

## What is Attachment Disorder?

Attachment is the result of the bonding process that occurs between a child and caregiver during the first couple years of the child's life. The first year of life is the year of needs. The infant's primary needs are touch, eye contact, movement, smiles, and nourishment. When the infant has a need, he or she expresses the need through crying. Ideally, the caretaker is able to recognize and satisfy the need. Through this interaction, which occurs hundreds of thousands of times in a year, the child learns that the world is a safe place and trust develops. In addition, emotional connection forms, the child feels empowered in his or her environment, and develops a secure base from which the child can confidently and effectively explore the world. Attachment is reciprocal, the baby and caregiver create this deep, nurturing connection together: It takes two to connect. It is imperative for optimal brain development and emotional health, and its effects are felt physiologically, emotionally, cognitively and socially.

When this initial attachment is lacking, children lack the ability to form and maintain loving, intimate relationships. They grow up with an impaired ability to trust that the world is a safe place and that others will take good care of them. Without this sense of trust, children believe that they must be hypervigilant about their own safety. Unfortunately, their idea about safety prevents them from allowing others to take care of them in a loving, nurturing manner. They become extremely demanding and controlling in response to their fear. Emotionally they believe that if they do not control their world then they will die.

Children without proper care in the first few years of life have an unusually high level of stress hormones, which adversely affect the way crucial aspects of the brain and body develop. Conscience development is dependent upon brain development and follows attachment. Therefore, these children lack prosocial values and morality as well as demonstrating aggressive, disruptive and antisocial behaviors.

There are many reasons why the development of this connection can be disrupted. Factors that may contribute to impaired attachment include: Premature birth

- ?? In utero trauma such as exposure to drugs or alcohol
- ?? Unwanted pregnancy
- ?? Separation from birth mother
- ?? Postpartum depression in mother
- ?? Severe abuse and/or neglect in the first years of life
- ?? Multiple caretakers
- ?? Hospitalizations
- ?? Unresolved pain
- ?? Painful or invasive medical procedures
- ?? Insensitive parenting

These children have learned at a preverbal stage that the world is a scary and distrustful place. This lesson has taken place at a biochemical level in the brain. For this reason, these children do not respond well to traditional therapy or parenting since both rely on the child's ability to form relationships that require trust and respect. These children have Reactive Attachment Disorder, and it requires a different type of therapy to address these early attachment difficulties.

## **Identifying Attachment Disorder**

### **The Child:**

- ?? Superficially charming, acts cute to get what he/she wants.
- ?? Indiscriminately affectionate with unfamiliar adults.
- ?? Lacks genuine affection with primary caregivers (especially mother).
- ?? Controlling, bossy, manipulative, defiant, argumentative, demanding, impulsive.
- ?? Preoccupation with fire, death, blood, or gore.
- ?? Cruelty to animals, destruction of property, aggression toward others or self.
- ?? Destructive, accident-prone.
- ?? Rages or has long temper tantrums, especially in response to adult authority.
- ?? Poor eye contact, except when lying.
- ?? Blames others for their problems.
- ?? Lacks self-control.
- ?? Lacks cause and effect thinking.
- ?? Lies, steals, shows no remorse, no conscience, defiant.
- ?? Hoards or sneaks food, strange eating habits.
- ?? Poor hygiene: wets or soils self.
- ?? Has difficulty maintaining friendships.
- ?? Underachiever.
- ?? Persistent nonsense questions and incessant chatter.
- ?? Grandiose sense of self lacks trust in others to care for him/her.

**The Parents:**

- ?? Feel helpless, demoralized, emotionally exhausted.
- ?? Appear angry, frustrated and hostile.
- ?? Feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

There is a range of attachment problems resulting in varying degrees of emotional disturbances in the child. Some of these children may have concurrent diagnoses such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Mood Disorders such as Depression or Bipolar Disorder, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Unfortunately, many children with Reactive Attachment Disorder are often misdiagnosed and receive inadequate therapy for years. Without proper treatment, these children and the societies in which they reside will pay a very high price indeed. Our prisons are filled with attachment disordered adults who failed to be diagnosed and treated while children. Although attachment therapy is not the cure all for attachment disorder, it is certainly a necessary piece of the puzzle.