

Education through attachment: Attachment theory and Waldorf education

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Attachment research identifies the prerequisites for a healthy, secure attachment between parents, educators and children. Children need to be recognised, seen and heard. In other words, we need to live ‘in community’ with our children instead of lecturing them about life.

The boom in daycare centres in recent years has led to an area of psychology – namely attachment research – becoming interesting for parents, educators and doctors alike. Whereas in the past the circumstances of successful or dysfunctional bonds between parents and children were tended to be studied in a clinical setting in connection with specific psychiatric disorders, the question of bonding is now also of great educational interest: How does bonding develop? What specific forms does it take? Can you bond with more than one person?

Bonding styles

British child psychiatrist John Bowlby is considered the father of attachment theory. As early as the 1940s, he investigated the effects of family patterns on child development. Since then, a great deal of research has been conducted in this area, including Mary Ainsworth's ‘Strange Situation Test’. This test can be used to assess the attachment style of children aged between 12 and 18 months. In the test, the primary caregiver (usually the mother) is in a room with her child and some toys, together with another person. After a while, when the child is playing, the primary caregiver leaves the room. What happens next provides information about the child's attachment pattern. In general, four types are distinguished.

1. The securely attached child, who mourns the attachment figure for quite a while, but eventually allows themselves to be comforted and is happy when the attachment figure returns. These children are confident that everything is always fine when the primary attachment figure is present. They feel fundamentally accepted and secure.
2. The anxious-avoidant child, who shows little reaction when the caregiver leaves the room or returns. However, these children are very disturbed inside. They feel hardly accepted, are preoccupied with themselves and avoid contact in order to avoid stressful experiences.

3. The child with an anxious-ambivalent attachment, who is very insecure, cannot be comforted and alternates between clingy and aggressive-rejecting behaviour when the caregiver returns. This child feels fundamentally insecure because they never know what to expect.

4. Children with disorganised/disoriented attachment give the impression of being completely disoriented and show no signs of attachment to a specific person. These children display stereotypical movements or move only briefly or not at all, or alternatively display other compulsive behaviours.

Interaction is crucial

However, attachment research does not only examine a child's attachment to their parents or caregivers, but also the conditions that give rise to secure or insecure attachment. According to current knowledge, the following factors are crucial for secure attachment:

Is the caregiver sensitive to the child's needs? Does she 'see' the child or confuse its needs with her own? Is she always reliable and available? Are her reactions reliable? Does she usually interpret undifferentiated expressions such as crying correctly?

The interaction between the primary caregiver and the child has a decisive influence on the child's ability to explore their environment through play. Self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as the ability to adapt appropriately to situations, develop through recognition, acceptance and appropriate responses – in short, through parental warmth.

If the interaction is characterised by unpredictable reactions on the part of the adult and the adult themselves has an ambivalent relationship with the child, an anxious-ambivalent attachment pattern develops. The child never knows exactly where they stand. And if the interaction usually takes place in such a way that the adult does not accept and see the child with inner warmth, but instead has to assert themselves against the child, an anxious-avoidant attachment pattern develops.

In such cases, children are highly stressed and preoccupied with themselves or their environment. But they do not explore the world from a secure base; rather, they do so as a form of compensation because they have given up on forming attachments.



Secondary attachments

However, every child needs a primary caregiver who is there for them from the first days of life – this does not necessarily have to be the mother. The child can also form other attachments, for example to the father, siblings or caregivers. If this happens ‘naturally’ within the family, these additional attachments develop. Primary attachments develop almost automatically through closeness. If this happens for ‘cultural reasons’ due to the parents’ desire for childcare, this places high demands on parents and childminders with regard to the sensitive development of a bond with a “new” person. The latter then becomes a secondary attachment figure.

This aspect becomes particularly fascinating when we consider that later relationships with friends, partners and, above all, with one’s own children are decisively shaped by the bondin

Interpersonal dynamics

There are two findings that we would like to briefly discuss here. The first is the realisation that human behaviour is far less determined by genes than was assumed just a few years ago. Rather, it is a dynamically developing interaction between adults and children that creates bonds in the first eighteen months of life. The more children feel accepted and understood, the more secure they become in their self-perception and in their perception of the world. The more they feel misunderstood and misperceived, or the less they can rely on the response to their statements, the more insecure they become in every respect. Children are then hardly able to explore the world because they are under constant stress to reassure themselves of their secure attachment to the world.

The warmth of the relationship is crucial

The second insight is that adults and children must live together in community, recognise, touch, see and hear each other. This is the prerequisite for a life of self-confidence and self-esteem. First and foremost, it is the relationship that matters – acceptance and parental warmth – not the conventions and content of education. The latter are secondary. Without a shared, warm coexistence, no education or upbringing is possible, because only a secure attachment makes us receptive. Children who feel insecure in their relationships with their parents, caregivers or teachers are forced to activate their attachment behaviour, as this always takes precedence over exploratory and learning behaviour in neurobiology. Attachment stress leads to the release of hormones that prevent exploration of the environment and learning. First comes attachment, then education!

Attachment theory and Waldorf education

In Waldorf education, we like to talk about the shell that surrounds the child. Just as the womb surrounds the unborn child, the etheric shell surrounds the preschool child, protecting them from the emotional demands of explicit learning, emotional attractions and external demands through habitual actions and communal life. emotional demands of explicit learning, emotional attractions and external demands. In the years leading up to puberty, the child is protected by the astral shell, which shields it from critical judgement. In the period leading up to adulthood, the free activity of the ego, the self-realising activity based on one’s own motives for life, is enveloped by the last veils of the soul. Taking these envelopes into account in an age-appropriate manner is a task of education. The child should be protected from harmful early maturation and excessive demands. If attachment theory suggests that the environment of the young child must be sensitive, reliable and available, then this corresponds to the approach of Waldorf education, which is to nurture the etheric sheath of the young child. The development of habits through a rhythmic daily routine and rituals, as well as the sensitive perception of the child by adults, are elements of the ethereal, of life. Even if we normally describe such perception as either an emotional ability or, alternatively, as pure physical receptivity, there is nevertheless always an underlying sphere of life that cannot be perceived by the senses. As Rudolf Steiner writes in ‘The Study of Man’: ‘When you pick up a piece of chalk, for example, this is a physical process that is very similar to the mental process that takes place when you send the etheric forces out of your eye in order to perceive the object through seeing.’ However, Steiner says that these ‘sensors’ (Steiner) cannot be



detected with the sensory organs. Seeing is very similar to physical touch in a much finer form. 'What is important in every respect for the sensory perceptions of the eye and ear is not so much the passive part, but the active part that we extend to things.

Anthroposophical understanding of attachment

From an anthroposophical perspective, forming an attachment is actively enveloping the child with the etheric perception activity of the adult. It is less important how long or how closely I look at the child, listen to them or morally judge what they say; much more important is the qualitative way in which I perceive the child. It is important that I accept the child's reality as it is, that I support them through my active perception, through my interest and acceptance, through my intention to understand them. The child senses this because their perception and mine overlap.

The child is not an object like the piece of chalk mentioned earlier, which I touch as a subject. Rather, two subjects, the adult and the child, meet in the invisible space of mutual perception. It is not just glances that are exchanged, but lively activities. This is a supernatural process in the sphere of life, which is then expressed in the child's secure or insecure attachment to its caregiver. Constantly looking at your mobile phone separates this relationship space.

The neurobiologically verifiable security (or stress) of a bond has its origin in the encounter of the ethereal 'sensors' that arise from the perceptual activity of the twelve senses of adults and children. Since small children familiarise themselves with the world exclusively through imitation, the perceptual activity of the adult determines the child's possibilities of perception. Both the perception and imitation of the loving, fear-free and purposeful perceptual activity of adults creates a basic trust in the child: the world is good, I am safe, and from this safe haven I can explore the world. Mutual touch in the first year of life is of central importance. Through a shared rhythm of life and encounters through touch, sight and hearing, a shared etheric fabric is woven. This knowledge can help parents to involve their child more actively in their own perception and helps educators in nurseries, kindergartens, daycare centres and schools to understand how a new (secondary) bond can develop in the first place: namely through living together and mutual perception within the community.

This is the real reason for long settling-in periods in nurseries and kindergartens. However, such settling-in is not a one-way street with activity and adaptation on the part of the child, but a joint, lively interaction based on reciprocity in the etheric space between the educator and the

child.

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