

Attachment in the Preschool Years

Maturation. The period for roughly 18-24 months of age constitutes the first of two periods of very substantial biological maturation; the second such period is puberty. During this first period, infants' brains change in ways that make walking, talking, thinking, and feeling possible in new ways. Specifically, maturation of the motor cortex makes walking, running, jumping and other forms of upright locomotion possible. That changes children's relationship with their parents because pre-schoolers can move independently and, thus, incur danger independently. To keep children safe, parents must add hierarchical authority to their caregiving relationship with their developing child. Children often resent this; the battles that can ensue give this stage of development the label 'the terrible two's.'

Concurrently, the hippocampus and the frontal lobe and cerebral cortex of the brain are maturing; these changes enable pre-schoolers to move beyond recognizing and producing a few communicative sounds (infants' first words) to using language, with its many words and grammatical structure. This change permits children to communicate thoughts and hold reciprocal dialogues with another person. This ability, in turn, underlays learning to tell event sequences, episodes, and making simple plans. Learning to string events together to make an episode is crucial to understanding how things happen. It is also dependent on input from adults; if adults misunderstand what happened or disapprove of what actually happened, they can mis-narrate stories, thereby affecting what child remember and what children consider 'speakable.' If narration has become skewed in this manner, explicit language, even at later ages, will not readily reveal the distortion; instead, assessment will need to address non-verbal aspects of verbal communication. Simple plans that promote children's safety are called 'a goal-corrected partnership' because young children make increasingly important contributions to their own safety plans. As children move toward adulthood, they take over more and more of the responsibility for planning their own safety.

Maturation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is just starting to develop, which enables preschool-aged children to draw intuitive causal conclusions from the sequences of events that they experience or observe. Outcomes tied to danger are particularly salient and become children's first and foundational understanding of what is safe/dangerous and what they should do to keep themselves safe. Because intuitive intelligence is implicit, basic life-structuring understandings are drawn without the understanding being put in words and with the errors of mistaking temporal order for causal process. These errors of causation can be carried forward to later developmental periods without the error being discovered. This is particularly likely to occur if the event sequence involves pain, for example physical abuse, the absence of observable behaviour, for example neglect, or infrequently occurring or unspoken behaviour, for example sexual abuse. If the intuitive conclusion is both erroneous and also used to organize children's safety strategies, then their behaviour can become maladaptive at later ages when the faulty organization is no longer appropriate.

Finally, maturation of the limbic structures, such as the amygdala, as well an increase in speed and connectivity helps the brain perform more complex tasks and makes new emotions and communication of emotion possible. Higher-order cognitive abilities are developing, such as awareness of one's own emotions and intentions. Coy behaviour, with its functions of attracting

attention and disarming other people's aggression, is first used in the middle of the second year of life. Coy behaviour includes sweet half-smiles, head cocking, belly protruding, bent ankle stances, and hand up or praying positions. All children use coy behaviour, but children using a Type C strategy use it in alternation with angry/aggressive signals to get attention from unpredictable parents and shape the sort of attention they receive. This strategy typifies many children during the terrible two's. Other children use only coy behaviour, without alternation with angry/aggressive behaviour, to ensure that mistakes are appeased before they elicit punishment.

Forming and maintaining attachments. The preschool years constitute the completion of the initial period of forming attachments. If an attachment relationship has not been established by age 3-4 years, it may be extremely difficult or even impossible for a child to form enduring bonds later (Kumsta, et al., 2015; Lieberman, 2003; Tizard & Rees, 1975). Further, if attachment bonds are repeatedly disrupted during the first five years of life, it may become impossible for the child to establish normal, safe, and enduring human relationships even when later provided with suitable adult caregivers (Rubin, et al., 2007). Moreover, 3 or more foster placements and brief episodic placements are associated with higher behavioural, psychological, and physical problems and with very high health service costs as compared to stable foster placements (Rubin, et al. 2004). The repeated breaking of attachments is probably more detrimental and costly in the long-term than enduring stressed attachments which, in turn, are more detrimental than protective attachments.

Developmental advances in attachment. In the preschool years, the parent-child relationship is transformed from the comfort and protection-based relationship of infancy to a dominance hierarchy in which the parent sets and enforces protective limits with children. Most children protest this, especially early (that is, during 'the terrible two's'), but adapt by learning to impose protective limits upon themselves (like learning not to run into the street) even when their parents are not present.

In addition, children use their developing cognitive, linguistic, and emotional skills to become specialists in coping in their own family. If their family is safe and comforting, they learn to explain themselves accurately in words, to recognize that other people have different perspectives, to moderate their responses, and, over the course of 4-5 years, to tell the episodes of their life. Their self-protective attachment strategies become more specific to their interpersonal context; this is adaptive when they remain in that context (Crittenden, 1992a, 1996; Steele & Steele, 2005).

Problems develop when children are unsafe, uncomfortable, or discouraged from using language to tell what they really think, really feel, and recall seeing or doing. In such cases, the inarticulate experience may become twisted into inaccurate words, silence, or somatic symptoms.

Because 2-5-year-old children need their parents to survive, they adapt to what their parents require. If their parents punish them harshly, even abusively, and tell them that they deserved it, children may learn and recall that their parents were right and that they deserved the harsh treatment. If their parents neglect them, but say that they loved them, children may learn to think and say that they were loved. If they try to tell their version of family experiences and are told

they are wrong, or frowned at, or ignored, they may learn to tell the story differently such that their parents are pleased. When that happens, they may have memories, but the memories will not be accurate. If no one recounts the daily stories of their lives with them, they may not learn to tell episodes at all and they may have very few memories from childhood to recall. It can be almost impossible to integrate or reflect if one has only distorted information or lacks information (Bowlby, 1988).

Sexual behaviour among preschool-aged children. Preschool-aged children are not sexually mature and do not experience sexual desire. Nevertheless, they do use sexualized behaviour (e.g., touching their own or others' genitals) and some are sexually abused (with rates being much higher than in infancy, US DHHS, 2013). In both cases, the sexualized behaviour associated with preschool-aged children most often occurs when children live in risk conditions, for example, a home with a withdrawn mother or multiple foster placements. Children's sexualized behaviour can serve one or more functions including allowing the child to (a) comfort him- or herself (that is, down-regulate high arousal), (b) establish a dominance hierarchy that places the adult in a protectively dominant role, and (c) attract unfamiliar adults who might protect the child (the last is 'indiscriminate attachment' and is strongly indicative of the need for protection and stability, Chisholm, 1988). Notably, these functions may also be present in adults who engage sexually with children. The presence of sexualized behaviour among pre-pubertal children is best interpreted as indicating the child's intense need for an attachment figure whom *the child experiences* as protective and comforting.

New protective strategies. The self-protective attachment strategies of endangered and un comforted preschool-aged (2-5-year-old) children are often extreme, either relying solely upon the self (Type A) or solely upon others (Type C) or both (Type A/C). In such cases, the balance of input from self and attachment figures is skewed. This adapts the child to their immediate threats, but leaves them unprepared for life outside their home (Crittenden, 1992b; 2015). The new strategies in the 'cognitive' Type A pattern in the preschool years are A3 compulsive caregiving of unresponsive or depressed caregivers, A3- compulsive caregiving to emotionally needy caregivers, A4 compulsive compliance to dangerously threatening caregivers, A4- compulsive performance for parents whose love is contingent upon the child's high performance. The new strategies in the 'affective' Type C pattern are C3 aggressive and C4 feigned helpless.