



# PAUQUETTE NEWS

The Pauquette Center for Psychological Services Newsletter

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## Understanding Attachment

When we hear the word “attachment,” we think about something that comes with our email. But attachment is a technical term in the field of child development. Understanding attachment can help you gain insight into yourself, your significant other, and your children. With that insight, you can be more skillful in how you manage your relationships with others, and more proactive in your parenting strategies with your children.

Attachment means the quality of the emotional bond between a young child and one or two significant care-takers. Traditionally, this bond is between the mother and an infant, but young children form an attachment to any adult in the role of caregiver, regardless of the gender of that person. Young children even feel attachment to their older and more capable siblings. This attachment to mother, father, or other primary caretaker is the basis of an emotionally intense relationship, and serves as the underpinnings for all of the child’s development in the areas of social relations and communication with others. When there are two caregivers in the home during the child’s infancy, the child will likely form an attachment to both of these adults.

Most of the time, the attachment that forms is secure. This means that the child feels safe and reassured when the caregiver is nearby. The child turns to the caregiver whenever s/he feels distressed, and is comforted by the caregiver. The child seeks to keep the caregiver nearby, and therefore works to communicate with the caregiver in whatever fashion s/he is capable of – starting with crying, moving on to coos and babbles, and eventually developing into language. Caregivers foster the development of a secure attachment by being consistently present and available to the child, by responding to his/her efforts at communication in a way that matches what the child needs (e.g. comforting the child when in distress, feeding the child when hungry, etc.), and by being patient and positive when interacting with the child. Having a secure attachment with an adult during infancy and early childhood lays the groundwork for a child to have mastery of language, to be able to regulate their emotions, control their impulses, and form lasting, meaningful friendships.

However, there are times when the caregiver-child attachment is not secure. Researchers categorize insecure attachment as either anxious, avoidant, or disorganized. If the caregiver is impaired in some way – such as suffering from alcoholism or addiction, having a mood disorder, being inconsistently available due to demands of supporting the family, or simply being absent from the home for extended periods – then the child will not have that deep, internal sense of security in their relationship with the most important person in their early life. Children with an *anxious* attachment struggle with feelings of trust, worrying about whether others will be there when they need them. An *avoidant* attachment forms when the caregiver is not very responsive, or treats the child with anger and annoyance. The child copes by being as independent as possible and suppressing his/her needs for closeness with others. A *disorganized* attachment is developed when the caregiver is actually physically aggressive toward the child, or when the caregiver is so fragile themselves that they are unable to provide the child with a sense of safety. The child then is caught in a push-pull of wanting to be near the caregiver, but being afraid at the same time, and will show “hot and cold” behavior in relationships. The concept of attachment as a central organizing principle in human development has existed for over 50 years, and has been studied extensively all over the world. This research has shown that attachment styles can be analyzed and categorized by the time a child is 3 years old, and that the child’s central attachment style then remains stable into and throughout adulthood. Therefore, understanding attachment helps you to see why you might have trouble maintaining a marriage, or keeping friends, and also gives you direction as to what you can do to address this within yourself. While attachment styles are formed early in life and tend to last a long time, they can be changed and improved through conscious effort and psychotherapy.

Understanding attachment is particularly important for parents of adoptive children, and people who are raising children who have not been with them since birth. If a child is adopted at age 1 year or older, and particularly if the child was in an orphanage (such as children adopted from Russia or different Asian countries) or had more than one foster home during that first year of life, it is very likely that the child suffers from disordered attachment, and will need special care in order to remediate this problem. Another example of this concern is when grandparents or other relatives take over the raising of a child due to a parent being incarcerated, or incapacitated due to alcoholism or addiction. These children may have never had a secure attachment in the first place, and then the attachment has been further disrupted by being placed with a new caregiver, resulting in high risk for various behavioral and emotional problems going forward. The term “reactive attachment disorder” is used in the field of psychiatry to describe and diagnose children with more extreme symptoms of an anxious, avoidant, or disorganized attachment.

As an example, meet Valerie (name and certain facts changed to protect confidentiality). Valerie is an 8-year-old child brought to Pauquette for therapy by her aunt and uncle. She and her younger brother have been living with them for about a year, after being removed from their parents' care. Both parents are in jail on drug charges, and it is likely that Valerie's aunt and uncle will become her permanent guardians. Valerie is a very restless child, constantly moving and having trouble sitting in her seat at school. She is not particularly affectionate with her aunt and uncle, resisting hugs. Valerie struggles with temper tantrums at times, and seems very moody with her friends, often getting into arguments. Teachers thought that Valerie might have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but testing at Pauquette showed that she does not. Instead, her diagnosis is reactive attachment disorder. From what we know, the quality of care that she received in her parents' home during her early years was very inconsistent – her birth parents were using and dealing heroin, and therefore very unlikely to have been consistently responsive when Valerie was an infant and toddler. Valerie's "hot and cold" behavior in relation to the adults now caring for her and to her friends, reflects a disorganized attachment style. Treatment for Valerie involves both psychiatric medication at a low dose to bring her nervous system down from a "red alert" status all the time, and weekly family and individual therapy to work on helping Valerie build trust with others so that she can receive and express true affection within healthy relationships.

At The Pauquette Center, our therapists are trained in understanding attachment and how problems with this central organizing principle in one's development can be played out in one's life, in ways that cause lots of problems at home, work, and/or school. We can help you gain insight into your own or your child's attachment history, and develop strategies to address and correct the problem. We can work with adults on their own attachment histories, or with parents or other caregivers on gaining insight into their child's attachment history. With consistent effort and conscious awareness, attachment disorders can be remediated, and the affected person can go on to have a more fulfilling life.



Angy Gouker, Receptionist	Baraboo
Lori Henderson, LPC-IT	Portage/IOP
Ryan Jones, LPC	Sauk/Richland Center
Tracy Kemp, MA	Portage
Emily Silva, LPC-IT, SAC-IT	Baraboo/Sauk

See a description of all our therapists & their locations @ [www.Pauquette.com](http://www.Pauquette.com)

Check out our Facebook Page for tips and strategies on mental health, wellness, and parenting.



From all of us here at Pauquette, we want to take this opportunity to wish you and your family

Happy Holidays and a Safe and Prosperous New Year!

**PAUQUETTE CENTER FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES LOCATIONS**

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