



Understanding Attachment and the Development of Beliefs

Adapted from presentation by Penny Davis, MA, based on training materials, Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District, Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Care Education Program "Attachment Parenting"



Beginning at birth, through the attachment relationship with a primary caregiver, infants start making decisions about who they are, what the world is like and what place they have in it, what caregivers are like, and what they need to do in order to thrive or survive. These decisions form a blueprint in their brain for how to navigate life, and become the lens through which they view the world. All future relationships are affected by this blueprint.

When children's physical and emotional needs are met consistently, it builds a strong and healthy attachment between children and their caregivers. The dance that occurs between a sensitive, responsive caregiver and a child who clearly signals his/her needs forms a blueprint in that child's brain based on trust and security. This child sees his/her world as predictable and consistent, trusts that his/her needs will be met and that caregivers understand how he/she feels. These internal beliefs provide the foundation for a successful future at school, at work and in forming healthy relationships.

Some things that can get in the way of building secure, healthy attachments include caregiver addictions or mental health issues, abuse and/or neglect, and caregivers who did not develop secure attachments themselves or are very young or developmentally incapable of providing consistent care. When infants' needs are met inconsistently or perhaps not at all, a blueprint is formed in their brain based on mistrust and insecurity. These children grow up viewing the world as unpre-

dictable and inconsistent, caregivers as disinterested and unsympathetic, and as a result they become incapable of trusting that their needs will be met. Lacking the strong, stable foundation of secure attachment, children cannot go on to build the skills they need in order to be successful in school and in forming and maintaining relationships.

The foundation built in the brain through the relationship with primary caregivers, beginning at birth, determines how successful individuals will be in reaching their intellectual potential. The four basic building blocks that form this foundation are:

1. causal thinking
2. basic trust
3. conscience development
4. the ability to delay gratification

Causal Thinking

Causal thinking is the ability to understand cause and effect. When children's needs are met consistently, they learn that expressing a need (A) leads to the need being met (B), which helps them feel better (C). When A leads to B leads to C over and over again, children decide that the world is consistent and predictable. Some things for which we depend on causal thinking include math, spelling, organizational skills, problem solving skills, and the ability to follow directions. When we reach school-age, without causal thinking, we may not understand that two plus two will always equal four, and

so we may answer that simple math problem differently each time we encounter it. If our brain has decided that the world is not predictable, why would math be? One of the most widely used discipline methods in our society is consequences. Without causal thinking, consequences make no sense, because we don't have the ability to think through "if I do ___(this)___, ___(that)___ will happen". Later on, when we decide to go to college, the entrance requirements may be so overwhelming that we might give up because we don't have the ability to problem solve the order in which things need to be done or to think through what comes next. Lack of a strong causal thinking building block creates difficulties in life.

Basic Trust

The basic trust building block is built through the belief that our needs will be met and consequently the ability to develop a relationship with our caregiver that is based on unconditional positive regard. When we have the knowledge that we will be loved no matter what, it helps us feel safe to express ourselves, explore, and make the mistakes in life that are necessary for learning. Without basic trust, all future relationships are more difficult.

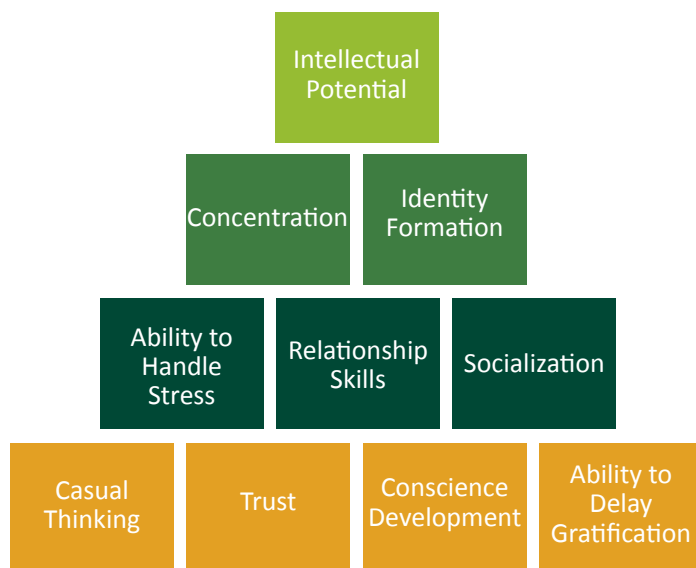
Conscience Development

Conscience development is built by developing a sense of empathy, or the ability to feel what others feel, to put oneself in another's shoes. When a caregiver is responsive to children's needs and sensitive to their feelings, they learn that others understand them, that their feelings are real and legitimate. The ability to empathize leads us to develop a sense of right and wrong. We are able to understand what it feels like for another person if we are not kind to them. Without this ability, it is difficult to understand why we should not hurt others.

Delayed Gratification

Delayed gratification is the ability to wait, to be patient. When children know their needs will be met and that caregivers understand how they feel, they are able to learn how to wait. Without a strong delayed gratification building block, we may just take what we want when we want it, because our brain has decided that if we don't, we may never get what we need.

Attachment Building Blocks



These four building blocks provide a firm foundation on which to build. Causal thinking allows for development of intellectual potential. Identity formation comes from basic trust. In order to build socialization and relationship skills, we need conscience development and delayed gratification. If the foundation is weak or non-existent, it is very difficult or impossible to move on to develop other skills.

As a result of the decisions our brains make in relationship to our early caregivers, we end up with an internalized belief system that looks like this:

- I feel _____.
- Caregivers are _____.
- The world is _____.
- I am _____.

This becomes the lens through which we view the world.

The good news is that weak foundations can be strengthened or rebuilt for children through connection with kind, caring and compassionate adults. The younger we are the easier it is to rebuild our foundation. For ideas about what you can do to begin rebuilding the foundation for children, please see *Rebuilding the Foundation for Children with Insecure Attachments* or *Trauma in the Attachment* section.