

MISSING OUT ON EARLY ATTACHMENTS: THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS, PART 1

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Attachment is one of those issues that everyone talks about but few understand. Most of us have seen movies of the week that depict troubled teens and adults who experienced severe abuse or total abandonment as children, or read about serial killers who have horrible life stories. Those cases are the extremes, and no doubt related to early victimization. Subtler cases that create problems just as damaging are more common. Well-meaning parents may use outdated methods of child rearing that inadvertently lead to problems for their children in later life. This is often the case in children who have insecure or distorted attachments, rather than those completely absent of attachments.

Larry Brentro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Brockern discuss four critical stages in the life cycle that must be successfully completed for a balanced, well-adjusted life. The stages are based on Native American beliefs and practices. The authors clearly demonstrated the relationship between attachment issues and the resolution of each stage in their book, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*. I have highlighted some of that information in this article to give you a better understanding of the long term effects of attachment problems.

An interesting thing about their material is that it differentiates between an insecure attachment -- which may lead to behaviors identified as "distorted" -- and completely unattached, which may lead to the behaviors described as "absent." Please note that not everyone who exhibits some of these behaviors has an attachment disorder. These indicators must be looked at in relation to many other factors. A person would exhibit most or all them if he or she has attachment issues. These are submitted as guidelines that may indicate further investigation is needed into the individual's relationships with primary caregivers, parenting styles and the ability to connect to others.

Stage One: Attachment/Belonging

People with strong attachments often display the following characteristics and are well-adjusted:

- Friendship

- Cooperation
- Intimacy
- Respect
- Trust
- Love

People with distorted attachments often display the following characteristics and are still trying:

- Attention-seeking
- Crave affection
- Promiscuity
- Clinging
- Cult-vulnerability
- Gang-involvement
- Crave approval

People with absent attachments often display the following characteristics and have given up:

- Alienation
- Withdrawn
- Isolated
- Rejected
- Lonely
- Lacks affect
- Suspicious

Everyone needs to belong to a group that accepts them unconditionally, whether that is family, peers, school, work or otherwise. Young people who do not find these groups within their environment are susceptible to cults, gangs and other negative influences that offer a sense of acceptance and belonging. Even children who do not get their nurturance and attachment needs met by a parent may get those needs met by others. While some argue that the biological parent must provide that attachment, others believe that need can be met in other ways. Teachers, extended family members, members of the clergy and other significant adults who believe in and pay attention to a child may form an attachment that can help children learn to trust and care about others, thus moving them through that stage.

Some groups that provide this sense of community and acceptance for adults are churches, support groups, clubs, civic groups,

community groups, ethnic and cultural groups. Shared interests in scouts, art, music, reading or others may also provide a place for people to come together and get their belonging needs met.

Stage Two: Independence/Autonomy

People with a balanced autonomy often display the following behaviors and are well-adjusted:

- Self-control
- Confident
- Assertive
- Responsible
- Leadership
- Independent

People with a distorted autonomy often display the following behaviors and are still trying:

- Rebellious
- Reckless/Macho
- Sexual Prowess
- Manipulates
- Bullies
- Victimizes
- Overly controlled
- Passive aggressive

People with absent autonomy often display the following behaviors and have given up:

- Look Confident
- Inferior
- Learned helplessness
- Easily misled
- Lacks self control
- Powerless
- Impotent
- Irresponsible

Everyone needs to have some control over their life, including kids. Giving kids choices within given parameters empowers them and builds their confidence and skills. Using external control instead of

allowing them to develop internal control robs them of their confidence and prevents them from developing self control.

Empowering young people does not mean turning over the control to them. Adults can maintain control and still allow children and teens to make choices by outlining the choices and consequences of each, then allowing the child or teen to practice their decision making skills and exert their power by making a choice. It is ultimately the difference between independence and dependence. This sends the message that we trust them to use the tools we have given them. It promotes responsibility and instills a sense of personal power, pride and self esteem.

As adults, we need to take control of our lives and choices to feel empowered. Those who often feel like victims feel helpless or hopeless. Most of the trials and tribulations we encounter are a result of choices we have made. Accept responsibility for those choices, including the horrible aftermath you may be experiencing. Decide what you did wrong and figure out how to prevent it from happening again. If you can't figure it out alone, ask for help from a friend or professional. If your choices include choosing unhealthy partners or getting into bad relationships consider attending AIAnon or Codependents Anonymous for support and self-help.

Stage Three: Mastery/Achievement

People with a sense of mastery often display the following and are well-adjusted:

- Successful
- Problem solver
- Creative
- Resilient
- Persistent
- Motivated

People with a distorted sense of mastery often display the following and are still trying:

- Over Achiever
- Workaholic
- Delinquent skills
- Cheating
- Perserverative

- Overly competitive
- Risk seeking

People with an absent sense of mastery often display the following and have given up:

- Under Achiever
- Failure oriented
- Unmotivated
- Lazy
- Gives up
- Avoids risks
- Fears change
- Inadequate
- Immature

We all need to succeed at something to feel good about ourselves and gain a sense of mastery. Not all of us are good in school, but each of us is good at something. Find a child's strengths and build on those. Many children who have learning difficulties are creative and expressive. Channel those abilities into positive activities. Art, music, sports, dance and others provide an outlet for creative self-expression and build confidence and mastery. Recreational and sporting activities can be used to build self-confidence, social skills, organization, and time management and promote teamwork and sportsmanship. Challenge them to try new things, set up successes and teach them to look for positives within themselves.

If you are feeling bad about yourself as an adult, ask a friend or family member who loves you to point out the features they most appreciate about you. Ask them what traits and talents they see as being your best. Often we are surprised at how others perceive us. They can usually help remind us of things we know about ourselves, but have discounted or no longer believe due to outside forces sending us different messages.

Stage Four: Generosity/Altruism

People who have healthy altruism often display the following characteristics and are well-adjusted:

- Caring
- Compassion
- Empathy

People who have distorted altruism often display the following characteristics and are still trying:

- Selfish
- Overly involved
- Over Indulgent
- Self-abasing
- Co-dependent

People who have an absence of altruism often display the following characteristics and have given up:

- Narcissistic
- Hedonistic
- Anti-social
- Psychopathic
- Exploitative

People who are unable to give of themselves or their belongings are often those whose emotional or physical needs have not been met consistently throughout their life. Some can't give, and go to any extreme to take what they want with little regard for the consequences to themselves or others. Others give of themselves to meet their own needs, often without realizing it. These people are usually codependent, give too much of themselves and often find themselves in the role of a martyr. People who are well adjusted show empathy and caring for others without sacrificing their own dignity and well being or that of the other person. Giving too much can be just as damaging as not giving at all.

Given this new information I challenge you to examine your own behaviors and the patterns that you are passing on to your children, intentionally or unintentionally. If you find that you or your child consistently display behaviors that are indicative of distorted or absent attachments, consider therapeutic assistance and seek out further information.