

Attachment & Sexuality

Humans need intimate and enduring relationships with other people. Relationships make each individual safer, enable them to feel comfortable (secure), and, in the case of adults, promote reproduction. Both attachment and sexuality promote those goals and both are essential for individual well-being and species survival (Crittenden, 1997).

Attachment and sexuality overlap very considerably in both behaviour and function. Behaviorally, attachment includes such behaviours as holding, gazing, sucking, reaching, touching, caressing, kissing, and following. Sexuality includes all the same behaviours, plus genital contact. Functionally, both attachment and sexuality bring people together and maintain bonds of affection between them. They differ only in terms of reproduction and attachment functions to promote reproduction. Because both the mouth and genitals are highly innervated, contact can produce powerful responses. Because the responses are reflexive, they create interpersonal contingencies. Intense and contingent responses connect people and promote enduring bonds.

If either behaviour system fails, the other can take over some of its functions. For example, in couples who cannot engage in sex, attachment can sustain the relationship. Similarly, in families where attachment is threatened, sexuality can hold parents and children together. This is particularly likely to occur with adolescent daughters. In fact, at their daughters' adolescence, fathers tend to withdraw, even if (maybe especially if) their relationship has been quite close with their child daughter; this reduces the risk of their responding sexually to their daughter, but sometimes confuses the daughters who may feel rejected. The point is that behaviour that appears sexual may serve other functions.