



## **The influence of Parenting on Attachment Style and Self-Esteem/ Identity Formation in Adolescents**



Attachment is the deep connection established between a child and caregiver that profoundly affects a child's development and ability to express emotions and develop healthy relationships.

Various attachment theories have been developed to explain attachment in humans. Some of these theories include: learning theory by B. F Skinner and Harry Harlow; ethological theory by John Bowlby and Konrad Lorenz; and cognitive developmental theory by Jean Piaget and Mary Ainsworth, to mention a few. True attachment usually develops around 7 to 9 months when the infant begins to protest separation from familiar caregivers. Familiar caregivers are adults with whom the infant feels "safe," i.e. he can rely on them for comfort and protection when distressed, and they are usually limited in number. This protest is usually referred to as separation and stranger anxiety. According to theorists, true attachment is a precursor to successful cognitive, social and emotional development. A child could develop a secure or insecure attachment style, depending on the interaction between the infant and the primary caregiver (s), in the first year of life.

Ainsworth identified four attachment styles namely: secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized attachment styles. The secure attachment is the healthy form attachment in which a child is able to separate from parents, seek comfort from parents when frightened, display positive emotions when parents return and prefers parents to strangers. The child views the world as a safe place that could be trusted. Children with the secure attachment grow to be differentiated adults with good self-esteem, who are able to seek social support and maintain trusting, long lasting relationships. Infants and adolescents need to feel safe in their homes in order to be able to develop secure attachment. For this need to be met, parents should be: sensitive to the child's signals, accept their roles as the care giver; be cooperative rather than assertive; be accessible to the child; have good self-esteem and a sense of competence; be affectionate; and flexible. Children who do not feel safe in their homes are bound to develop one of the other three attachment styles, depending on the parenting style adopted by the primary caregiver (s). Children with avoidant attachment do not seek comfort or contact with their parents, and may avoid their parents. Such children show little or no preference between their parents and strangers and they eventually grow up to have problems with intimacy. As adults, they are likely not to invest much emotion in social and romantic relationships and are usually unable or unwilling to share their thoughts and feelings with others. Children with ambivalent attachment style may be wary of



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strangers and become greatly distressed when their parent leaves. However, they usually seem not to be comforted by the parent's return. As adults, they are usually reluctant to form close relationships and they question their partner's love. They also do not handle break ups very well. Children with disorganized attachment style usually display a mixture of the characteristics of the avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles; show a mixture of avoidant and resistant behaviors and may seem dazed, apprehensive or confused.

Secure attachment, healthy self-esteem and identity development in children and adolescents are positively correlated. Adolescents who developed a secure attachment style as young children usually develop a sense of competence and the ability to problem-solve constructively with parents.

Adolescents are at stage of life in which they are seeking to develop an identity for themselves. Their basic needs at this stage include: feeling safe at home, having some form of structure that creates a sense of security, flexibility that encourages gradual independence, developing an integrated self, and feelings of belongingness and connectedness. To meet these needs, the family is presented with the task of establishing an atmosphere that encourages identity development; promoting graduated independence and autonomy; renegotiating rules and responsibilities; preparing for the launching of the young adult and ensuring marital stability and growth. Parents have a role to play in nurturing identity

in adolescents and creating a conducive environment for the adolescent to thrive. When these needs are met, the adolescent is able to develop a strong sense of self, as evidenced by his ability to maintain a stable self-concept, withstand peer pressure, combine short term goals with long term plans, accept responsibility, be cognitively flexible and establish close relationships while maintaining individuality. In other words, the adolescent is able to develop a conscious sense of individual identity and maintain a continuity of personal character. Once an adolescent is able to develop a strong sense of self, Identity, he equally feels good about himself, thereby adopting a healthy self-esteem.

Unfortunately, rather than create a secure home base where the adolescent is encouraged to develop a strong sense of identity, most parents adopt parenting styles which are detrimental to the adolescent's development. For instance some parents are overly restrictive and controlling, not allowing the adolescent to develop any iota of autonomy, while some lack structure and offer no guidance whatsoever to the adolescent.

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