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Parenting, Attachment Theory, and God

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Parenting, Attachment Theory, and God

Abstract

"Have you ever stopped to consider how experiences in your childhood may have impacted your perceptions of God?"

Posting about the importance of the parent-child relationship from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/parenting-attachment-theory-and-god/>

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Comments

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Parenting, Attachment Theory, and God

 inallthings.org/parenting-attachment-theory-and-god/

Erin Olson

May 24, 2018



How distant or close does God seem to you at any given moment? What description of God seems to resonate most closely with your picture of Him? Is it Heavenly Father, Almighty God, Immanuel, El Shaddai, or some other name or descriptor? Have you ever stopped to consider how experiences in your childhood may have impacted your perceptions of God?

British psychologist John Bowlby developed attachment theory after he conducted research about why infants and small children seem to experience such distress upon separation from their parent(s) (Bowlby & King, 2004). He also wanted to understand the effect that this separation might have on children and if children might respond differently to separation based on other factors. After years of research, we now know that children (infants specifically, but also toddlers and older kids) need connection with a caregiver in order to form *secure* attachments. Infants whose needs are regularly left unmet and are left on their own in cribs or other places often experience difficulties throughout childhood and beyond. Bowlby proposed that three patterns of attachment exist—1) secure, 2) anxious/ambivalent, or 3) avoidant. Infants who securely attach receive in their caregiver “haven of safety and comfort,” and also a “secure base for exploration of the environment in the absence of danger” (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, p. 317).

In a secure attachment, if the child becomes distressed or startled, they look to the caregiver for reassurance and security. Similarly, an older infant or toddler, when attached securely to a caregiver, will feel comfortable wandering away to explore and then return periodically to make sure that their caregiver is still “attentive and available” (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, p. 317). An *anxious/avoidant* attachment means the child will be uncertain about the caregiver’s availability and responsiveness, and the child responds by being generally anxious or clingy. An *avoidant* child expects the caregiver to be distant and unresponsive and therefore expects to be disregarded when seeking comfort. These attachment “styles” as they are called seem to be fairly consistent throughout childhood and often times adulthood.

At its root, attachment theory is all about relationships. The most influential relationship to determine our attachment style for future relationships is the relationship we form with our parents (or in some situations, other caregivers). How parents/caregivers respond when a baby is faced with a threat to their survival (hunger, thirst, sickness, distance from their caregiver) shapes an individual's emotional and behavioral health and ability to form healthy, stable adult relationships. Romantic relationships seem to be affected by our attachment style and children who had anxious/avoidant attachments often become similarly anxious and avoidant adults who have differing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors when it comes to relationships with significant others.

What about our other relationships? Our attachment style affects our relationships with parents and partners. Could it also affect how we see God and our relationship with Him (or His relationship with us)? Could our attachment style impact how we see God and how we rely on Him in our day-to-day lives? The answer is yes. How we were parented does impact the way we see God as our Heavenly Father and how we come to rely on Him. There are two main models of thought about how anxious/avoidant or avoidant attachment styles might affect perspectives on a relationship with God. The first is called the *compensation hypothesis*; and in this situation, individuals tend to identify as having strong relationships with God and see their relationship with Him as being compensatory to failed relationships with earthly parents. God becomes the parental figure these individuals didn't have during their childhood. In the *mental model hypothesis*, the opposite happens and the earthly representation of a father/mother/caregiver becomes the mental model for God as Heavenly Father (Reinert & Edwards, 2014). The model of relationships formed with earthly parents or caregivers ultimately causes these individuals to see God as similar to their parent(s)/caregiver—distant and unresponsive.

So, what does this mean for those of us who are currently parenting? Parents today already feel an immense amount of pressure around “doing the right thing,” and many of us walk around terrified that we might mess up and leave our kids damaged goods for life. In a recent article in *Christianity Today*, Liuan Huska asks her readers to think about the possibility that attachment theory has caused us to become more anxious as parents. Because attachment styles seem to affect many future relationships, we are concerned about ensuring that our kids develop secure attachments. Add the further complication that how we parent our kids might impact their future relationship with God, and it's likely that our anxiety and guilt could become overwhelming to the point of being disabling.

Here is the bottom line: there is no one *right* way to parent or to be a parent. Too much variability across cultures and personalities exists to give a specific set of rules. We need to relax, trust our instincts, and get advice from those older and wiser than us. Stop reading all the parenting books and blogs and find a parenting style that seems to fit with who you (and your spouse) are and the strengths that you have. Realize that it takes a village to raise a child and while we may not always be willing to let the village *in*, we can do our best to surround

ourselves and our children with a community of people—church congregation, teachers, mentors, coaches, youth ministers, pastors, neighbors—who will walk alongside us and our children as we progress.

One last question to consider is whether these attachment styles are able to be changed or are they carved into our beings so deeply that they can't be undone and therefore will forever influence our relationships with both others and God. Significantly pathological care as an infant or young child can have detrimental effects on a person's ability to form healthy, stable relationships in adulthood. However, in many cases, the formation of relationships and mindsets that challenge some of those core beliefs about the general untrustworthiness of people can be powerful change agents. These positive and healthy relationships can often be more effective than trying to talk someone into believing that God really cares for them and that if they just "draw near to God" (James 4:8), then he will draw near to them. Their inability to reconcile what they hear to be true about God and what they are presently feeling to be true may not be so much about a theological discrepancy as it is about something they have experienced earlier in life in other relationships (Huska, 2018).

Ultimately, God loves us, created us, sustains and changes us, and wants us to be in relationship with Him and other people. Sin and brokenness may taint and harm those relationships—including the relationships that parents have with their children, and the way we view our relationship with God. But, we are a people of hope. We have hope in the coming kingdom and the making new of all things in both our present world and the world to come. May we rest in the confidence that we serve a God who can work in, through, and above all things—there is no relationship He is unable to restore and no brokenness He is unable to redeem.

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