

WHAT IS ATTACHMENT?

What is the skill?

Attachment is the system that motivates children to seek protection, comfort, and connection from familiar caregivers when they feel frightened, hurt, overwhelmed, or uncertain. It is not simply affection, closeness, or whether a child appears to love a caregiver.

Through attachment relationships, children develop expectations about whether adults will notice their distress, whether help will be available, and whether they are worthy of care. These expectations become part of the child's understanding of themselves and relationships.

Normal development

Young children depend on caregivers for protection and emotional regulation. When distressed, they may cry, reach, follow, call out, or seek physical closeness. A sensitive caregiver notices the child's signals and responds in a way that helps the child feel understood and protected.

Once the child feels sufficiently safe, the attachment system becomes less active, allowing the child to return to exploration, play, and learning. The caregiver therefore serves as both a safe haven during distress and a secure base from which the child can explore.

How neglect interferes

Neglect can teach children that showing distress does not reliably bring protection or comfort. The child may alter how they communicate attachment needs in an effort to preserve some connection with caregivers or manage distress without dependable help.

These responses are adaptations to earlier caregiving experiences. They should not be understood as evidence that the child does not want or need relationships.

What it might look like

A child may:

- Minimize or hide distress.
- Become highly focused on a caregiver's availability.
- Seek help indirectly through behavior.
- Appear unusually self-reliant.
- Have difficulty returning to play after becoming upset.
- Show different attachment behaviors with different caregivers.

Parenting implications

Do not judge attachment by how affectionate, compliant, independent, or clingy a child appears. Instead, notice what happens when the child is tired, frightened, hurt, separated, or uncertain.

Ask yourself:

- How is my child communicating a need for safety?
- What response might the child expect from me?
- What helps the child feel understood without becoming overwhelmed?

From Understanding to Attunement

The question beneath attachment behavior is often not, "*Do you love me?*" but, "*What will happen when I need you?*" Your responses gradually help shape the child's answer.

