Understanding Attachment Theory

Melissa Kraemer Smothers, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor, M.S. in Counseling Program, Mt. Mary University

Angela Wusler, BS
School Counseling Graduate Student & Counseling Intern at Pius XI

2018 Catholic Educators’ Convention: October 5, 2018
Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space. (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969).

“Attachment is a memory template for human-to-human bonds. This template serves as your primary ‘worldview’ on human relationships” (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006, p. 85).
How attachments are formed
Two Roles of Attachment Figures

Secure Base
- Facilitate child’s exploration of physical environment
- Emotionally available
- Physically available

Allowing the child to go into the environment to explore

Safe Haven
- Responding sensitively in stressful/alarming situations
- Provide reassurance
- Provide comfort
- Provide protection

Welcoming the child back for comfort/protection

Boris, 2012
Attachment Theory: Secure Base

- **Secure base**: A responsive caregiver provides security to explore the environment
  - If the caregiver’s responses to the child’s needs are appropriate, then the child will feel confident to explore occasionally returning to the caregiver for confirmation
  - If the caregiver’s responses to the child are inappropriate, the child becomes insecure and are less likely to use the caregiver as a base for exploration.

- Promotes Exploration and Autonomy
  - By responding to child’s proximity-seeking attachment behaviors rather than resisting it, proximity promotes autonomy rather than inhibiting it.
  - Creates internalized models of safe secure relationships.
  - ALL children “attach”
Secure Base: Attending to Needs

I need you to:
- welcome my coming to you
- protect me
- comfort me
- help me organize feelings

I need you to:
- support exploration
- watch over me
- delight in me
- help me
- enjoy with me

Adapted from Circle of Security
The child develops internal representations of behavioral and emotional expectations
- Firstly, a model of him/herself
- Secondly, and in response to the first, a model of others response to his/her attachment strivings

Can internal working models change?
- They can be affected by new experience but new experience is also shaped by the existing model.
Attachment Styles

• Attachment theory predicts that the quality of the attachment predicts subsequent development
  • Longitudinal study found that securely attached infants were more competent at age-appropriate tasks throughout adolescence (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005)

An infant’s attachment style to a caregiver predicts:
  • Effective social functioning during childhood and adolescence
  • Sociability through early, middle, and late adulthood
  • Self-esteem
  • School grades
  • Teenage sexual activity
  • Quality of attachment to their own children
  • Attitudes toward their own children
Attachment to Parents is Linked to School Success

(1) willingness to accept challenges and independence
(2) social competence
(3) ADHD behaviors
(4) emotion regulation

(Bergin & Bergin, 2009)
Emotional-Self Regulation

■ A child’s ability to deal with stressors effectively and efficiently and then return to a baseline of being calmly focused and alert.

■ ‘Optimal regulation’ is said to be better when a child can smoothly make the transitions involved from being hypo-aroused (necessary for recovery) to hyper-aroused (necessary to meet a challenge) and return to being calmly focused and alert (Shanker, 2012, p. 12).
Strengthening the “Social Nervous System”

- Smile and look children in the eyes as you greet them by name
- Spend time with the child; quantity matters
- Help children and teens focus on the present moment
- Engage the sense of smell with an essential oil that brings a positive association or feeling
- Re-establish connection by allowing students pet an animal, or receive a loving touch.
- Allow expression of feelings through talking, writing, drawing, movement
- Help student focus on their breath to regulate the nervous system
- Engage students in a mindfulness practice (i.e., meditation, yoga, drumming)
- Allow the opportunity for students to play
Attachment in the Classroom

- Attachment provides feelings of security, allowing children to explore freely.

- While all children seek to feel secure, attachment helps them balance this need with their innate motivation to explore their environment.

- Attachment forms the basis for socializing children.

(Bergin & Bergin, 2009)
Attachment to Teachers is Linked to School Success

- Teacher relationships with children may have an “attachment component”
  - *Ad hoc attachment figure*
- Attachment provides a way to conceptualize and operationalize ‘high-quality’ teacher-child relationships
- Attachment theory highlights the importance of teacher sensitivity or responsiveness to children’s needs as a determinant of the relationship quality
- Attachment perspective guides interventions aimed at improving teacher-child relationships

*(Verschueren & Koomen, 2012)*
TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS: THE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE
Teachers Tell Individual Students How Special They Are

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFLzjI9QZm4
Responsive Teacher Behaviors
Promoting Safety and Connection

- Creates and/or maintains consistent daily routines for the classroom
- Tells children when something out of the ordinary is going to occur
- Offers children developmentally appropriate choices
- Anticipates difficult periods and transitions and offers extra support
- Uses techniques to support children’s self-regulation
- Helps students manage their feelings during intense emotional moments by remaining composed and offering empathy and support
- Is appropriately nurturing and affectionate
- Uses positive guidance and supportive interventions to help all children
- Goals for achievement are consistent across groups of students
Specific Strategies

■ Provide suggestions for appropriate boundaries:
  - “Let’s shake hands when we have a visitor come to class.”

■ Provide concrete, specific and authentic praise:
  - “That was hard for you, but you kept going.”
  - “Your thoughts were well organized in this essay.”
  - “You are a considerate friend letting Jackson choose the book.”

■ Make certain rewards absolute and not dependent on anything

■ Implement schoolwide interventions
  - Provide numerous extracurricular activities to help students get involved
  - Keep students together for several classes to develop cohesion
  - Help with transitions to new schools or environment (Bergin & Bergin, 2009)
Specific Strategies

- Respond consistently and calmly to unacceptable behaviors using a “matter of fact” voice
- Promote self-reflection, “I see you need help with…”
- Stop inappropriate interactions and address them privately
- When misbehavior occurs, explain, “I see that you are not ready to…” and provide a logical consequence and one that doesn’t perpetuate the student’s negative sense of self

Every child deserves a champion -- an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be. -- Rita F. Pierson
Teacher Capacity & Self-Care

- To effectively work with students, teachers must take care of themselves and find a work/life balance.
- Identify your limits, and realize that sometimes you will be pushed beyond them.
- Find balance.
- Have good collegial relationships that can both buffer and help identify compassion fatigue.
- Get back to the basics: Good self-care involves getting enough sleep, eating and exercising, participating in non-work related activities with people you enjoy being around.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2LNK2MW_xQ
Helpful websites

- https://www.attachmentleadnetwork.net/What-is-Attachment.php
- https://creatingtraumasensitiveschools.org/
“Being loved gives you strength, loving someone gives you courage”

-Lao Tzu
Selected References


