

Attachment in the preschool years

In the preschool years, children use their developing cognitive, linguistic, and emotional skills to become specialists in coping in their own family. If their family is safe and comforting, they learn to explain themselves accurately in words, to recognize that other people have different perspectives, to moderate their responses, and, over the course of 4-5 years, to tell the episodes of their life. Their self-protective attachment strategies become more specific to their interpersonal context; this is adaptive (Crittenden, 1992, 1996; Steele & Steele, 2005).

Problems develop when children are unsafe, uncomfortable and discouraged from using language to tell what they really think, really feel, and recall seeing or doing. In such cases, the inarticulate experience becomes twisted into inaccurate words, silence, or somatic symptoms.

Because 2-5 year old children need their parents to survive, they adapt to what their parents require. If their parents punish them harshly, even abusively, and tell them that they deserved it, children may learn and recall that their parents were right and that they deserved the harsh treatment. If their parents neglect them, but say that they loved them, children may learn to think and say that they were loved. If they try to tell their version of family experiences and are told they are wrong, or frowned at, or ignored, they may learn to tell the story differently such that their parents are pleased. When that happens, they may have memories, but the memories will not be accurate. If no one recounts the daily stories of their lives with them, they may not learn to tell episodes at all and they may have very few memories from childhood to recall. It can be almost impossible to integrate or reflect if one has only distorted information or lacks information (Bowlby, 1988).

The self-protective attachment strategies of endangered and uncomfortable preschool-aged (2-5 year old) children are often extreme, either relying solely upon the self (Type A) or solely upon others (Type C) or both (Type A/C). In such cases, the balance of input from self and attachment figures is skewed. This adapts the child to their immediate threats, but leaves them unprepared for life outside their home (Crittenden, 1992; 2008).

References

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