

The Attachment Bond:

Our first relationship that shapes future relationships

The *attachment bond* describes our first relationship—the relationship between a primary caretaker and infant that shapes the brain and profoundly influences our self esteem, our expectations of others and the long-term success or failure of our ability to attract and retain successful relationships.



What is attachment and how does it affect relationship and emotionally intelligent communication?

The brain at birth is programmed to connect us to one very significant person. How we relate to that special someone will be determined by nonverbal communication and will, in fact, determine how we relate to other people later in life. The attachment bond we formed *then* was our first experience in communication and sets the stage for our ability to communicate in all future relationships. Those who experienced confusing, frightening or broken emotional communications early in life often grow into adults who have difficulty understanding what they and others experience emotionally. This, in turn, will greatly limit their ability to accurately assess and successfully participate in relationships. Attachment, the relationship between infant and primary caretaker, is responsible for:

- shaping the success or failure of future intimate relationships
- the ability to sustain emotional equilibrium
- the ability to enjoy being ourselves and find satisfaction in being with others
- the ability to rebound from disappointment, discouragement and misfortune

Knowledge of the living brain and the role attachment plays in shaping it has given us a new science for understanding why even smart people may have great difficulty communicating well with the most important people in their work and love lives. Previously, we could only speculate as to why important relationships never evolved, disappeared, disintegrated or became contentious. But thanks to new insights into brain development, we can understand what it takes to help build and sustain productive and meaningful home and work relationships.

What defines the *attachment bond*?

The mother-child bond is the essential primary force in infant development, according to the attachment bond theory pioneered by English psychiatrist John Bowlby and American psychologist Mary Ainsworth. The theory has gained momentum in recent years, substantiated across the world by studies in a wide array of disciplines and with the aid of brain imaging technology. For more on the science behind attachment bond theory, see [The Social, Emotionally Intelligent Brain](#).

Bowlby's premise concludes that the relationship between infant and primary caretaker is responsible for:

- shaping all of our future relationships
- aiding or hindering our abilities to focus, be conscious of our feelings and calm ourselves
- the ability to rebound from misfortune

Filmed research depicts both the subtle nuances that result in a successful (or “secure”) attachment, consisting of emotionally attuned communication, as well as the problematic (or “insecure”) attachment, where communication efforts run amiss. Researchers found that successful adult relationships depend on the ability to:

- manage stress
- stay “tuned in” with emotions
- use communicative body language
- be playful in a mutually engaging manner
- be readily forgiving, relinquishing grudges

The same research also found, unexpectedly, that “insecure attachment” is **as likely to stem from isolation or loneliness, as it is from abuse**. When woven together, these varied discoveries offer a new glimpse into fulfilling love relationships, providing the keys to identify and rectify a love relationship that is on the rocks.

How does the *attachment bond* shape future relationships?

For better or worse, the infant brain is profoundly influenced by the attachment bond – a baby's first love relationship. When the primary caretaker can manage personal stress, calm the infant, communicate through emotion, share joy and forgive readily, the young child's nervous system becomes “securely attached.” With a successful attachment relationship in tow, the child will be self-confident, trusting, hopeful and comfortable in the face of conflict. As an adult, he or she will prove to be flexible, creative, hopeful and optimistic.

The bond formed as an infant with a primary caretaker helps shape our abilities to:

- feel safe
- develop meaningful connections with others
- explore our world
- deal with stress

- balance emotions
- experience comfort and security
- make sense of our lives
- create positive memories and expectations of relationships

Every attachment bond is as unique as we are. Primary caretakers don't have to be perfect. In fact, they can miss opportunities for emotional attunement more often than not, but a reasonable consistency is invaluable.

How can insecure attachment influence our current relationships?

Insecurity – it takes root when the attachment bond fails to provide a child with sufficient structure, recognition, understanding, safety and mutual accord. These insecurities may lead us to:

- **tune out and turn off** – If our parent is unavailable and self-absorbed, as children we may get lost in our own inner world, avoiding any close, emotional connections. As adults, we may become physically and emotionally distant in relationships.
- **remain insecure** – If we have a parent who is inconsistent or intrusive, we likely will become anxious and fearful, never knowing what to expect. As adults, we may be available one moment and rejecting the next.
- **become disorganized, aggressive and angry** – When our early needs for emotional closeness go unfulfilled, or when our parent's behavior is a source of disorienting terror, problems are sure to follow. As adults, we may not love easily and are insensitive to the needs of our partner.
- **develop slowly** – Such delays manifest themselves as deficits and result in subsequent physical and mental health problems, and social and learning disabilities.

| ATTACHMENT STYLE | PARENTAL STYLE | ADULT RELATIONSHIPS |
|------------------|--|--|
| Secure | Aligned/attuned with child | Able to create meaningful relationships, empathetic, appropriate boundaries |
| Avoidant | Unavailable or rejecting | Avoids closeness emotional connection, distant, critical, rigid, intolerant |
| Ambivalent | Inconsistent and sometimes intrusive parent communication | Anxious and insecure, controlling, blaming, erratic, unpredictable, sometimes charming |
| Disorganized | Ignore or don't see child's needs; behavior frightening/traumatizing | Chaotic, insensitive, explosive, abusive, untrusting even while craving security |
| Reactive | Extremely unattached or dysregulated | Cannot establish positive relationships; often misdiagnosed |

These consequences can affect any one of us, no matter our socio-economic status.

What conditions may lead to insecure attachment?

Major causes of insecure attachments include:

- **physical neglect** – poor nutrition, insufficient exercise and neglect of medical issues
- **emotional neglect or emotional abuse** – little attention paid to child, little or no effort to understand child's feelings; verbal abuse
- **physical or sexual abuse** – physical injury or violation
- **separation from primary caregiver** – due to illness, death, divorce, adoption
- **changes in primary caregiver** – succession of nannies or people at daycare centers
- **frequent moves or placements** – constantly changing environment; for example: children who spend their early years in orphanages or who move from foster home to foster home
- **traumatic experiences** – serious illnesses or accidents
- **maternal depression** – withdrawal from maternal role due to isolation, lack of social support, hormonal problems
- **maternal addiction to drugs or alcohol** – maternal responsiveness reduced by mind-altering substances
- **young or inexperienced mother** – lacks parenting skills

How can the lessons of attachment help us heal adult relationships?

The powerful, life-altering lessons we learn amid our first love relationship continues to teach us as adults, instructing us on how improve and secure our adult relationships. Lesson No. 1 – adult relationships depend for their success on **nonverbal** forms of communication. Newborn infants cannot talk, reason or plan, yet they are duly equipped to making sure their needs are met. Infants don't *know* what they need, they *feel* what they need, and communicate accordingly. When an infant communicates with an attuned caretaker, something wonderful occurs.

Attuned relationships teach us that:

- nonverbal cues deeply impact our love relationships
- play helps us smooth over the rough spots in love relationships
- conflicts can build trust if approached without fear or a need to punish

We are able to foster a greater understanding of the problems we bring into our adult love relationships when we can pinpoint knee-jerk memories, expectations, attitudes, assumptions and behaviors. Only then can we begin to reconstruct the behaviors that produced attuned attachment.