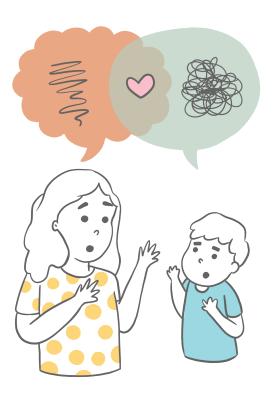


The Connected Parent

An initiative by Psych Connect



The propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals is a basic component of human nature

John Bowlby, 1969)



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Parenting

thave you ever tried to make sense of your relationship with your child, or wonder about the bond you have with your parents?

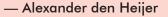
tave there been moments where you told yourself that you would not pass your emotional problems to your child, or swore to not repeat the mistakes of your parents?

Parents have the best intentions far their children.

However, with little understanding about the underlying mechanisms of parenting and attachment bonds, parents consciously or subconsciously go back to the ways of their parents as that is the only familiar way to them.



"When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment that it grows. Not the flower.









Attachment needs



Attachment between a parent and a child is a bio-behavioral system (Zeanah and Boris, 1994) which impacts the child.

As a child enters the world, s/he starts with a blank slate. The child's emotional relationship with his/her parent helps to shape his/her lens of the world. Based on his/her interactions with his/her parents, the child develops the concepts of self and others (Fonagy & Target, 1997).

We, as children, become the "the carriers of (our) parents' unconscious fears, impulses and other repressed parts of themselves" (Lieberman & Pawl, 1999).

The lens that we experience as a neonate, toddler, and infant becomes the magnifying glass on how we view the world.

From my relationship with you, I learn what I need to be or do to form and sustain close relationships with others as I grow older. From my relationship with you, I learn about whether I am a person worthy of love and good things. From my relationship with you, I learn about whether the world is predictable, and I can trust others. These are not just thoughts that I have when I learn to speak or think. They are the building blocks that start forming as early as 3 months old (Bowlby, 1982), and affects me all the way to adulthood, like how your parents have.

maybe, as parents we can reflect: thow can I provide a relationship that my child can use in his understanding of people and the world?

"It is at the end of each crying episode that the infant learns about whether, on average, the caregiver can be counted on to be available as the infant achieves a calm state or whether the infant typically must stop crying alone" - Dr. Susan S

Intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns

Your attachment style with your parents affects how you respond to the needs of your child. This determines how your child makes sense of his/her relationship & attachment. This is known as intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns.

When your child displays natural attachment behaviors (eg. cries, ways to get closer to you. to get comfort from you), it activates your own beliefs (and perhaps, anxieties) about attachment behavior.

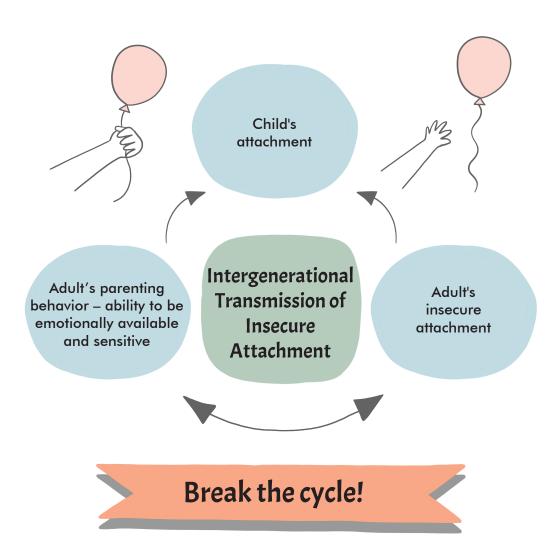
Adults, whose parents were not consistently present to attend to their needs, may present themselves as emotionally independent and distant. When required to attend to their child's emotional needs, they may feel a sense of discomfort.

Are there times when you had difficulty in attuning to your child's needs?

Think about a time when your child seeks for physical and psychological availability.

thow do you feel or react when your child seeks proximity or comfort from you? what is your attachment style and how is it affecting how you respond to your child?

How your attachment style **Adult Attachment** You as a child/Your child today responds to your child Secure Infant Secure-autonomous Having a secure attachment with Your parent(s) may have responded your parents. You are able to to your cries and attended to your develop a strong sense of self and needs. They were your safe haven and Responds higher self-esteem. You have stable secure base (Bowlby, 1969). You felt Sensitively relationships with others where you safe exploring your environment. You Reads signals are comfortable expressing your learnt that your needs can be heard by appropriately emotional needs and receiving others, you are worthy, and people Your attachment are generally good and care for you. support when in distress. figure responded to your emotional needs consistently Pre-occupied Insecure-ambivalent infant You may have unconsciously developed a Your parent(s) may have been fear of being ignored, neglected, alone, ambivalent in responding to your and/or abandoned. You may feel like you needs. You may have experienced lived in an unpredictable world, with no high levels of anxiety and been prone Inconsistent guarantee that others will be there in times to frequent emotional outbursts. You Intrusive and of need. Hence, you may respond to this may have felt yourself unworthy of ignoring fear by being overly concerned with others your parent's affection resulting in being available for you and may need you often being emotionally Your attachment frequent reassurance in relationships. dependent on them. figure was able to bring you back to a Disorganized infant Disorganized calm state With a disorganized attachment, you Your parent(s) may have responded want to have close relationships but to your distress in a frightening or maybe fearful as you expect to be hurt. helpless way. They may have been As you view people to be unpredictable, distressed themselves. Instead of **Emotionally** you may want to avoid or withdraw from No being your source of safety, they may Unavailable relationships, not because you reject have been your source of fear. You Fear-inducina intimacy but because you are afraid of it. may have been physically, verbally You may view yourself and others or emotionally abused in your negatively, having a low self worth as childhood. Your attachment well as difficulty trusting others. figure responded in a way that was Insecure-avoidant infant frightening Dismissina Your parent(s) may not have been and/or added to Today in adulthood, you may feel unconditionally available when you uncomfortable with intimacy and your stress were in distress. Therefore, you may Rejecting emotions. You may have difficulties have subconsciously learnt that you Adverse to contact, opening up and relying on others. had to be emotionally independent unresponsive This may manifest as problems with and self-sufficient at a young age. meeting your child's and/or partner's You may have avoided displaying needs. your need. You may have been emotionally distant.



The ability to be available from a physical and psychological perspective and at the same time allowing the child to explore the world with safety and proximity (Zeanah and Boris, 1994) may help repair the wounds of attachment and help develop a secure attachment with you.

When a child feels unsafe and is in distress, the need for safety in proximity (attachment system) is activated. S/he cries and engages in different behaviors to signal his/her needs to you. When s/he successfully receives comfort and feels safe again, his/her attachment system disactivated (Sroufe & Waters, 1977).

In a secure attachment, I experience empathy, warmth, attunement and nurturant emotions. I am provided with emotional availability (Zeanah and Smyke,2008) and emotional regulation when I am confronted with uncomfortable emotions or experiences.



You provide a secure base that supports my exploration of new experiences.



You provide a safe haven that welcomes me back and provide protection when I am in danger or distress. This builds me a resilient schemata of attachment.

"I need you to support my going out, welcome my coming in, be the hands that keep me safe"

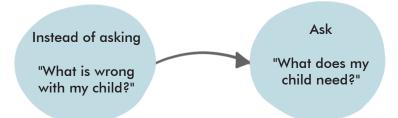
(Marvin et al., 2002)

Being Attuned

From an adult attachment perspective, we realize that people of all ages have attachment needs. Revisiting our personal history from an attachment angle allows us to better recognize our own possible struggles, feelings of abandonment or rejection that is linked to our childhood. This may have contributed to our "unexplained" anxieties or insecurities that we may experience today.

Attunement, or sensitivity to the inner world of the child, is key to a secure attachment. A parent denies or distorts his or her child's painful experiences when he or she has trouble grasping the inner world of the child – the emotional and mental states underlying behaviour (Fonagy et al., 2002)

Every distressing behaviour reflects a need.



thowever, in Singapore where emotional intimacy is not always encouraged, as parents do we reflect on how attuned we are to our child's inner worlds when they grapple with uncomfortable emotions or situations?

What happens to our children, when expression is frowned upon and suppression becomes the common way of dealing with "negative" emotions?

"Say yes to feelings, even as you say no to the behaviour" - Dr. Daniel Siegel "New mothers are often told that once they've fed, burped, and changed their baby they should leave them alone to self-soothe if they cry because all their needs have been met.

One day I hope all new mothers will be able to smile confidently and say, 'I gave birth to a baby, not just a digestive system. My baby has a brain that needs to learn trust and a heart that needs love. I'll meet all of my baby's needs – mental, emotional, and physical – and I'll respond to every cry because crying is communication, not manipulation"

- L.R.Khnost







Child tells parent about his or her emotional needs maybe by crying or throwing tantrums







Regulation

When your anxieties get in the way of hearing your child





Parent feels helpless and anxious



Walking away from these cries – Emotional Abandonment







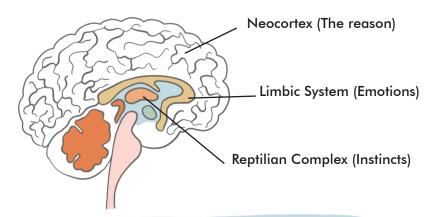
You and your child are caught in a cycle, fueling the dysregulation in each other. Coregulation is absent.

Recall the times you felt stormy as a child. Think about how your parents reacted to you. How did it feel? As a parent now, what would you change about it?

Attachment is a neurobiological system

Our emotional connection or your attunement to my emotional needs as a child determines how my brain develops and is structures.

Hence, it has long lasting effects on how I am like as a person.

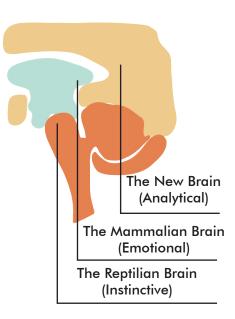


The Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) in our brain is considered as the "thinking center" as it is involved higher cognitive decision-making. The Anterior Cingulate Cortex acts as a "hub" for social interactions by connecting our "emotional" limbic system and the "cognitive" PFC. When exposed to stress, the amygdala- which is part of the limbic system- is activated and we enter "fight, flight or freeze" mode.



When I am in distress or feel unsafe, I go into fight-flight-freeze mode and my limbic system is activated. When you are not attuned to my emotional needs, my attachment system remains activated for a long time, and I continue to progress with the limbic system. This is what looks like to you as being "out-of-control" without self-regulation.

Without bring soothed, I am not able to move up the hierarchy to develop the higher order parts of the brain that allows me to express and process my emotions. You may continue to expect me to think and reason, or express my emotions "appropriately", but I am more often than not in survival mode. Prolonged or constant exposure to stress wires the neuronal synapses in my brain into "fight-flight-freeze" mode. Thus being in distress, without being soothed, leads to changes in my brain circuitry.



Calm me down in a way that is compatible with the limbic brain, by being attuned to my inner world.

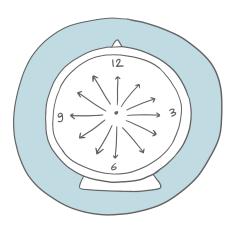


This means being with them and attending to them fully. They are already overwhelmed. Lashing out at them, making them aware of the consequences, making demands from them, is pouring into a cup that is already over-flowing.



Hence, reasoning with me during my meltdown is often not helpful as the limbic brains are in control. Instead, hold me in your arms, and help me feel safe.

Only then can I begin to process the situation. Help me to co-regulate so that I can learn to self-regulate.



Co-regulation can happen at any time. Being available should not be limited to only when maladaptive behaviours occur. Be in the space, provide a sense of containment, and let them know that they are being heard.



Parent Self Regulation

How parents regulate their emotions serves as a model for the child.

When parents experience overwhelming stress, they can be put in a "mindless" state where they too, rely on the more primitive brain where emotions and behaviours are not well regulated. (Hughes & Baylin, 2012)



Parent-led co-regulation



Child self-regulation



Co-regulation is the support, coaching, and modeling the parent provides to help the child understand his or her own emotions (recall the under- developed neocortex).

"Help me understand what it is I am feeling

"Help me learn what works in reducing the intensity of my emotions."

and what makes me act

in this way."

As the child learns self-soothing methods that work for him or her, their dependence on others to soothe them lessens.

"When you keep criticizing your kids, they don't stop loving you. They stop loving themselves."

— Unknown

It will happen but it will take time
– John Bowlby

It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self."

- Donald Woods Winnicott

An initiative by Psych Connect

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Think of a time you were overwhelmed with strong feelings. thow did you react? What did you do to reduce the intensity of your emotions?

