

## When We Are Very Young

### Episode 1

#### Attachment and Society: Part 1

What is ATTACHMENT?

Why does it matter?

What can we do to enhance secure attachment in our society?

Each of these three questions have been addressed by many authors, in many volumes. I humbly wish to add my two cents to the discussion, as a mother, as a professional who assists traumatized children, as a Canadian and as a person living on this planet, this planet whose health depends on human behaviour. I am going to stick my neck out here and say that protecting the development of secure attachment in children is the most critical pathway to the peaceful future of human society and well-being of the planet.

Let me explain, but first let's define our terms.

The term attachment refers to the quality of the relationship between a child and his or her parent (and between intimate adults although I am not going to go into this at this point). With respect to the term *parent*, in all of my work, the term refers to the primary nurturer of the child, be it mother, father, grandparent, foster parent, adoptive parent or customary care

parent. (Customary Care is term utilized by Indigenous Peoples of Canada when a child is being cared for by members of his extended family and band). *Parent* is the person who is responsible for meeting the child's needs and growing up the child in a permanent relationship. There may be one or two parents in a child's life and maybe one alternate carer. The term *child* refers to any infant, toddler, child or youth who is still in a position of dependency. To make things clearer, I am going to use the term *attachment* to refer to the child's relationship with the parent and *bonding* to refer to the parent's relationship with the child.

Attachment and bonding are life-long processes beginning before birth and ending when both members of the relationship are dead.

Attachment is innate process; that is, it is present in all healthy mammal newborns. All newborn mammals behave in such a way as to entice their mother (or other lactating female) to provide milk, shelter, warmth and protection. Later, socialization into the group, will also become an important aspect of the attachment relationship... as we shall see. So, attachment is the system by which mammalian infants, including humans, entice an adult to meet their needs for survival. Without attachment behaviours, mammalian infants would be abandoned and not survive. Attachment behaviours in infant humans are crying, gazing at the human

face, and settling when fed and comfortable. Later, when mobile, infants call and reach for their parent.

There are reciprocal bonding processes in mother mammals which are powerful drives to protect, nourish and care for infants born to the mother. Interestingly, many mammals will accept off-spring from another mother if her own infant is a similar age or has died. Together these two systems of attachment and bonding work quite well ensuring the survival of most infant mammals.

Now beyond survival, attachment has many other physiological, psychological and social outcomes. When the primary parent, is attentive, responsive and sensitive to the needs of the child, the child will develop an attachment style that is *secure*. If the parent is not attentive, responsive or sensitive, then the child will more likely have an anxious or insecure attachment style; the child will be more likely to be worried about or focused on getting his or her needs met rather than playing, socializing and learning. If the parent is frightening, frightened or harmful and neglectful, then the child may develop a disorganized attachment style to the parent, which may or may not generalize to other parents and care givers. All this in the first 18 months of life!

So, you might surmise from this description that attachment style is not a choice made by the child, not a decision. The quality of the relationship with the parent determines the attachment style of the child with that parent. Attachment style is resistant to change --- although not unchangeable--- however the experiences of the first two years of life form the foundation for the formation of the personhood of the child. (Caution to parents: assessing your child's attachment style is best left to attachment competent professionals; it is quite complicated to assess.)

Let's now talk about the outcomes of the two different types of attachment security: Secure and Disorganized.

The outcomes of secure attachment are: increased resilience to change and stress, increased empathy and compassion, and increased ability to regulate emotions and behaviour. Most importantly are the deeply held concepts (or John Bowlby's term Internal Working Models) of self, others and the world. Those with secure attachment style understand themselves as good, loved and worthy of that love. The concept of others is that they are good (beneficent) and trustworthy and the world is a safe place to explore.

In contrast, children who have experienced frightening, frightened, harming or neglectful parents, do not have these deeply held beliefs but

may have IWM of themselves as bad, unloved and not worthy of love. Other are maleficent (have hostile intentions and motivations) and are not trustworthy. So of course, the world does not feel like a safe place to enjoy. The outcomes of Disorganized Attachment are decreased trust in others, decreased ability to self-regulate (that is volatile in emotions and behaviour), and decreased empathy and compassion. Often, there is an increased risk of problems with cognition and learning, physiological problems related to trauma and compromised overall health and well-being.

In other words, attachment security is the best overall predictor of life-time health, both physical and mental health and well-being.

Take that in for a minute.

Secure attachment style, developed in the first 18 months of life is the best predictor of life-long health and well-being.

Well I think that answers our first question – “What is attachment?” -- and begins to answer the second – “Why does it matter?”.

As you can see, it MATTERS!

Let's look at some numbers.

In the early attachment research on adults in the 1970s, it was determined that 60-65% of adults had a secure attachment style, while 25-30% were insecure and 5-10 % were disorganized. Recent studies in the

United States are finding that these proportions are changing. The proportion of securely attached adults has dropped to about 50% and the proportion of insecure / disorganized attachment style adults is increasing accordingly. (Dr. Dan Siegel, *Neurobiology of We*, 2008)

Take that in. In about two generations, in the United States, the proportion of people with secure attachment has dropped by 10-15% of the total population. I haven't seen any research in Canada but I suspect that the situation is not as dire because we support the parent-infant attachment process with maternity leave. One year, on Employment Benefits, if you have them. The USA has very limited maternity leave of 3-6 weeks in many jurisdictions. Infant daycare is the norm.

In Canada, we have other considerations. Because we have a health care system funded by the taxpayers, the proportion of secure attachment in the population would have a direct impact on the cost of health care; declining attachment security would result in increasing health care costs. Many studies suggest that our prison population comprises mostly disorganized attachment style persons. Increases in the proportion of disorganized attachment would likely result in increased crime and costs for policing, the justice systems and the penal systems.

I think that any decline in attachment security puts our society at greater risk, not only financially but also in terms of interpersonal safety and global security. In the next blog, I will continue these thoughts and opinions, discussing adult outcomes of attachment security and its relationship to peace capacity in individuals and societies. I will also suggest some ideas about how to enhance attachment security in our society.

#### Reading List:

1. Kim Golding: Nurturing Attachments: This book had one of the best descriptions of Attachment Styles.
2. Maia Szalavitz and Dr. Bruce Perry: Born for Love: PLEASE read. This book really helps to understand the importance of attachment in human society.
3. Dr. John Bowlby: This is the seminal work of the field. There are three volumes: Attachment, Separation and Loss. This is where the field really started, they were written starting in 1956. For the real keepers.
4. Dr. Dan Siegel: The Neurobiology of We (Audio Series:

<http://www.soundstrue.com/store/the-neurobiology-of-we-928.html>

August 2017