

# The Journey of Attachment

## *A Practical Roadmap for Parents and Children*

**Resource: Child Development**

### **INFANT: BIRTH TO 1 YEAR**

#### **Primary Tasks & Milestones**

The primary developmental task in a child's first year of life is to learn that the world is a predictable and reliable place. This is achieved by attachment with a primary caregiver who provides loving nurture, and meets the baby's needs consistently. A caregiver who provides attention and affection, takes pleasure in interacting with the child, and who responds to his cries, encourages the process of attachment at this stage.

The physical goals for a child in the first year are to gain muscle control over their bodies: smiling, grasping, walking and vocalizing. These tasks are subject to delays if the primary task, attachment, is impeded in some way. Children who do not receive consistent nurture in the first months of life may find themselves several months behind on normal developmental milestones such as sitting up, standing, walking, and even making eye contact.

#### **Observation Checklist: What to Look for in Assessing Attachment and Bonding: Birth to One Year**

##### ***Does the child...?***

- appear alert?
- respond to people?
- show interest in the human face?
- track with his eyes?
- vocalize frequently?
- exhibit expected motor development?
- enjoy close physical contact?
- signal discomfort?
- appear to be easily comforted?
- exhibit normal or excessive fussiness?
- appear outgoing or is he passive and withdrawn?
- have good muscle tone?

##### ***Does the parent...?***

- respond to the infant's vocalizations?
- change voice tone when talking to or about the baby?
- engage in face to face contact with the infant?
- exhibit interest in and encourage age appropriate development?
- respond to the child's cues?
- demonstrate the ability to comfort the infant?
- enjoy close physical contact with the baby?
- initiate positive interactions with the infant?
- identify positive qualities in the child?

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## **TODDLER: 2 TO 3 YEARS**

### **Primary Tasks & Milestones**

The primary emotional task for a child at this stage is to develop a sense of self and begin to psychologically separate himself from his primary caregiver. As the toddler begins to walk, he begins to physically move away from the caregiver, and explore the world on his own. He begins to identify the caregiver as a safe haven that he can return to, and in time he will carry an image of the caregiver in his mind's -eye, and needn't be in physical proximity to feel secure.

Language development is part of this process. The child begins to distinguish between you and me, yours and mine, recognizing and identifying the physical differences between himself and his parents. With language also comes the ability to express emotions verbally, and a greater ability for social interaction with parents and others.

This is also the period when the child begins to internalize the attitudes of others and begins to develop a sense of shame. When the parent scolds the child, or says "No", the child begins to understand concepts of right and wrong. The parent's reaction lets him understand that he is still loved, despite incorrect behavior.

### **Observation Checklist: What to Look for in Assessing Attachment and Bonding: One to Five Years**

#### **Does the child...?**

- explore his surroundings?
- respond positively to parents?
- keep himself occupied?
- show signs of reciprocity?
- seem relaxed and happy?
- look at people when communicating?
- show emotions in a recognizable manner?
- react to pain and pleasure?
- engage in age appropriate activities?
- use speech appropriately?
- respond to parental limit setting?
- demonstrate normal fears?
- react positively to physical closeness?
- show a response to separation?
- note the parent's return?
- exhibit signs of pride and joy?
- show signs of empathy?
- show signs of embarrassment, shame, or guilt?

#### **Does the parent...?**

- use disciplinary measures appropriate for the child's age?
- respond to the child's overtures?
- initiate affection?
- provide effective comforting?
- initiate positive interactions with the child?
- accept expressions of autonomy?
- see the child as positively "taking after" a family member?
- seem aware of the child's cues?
- enjoy reciprocal interactions with the child?
- respond to child's affection?
- set age appropriate limits?
- respond supportively when the child shows fear?

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## **PRESCHOOL-AGE: 4 TO 5 YEARS**

### **Primary Tasks & Milestones**

This is the stage when children engage in "magical thinking," believing that what they wish for will come true. They are also very self-absorbed. They tend to see themselves and their families as the center of the universe, and often believe that they are responsible for whatever happens to them. The process of separating from the parent continues, and children begin to spend more time with others, in preschool and at play dates.

Play is a crucial part of this stage of development. Children begin to develop their imaginations, and take on different roles in their play. Playing allows them to explore dependence and independence, sometimes being the baby and other times playing the caregiver. This is also the stage when children begin to reconcile the differences between good and bad, and begin to understand that good people can sometimes do bad things. In play, taking on the roles of "good guys" and "bad guys" can help them to integrate those ideas.

### **Observation Checklist: What to Look for in Assessing Attachment and Bonding: One to Five Years**

#### **Does the child...?**

- explore his surroundings?
- respond positively to parents?
- keep himself occupied?
- show signs of reciprocity?
- seem relaxed and happy?
- look at people when communicating?
- show emotions in a recognizable manner?
- react to pain and pleasure?
- engage in age appropriate activities?
- use speech appropriately?
- respond to parental limit setting?
- demonstrate normal fears?
- react positively to physical closeness?
- show a response to separation?
- note the parent's return?
- exhibit signs of pride and joy?
- show signs of empathy?
- show signs of embarrassment, shame, or guilt?

#### **Does the parent...?**

- use disciplinary measures appropriate for the child's age?
- respond to the child's overtures?
- initiate affection?
- provide effective comforting?
- initiate positive interactions with the child?
- accept expressions of autonomy?
- see the child as positively "taking after" a family member?
- seem aware of the child's cues?
- enjoy reciprocal interactions with the child?
- respond to child's affection?
- set age appropriate limits?
- respond supportively when the child shows fear?

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## **SCHOOL-AGE: 6 TO 12 YEARS**

### **Primary Tasks & Milestones**

Starting school is the first big transition that most children make. It is the first time that they truly have a life of their own, outside the family unit. At this stage children's development focuses outward, rather than inward, as they begin to master social interactions with their peers. Physically, they continue to develop their gross motor skills, as they become bigger and stronger. Emotionally, they are concerned with fairness, and how it affects them, and may become upset by perceptions of unfairness. They also become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and begin to internalize concepts of right and wrong.

This can be a challenging stage for parents, because they need to help children learn to express their emotions in positive ways. Because it is a time of conscience development in children, parents need to provide clear messages about family values. Children are developing their own preferences, in food, clothing, and hygiene, and it is up to the parents to provide guidance about what is and isn't acceptable within the family.

### **Observation Checklist: What to Look for in Assessing Attachment and Bonding: Grade School Years**

#### **Does the child...?**

- behave as though he likes himself?
- show pride in accomplishments?
- share with others?
- accept adult imposed limits?
- verbalize likes and dislikes?
- try new tasks?
- acknowledge his mistakes?
- express a wide range of emotions?
- establish eye contact?
- exhibit confidence in his own abilities?
- appear to be developing a conscience?
- move in a relaxed manner?
- smile easily?
- look comfortable when speaking with adults?
- react positively to parent being physically close?
- have positive interactions with siblings and/or peers?

#### **Does the parent...?**

- show interest in child's school performance?
- accept expression of negative feelings?
- respond to child's overtures?
- provide opportunities for child to be with peers?
- handle problems between siblings with fairness?
- initiate affectionate overtures?
- use disciplinary measures appropriate for child's age?
- assign the child age appropriate responsibilities?
- seem to enjoy this child?
- know the child's likes and dislikes?
- give clear messages about behaviours that are approved or disapproved of?
- comment on positive behaviours as well as negative?

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## **ADOLESCENT: 13 TO 18 YEARS**

### **Primary Tasks & Milestones**

Adolescence is the transition period between childhood and adulthood. Adolescence brings numerous changes to all children, but may be even more problematic in children who are adopted. The two primary features of this stage are identity formation and assertion of independence. In many ways, this stage is reminiscent of the child's early development - they begin separating themselves from the parents, and begin finding their place in society. Psychologically, too, it is similar to early childhood. Adolescents are egocentric and prone to magical thinking. They are fascinated by their own bodies and the changes that are taking place in them. They are looking to make sense of the world and to determine what their place in it will be.

### **Observation Checklist: What to Look for in Assessing Attachment and Bonding: Adolescents**

#### **Is the adolescent...?**

aware of personal strengths?  
aware of personal weaknesses?  
comfortable with his sexuality?  
engaging in positive peer interactions?  
performing satisfactorily in school?  
exhibiting signs of conscience development?  
free from severe problems with the law?  
aware of his parent's values?  
keeping himself occupied in appropriate ways?  
accepting of adult imposed limits?  
involved in interests outside the home?  
developing goals for the future?  
emotionally close to parents?

#### **Does the parent...?**

set appropriate limits?  
encourage self-control?  
trust the adolescent?  
show interest in and acceptance of adolescent's friends?  
display an interest in the teen's school performance?  
exhibit interest in teen's activities?  
have reasonable expectations regarding chores and household responsibilities?  
stand by the adolescent if he gets in trouble?  
show affection?  
think this child will "turn out" okay?

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