

We can identify six ways of attaching, each of them providing a clue to the behavior of our children—and, often, to our own behavior as well. These six ways ascend from the simple to the more complex. Notice that immature kids tend to employ only the most basic modes when attaching to each other.

## Senses

Physical proximity is the goal of the first way of attaching. The child needs to sense the person he is attached to, whether through smell, sight, sound, or touch. He will do whatever he can to maintain contact with that person. When closeness is threatened or disrupted, he will express alarm and bitter protest.

Although it begins in infancy, the hunger for physical proximity never goes away. The less mature a person is, the more he will rely on this basic mode of attaching. Immature kids are preoccupied with being together, occupying the same space, hanging out, and staying in touch. When attachment is this primitive, the talking can be gibberish and nonsense. “My friends and I talk for hours without saying anything,” says Peter, a fifteen-year-old. “It’s all ‘what’s happening’ and ‘whazzup, man’ and ‘you got a smoke’ and ‘where we going’ or ‘where is so-and-so.’ ” The talking is not about communication; it is an attachment ritual for the simple purpose of making auditory contact. Immature kids have no idea what drives them so intensely; for them it feels absolutely natural and even urgent to want always to be close to each other. They are just following their skewed instincts.

## **Sameness**

The second way of attaching is usually well in evidence by toddlerhood. The child seeks to be like those she feels closest to. She attempts to assume the same form of existence or expression by imitation and emulation. This form of attachment figures prominently in learning language and in the transmission of culture. It has been noted that since the Second World War the vocabulary of the average child has diminished significantly. Why? Because children now acquire language from each other. Immature children model one another's walk and talk, preferences and gestures, appearance and demeanor.

Another means of attaching through sameness is identification. To identify with someone or something is to be one with that person or thing. One's sense of self merges with the object of identification. This entity may be a parent, a hero, a group, a role, a country, a sports team, a rock star, an idea, or even one's work. Extreme nationalism and racism are based on identifying one's sense of self with one's country or ethnic group. The more dependent a child or person is, the more intense these identifications are likely to be. In our society, peers—or the pop icons of the peer world—have become the focus of identification in place of parents or the outstanding figures of history and culture.

## **Belonging and Loyalty**

The third way of attaching also makes its debut in toddlerhood—if all is unfolding as it should. To be close to someone is to consider that person as one's own. The attaching toddler will lay claim to whomever or whatever he is attached to—be it mommy or daddy or teddy bear or baby sister. In the same way, peer-oriented kids jealously seek to possess one another and to protect against loss. Conflicts generated by possessiveness can become vicious and intense. Who is whose best friend occurs as a life-or-death question to many adolescents.

On the heels of belonging comes loyalty—being faithful and obedient to one's chosen attachment figures. Immature kids are just following their natural attachment instincts when they keep each other's secrets, take each other's side, and do the other's bidding. Loyalty can be intense, but it merely follows attachment. If a child's attachment changes, so will the sense of belonging and loyalty.

## **Significance**

The fourth way of pursuing closeness and connection is to seek significance, which means that we feel we matter to somebody. It is human nature to hold close what we value. To be dear to someone is to ensure closeness and connection. The attaching preschooler seeks ardently to please and to win approval. He is extremely sensitive to looks of displeasure and disapproval. Such children live for the happy face of those they are attached to. Those they call "nice" are usually the ones who like and approve of them, even if the same "nice" person is nasty to others.

The problem with this way of attaching is that it makes a child vulnerable to being hurt. To want to be significant to someone is to suffer when we feel we don't matter to that special person. Seeking someone's favor leads to feeling wounded by signs of disfavor. A sensitive child can be easily crushed when the eyes he is scanning for signs of warmth and pleasure do not light up in his presence, be they the eyes of parent or peer.

**Feeling: emotional intimacy**

A fifth way of finding closeness is through feeling: warm feelings, loving feelings, affectionate feelings. Emotion is always involved in attachment, but in a preschooler who can feel deeply and vulnerably, the pursuit of emotional intimacy becomes intense. Children who pursue connection in this way often fall in love with those they attach to. A child who experiences emotional intimacy with the parent can tolerate much more physical separation and yet hold the parent close. If attaching via the senses—the first and most primitive way—is the short arm of attachment, love would be the long arm. The child carries the image of the loving and beloved parent in his mind, and finds support and comfort in it.

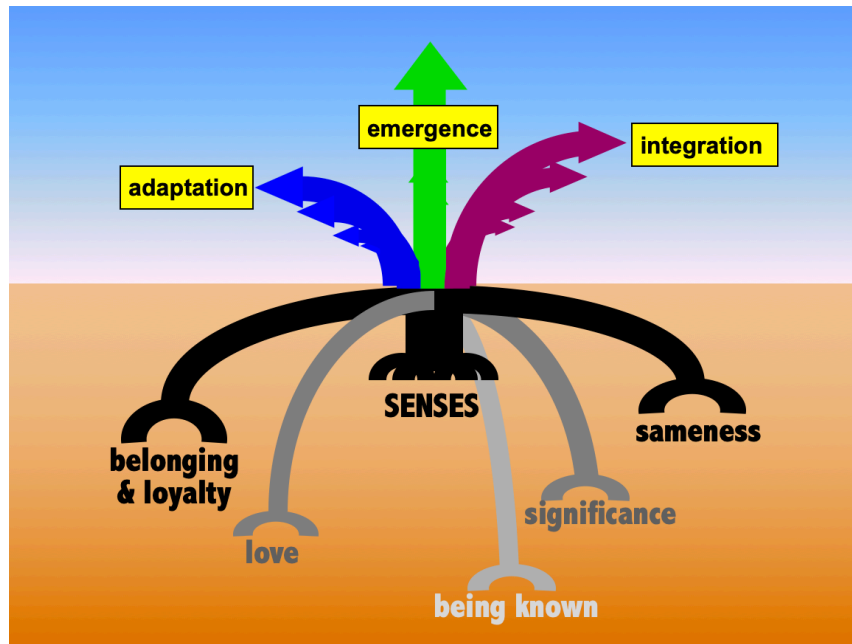
But now we are getting into dangerous territory. To give one's heart away is to risk it being broken. Some people never develop the capacity to be emotionally open and vulnerable, usually due to early perceptions of rejection or abandonment. Those who have loved and suffered hurt may retreat to less vulnerable modes of attaching. As we will show, vulnerability is something peer-oriented children seek to escape. When deeper forms of attachment appear too risky, the less vulnerable modes will predominate. Emotional intimacy is much less common among peer-oriented kids than in parent-oriented kids.

**Being Known: psychological intimacy**

The sixth way of attaching is through being known. The first signs of this final way of attaching are usually observable by the time a child enters school. To feel close to someone is to be known by them. In some ways, this is a recapitulation of attaching by way of the senses, except that being seen and heard are now experienced psychologically instead of strictly physically. In the pursuit of closeness, a child will share his secrets. In fact, closeness will often be defined by the secrets shared. Parent-oriented children do not like to keep secrets from their parents because of the resulting loss of closeness. For a peer-oriented child, his best friend is the one he has no secrets from. One cannot get much more vulnerable than to expose oneself psychologically. To share oneself with another and then be misunderstood or rejected is, for many, a risk not worth taking. As a result, this is the rarest of intimacies and the reason so many of us are reluctant to share even with loved ones our deepest concerns and insecurities about ourselves. Yet there is no closeness that can surpass the sense of feeling known and still being liked, accepted, welcomed, invited to exist.

As we observe our children busily and furtively exchanging secrets, it is easy to assume that they are sharing themselves vulnerably with each other. In fact, the secrets they do share are most commonly in the form of gossip about other people.

Six ways of attaching but only one underlying drive for connection. If development is healthy, these six strands become interwoven into a strong rope of connection that can preserve closeness even under the most adverse circumstances. A fully attached child has many ways of staying close and holding on, even when physically apart. The less mature the child, the more primitive—the more like an infant's or a toddler's—will be his style of attaching. Not all children come to realize their attachment potential, the peer-oriented least of all.



## Maturation is an outcome of fulfilling attachment

Maturation is spontaneous but not inevitable. Although parents and teachers are forever telling children to “grow up,” maturation cannot be commanded. One cannot teach a child to be an individual or train a child to be his own person. This is the work of maturation and maturation alone. We can nurture the process, provide the right conditions, remove the impediments, but we can no more make a child grow up than we can order the plants in our garden to grow.

For years, developmentalists puzzled over the conditions that activated maturation. The breakthrough came only when researchers discovered the fundamental importance of attachment. Surprising as it may be to say, the story of maturation is quite straightforward and self-evident. Like so much else in child development, it begins with attachment. Attachment is the first priority of living things; it is only when there is some release from this preoccupation that maturation can occur.

Attachment is the womb of maturation. Just as the biological womb gives birth to a separate being in the physical sense, attachment gives birth to a separate being in the psychological sense. Following physical birth, the developmental agenda is to form an emotional attachment womb for the child from which he can be born once again as an autonomous individual, capable of functioning without being dominated by attachment drives. Humans never outgrow their need to connect with others, nor should they, but mature, truly individual people are not controlled by these needs. Becoming such a separate being takes the whole of a childhood, which in our times stretches to at least the end of the teenage years and perhaps beyond.