Attachment and development

There are different stages of emotional development, depending on age, and each stage is important to developing ‘attachment’, which is one of the most important building blocks for human emotional development.

Erickson (1968) created a ‘model’ of these stages using a sequence of developmental steps for each age. The care children are given at each of these stages may affect their developing attachment and emotions.

The following is taken from Erickson’s theory of development (which is one theory in relation to child development).

a) Birth to one year (trust versus mistrust)
Babies must learn to trust others. They need to learn that when they cry their demands will be met. As each demand is met they will grow in trust and their sense of self-identity is fostered by the care they receive. If they do not receive sufficient warmth and care at this stage the infant will view the world as a dangerous place and can become distrustful of adults. Attachment is established and begins to allow relationships to be understood. If the baby is separated from its main care-giver before six months old then the new family will become the attachment figures. However, if the baby is separated from its main care-giver between six months and one year old, then the early attachment process may be significantly jeopardised.

You can minimise this by:
- keeping calm and patient
- treating the infant like a very young baby
- giving a lot of stimulation – talk a lot, sing, play games
- providing lots of physical contact, hugs and carrying around

Always remember each baby is an individual.

b) One to three years (autonomy versus shame and doubt)
This is the stage at which the child’s self will emerge. They will try to control and order events in their lives and can be very demanding. At this stage parents need to maintain clear and consistent boundaries, and provide the care and security to develop the child’s developing sense of self-esteem.
At this age parental figures are the most important in the child’s life. This is a sensitive period for the development of attachment.

Ways to help manage children at this age are:
- accepting regression to baby behaviour
- not overreacting
- directing rather than confronting
- encouraging the child to explore and making it safe
- not letting tantrums be the only way to get attention
- explaining what is happening and why


c) Three to six years (initiative versus guilt)
At this age children attempt to act ‘grown up’ and develop some self-control. They are exploring their world and strive to achieve physical independence from their parents. At this stage they begin to notice gender and role differences, and explore this learning through play. The family are the key figures at this stage. Separation from the main carers, if handled sensitively, can be achieved. At this age the child can recognise the breaking of current attachments and is able to add and adapt to new ones.

Carers can help them by:
- explaining things (talking a lot about what has happened)
- reminding them it was not their fault.
- encouraging them to ask questions, and ask for their opinions
- letting the child do things alongside the carer
- encouraging supervised activities with other children
- encouraging physical activities
- encouraging reading and quiet activities
- encouraging social skills, such as washing and using the toilet
- having comforting routines (bedtime, reading etc)

d) Six to 12 years (industry versus inferiority)
At this stage children relate to their parents and other adults on an equal basis. The child compares itself to peers, and teachers and friends have the greatest influence. At this age attachment to their main carer and family is very strong. Separation at this stage can produce difficulties in a new placement. These are caused both through attachment issues and because of the length of time the child has spent in a damaging environment.
Some ways to manage children at this age are by:
- empathising (listen, talk about problems)
- explaining right and wrong
- allowing them to take responsibility
- providing firm consistent boundaries
- encouraging appropriate contact with peers, groups, etc
- encouraging reading, outdoor activities and hobbies
- using games to help develop skills
- helping with school work
- not expecting the child to be grateful!

e) Adolescence
Adolescence is a significant stage and, in common with the very early years, a time of great developmental change. (The difference being that the young person is now too big to pick up and remove from danger!) They have to learn to make their own mistakes and take responsibility for their own actions if they are to develop into competent adults.
Allowing young people to learn by their own mistakes requires:
- clear information about the young person
- a willingness to listen and compromise
- a good sense of humour!

Allowing young people to learn by their own mistakes, yet being there to help them sort things out, is a skilled and delicate task. This can be a very stimulating time as well as very demanding.