). For example, Boyatzis, (2005) described a study by Coles (1990) who analysed a large number of children’s drawings of God. He noted that 87% of these drawings showed God’s face. In an earlier study, Heller (1986) explained that Hindu, Jewish, Baptist and Roman Catholic children saw God as “considerably more than human” (Boyatzis, 2005,

“*Research suggests that attachment styles are not static, but develop complexity with maturation*”

“The better the teacher and child bond, the more loving God seems to the child”

p. 127). Children are able to conceive of God as more than human, while often in a human form.

Pearce and Axinn (1998) found that children felt closer to church-going mothers. Varon and Riley (1999) found that the church-going mothers reported greater satisfaction with offspring and life in general (both cited in Miller & Kelley, 2005). Many researchers have found that competence in social relationships is strongly correlated with a secure childhood (Bohlin, Hagekull & Rydell, 1998; Elicker, Englund & Stroufe, 1992, cited by Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). Securely attached children are more adequately socialised, and are more likely to gradually become socialised into their primary caregiver's religious approaches and lifestyle (Granqvist & Hagekull 1999, cited by deRoos, 2006).

By the time children begin school, their understandings of God have begun to form. The relationship that is established between the kindergarten teacher and the child has great potential for the child's later school competence (deRoos, 2006), as well as the child's God concepts. School-aged children live in two worlds—the imaginative world of play, and their everyday lives (Nelson, 2009). The better the teacher and child bond, the more loving God seems to the child (deRoos, 2006). deRoos develops these findings by saying that the young children who enjoyed “close, open, and harmonious relationships” with their teachers were more involved in groups and experienced higher self esteem. These positive emotions were indicative of “loving, caring God concepts” (deRoos, 2006, p. 92). It is interesting that in this study, the teachers were religious, working with students from non-religious homes (deRoos, 2006). Even when a child has negative experiences in the relationship to primary carers, a teacher can significantly impact the child's positive God perceptions (deRoos, 2006). It was a great help to children to have at least one warm, positive relationship with a teacher. When home attachments were stressed and negative, it helped the child who had a close, significant relationship with their teacher to experience an intimate relationship with God. The significance here lies in the fact that the child has one important positive relationship (deRoos, 2006), which builds self-esteem.

In contrast, Gur, Mill and Weissman (2004) found that depressed mothers are correlated with less religiosity in the child, possibly due to the home being low in hope and lacking a sense of satisfaction (cited in Miller & Kelley, 2005). A teacher or other who is secure enough to encourage positive feelings in the child will help to influence that child in developing a positive image of God and a child-God relationship (Kirkpatrick, 1998 cited in McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2005).

A Scandinavian study by Granqvist and Hagekull (1999, p.266) highlighted that the more securely the child is attached to both parents, the more likely the child was to show “intergenerational similarity”. In other words, the safer the child felt with the parents, the more the child identified with the standards that the parents represented. In the same way, adults who were securely attached to their adult partners showed deeper religious commitment and their God concepts were more favourable than those who were insecurely attached to their significant other (deRoos, Miedema, & leDema, 2001).

While securely attached children slowly grew into a lifestyle with similar values as their primary caregivers, the anxiously-attached were more likely to report religious conversions of a sudden nature (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). Religious changes tend to come later to people who have an insecure attachment style (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). Many converts tell about unhappy childhoods, stressful adolescence, problems with mental health, or drug dependency (Hood et al., 2009). A spiritual conversion involves a positive life transformation (Hood et al., 2009). Hazan and Shaver (1987; 1994) highlight the tendency of anxious-ambivalently attached individuals to also fall in love suddenly and deeply (cited by Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). Suddenly falling in love and suddenly experiencing a conversion are experiences which are common within the same attachment style.

“Call on me, you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28)

It has been argued by deRoos (2006) that people's concept of God mirrors their experience in early formative caregiver-child relationships. When the child experiences interaction with the primary caregiver as conflict producing or rejecting, insecure attachment styles follow (Izard & Kobak, 1991, cited in Ghafoori & Hierholzer, 2007). An insecure attachment style is correlated with perfectionism (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and with conversion experiences. Childhood attachment shapes concepts of God through the very socialising process of forming emotional bonds with significant others (deRoos, 2006). Hood, Hill and Spilka (2009) claim that in the years between early and middle childhood, children's aloofness from parents was in inverse proportion to nearness to God. A sharper focus on God attachment occurs as children grow independent of their primary carers (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006, cited in Nelson, 2009).

In most religions there are concrete places considered sacred, places where people can feel nearer to God. Besides sacred places, there is also sacred time, like the seventh day and specific festival

times; but that which is most frequently sought is proximity to God through prayer. When religion is a part of life from early on, this influences prayer (Byrd & Boe, 2001). Prayer for the believer is a way of addressing God. Prayer is an expression of the wish to be in a knowing relationship with God (Byrd & Boe, 2001). Prayer has been compared to the crying of an infant (Kirkpatrick, 2005). The infant has no language, but calls to his parent through crying. Adult humans cry out in prayer. Hands raised in prayer may constitute proximity seeking.

Different approaches to prayer are indicated by a person's attachment style. It makes sense that people with an avoidant attachment style are not likely to use meditative or conversation prayer (Byrd & Boe, 2001). People with attachment styles other than avoidant may use meditative and conversation prayer. Securely attached people find closeness comforting and stress reducing (Byrd & Boe, 2001), and are more likely to see God as loving and not controlling. God is usually experienced by secure people as accessible (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 1998, cited by Byrd & Boe, 2001).

Attachment statements can be found throughout scriptures and in hymns and spiritual songs. Both Granqvist (2005) and Kirkpatrick (2005) drew attention to the believer's efforts at being close to God.

[A]chieving a safe haven in times of distress ('Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me'; Psalm 23:4), and using a 'stronger and wiser' other as a secure base (e.g. 'On the day I called, you answered me and made me bold with strength in my soul'; Psalm 138:3). (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 244)

The Protestant hymn, 'Nearer, My God, To Thee' is given as an example of group proximity seeking.

Attachment styles and the workplace

Attachment behaviour and its impact is also in evidence in educational institutional settings. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) define a cohesive group as one that brings about a unique experience of approval and security in being together. A group of people, such as the staff of a school, can serve as a secure base that supports exploration of the environment (Forsyth, 1990, cited in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This cooperatively functioning group becomes security enhancing for its members. It is easier for a securely attached individual to experience the group as positive, and be comfortable with emotional interaction. Insecurities in relating to a group may mirror insecurities relating to individuals. Avoidant individuals are often less

engaged with their staff, tend to feel less supported and are more likely to view others negatively (Smith et al., 1999, cited in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In short, the various attachment styles reflect how individuals relate to their group.

An attachment figure is someone who has people depending on them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In 2003, Popper and Mayseless (cited in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) published a study that demonstrated a strong connection between leaders (including managers and teachers) and the role of attachment figures. In educational settings, this equates to teacher, team leader, principal, head of faculty, or president. Secure leaders are more "sensitive and responsive" caregivers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 440)—resources are provided, creativity and initiative are encouraged, and competence and self-worth are strengthened. Numerous researchers have found this to be true (Bass, 1985; House & Howell, 1992; Howell, 1988; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993; Zaleznick, 1992, cited in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). A secure leader is sensitive to genuine needs among the team members. This stimulates hope and competence among team members (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Insecurely attached leaders are less likely to encourage their staff in the direction of growth and creativity. Insecurely attached staff are less likely to commit to the institution (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Avoidant leaders, for example, may achieve success in a specific task-oriented area crucial to the organisation, such as finance, while being unable to meet emotional needs and provide growth opportunities for their staff (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Anxious-ambivalent leaders tend to focus on socio-emotional needs within their team, to the neglect of wider organisational goals and values (Davidovitz et al., 2006, cited in Mikulincer & Shaver 2007). Even secure team members working for an insecure leader can feel tense and insecure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Based on findings by Desivilya, Sabag and Ashton (2007), Mikulincer and Shaver (2007, p. 452) conclude that "attachment style differences are relevant to organisational effectiveness and sustainability". Team cognitions and emotions are influenced by insecure and secure attachments, as are issues such as institutional change and team functioning.

Socialised, transformational leaders tend to function as symbolic attachment figures, bolstering members' and followers' senses of safety, security, and permanence, activating and supporting a broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security, and facilitating personal and organisational effectiveness and personal growth. (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p.453–454)

A secure leader is sensitive to genuine needs among the team members—this stimulates hope and competence

Conclusion

Attachment theory is receiving more attention from research in neurobiology and has been successfully applied to research in the psychology of religion. What infants understand cognitively and experience affectively profoundly influences later socialisation and spiritual expression. Research has shown that it is possible to move from an insecure to an earned secure attachment style and that previously insecurely attached parents can raise their own children with secure attachments. Secure / insecure attachment styles inform human interactions at home, at school, with peers, with life partners, at worship, and in the workplace. It is important for educators to be aware that they may be experienced as attachment figures. This provides an opportunity to foster secure interactions. To Christian educators, God is the ultimate attachment figure. In their areas of influence, Christian educators can be stable, long term, sensitive attachment figures for children, students, families and colleagues in their care. **TEACH**

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