

HOW ATTACHMENT DEVELOPS

What is the skill?

Attachment develops as children organize repeated experiences with caregivers into expectations about relationships. They help children anticipate how others will respond and what they must do when they need protection, comfort, or support.

Normal development

Children learn about relationships through ordinary interactions. A caregiver notices that a baby is distressed, tries to understand what is needed, responds, and helps the baby return to a calmer state. As this pattern is repeated, the child begins to expect that distress can be communicated and that help may be available. Caregivers do not need to understand every signal correctly. Misunderstandings are a normal part of relationships. What matters is the caregiver's willingness to notice, reconsider, reconnect, and repair.

How neglect interferes

When caregivers are unavailable, emotionally disconnected, frightening, or inconsistent, children must adapt to uncertainty. They may develop expectations such as:

- Adults may not notice when I need help.
- Showing distress may make things worse.
- I must manage difficult feelings alone.
- I need to increase my behavior before someone responds.
- Relationships can change or disappear without warning.

These expectations may continue after the caregiving environment changes.

What it might look like

A child may:

- Have difficulty believing reassurance.
- Continue escalating after help is offered.
- Watch caregivers closely for signs of rejection.
- Resist depending on adults.
- Expect conflict to end the relationship.
- Struggle to use a caregiver as a source of comfort.

Parenting implications

Attachment is not created through one special activity. It develops through repeated experiences of availability, sensitivity, protection, enjoyment, and repair.

Caregivers can support this process by:

- Responding predictably to distress.
- Keeping appropriate promises.
- Acknowledging misunderstandings.
- Reconnecting after conflict.
- Showing interest in the child's thoughts and feelings.

From Understanding to Attunement

Your child is learning from patterns, not isolated moments. Each dependable interaction contributes to a developing expectation that relationships can remain available during both comfort and distress.

