

# **When Attachment Issues Come to School: Understanding and Applying Attachment Principles to Reach and Teach Difficult Youth**

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# Questions we will explore today

- How can we understand behavior as communication?
- What is secure attachment? How does it relate to future pupil behavior and performance?
- What are the core concepts of attachment theory?

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- What is the “Learning Triangle,” and how does security of attachment relate to a healthy balance between its three components?
- How are the patterns of attachment seen in the classroom?
- What are some internal struggles faced by youth with anxious attachment?

# Questions we will explore today

- Which teaching strategies work best with each attachment style?
- What can we do to promote schools as a “secure base” for troubled students?

# Understanding behavior as communication

- When emotional/social needs are not met at home/community, students may not be able to put aside preoccupations/worries enough to learn
- Often expressed in behavior that interferes
- Need to know possible meaning of behavior as a communication about preoccupations, past experiences

# Behavior has meaning

- Identifying the meaning of behavior, making it explicit can remove block on learning
- Problem behaviors/difficulty learning can result from:
  - Performance fears (child unable to do work)
  - Preoccupations about separations- urges to leave classroom a possible expression re external concern, issues at home

# Behavior has meaning

- Problem behaviors and difficulties in learning can result from:
- The impact of loss
- The effects of traumatic experiences
- Early relationships which affect responses at school, e.g., secure vs. insecure attachment

# What is secure attachment?

- John Bowlby (1969) defined attachment as the strong, reciprocal affectional ties with people we care most about “from the cradle to the grave”
- Secure attachment: infant-caregiver bond in which the child welcomes contact with the caregiver & uses that person as a secure base from which to explore the environment
- About 65% of North American infants

# What is secure attachment characterized by?

- Young children explore while alone with mother, but visibly upset by separations
- Warmly greet mother when she returns- seek comfort to alleviate distress
- Children outgoing with strangers with mother present
- Mother is warm, sensitively attuned, consistent, responds quickly to child's distress

# Long-term outcomes: The Minnesota studies

- Longitudinal studies by Sroufe and Egeland at U of Minnesota during 1970s/1980s
- Used the attachment classifications developed by Ainsworth and Main to distinguish differences between children with secure vs. insecure attachment styles
- Very revealing as to the impact of attachment security on children's ongoing development

# The Minnesota studies

- In preschool: securely attached children more likely to be leaders, to suggest activities, to be more sympathetic to peers' distress, more popular, and to enjoy learning
- Insecure preschoolers more withdrawn, hesitant to join in, spaced out, aggressive, acting out, noncompliant, dependent, attention-seeking and less curious, attentive

# The Minnesota studies

- In school-age children, securely attached kids had more stable friendships, self-assurance, competence
- Insecure more dependent, shy, withdrawn or aggressive, bullying, defiant, destructive, etc.
- By adolescence, secure teens more popular, socially competent, responsible, assertive, better at handling conflict/stress, less aggressive than insecure teens

# Patterns of children who resist attachment (Hughes, 2009)

- Pervasive urge to control people/events in their lives
- Chronic hypervigilance
- Emotionally volatile- intense anger, fear, despair, shame
- Difficulty anticipating consequences of actions of self and others
- Pervasive sense of shame, being unlovable, worthless, bad

# Patterns of children who resist attachment (Hughes, 2009)

- Difficulty experiencing empathy for others
- Difficulty perceiving inner lives of self/others
- Difficulties with speech/language, sensorimotor, self-care development
- Difficulty experiencing self/others as continuous, coherent- experience often disjointed

# The core concepts of attachment theory

- The “secure base” - as infants learn to explore the world, they return to mother for reassurance, enabling them to confidently explore their surroundings
- Secure base has a “containing” quality: helps child co-regulate anxiety, how to think/ talk about fears, cope with them, & believe that others will help if the challenge is too great

# The core concepts of attachment theory

- “Safe haven”- child returns to the caregiver for comfort/safety in face of fear or threat
- Proximity maintenance- the desire to be near people we are attached to, with physical proximity slowly replaced by psychological proximity, i.e., felt security
- “Wilson, I’m sorry!” (“Cast-away”)

# The core concepts of attachment theory

- Attunement- the sharing of an affective state
- When two people are attuned, they are in synch, share a similar degree of intensity in present experience
- Matching of affect creates feelings of being understood, helps child regulate emotions
- Secure attachment is “the effective dyadic regulation of emotion in infancy” (Sroufe)

# Attunement- continued

- An infant's communications are "translated" by caregiver's responsive facial, verbal gestures and actual responses- comes to learn about self by being understood by other
- "Still face" experiment- how infants come to feel recognized, understood, "mirrored," and develop sense of personal agency
- Video example

# Still Face Experiment: Dr. Edward Tronick

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8ZTx1AEup4>

# The core concepts of attachment theory

- Internal working models: Bowlby's concept of inner representational models of attachment figure and of self
- A child with secure attachment has model of attachment figure as available, responsive, helpful, and of self as worthwhile, lovable, etc
- A child with insecure attachment lacks these
- Influences relational choices throughout life

# The core concepts of attachment theory

- Attachment patterns- result of work by Mary Ainsworth using the “Strange Situation”
- Found 3 main patterns/styles: Secure, Avoidant and Ambivalent
- Mary Main and colleagues added a 4<sup>th</sup>: Disorganized/Disoriented
- Video example

# Secure, Insecure, Avoidant & Ambivalent Attachment

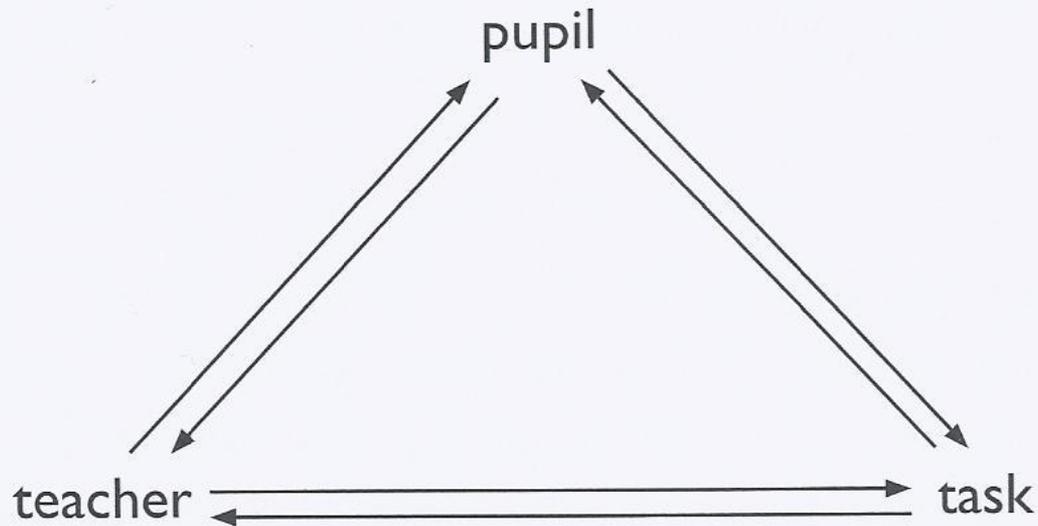
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH1m\\_ZMO7GU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH1m_ZMO7GU)

# What is the Learning Triangle ?

- Consists of 3 components: the pupil, the teacher, and the learning task, all each impacting and being impacted by one another and being in balance (Geddes, 2012)
- For the securely attached child, there is a fluid dynamic between engagement and support with teacher and involvement with the task

# The Learning Triangle of the Securely Attached Student (Geddes, 2012)

## The Learning Triangle of the Securely Attached Pupil



# What does the securely attached child bring to the Learning Triangle?

- Capacity to explore objects in the immediate world with curiosity & creativity within the secure base
- Can tolerate frustration & uncertainty of not knowing
- Secure base provides source of containment of anxiety during exploration
- Brings confidence, sense of agency to task & to engaging with teacher

# The Learning Triangle of the securely attached student

- Result for student is sense of personal agency, self-worth & mastery orientation
- Success with task enhances resiliency and growing self-sufficiency
- Insecure attachment patterns distort the Learning Triangle

# Students who can't ask for help - Avoidant Attachment (20% of population)

- Strange Situation: when anxiety was aroused, avoidant children would avoid contact with mother, not seek contact
- Mothers/caregivers dislike neediness, favor precocious autonomy
- Inwardly want reassurance, but avoid closeness due to past rejection

# Avoidant Attachment in the classroom

- Students often cannot ask for help, deny need for support, don't like the teacher to stand too close
- Ignore teacher, avoid eye contact, seem indifferent, passive/bored, say they don't care, shrug
- Or controlling and cope with anxiety with omnipotence, bossiness, fearlessness

# Avoidant Attachment in the classroom

- Take refuge in same kind of repeated task, avoid or give up on new, open-ended tasks
- Avoid creative, communicative activities which run risk of failure/criticism
- Unprepared to engage, discuss a problem-inhibit feelings/action to avoid criticism
- Rip up their work, calling it trash, before teacher can comment on it

# Avoidant Attachment in the classroom

- Show underlying anger they have not learned to direct toward its source, i.e., the mother
- Their anger often directed at objects or others & at provoking anger in others, e.g., teachers
- Want to do tasks autonomously, even if don't know how to
- Excessively pre-occupied with cell phones, iPods
- Their work often not as good as they want, but can't accept teacher input or help

# The Learning Triangle of the student with Avoidant Attachment

- Both the pupil and teacher need to focus on the task
- Helps to moderate the student's experience of relationship with teacher- one often full of doubt about availability, acceptance, support

# Problems in the Learning Triangle of the student with Avoidant Attachment

- Student experiences relationship and teacher's questions as intrusive, dangerous
- Teacher may feel ignored by student and be very annoyed, provoked into over-reacting
- Teacher may try too hard to help, triggering student's avoidance even more
- Teacher may feel helpless, give up, ignore them, decide someone else needs to help them- results in colluding with the pattern of rejection

# Teaching strategies

- Allow student to have some control or choice over activities when possible
- Use language such as “You know you can do this,” not “I know you can do this”
- Tasks are the key- comment on the task itself instead of trying to build the relationship directly (make comments about how the student is doing task, be curious about it, avoid direct suggestions)
- Find tasks they enjoy doing, can be fairly self-directed on

# Teaching strategies

- Organize group projects- they sometimes will work better with peers
- The type of group task still important, e.g., writing the answers on a worksheet, keeping score in game, etc- little interaction
- Tasks that involve a product rather than a process, e.g., design a poster, with achievable results- can show results without much interaction in relationships

# Teaching strategies

- Use of metaphors and stories, drawing, writing, etc, to explore themes in books and movies which is safer than talking about themselves
- Left-brain, concrete, mechanical tasks, e.g., sorting, organizing, categorizing, building, cleaning up, help with classroom routine
- Staff must avoid “splitting” with avoidant kids, who present differently according to subject

## **Students who fear separation- Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment (10% of population)**

- Strange Situation: child with this style is anxious in mother's presence and very upset when separated
- Will exhibit reunion behavior that is a mix of contact-seeking and angry resistance
- Mothers often inconsistent, out of synch with child, hyper-alert to fear in child, may role reverse with child re seeking comfort due to own unresolved dependency issues

# Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

- Thus, child lacks confidence in mother's responsiveness
- Learns to expect to be frustrated instead of comforted- anger is directed at mother
- Has difficulty separating, has separation anxiety, tries to control by clinging, misses a lot of school

# Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

- Child experiences attachment relationship as one in which separation/autonomy are denied in favor of anxious involvement with mother/caregiver
- Ambivalence expressed by both clinging and controlling behavior
- Can be overtly hostile and verbally/physically attack mother

# Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment in the classroom

- Older children become coercive
- Mixture of immature, demanding, bossy, pushy, intrusive, needy and helpless
- More intense than avoidant kids, easier to engage, but set up “tests” to prove you care
- Lots of posturing, angry energy pervading relationships- often “in your face”
- Mix of intimacy-seeking and anger- teachers & counselors feel punished and provoked

# Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment in the classroom

- Difficulty with personal boundaries- may want to exchange personal information, will feel rejected if teacher does not reciprocate
- May try to get very close relationship, tell all their problems to you
- Unable to focus on the task if they lose teacher's attention- in need of constant reassurance

# Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment in the classroom

- Quick to become abusive/rude if feeling frustrated or ignored
- May demand more help and expect you to do it for them- can be labeled manipulative, immature, attention-seeking
- Peer problems may result, as peers get irritated by their constant attention-seeking and apparent persecution complexes

# The Learning Triangle of the student with Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

- Reflects the tension between the student and teacher/adult at the expense of the task
- Reflects unresolved conflict which does not allow “another,” i.e., the task, to come between the child and mother
- The child is preoccupied with the relationship with the teacher at the expense of the task

# Teaching strategies

- Break task into small steps, use turn-taking to model experience of 2 separate people
- “Try the first 3 questions on your own, and then I will come back and check”
- Use timer to moderate anxiety during short, timed tasks, which they can check on watch/timer

# Teaching strategies

- Gradually increase duration of task
- Avoid temptation to over-help: these students need to learn to experience some frustration in order to develop problem-solving abilities
- Board games create turn-taking/separation
- Curriculum can include stories about journeys, separations, identity, independence

# Teaching strategies

- Can be given responsibility for tasks, rather than for controlling others
- Need to plan ahead of time for beginnings, separations, endings: transition from elementary to middle school often difficult
- Awareness of separation anxiety problems
- Reliable, consistent adult support that does not collude with dependency, but can stand in as alternative attachment figures

# Students who worry us the most- Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment (5% of population)

- The most distressing, impaired
- Severe, challenging behavior in school
- Bang head when frustrated, abusive to other students and teacher, run around uncontrollably, run out of class, sudden shifts in mood, unexplainable rages, truant and bully others
- Parents are often difficult to engage

# Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment

- Unlike Avoidant & Resistant/Ambivalent infants in Strange Situation, these children had no consistent patterns of response for dealing with stress
- Disoriented behaviors in Strange Situation included freezing, contradictory behavior (e.g., approaching with head averted), and mixture of proximity seeking & avoidance

# Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment

- These children more likely to have experienced neglect, abuse, witnessing domestic violence or having unresolved grief from maternal deprivation or abandonment
- Hyper-vigilant for danger, anxious, fight or flight easily triggered
- Very controlling toward parents and other adult caregivers, little self-awareness or sensitivity toward others- lack of empathy

# Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment

- Perceive self as unworthy of and very sensitive to any form of perceived disrespect
- Internal Working Model is one of undeserving child of little value and world as unsafe, uncaring
- Thus, anything they do not know or understand is perceived as a threat or humiliation

# Teaching strategies

- Early identification is key, as the longer children go without adequate containment, the harder it becomes to change reactive patterns serving as defense to extreme anxieties
- Reliable, safe, predictable routines- school may be the first place experienced with predictable activities, rituals
- Reliable rules help regulate brain pathways

# Teaching strategies

- A physical container, eg, box, heavy quilt, etc., can provide symbolic “secure base” as precursor to emotional containment
- Residential school may be needed for those needing high level of physical containment long enough to be able to look toward relationships for containment

# Teaching strategies

- Need to understand the meaning of the communication behind the behavior is key to child's feeling understood, "held in mind"
- Frequent positive feedback to reinforce positive responses when possible
- Use of agreed-upon procedures helps contain student reactivity & protect the teacher

# Teaching strategies

- Teachers working with these students experience high levels of stress, reactivity and uncertainty
- Easy to feel angry & rejecting toward them
- System becomes at risk for becoming reactive, punitive, replicating student's past experiences of rejection, abandonment
- Need for reflective, supportive network

# Teaching strategies

- The nature of the task can be experienced as humiliating reminder of inadequacy
- Concrete, mechanical, rhythmic activities engage the left brain to soothe distressed right brain
- Counting, coloring, drawing, sorting, building structures, copying, sequencing pictures/objects
- Rhythmical exercise, music helps regulate right brain
- Re emergencies, step back and try to see the unregulated fear that may fuel aggression, and removal to quiet, safe, place with trusted adult, with some concrete activities to focus on

# How schools can become a “secure base”

- By teachers and others developing an awareness of principles of attachment theory & secure attachment
- Learn ways of being attuned with students in order to better understand and respond to them, e.g., Dan Hughes’ “PACE” (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) helps co-regulate affect
- By teachers and others seeking to respond to meaning of behavior rather than reacting to difficult feelings provoked by students’ IWM

# How schools can become a “secure base”

- By schools having ongoing supportive networks to help contain anxiety for staff and students, to turn reaction into reflective interventions
- By focusing on early identification and intervention
- By believing in the capacity and potential of teachers and related professionals to promote and maintain student well-being
- By becoming “Attachment aware”

# Becoming attachment aware in school

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFmqKGEcidg>

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# Videos on You Tube

- Marie Delaney: “The effects of loss and trauma on learning and behavior”
- Marie Delaney: “Dealing with students with challenging behavior”