

## **A Secure Attachment Base is Ideal to be a Great Learner**

**Heather L. Corwin**

**Abstract:** Secure attachment allows a person to grow and learn while being confident of his or her place in the world. The early years of life determine who we are and how we operate in the world (Venske, 2005). California is ranked second largest class size of all states in “Students enrolled per teacher in K-12 public schools” at “21.4 students to one teacher” (National Education Association, 2010, p.17). This ratio makes teaching difficult: students suffer. Applying secure attachment theory in classrooms may encourage students to succeed. Elements of secure attachment echo elements of successful teaching. Secure attachment in the classroom may intensify educational tools for teachers to support successful learning.

**Keywords:** Education, Attachment Theory, Secure Attachment, Great Teaching

Who we are is a result of an accumulation of events that begin at conception. How we operate in the world is profoundly attributed to the connection we have with our caregivers during our first years of life (Bowlby, 1988, p. 15). When a child thrives in her environment as a direct result of her caregiver’s efforts, this is called secure attachment. In this paper, I posit that the basis for secure attachment in infants is the same as the elements required for a solid foundation for learning at any age. “In essence this role is one of being available, ready to respond when called upon to encourage and perhaps assist, but to intervene actively only when clearly necessary” (Bowlby, 1988, p. 11). The areas of secure attachment we will focus on include the caregiver’s or teacher’s ability to sensitively address the infant or student’s needs, the caregiver’s or teacher’s ability to instill self-trust in the child/student, and the student’s ability to work autonomously, or without the attachment figure present, to cultivate learning outcomes. In this article I will examine elements of secure attachment such as sensitivity to a child, trust, and autonomy. These elements of secure

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Heather L. Corwin received her M.F.A. in Acting from FSU/Asolo Conservatory. She is now a Ph.D. student of somatic psychology at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, RME with ISMETA, and a Certified Rolfer. She teaches movement/voice at Azusa Pacific University; acting at Pasadena City College. You can find more about Heather at [www.BodybyHeather.com](http://www.BodybyHeather.com).

attachment will also be looked at through the lens of impactful and successful learning elements in an educational setting. I posit that when elements of secure attachment are present in the classroom, the student has the foundation to learn successfully and easily.

### **Literature Review**

*“I think, at a child's birth, if a mother could ask a fairy godmother to endow it with the most useful gift, that gift should be curiosity.”*

~Eleanor Roosevelt

### **Sensitivity to Child**

A sensitive and responsive mother helps establish a secure attachment with her infant (Ainsworth, 1974). A secure attachment implies that a caregiver's responses are consistent and continually meet the child's needs. The important part of this attachment process is the child's ability to trust that the caregiver is going to meet her needs. “In the first two years, as attachment grows, so does that baby's sense of security and confidence in being protected and comforted” (Gordon, 2009, p. 102). When a mother is interested, curious, and present with her infant, she has the accurate tools to successfully bond with and nurture the child. Just as important is the mother's ability to self regulate and remain in a state of calm when the child is upset, even if she knows she is not meeting the child's need accurately.

As long as mom remains committed to accurately determining the reason for the child's distress, and, therefore, addresses the needs of her child, the child will ideally get her needs met in a timely manner. For example, most newborns often have few needs such as eating, wearing a dry diaper, temperature regulation, and feeling safe. I would go one step further and suggest that the child often enjoys the warmth, safety, and linkage with her mother as a soothing tool which could translate into being held or worn close to the body. Being around the child consistently gives the parent or caregiver the experience of learning the child's moods and expressions which lead to the ability to discern the need in the child. “The sensitivity that attachment-style parents develop enables them intuitively to get behind the eyes of their child to see situations from his or her viewpoint” (Sears & Sears, 2003, p. 18). The adult noticing the child's preferences is the type of sensitivity also required in a great teacher. “As you become more sensitive to your baby, your baby becomes more sensitive to you” (Sears & Sears, 2003, p. 13). Growing this sensitivity is helpful in all types of communication including refining the ability to teach.

Whereas teaching does not usually require an assessment of the student's basic needs unless the child is acting out in the class, a good teacher does need to be sensitive to the student's curiosity. Basic needs that will affect a student's success may take the shape of behavior such as falling asleep, blankly gazing out the window, or distracting self and other. In cases where basic needs are not being met, something is usually going on at home as a result of the other people, the environment, or the student pushing himself too hard by working a late shift the night before (as some college students do). Assuming basic needs are being met, learning can take place. In any case, the teacher needs to be sensitive to how the student learns, what part of the knowledge or process being conveyed sparks interest in the child, and how to make the knowledge accessible. In other words a great teacher needs to nurture. "The nurturance of a loving adult does more to foster intellectual competence than any course or program or teacher" (Gordon, 2009, p. 211). Ideal is the situation wherein a student has a teacher who can nurture and have intellectual competence.

Furthermore, "Early relationship experience affects later relationships, both as a separate factor and as an organizing model" (Venzke, 2005). A child who learns she is valued when she is an infant will go through her life knowing she is valued. The knowing is inherent and unshakable; it is a part of her core. That knowing is an essential part of how she processes information, emotional and intellectual. If a child does not have this knowing as a part of her experience, doubt and anxiety can outweigh confidence in her learning and growth. As a possible consequence, teachers may need to combat that anxiety through naming what is happening in the room, acknowledging the student's abilities, and nurturing the student's growth. These supporting behaviors by the teacher may be the student's first experience with an adult who is expressing secure attachment behavior. This type of supportive behavior can and will lead to trust.

## **Trust**

Trust and self trust is indispensable both in the teacher and student. Mary Gordon (2009) expresses her experience working with children just entering kindergarten who exhibit traits of success upon meeting them:

You could tell, right from that initial entrance, which ones were going to be winners and which ones would struggle. The kind of

start they had had in life determined their overall sense of competence and their ability to cope with the stress of transition to school. (p.16)

Inferred from this passage is the ability of a teacher to recognize a student's ability to trust herself. The patterns set up in infancy will best determine how the child operates in the world. This includes the implicit and inherent perception of how the child takes in the world. These root beliefs are the core of a secure attachment for the child. These beliefs can be fostered by mirroring.

Mirroring is the action of the caregiver reflecting the behavior and emotion that the child is communicating as a direct response to a child's expression. This activity helps the child learn what she is conveying at the same time the child builds trust that she is being listened to or heard. Being heard is crucial for the child to understand and believe her needs will not only be recognized but also met. This requires of the caregiver the ability to play and interact with the child in the moment. Without the spontaneity of play, the caregiver cannot stay in the moment and accurately reflect the needs or emotions of the child.

The reciprocal quality of these interactions enables the infant to develop a sense of agency through having an impact on the caregiver, as well as to begin to understand his or her own expressions by experiencing how the caregiver experiences these expressions. He comes to organize his experience of both self and other through experiencing the caregiver's experience of both. When the caregiver experiences interest, joy, love and delight while interacting with the baby, in turn the baby comes to experiences his - or herself as being interesting, joyful, lovable and delightful. (Fosha, Siegel, & Soloman, 2009, p. 284)

All of us have teachers who have left indelible impressions upon us, good and bad. When I recall my kindergarten teacher, I do so with supreme dislike and anger that she could treat a young person so poorly. Not only was she insensitive, she believed in public humiliation and exercised her joy of that weekly to me during the interminable year I was her student. In contrast, I think of my high school's guidance counselor and her ability to help me learn orientation, emotional articulation, and feeling heard. The kindergarten teacher terrorized me; the counselor became a personal haven. The counselor exhibited secure attachment behaviors that included the "Quality of maternal caregiving, particularly caregiving that is sensitive, i.e.,

involving prompt, contingent, and appropriate responsiveness to infant cues and signals (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978 ), is the key theoretical antecedent to attachment” (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, p. 229). In other words, a caregiver needs to listen, notice, address needs, and respond appropriately to build secure attachment. This attachment allows the child to trust her feelings. “The consistent availability of the mother or an attached caregiver provides confidence and helps the child learn to trust himself, culminating in the child’s developing independence” (Sears & Sears, 2003, p. 12). This independence leads the child to enjoy and excel through autonomy.

### **Autonomy**

A clear sign of a child maturing into a healthy adult is the child’s ability to independently think and make decisions free of the parent or caregiver. The child can connect the dots of learning on her own rather than continuously rely on her parent to make those choices.

When a mother and an infant of two or three weeks are facing one another, phases of lively social interaction occur, alternating with phases of disengagement. ...Throughout these cycles the baby is likely to be as spontaneously active as his mother. Where their roles differ is in the timing of their responses. Whereas an infant’s initiation and withdrawal from interaction tend to follow his own autonomous rhythm, a sensitive mother regulates her behavior so that it meshes with his. In addition she modifies the form her behavior takes to suit him: her voice is gentle but higher pitched than usual, her movements slowed, and each next action adjusted in form and timing according to how her baby is performing. Thus she lets him call the tune and by a skilful interweaving of her own responses with his creates a dialogue. ... In a happily developing partnership each is adapting to the other. (Bowlby, 1988, pp. 7-8)

Explicit in the passage above, Bowlby makes clear the dance of communication necessary between mother and child that leads to secure attachment “partnership.” When a child’s needs are met, the child can relax and expect those needs to be met in the future based on the past. Hence, the curiosity about the world and how it works and how the child fits into that world can be explored, rather than the child being preoccupied with concerns for basic necessities, like whether or not she is going to be fed, or changed, or safe. In the classroom, if the

child's needs have been met, the child already enters the learning arena with curiosity and confidence whereas the disorganized child requires more attention and assurance that her needs will be met. When the child trusts the teacher to meet her needs, only then can profound learning – and perhaps learning how to learn – begin.

A baby is not born with bad feelings about himself. All babies think they are wonderful. How a child feels about himself after a time, however, is certainly determined to a great extent by the early messages he gets about himself from his parents. (Oaklander, 2007, p. 281)

It is not the teacher's responsibility to undo the damage to the child's psyche. However, continuing the damage is not acceptable nor is ignoring the needs of the student. If a teacher spends all of her time on the talented and exceptional students, the struggling students will never be given the tools to succeed. A teacher may not have the time when working with a student to counteract the poor attachment of the parents to the child, but the teacher can identify needs. If even one of the student's needs is met by the teacher, the student might recognize other ways of being as a result of that need being met. That acknowledgement by the teacher could lead the student to examine her life and make small changes that foster health to reclaim her attachment potential with another adult or caregiver.

"A baby and a parent together form a powerful dyad that allows children to be present in an evolving drama starring the most influential, indelible, and life-shaping relationship ever" (Gordon, 2009, p. 52). This influential dyad informs communications between the child and everyone else after this relationship. This is why secure attachment is so significant. "Securely attached individuals don't "need" their attachment figures present to regulate their commotional reactions to a stressor" (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, p. 233). When big stressors occur to the child who is securely attached the child usually has the skills and ability to adapt and deal with the trying event.

This skill applies to learning. Learning is being challenged to do something or create a skill that otherwise did not exist prior in the student's life. The student may have the capacity to draw upon other experiences to create parallels or support for the learning. For example, if the student had spent her summer fishing with her family in the deep woods of Wisconsin, she may have learned that she can catch fish with skill, drive a boat, and take out a hook from a fish's mouth without hurting the fish. After those experiences, taking a math

test might not seem so daunting. Perspective can be taught and learned. Support from parents can be like a quiet mantle of love that boosts the confidence of the student to the point that fear exists, but courage propels the child to seek new heights with success. The child will risk failure to learn. Assignments that are to be conceived and executed as homework do not seem as daunting – because she knows she has other skills that may remain secret to others... but she knows she has skills. This list of secret skills grows exponentially with secure attached children as they age and mature. Secure attachment bolsters the child with courage throughout life.

Self-regulation is the final element vital for successful autonomy in a person. Pat Ogden introduced the concept of the “window of tolerance” which is a person’s ability to tolerate her circumstances prior to being overloaded or deregulated. A person may become disoriented, angry, shaky, as the nervous system responds and prepares for fight, flight, or freeze – evidence that the window of tolerance has been exceeded. “A window of tolerance may be determined both by constitutional figures (temperament) and by experiential learning” (Siegel, 1999, p. 254).

Other factors include sleep patterns, illness, and hunger, which will all exacerbate and narrow a window of tolerance. When a mother sees her child “hit the wall” (or touch the window pane, metaphorically speaking), she has many tools she can use to help resource her child back into the window of tolerance. For example, the mother can talk softly with a low tone, breathe, speak slowly, make eye contact with the child, and touch the child. All of the skills just mentioned model regulated behavior for the child and can amplify the bonds of attachment.

Attachment serves as a crucial way in which the self becomes regulated. As the child’s evaluative mechanisms become more active, and memory processes enable the child to respond to discrepancies, subjective meaning is created in engaging with the social surround. ... As infancy gives way to the toddler period, dyadic regulation is supplanted by “caregiver-guided self-regulation,” in which the adult helps the child begin to regulate states of mind autonomously. (Siegel, 1999, p. 240)

Sadly, some infants do not have care-givers who are able to self-regulate and therefore are unable to offer the skill of self-regulation to their child.

Repeated senses of being out of control – experiencing emotions without a sense of others helping to calm them down – can lead such persons to be unable to soothe themselves as they develop...The result is very disorganizing,...which in itself creates a further state of distress. (Siegel, 1999, pp. 255-256)

Another imperative element to self-regulation is the ability to orient. For a child, this means understanding how things work in the day to day world. Examples of orientation would be the child's knowing that he can count on mom to feed him – predictable behaviors and patterns on which the child can rely. As a teacher, the tools used to orient include a course outline or syllabus, clear learning goals, clear assignments and due dates, noting where the bathrooms are located, and any other rules, information, or boundaries required of the students to succeed in the class.

An integral piece to orienting is naming parts of learning or explicitly breaking down a process of learning so the child can make what might be unconscious into a conscious learning. The reason a teacher might want to do this is to aid the child to articulate the parts of a process that work for him and the parts that do not may be reconsidered or refined. This meta-learning encourages the child to explore his own preferences, value his personal experience, and more fully integrate the lesson. Plus, feeling supported by the teacher, the student ideally feels more empowered and positive emotionally. "The ability to integrate each moment or experience into recognizable components for learning is also informed by emotional state making emotions inherently integrative in their function" (Siegel, 1999, p. 240). Regardless of the combination of orienting tools the teacher employs, using orientation will help the student succeed.

### Summary

To address the increasing classroom sizes of students in California and across the country, introducing secure attachment theory elements may foster an additional point of view from which educators can excel, inspire students, and help these students thrive. An infant who develops secure attachment is given a solid foundation for life. She is given the skills to excel as a student because learning employs the same functions required within secure attachment. When secure attachment is present, the child can focus on learning rather than fundamental needs. Educators have the opportunity to provide this to students in their classrooms, especially to those who have not had a

“secure attachment” experience in their early beginning and formative years, by incorporating these same principles involved in the “secure attachment” relationship dynamics into their relationship with their students in order to create and / or insure a secure attachment dynamic is occurring there.

In conclusion, a person who trusts herself, is sensitive to others around her, and who works autonomously when given a task, will succeed through the perils of existence as a life-long learner.

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