

Attachment explained: Guide for parents and carers



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Understanding attachment

Attachment is the deep and enduring connection established between a child and caregiver in the womb and in the first years of life. It profoundly influences every aspect of a person's mind, body, emotions and relationships both as a child and a parent.

Attachment is not something parents **do** to their children; rather, it is something children and parents create together, in an ongoing, to and fro relationship. It is not founded on how much parents love their children or the daily physical tasks they do for them, but on the nonverbal emotional communication between child and parent known as the **attachment bond**.



For this bond of emotional communication to develop, the caregiver must be psychologically attuned to the child's needs, emotions and mental state.

This bond is important because it creates a template for all future emotional relationships. It creates a feeling of safety so a child can develop cognitively and socially. It helps to develop the ability to self-regulate, which results in effective management of impulses and emotions. It



helps create a foundation for the formation of identity that includes a sense of competency, self-worth, and a balance between dependence and autonomy. Finally it provides resilience and a defence against trauma and stress.

Babies are very clever and begin communicating from birth; their survival depends on it. Through crying and seeking interaction with their care givers, babies try to make their needs known. It is this communication and our responses to this that begin to form the templates or foundations for their relationships. As a parent, you may not always know what your new baby is trying to communicate and to some extent, neither will they. For example they may feel discomfort, but not know why, so they may cry to let you know this.



Through shared experience you and your baby become skilled communicators, as they grow and develop. Many parents may worry when they struggle to soothe their unsettled baby and can feel they just don't know how to 'get it right'.



Being 'Good Enough'

In fact, getting it wrong is just as important. A famous Psychotherapist Donald Winnicott said that sometimes we will get it right and sometimes we get it wrong and that is what he described as "good enough" 'mothering'. Winnicott believed that being 'a good enough mother': by which he meant a mother (or father) who gets things wrong and right was important for healthy psychological development in babies. Knowing this is often a relief to parents.

As psychologists, we know all parents and their babies are different. Research tells us there are many things that can get in the way of developing this attachment bond. **These include many things that are out of your and your baby's control and are no-one's fault.**

These are:

Temperament: Each baby is unique and individual. Some babies are harder to settle and soothe and some are naturally more settled. As parents, we all have different personalities and temperaments too and this can impact on our parenting.

Physical Health: Your and your baby's health can impact on you both. If your baby is born early or born poorly it may well be more difficult for you to communicate with each other and even spend time getting to know each other in the early days. The same is true if your physical health is affected and you were poorly.

Mental Health: Mental health is also important and may impact on you and your baby in many ways. Having a baby is a big adjustment and this transition can be hard. For example, 1 in 4 mothers suffer from post-natal depression. Past experiences of mental health challenges could exacerbate these difficulties.



Disability: If your baby is born with a disability or you have a disability this may impact on your communication and developing relationship in different ways depending on the disability.

Parenting experiences: Your own parenting experiences can impact on your parenting and this may impact on your developing relationship with your baby.

Past history: Your history and difficulties you may have experienced in your life, e.g. trauma, may affect baby and this can make these relationships harder for you both.



Current experiences: Babies are born in a range of circumstances. This understandably can have an impact on our capacity to parent e.g. temporary housing, substance abuse, relationship difficulties.

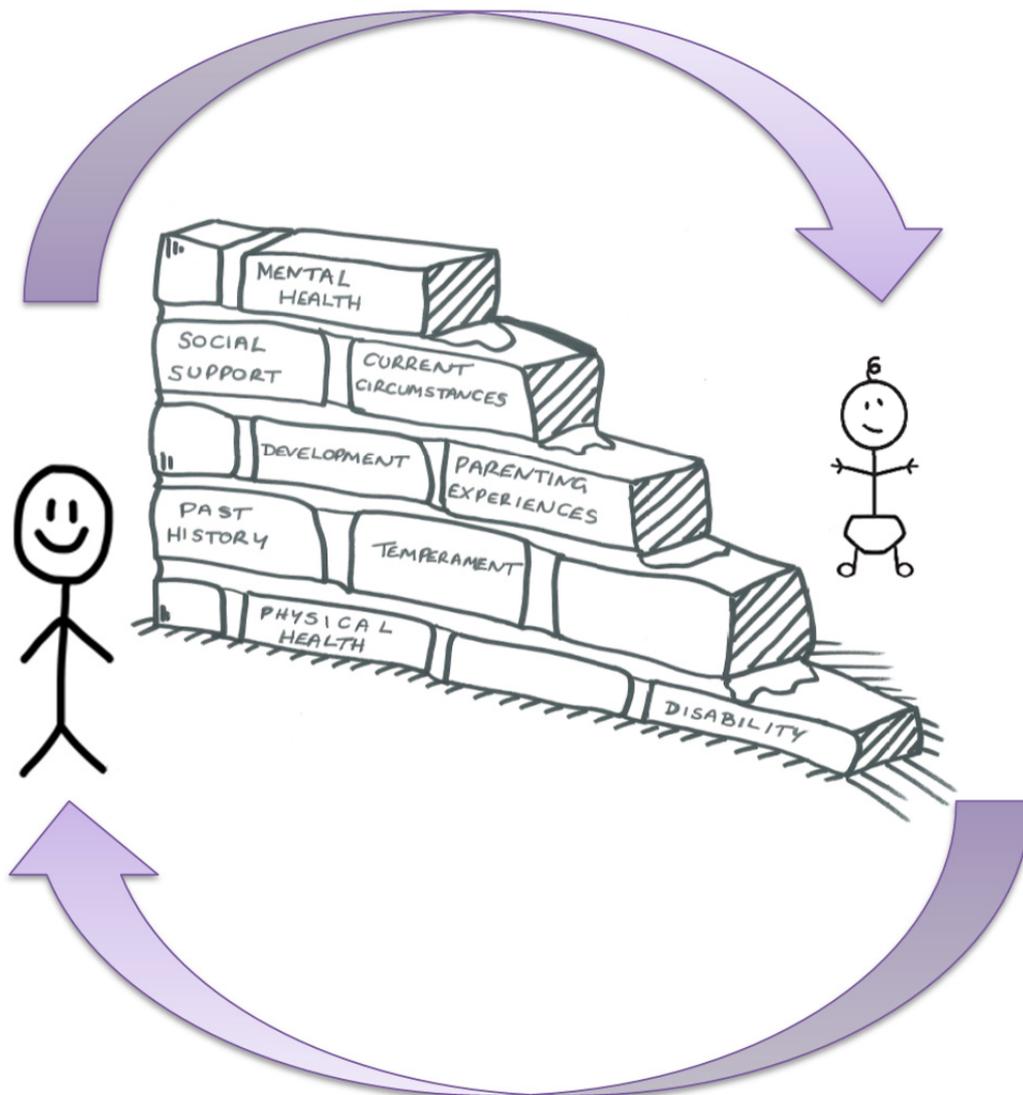
Development: Not all children develop in the same way or at the same rate. Managing our own and other's expectations around this can be challenging.

Social support: Being isolated with a young baby can be very challenging for most parents. Equally, having others who may undermine your confidence can be equally difficult. Good support is really important as young babies needs 24 hour care. This can be physically and emotionally draining.



One way to think about this is using the drawing on page opposite. A number of factors can make developing relationships or attachments more difficult. It is as if these things are like a wall between you and your baby and may at times make communication (giving and receiving messages) hard for you both. This communication is important for developing and strengthening your relationship with your child and supporting them to develop certain core skills.

Things that get in the way of building strong relationships:



As psychologists working with children and parents we often work around attachment relationships. When we do this work we try to think with you about what the challenges may be for you and your child in your relationship and work with you to understand these.

We also work to help you think about the ways your child may be communicating with you, so you can better understand and help your child with the underlying need or feeling they may be trying to express.

For example, children often communicate through behaviour rather than words. We can help you think about the meaning behind your child's behaviour and how to support them in a positive way. Often when you build up a greater understanding of your child and their communication, this can change the way you relate to your child and in doing so improve your relationship.



More Information

If you want to find out more about the importance of attachment and early relationship development, we would recommend looking at the following resources:

Websites

Ahaparenting.com (Relationship-based parenting support)

Understandingchildhood.net (downloadable information leaflets for families to help raise emotionally secure children)

On YouTube search for:

Circle of Security Animation (Relationship-based parenting approach)

Books

Attachment in Common Sense and Doodles by Miriam Silver

Your notes:



This leaflet is available in large print and other formats and languages.

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