

SEEING BEHAVIOR THROUGH AN ATTACHMENT LENS

What is the skill?

Seeing behavior through an attachment lens means considering how a child's behavior may be connected to needs for safety, protection, closeness, reassurance, or emotional regulation. It does not mean explaining every behavior as attachment-related or excusing unsafe conduct.

Normal development

Children communicate attachment needs through both words and behavior. Younger children especially may not be able to say, "I am afraid you will leave," "I need reassurance," or "I do not know whether I can trust you." Their internal experience may instead appear through clinging, withdrawal, anger, controlling behavior, or resistance. With development and responsive caregiving, children become better able to recognize these experiences, communicate them, and seek support more directly.

How neglect interferes

Children who have experienced neglect may have learned that direct communication of need is ineffective or unsafe. Their behavior may therefore carry information that they cannot yet put into words.

For example:

- Refusal may protect against disappointment.
- Control may reduce uncertainty.
- Anger may keep a caregiver engaged.
- Indifference may hide vulnerability.
- Excessive compliance may help prevent rejection.
- Withdrawal may reduce the risk of needing someone unavailable.

These are possible meanings, not conclusions. Reflective caregiving holds ideas lightly and remains open to other explanations.

What it might look like

A child may:

- Become dysregulated before or after separations.
- Create conflict following a warm interaction.
- Reject comfort while remaining near the caregiver.
- Try to control routines or adult behavior.
- Appear unaffected by events that would usually produce distress.
- Become younger in behavior when frightened or overwhelmed.

Parenting implications

Pause before assigning intention. Replace statements such as "You are manipulating me" with reflective questions:

- What may have happened just before this behavior?
- What might my child be feeling or expecting?
- Is the attachment system activated?
- What does my child need from me while I maintain the limit?

From Understanding to Attunement

Attachment-informed caregiving asks not only, "How do I stop this behavior?" but also, "What might this behavior be trying to manage or communicate?"

