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Dan Hughes' Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy for Children with Trauma and Attachment Histories: an Introduction for Caretakers and Therapists

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Attachment in a Nutshell

The infant attachment response was defined by John Bowlby in the 1950s as an innate survival mechanism which helps the child attract and hold the attention of an adult – an infant's only hope for survival. Bowlby was somewhat ostracized in psychoanalytic circles for stating that attachment is about survival instead of about love, but the field has gradually come around. Infant humans generally arrive with the ability to smile, wave, coo, etc., and we adults are hardwired to respond with proximity and mirroring behaviors. (“Ooh, are you talking to me, cute baby?”) This normally gives the child an early sense of agency (I can make something happen!) It also begins a preverbal relationship based in intersubjective connection which hopefully provides both physical care and dependable access to emotional safety which then allows the child to explore their world for patterns. (Humans are born pattern-dependent organisms, important for learning to predict events.)

The best outcome from attaching to a nurturing adult includes 1) the child's internalizing a “secure emotional base” from which they can grow to enjoy school and a lifetime of learning, and 2) the child's building a “positive internal working model” view of themselves and their world (i.e., I am good, my parent likes me, my world is safe, etc.)

However the children who end up in our helping programs and supportive agencies generally do not emerge from infancy with the best outcomes. Thus our understanding of what is optimal can help us find some measure of empathy for what they have been through. It can help us see their behaviors as making sense -- in a coded way -- of their own experiences. (See “The Refrigerator List” for a handy behavior-decoding cheat sheet.)

[For further background, Inge Bretherton's readable history of Bowlby, Ainsworth, and their development of attachment theory can be found on line at:]

http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/online/inge_origins.pdf

[Also Cooper, Marvin, et al, have posted their helpful “Circle of Security” graphic at:]