

Supporting a Child with Attachment Disorder:  
A Guide for Parents



# Supporting a Child with Attachment Disorder

If you are concerned that your child may need support with forming emotional attachments, this guide is here to break down different attachment styles and help you to find practical ways to support your child's development.

## What is attachment?

Attachment has been described as a lasting connection between human beings, which often involves care, comfort and pleasure. The first emotional connections that we make as humans are often with our primary caregivers in infancy. The nature of these early relationships can affect the way a child views themselves and their relationship with others. Children with secure attachments know that their attachment figure is safe and secure and so will seek to be near to them. They will often feel distressed when away from them for a prolonged time.

## What is attachment disorder?

Attachment disorder is a psychiatric condition that can affect young children. A child with attachment disorder may find it difficult to form emotional attachments, particularly with caregivers. It is not uncommon for parents and caregivers to notice that a child may be having difficulties with emotional attachments before the child's first birthday, but the condition can develop later in childhood too. It is common for children who have experienced difficulties in relationships in early life to develop attachment disorders - this can include children that may have been neglected or abused, those who have suffered from the loss or change of a caregiver, or even those who have spent time apart from their caregiver as a result of medical intervention.



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## What are attachment styles?

Attachment styles are the ways in which children respond and adapt to their environment. Children's attachment styles are usually fixed by around three years of age, therefore the way that they form attachments in their early life is critical.

### Secure

A child with a secure attachment style will be confident that their needs will be met by their caregivers and will trust that they will be cared for unconditionally. This sense of security will then inform the child's other relationships throughout their life.

### Avoidant

A child with an avoidant attachment style is likely a child that has become accustomed to not getting their needs met empathetically. This may be a child that finds that their needs are met with anger or frustration or are simply ignored. For this reason, the child may learn to keep their needs to themselves, becoming very independent emotionally and physically.

### Resistant/Ambivalent

A child with a resistant attachment style (sometimes called ambivalent attachment) may be accustomed to getting their needs met inconsistently or unreliably. These children may grow up feeling undeserving of attention unless it is desperate. As such, they will do anything they can to get attention, often through exaggerated, aggressive or clingy behaviours. Children with resistant attachment styles may then push away the caregiver, resulting in strained relations between the child and the carer.

### Disorganised

A child with a disorganised attachment style is likely to have not developed a safe way of having their needs met. This is often when a person exhibits dangerous behaviour towards a child but is also the primary caregiver, leaving the child unsure and fearful.



# What causes attachment disorder?

Attachment disorder is caused by a child being unable to connect emotionally with a caregiver in early life. Here are some examples:

A baby being left to cry out, being left unfed or unchanged for long periods of time

A child getting attention only for negative actions

A baby or child being unable to connect with a caregiver due to other issues, such as parental depression or illness

A baby or child getting their needs met inconsistently, e.g. a caregiver only responding to some of the baby's cries

A baby or child frequently changing caregivers, e.g. through fostering, adoption or parent loss

A baby is separated from their mother for a long period of time, e.g. a baby placed in neonatal intensive care



# Diagnosis and Support

## What are the signs of attachment disorder?

Attachment disorder can look different in every child, but here is an idea of some of the traits that you could look out for. Bear in mind that it can be possible for a child to attach to one caregiver and not another.

Lack of trust in others

Low self-esteem

Difficulty relating to and empathising with others

Eye contact avoidance

Easy to anger

Self-soothing rather than seeking out a caregiver

Lack of concern when left alone or with a stranger

Overfamiliarity with strangers

Avoidance of touch, or perceiving touch as a threat

Seeking control



# Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)

Children who have severe attachment difficulties may be diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder. Around 1 - 2% of children have RAD and it is most common in those coming from the care system. Children with RAD may have the previous traits, as well as:



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If you are concerned about any aspect of your child's development, arrange to talk to the school's [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator](#) (SENDCo). They will be able to advise you about the next steps and procedures in school.

If support has been put in place but your child does not seem to be responding to it, it may be that a different approach is needed. You should speak to your child's GP and they may be able to refer you to a [paediatrician](#). Your child also may be referred to [CAMHS](#) for additional support.

## Practical Tips

Try to work out what your own attachment style is and figure out how to relate to your child in a way that suits you both.

Use therapeutic parenting techniques to nurture the bond with your child.

Try to recognise the child's behaviour in relation to their past experiences and use this knowledge to guide you.

Remember, all behaviour is communication.

Model staying calm and positive.

Avoid labelling your child's behaviour as 'bad' - their behaviour is showing you that they are not in control and they need your help.

Avoid using rewards and punishments as a strategy.

Set firm but fair boundaries and stick to them consistently.

Stick to routines as much as possible.

Be realistic about your expectations and be patient in meeting them.

Support your child in understanding and expressing their feelings in a safe way.

Own up to any mistakes that you make and apologise for them.

If your child missed out on key bonding in their early life (for example, if you are fostering or adopting a child who was not held much as a newborn), don't be afraid to meet those unmet needs no matter their chronological age. A seven-year-old child with attachment difficulties may still benefit from being held close like a baby.

Try bonding activities such as playing games that involve a lot of eye contact or touch, as far as your child permits it.

Make an effort to reconnect with your child after a falling out as soon as possible: they need to know that despite their behaviour, you will be there for them no matter what.

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## Acknowledge Their Feelings



There may be times when you or your child feel frustrated and occasions when you and your child may be worried or feel disconnected. Don't worry. These feelings (and others) will all come and go and the best thing to do is to acknowledge them and help your child work through them at their own pace. Give them the time, space and support they need and reach out for additional specialist support if you need it.

## Educate Yourself (And Those around You)



You will likely want to know as much as you can about attachment disorder and what you will need to do to support your child. You might feel overwhelmed at times, which is completely normal - try to let yourself work through your feelings at your own pace.

Over time, you will build up a bank of knowledge about your child's individual needs, which you can then use to help educate family members about how to support your child. This means that, if you are going to a family gathering for example, your child can feel supported and cared for by everyone around them.

## Take Care of You



There is a lot of work and worry that goes into having a child with any special educational need or disability. If you can, try and share your thoughts and feelings with another adult or health professional. This is really important for your physical and mental wellbeing.

Try to see your friends, spend time with your partner, take up a new (or old) hobby - whatever makes you feel like 'you'.

Make sure you ask for support when you need it. You and your child may have regular meetings with an [educational psychologist](#) or [CAMHS](#); always be as honest as possible about your feelings and the support you need. They may be able to offer guidance and support and could also point you towards groups that offer support specifically for parents of children with attachment disorder. Talking to people who have similar situations to yourself can help you feel part of a community.

# Therapeutic Parenting Techniques

Therapeutic parenting is a way of parenting that focuses on the whole child rather than just the behaviours. Children with attachment disorders can benefit from their needs being met at their emotional age rather than chronological age, so therapeutic parenting encourages you to invite joy and playfulness into your interactions with your child. In the UK, prospective adopters and foster carers are often trained in therapeutic parenting, as it has been proven to help children who have experienced lots of different caregivers or who have had adverse childhood experiences.

Therapeutic parenting often involves the use of the PACE approach:

**Playfulness** - Create an atmosphere of joy and fun in your interactions with your child.

**Acceptance** - Help your child to separate their sense of self from their behaviours by showing them that you accept them and love them unconditionally.

**Curiosity** - Be curious about your child's behaviour through 'wondering out loud' statements, such as "I wonder if you are feeling angry because..." to help your child begin to understand their feelings.

**Empathy** - Show your child that not only do you understand their emotions, but you feel them too. Provide comfort and support to your child no matter what.

We hope this guide is helpful in supporting you to understand attachment. Don't forget, you can't pour from an empty cup. Supporting a child with attachment disorder can be stressful and it is important that you take care of yourself too. Make sure that you set boundaries for yourself and keep in mind that you do not need to be the perfect parent to help your child to form secure attachments.



Disclaimers:

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.