

Attachment in Adulthood

Several competencies differentiate adult attachment from attachment in the transition to adulthood. Overall, they could be described as achieving 'clarity' and 'balance' for the function of raising children. For example, adults can differentiate needs from desires; because children cannot, adults must decide whether a child's demand needs a response or is merely a desire. Similarly, adults can consider the needs and desires of several family members simultaneously and reach decisions about which to prioritize at any particular moment. It is particularly important to note that all family members (including parents) have needs and, as much as possible, needs should be met. Balance is the issue, that is, distributing the family's resources as productively (as opposed to 'equitably') as possible. Adults can foresee consequences in the long-term, thus acting in the present in ways that will have long-term positive consequences. Children, often even adolescents, cannot do this. Adults form long-term committed love relationships. These relationships are mutually protective and comforting. Adults build conflict resolution skills that, together with their emotional commitment to one another, sustain the relationship through difficult periods. Finally, adults use these competencies to generate the resources to care for their children until they reach reproductive maturity (Crittenden, 2008; Rholes & Simpson, 2004).

Adults who were at risk in childhood have the possibility to use balanced reflective functioning (a late developing cortical process, not complete until the mid-thirties) in adulthood. Balanced reflective functioning can override the distorted neurological pathways (laid down in childhood) that lead to extreme self-protective behaviour. Being able to do this, however, requires: (1) a period of reorganization (that usually begins in the transition to adulthood), (2) sufficient time to engage in reflective thought, (3) a stable life context that prevents crises (real or imagined) from catapulting one into self-protective action prior to reflection, (4) practice, such that new response pathways are laid down, and (5) gentle tolerance of mistakes - because mistakes are certain and punitive responses lead to increased self-protective behaviour. The choice of attachment partner is crucial to being able to achieve stability and forgiving tolerance of mistakes.

In cases of adult risk, adults have children without having the competencies described above. Being unclear about circumstances, they necessarily act in ways that are not protective and comforting, sometimes even endangering their children, each other, or themselves. Being unable to differentiate needs from desires and long-term benefits from short-term preferences, they often mis-direct their efforts. Being unable to manage competing needs, they often favor one person's needs over another's, either prioritizing the children, their spouse, or themselves, but failing to find a balance that promotes everyone's development. When lack of money is the only issue, this can be provided and the family will function adequately. More often, however, it is the information processing that underlies attachment that is awry. When adults cannot process information to yield clarity of understanding and balanced responses, whole families are placed at risk (Busch, 2008).

Busch, F.N. (ed) (2008) *Mentalization: Theoretical Considerations, Research Findings and Clinical Implications*, New York: The Analytic Press.

Rholes, W.S. and Simpson, J.A. (2004) *Adult attachment: Theory, research, and clinical implications*. New York: The Guilford Press.