



Gofal Cymdeithasol **Cymru**
Social Care **Wales**

How children form attachments

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Go to <https://socialcare.wales/resources-guidance/improving-care-and-support/children-who-are-looked-after/how-children-form-attachments> for the latest version.

Find out how children form attachments in their early years and what can happen if the attachments are disrupted

An introduction to attachment

You may have heard people talk about different 'patterns of attachment' (secure, avoidant, ambivalent, disorganised).

In reality, most children don't fit neatly in these categories but they can be a useful starting place to understand how difficulties with attachment can impact on their behaviour.

You should remember that these behaviours are unconscious. Children will be using coping strategies that have worked for them in the past and reasoning with them may not help.

Consistency and stability are key, and children will slowly change as they develop new coping strategies.

Secure Attachment

A securely attached child has a relationship with their primary caregiver (often but not always their mother), where they know they're safe and their physical and emotional needs will be met.

By being a responsive caregiver and consistently meeting the infants' needs, a bond is formed and the infant feels safe. The first two to three years are the most important for this to occur and it forms the basis for social behaviour in their life.

The child can go and explore their environment and know they can come back for comfort and reassurance if they become afraid or need anything.

Children who have secure attachments ('I'm ok, you're ok') are more likely to have emotional intelligence, good social skills and be more resilient to difficulties.

Insecure Avoidant Attachment

This happens when the primary caregiver (the attachment figure) ignores or rejects the child when they need something or are seeking comfort or reassurance. The child may not return to their attachment figure in times of stress because their experience is that their needs won't be met.

Children with an avoidant attachment ('I'm ok, you're not ok') are likely to be self-reliant. They are likely to robustly reject your efforts to care for them as they have learned they can't rely on adults. This is why many of the children you work with will find it hard to ask for help or support and why it really matters that you repeatedly show them you care, even when they find it hard to accept that care.

Insecure Ambivalent Attachment

When parenting is very inconsistent (sometimes the caregiver will be responsive but other times they aren't, or they don't understand/can't consistently meet the child's needs) then children will try to get their needs met but can't trust that it won't be taken away. This is why it's really important for you to be consistent and predictable with your young people.

Children with ambivalent attachment (I'm not ok, you're ok) are likely to need reassurance and attention. They need others to show them they're ok and will have a unconscious expectation of failure or abandonment. This may mean the children you work with are worried to try something new, or feel negatively about themselves.

Insecure Disorganised Attachment

This happens when the caregiver, instead of meeting a child's physical and emotional needs may behave abusively towards the child.

Children with disorganised attachment (I'm not ok, you're not ok), unconsciously do not feel safe in any context. When the child is in stressful situations they may become highly distressed and behave in bizarre ways. This is because they are experiencing what is called 'fear without solution'. They don't know what else to do. This is why it's so important that home feels safe to them.

Children don't fit neatly into these categories, but it can be helpful to understand that the patterns of behaviour we see in children (and adults) are often rooted in their experiences of being parented when they were very young.

Useful resources

[The Encyclopaedia of Early Child Development](#) has more about forms of attachment

[Hope Attachment – resources about attachment](#)

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