

Assessing and Addressing Attachment Challenges in Children and Parents

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Assessing and Addressing Attachment Challenges in Children and Parents.

In this lesson, we will focus on understanding a child's and parent's attachment histories and current challenges.

We will consider different tools and strategies for assessing their attachment patterns and important goals for helping both children and parents build a secure attachment.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe the process of early attachment formation and behaviors associated with child and parent attachment styles, and
- Integrate adoption competent clinical practices to assess attachment history

2. Gathering Attachment Information

2.1 Gathering Attachment Information

Let's look at how mental health professionals can gather information from youth and their caregivers to learn more about the youth's attachment history and challenges.

2.2 Gathering Information

When talking with adoptive parents and guardians, it is important to learn as much as possible about their child's attachment history and the challenges they faced before and after joining their family.

You may also ask for a copy of any written information that they received on their child's history and work with them to request additional information from the placing agency and previous service providers.

2.3 Elaine, Joseph, and Tim

Now, let's look at a case example.

You will meet with Elaine, age 64, and Joseph, age 72, who became the legal guardians of their grandson, Tim, age 8, after his mother (their daughter) severely neglected him and her parental rights were terminated. They became his legal guardians 10 months ago.

In this meeting, you want to gather as much information as you can about Tim's attachment history.

2.4 Questions in Assessment Reflection

What questions do you want to include in your assessment? Write down the questions you would ask to gather information to ascertain Tim's attachment history with previous caregivers, kinship connections, and reasons surrounding his separation from his birth mother.

2.5 Compare

In the next slide, you will see your answers. Compare them to the answers provided in the handout in the Resources tab, or you can click the handout icon on the slide to access it.

2.6 Compare Answers

How do the answers on the handout compare with your ideas?

2.7 Missing Questions

Can you think of any questions that may be missing from both lists that you would want to add?

2.8 Missing Questions Response

You may want to print these questions for future reference when gathering information, including children's attachment history with previous caregivers, their kinship connections, reasons surrounding separation, and an understanding of the history of their community of origin.

3. Assessing Attachment

3.1 Assessing Attachment

In this section, we will look at some tools and strategies that mental health professionals can use to assess the attachment histories of children and adolescents.

3.2 Observation

Children up to seven years of age generally are assessed using well-defined observational procedures.

Reactions to separations between children and their current attachment figures, affective expressions, conversational exchanges, and subtle body language are observed and evaluated.

Much can also be learned by observing school age children in their interactions with their parents or guardians.

Review the Handout, *Observation Checklist: What to Look For in Assessing Attachment and Bonding* from Vera Fahlberg's *A Journey Through Placement*.

3.3 Case Example: Susanna

Click on each number to listen to the following short case example and complete the activity that follows.

1. You are working with 8-year-old Susanna and her adoptive parents, Mike and Joanna, who adopted Susanna from Russia when she was three years old. You observe Susanna as she sits with her parents during the session.
2. You notice that Susanna does not smile very often, seems tense, draws in her arms and legs very tightly, and replies minimally when her mother speaks to her, making no eye contact.
3. Joanna makes repeated attempts to get Susanna's attention and tries to place an arm around her, but Susanna shrugs it off. Mike stares out the window with a tight expression on his face. At one point, he says to Joanna, "Give it a rest" as she attempts to engage Susanna. You observed similar behaviors when you first met with them last week.

3.4 Case Example Observational Checklist

Using the handout linked below as a reference, note the specific behaviors on the checklist that you observed in Susanna and her parents.

3.5 Case Example Observational Checklist Response

Did you note that Susanna does not:

- Seem relaxed and happy
- Establish eye contact with her parents
- Smile easily
- Look comfortable when speaking with her parents
- React positively to parents being physically close

With respect to Mike and Joanna, you may have noticed that Joanna initiated affectionate overtures, but Mike did not? Joanna's behavior indicates that she is still trying to attach, whereas Mike's behavior might reflect withdrawal, frustration, and/or irritation with his daughter's rejection.

You will need to gather more information to better understand Susanna's attachment history and challenges, but this preliminary observation can be very helpful.

3.6 The Bird's Nest

Let's look now at the Bird's Nest Drawing. You may find this tool useful in better understanding a child's attachment challenges. Please note that there is no research on the validity or reliability of this tool.

The Bird's Nest Drawing is a tool that is often less threatening to children than asking them to draw a picture of their family, and it typically involves attachment-related themes.

You would first ask the child to draw a bird's nest and then to tell a story about the nest with a beginning, middle, and end.

Children with significant attachment problems typically draw empty nests or one with no mother bird and tell stories related to loss or abandonment.

If this were to occur when using this exercise with a child, you would need to explore further, such as asking the child what caused the baby bird to fall out of the nest or the mama bird to go away.

The therapist might explore further by asking questions like: "If you had the power to change the picture or story, how would it be different?"

Learn about the Bird's Nest Drawing by reviewing the handout on this tool in the Resources tab.

3.7 The Bird's Nest Drawing

One caution regarding the use of a projective assessment tool like the Bird's Nest Drawing is that different people may assign different meanings to symbols depending on how they were raised and what beliefs were imparted to them.

For example, in some Native American communities, the owl is a symbol of death. When assessing a child, it is important to understand the meaning of symbols to that child.

3.8 Interpret the Drawings Reflection

Based on your understanding of assessing attachment through the Bird's Nest Drawing, how might you interpret the following drawings?

3.9 Interpret the Drawings Response

This drawing might reflect a closeness of the child and parent. They are both in the nest that is well anchored on the tree limb and sturdy, suggesting that the child feels supported by their parent.

There are multiple colors used, bringing life to the drawing. Questions for the child could explore further what they are doing in the nest.

3.10 Representation

This drawing might represent a sense of loss as the nest falls from the tree to the ground with marks around it to suggest a fast fall. There do not appear to be any bird family members in the nest.

Has the family dispersed and is no longer together? Is there no longer a home? Has the home been destroyed?

Questions for the child about the nest might explore their sense of security.

3.11 The Nobody Assessment #1

Another tool called the "Nobody" Assessment is particularly useful for exploring young children's perceptions of the relationships they have had with significant caregivers in their lives.

You would begin by finding out what important people were in the child's family network. Use a card with a line drawing to represent each person. You can provide blank spaces to capture names and titles specific to the child's experience, for instance "Baba," "Tita," or names of significant adults.

Lay these cards, as well as one for Nobody, in front of the child and ask them a series of questions. As an example, listen to the questions and click on the people you would choose from your own life.

Who did you go to when you were hungry?

3.12 The Nobody Assessment #2

Who did you go to when you were hurt?

3.13 The Nobody Assessment #3

Who did you go to if you felt sick?

3.14 The Nobody Assessment #4

Who did you go to when you wanted a hug?

3.15 The Nobody Assessment #5

Who did you go to when you wanted to play a game?

3.16 The Nobody Assessment #6

Who did you go to when you wanted someone to listen?

3.17 The Nobody Assessment Response

The child points to the person fulfilling that need...or Nobody. Mental health professionals can make up items to explore other areas related to discipline, guidance, protection, and other forms of nurturance.

This exercise can be powerful for the child. It is important that you acknowledge the voids that are identified and affirm the difficulty of not having their needs met.

3.18 Whose Job Was It?

A similar tool to use with older children and youth is, "Whose Job Was It?" This assessment tool is included in the Resources tab. It can be used to assess who was available to meet specific needs in their lives.

You would ask the child to choose from the following persons: Mom? Dad? Both? Relative? Sibling? Neighbor? Social Worker? Yourself? Nobody?

There is a column for each change in family, and you could add other areas of interest. For example, a few of the categories are food, clothing, help with schoolwork, and affection.

3.19 Wall Around the Heart

Another tool to learn more about a child's attachment challenges is the "Wall Around the Heart." The technique was adapted by Dr. Daniel Hughes as a tool to use both in therapy and assessment.

It uses a series of drawings of the child's heart at different life stages:

- At birth
- The time they were separated, abandoned, or began to be maltreated when the heart has cracks
- After the pain got more intense and there is a wall around the heart, and
- Now with a pencil wall that they are trying to tear down, so that the child can feel loved

There is a handout in the Resources tab that describes this technique.

3.20 Lifebooks

Another important tool that can help bring to light a child's attachment history and challenges is life story work, including lifebooks. This technique was described fully in an earlier lesson.

Lifebooks are useful in exploring children's memories of the various families in which they have lived, and the happy and painful memories associated with each.

They are helpful in working with children to understand their past losses and the reasons for moves in care.

4. Parental Attachment

4.1 Parental Attachment

Let's turn now to a discussion about parental attachment.

4.2 Two Important Areas

There are two important areas to consider in assessing the capacity of adoptive parents and guardians to respond to their children in a therapeutic manner:

Adoptive parents' or guardians' attachment styles and emotional well-being impact their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to their child and their parenting.

As discussed in the last lesson, adoptive parents with a high degree of sensitivity and secure attachment styles are better able to respond to maltreated children's past loss or trauma issues, and these placements are most likely to be stable.

Research indicates that insecure adult attachment style and insensitive parenting behaviors are influenced by the parent's current stresses. In other words, their impact on the child is amplified when the parent is under high stress.

4.3 Adult Attachment Interview

We have learned much about the impact of a parent's attachment style on the attachment security of children through research using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), developed by Mary Main.

This tool assesses adults' states of mind with respect to attachment.

Most studies have found a consistent relationship among AAI classifications, parenting behavior, and child attachment status.

However, some studies indicate that parental attachment theories, such as those stated here, may not be universal. For example, there are differences in communities that value individualism vs. collectivism. Therefore, it is important to be mindful of the perspective of the parents and the context in which the child was raised.

4.4 Four Primary Attachment Styles

As introduced briefly in the previous lesson, adults have four primary attachment classifications. As with the four attachment patterns in children, the first is secure and the other three are insecure attachment styles.

Click on each number to learn more about the four attachment styles.

1. Secure/ Autonomous Attachment

The parent:

- Recognizes both the limitations and positive qualities of their childhood attachment figures
- Values relationships
- Tends to be forgiving of their own less than optimal caregiving
- Is at peace with imperfections in themselves and others
- Is coherent and objective in describing their childhood experiences

2. Preoccupied Attachment

The parent:

- Is entangled in the details of their childhood
- Tends to be preoccupied with early experiences, often appearing overly concerned with trying to please their own parents
- Is not at peace with imperfections in oneself or others

3. Dismissing Attachment

The parent:

- Tends to say little about childhood attachment experiences, often giving short, minimally informative answers
- Often insists they cannot recall or presents idealized account
- Minimizes the impact of key relationships from their past

4. Unresolved/ Disorganized Attachment

The parent:

- Lacks resolution of mourning of a significant loss or trauma
- May show confusion surrounding a death or trauma in their life
- Shows lapses of reasoning in interview

4.5 Parent's Attachment Styles

Click on each number to hear how we might expect parents or guardians to parent based on their attachment styles.

1. **Secure/autonomous:** Parents with a secure or autonomous attachment show more warmth and supportiveness toward their children than parents with insecure attachment. They are able to attune to their child's needs, empathize with them, and regulate their own emotions in responding to their child.
2. **Dismissing:** Dismissing parents tend to have a cool, controlling, task-focused style. They are somewhat distant and have difficulty responding to their child on an emotional level, and their children often adapt with the same behaviors.
3. **Preoccupied:** Preoccupied parents may be inconsistently helpful or supportive, give confusing instructions, and display inconsistent affect. They tend to vacillate between being responsive and being unavailable, leaving their child confused and frustrated.
4. **Unresolved/ disorganized:** The unresolved/ disorganized attachment style in parents is linked with disorganized attachment in their children - the patterns found to predict serious maladjustment. Parents may experience alterations in normal consciousness and may display frightening behaviors to their children. This attachment pattern in adults is much higher in clinical populations and among maltreating mothers.

4.6 Insecure Attachment Style

A parent with a secure /autonomous attachment style is most likely to be able to provide an attachment-challenged child with sensitive, responsive, and consistent care, so that the child may develop a secure attachment.

Parents with insecure attachment styles are much less able to overcome many of the barriers that are likely to arise in parenting. Click on each of the numbers to hear some of these barriers.

1. Taking their child's distancing or hostile behaviors personally rather than understanding them in the context of their past.
2. Feeling threatened by their child's loyalty to previous caregivers, which often leads to forcing their child to give up, or at least not talk about, their previous caregivers.
3. Being able to cope with the high stress level involved in parenting children with higher emotional needs without resorting to angry, punitive parenting behaviors.

4. Being triggered by their child's past trauma and loss, so that the parent is unable to help them with negative emotions and respond empathically to their pain.
5. Distancing themselves from their child out of fear of another loss. This is particularly problematic when parents have their own unresolved losses.

4.7 Key Points

Click each number to hear some key points to remember in assessing attachment for children and parents.

1. It is important to utilize different methods in assessing a child's attachment. Gathering information and observation are key strategies in developing an understanding of a child's attachment history and challenges. A range of interview protocols, questionnaires and other techniques can be used.
2. Research suggests that an individual's attachment pattern may change over time based on life circumstances and intentional interventions.
3. Parents' attachment styles impact their emotional well-being and parenting and are important to understand in therapeutic family work.
4. Research indicates that parents with secure attachments are better able to help insecure children to form secure attachments in a new family.

5. Wrapping Up

5.1 Wrapping Up

In this lesson, you learned about clinical practices in assessing attachment history.

5.2 Your Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

5.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

5.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

5.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed Assessing and Addressing Attachment Challenges in Children and Parents. In the next lessons, we will look at practice models for working with parents and guardians and their children to address children's and youth's complex attachment challenges.