



Centre of Excellence for
MENTAL HEALTH

To: Our colleagues throughout Quebec From: The Centre of Excellence for Mental Health



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What is attachment?

Attachment is a deep and enduring affectionate emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space (Bowlby, 1963). The fundamental premise of attachment theory is the presence of a specific set of behaviours rooted in evolution that bring the child close to the attachment figure (AF) for care and safety. Attachment develops within a **dyadic regulatory system** wherein the primary AF notices, understands and responds to the child's moment-to-moment changes in emotional state (i.e., **attunement**). This process leads to the development of an unconscious set of beliefs and expectations about the self and others that serves as a template for future relationships (i.e., **internal working model; IWM**).

Secure attachments lead to representations of self as **valuable** and of others as **trustworthy** and **responsive**. Secure attachment allows for optimal social, emotional, and behavioral development, particularly affect-regulation skills.

Insecure attachments lead to representations of self as **unlovable** and others as **untrustworthy**. These representations cause the child to believe that they cannot rely on adults to respond to their needs and interferes with the ability to self-soothe, manage emotions, and engage effectively in reciprocal relationships.

Attachment styles: what a teacher may see in class

Secure

- Seek AF to cope with distress
- Positive outlook
- Explorative
- Curious
- Healthy self-concept
- Internal sense of safety and trust
- Lively, happy

Anxious/Ambivalent

- Preoccupied with AF
- Exaggerated emotional reactions
- Attention-seeking
- Hostile to AF when demands not met
- Anxious, difficult to soothe
- Poor concentration
- Academic underachievement

Avoidant/Dismissive

- Avoid AF and closeness to others
- Inhibited
- Lack of spontaneous expression
- Detached from emotions
- Want to be self-sufficient
- Sensitive to proximity of adults
- Prefer control to reciprocity

Disorganized

- Fearful and apprehensive of AF
- Intense and shifting mood states
- No consistent strategy for dealing with feelings
- Extremely sensitive to perceived criticism
- Highly motivated to avoid shame

What can educators do?

Authoritative Teaching (Firm Caring)

An authoritative teacher or parent seeks to provide **firm, realistic boundaries and limit-setting** in balance with **compassion, empathy and nurturance**. This parenting/teaching style is recommended to gradually restructure the child's IWM so that they can feel differently about themselves, adults and relationships. (For more information on teaching styles, see <http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2013/09/parenting-teaching.aspx>)

Ways to intervene when students present as:

Anxious/Ambivalent

How do we build the capacity to contain emotions and self-soothe?

A task that is broken into steps with teacher check-ins can help reduce reassurance-seeking and promote independence and autonomy.

Avoidant/Dismissive

How do we engage and build the capacity to connect with self and other?

Structured activities help the child feel safe until the relationship with the teacher becomes stronger and can facilitate asking for help.

Disorganized

How do we build safety when trust in self and other is so compromised?

Reliability, boundaries, and emotional consistency are essential, as well as continuity of relationships over time that gradually help the child feel safe and know who to turn to.

Guidelines to enhance the attachment relationship

Provide a Structured Environment: A structured, predictable environment and classroom schedule with clearly defined rules helps a child to feel safe.

Routines and Rituals: Consistent daily routines and predictability decrease insecurity and feelings of vulnerability. Rituals (celebrations or traditions) offer a connecting thread and sense of belonging to a group.

Maintain Control: Maintaining a calm and reliable response (consistent affect) and avoiding reactive anger helps the child feel safe.

Teach Concept of Choices: Children need to be taught about good choices, which lead to approval and avoid consequences, and negative choices, which should be followed by natural consequences. This helps children to feel in control and to take responsibility for their actions.

Watch Nonverbal Behavior: The child's nonverbal behavior will often reveal the child's true thoughts or feelings.

Act as a Historian: Help the child to remember moments of connection, success, or good fortune to keep things in perspective, as they may tend to forget the good things when one bad thing happens to them in the present (i.e., all or nothing thinking).

Resources & References

Attachment Association of Canada: <http://www.attachmentcan.ca>

Attachment & Trauma Network: <https://www.attachmenttraumanetwork.org>

Attachment Aware Schools: <https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools/>

Nurture Group Network (UK): <https://nurturegroups.org/>

If you have found this postcard to be helpful and informative, please share it with colleagues.
Dissemination of information about mental health is the first step toward promoting better mental health!

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