

Attachment and Bonding Overview

“Safeguarding the physical safety of infants and toddlers in foster care is not enough. It is important to also address the attachment and mental health needs of young children in foster care...young children in foster care face two big challenges: forming a positive attachment relationship with their substitute caregivers and maintaining an attachment relationship with their biological parents. Both goals are extremely important to the child’s short-term and long-term mental health.”

- Beth Troutman, Ph.D.

Attachment is the profound and lasting connection established between a child and caregiver in the first several years of life. It strongly influences every component of the human condition - mind, body, emotions, relationships and values. Attachment is not something that is done to children; rather, it is something that children and parents create together, in an ongoing reciprocal relationship. Attachment to a protective and loving caregiver who gives guidance and support is a basic human need. Attachment is a physiological, emotional, cognitive and social experience.

The need for children to have a consistent, positive, reciprocal relationship with a caring adult is instinctual. Many of the issues bringing children before the court may have already interrupted the attachment process. Abuse of drugs/alcohol or serious mental health issues may hinder a parent’s capacity to accurately read a child’s cues making this reciprocal process challenging; the child doesn’t get the parental response that he or she needs to be comforted or made secure and in turn, the parent does not get a child response that helps he or she feel adequate or accepted as a parent. So begins the missteps in the dance that can be called reciprocal attachment.

Without a strong attachment, children can fail to develop a secure base from which to take the risks necessary for the development of competency and confidence. By understanding this basic human need, judges can take steps to support a child’s attachment not only with his/her caretaker but also with his/her birth parent. Judges can ensure that children and parents have the opportunities they need to heal, strengthen or even develop a positive attachment. These connections provide one of the mitigating factors that can help children overcome the deleterious effects of maltreatment.

This section provides basic information regarding Attachment Theory and its impact on human development. Through a series of questions and answers, the primary resource for this section provides key information regarding the attachment process. Additional resources provide information on abandoned infants, brain development in the attachment process, and an analysis of “sibling attachment”.

This information can provide a useful foundation to the many judicial decisions outlined in the Dependency Benchbook. Decisions such as removal from the primary caregiver, changes in placements, separation from siblings, the frequency and purpose of visitation (Chapters 5 & 7), reunification and termination of parental rights (Chapters 10 & 12) all involve the consideration of attachment and bonding.