

Podcast: Attachment and Child Care Relationships

Intro: Welcome to Inclusion Matters, a podcast about children's development from the Center for Inclusive Child Care.

BM: Welcome to Inclusion Matters, a podcast from the Center for Inclusive Childcare. I'm Beth Menninga, the relationship based professional development specialist at CICC and I'm here with Dr. Mary Harrison from the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota. And we're continuing our conversation on attachment. So, I wanted to segway a little bit, Mary, from our conversation last time where I could hear in what you were saying, the implication that, yes, children can form a secure attachments with their caregivers in an early childhood setting. But I wanted to just check that. Is that possible for children?

MH: Yes, of course. It's really about the consistency of a relationship and sort of, you know, how much time and consistency that child experiences. So when you think of children in an early care setting, you know, they're, you know, often there for eight or 10 hours a day. That's a very important those are very important relationships for them. And during that time, a lot of really important learning is happening. And so they have the opportunity through their interactions all day with their, you know, childcare providers to learn how to relationships work. How can I get my needs met here? And especially when they've started from a very young age, that really can be part of what forms their core understanding of how relationships work simply because there's so much time spent together and there are so many important developmental experiences happening during the time they spend together. So while a child's parent would still be their most important attachment figure, they certainly develop attachment relationships and can develop a secure attachment relationship with a child care provider. It's important when you think about that, though, that, well, with any relationship, parent included, it's about that it be the same person as there's continuity there. So or the same small group of people that you know for a nine month old there's not a different caregiver every day at child care that even if there are, you know, new people coming in to help, that sort of the core teachers are consistently available to that baby or child or toddler almost every day because that person, their relationship with that person, the patterns they've developed over all of their routines and all of their experiences becomes their secure base. It's not about the classroom and it's not about, you know, the toys. It's about this person sees me and is committed to my well-being and she or he will help me when I need help. And so it really, you know, the attachment relationship lives with those two people.

BM: So what I hear in this is that family childcare providers have a real advantage in the opportunity because they're that consistent person all the time in centers. This can be more of a challenge. So I know there's this concept of primary caregiving out there where programs say, at least for this shift, this work shift, you're going to these are the three children that are going to be your connection and you're going to be the main their main person, their primary person for those 8 hours, even if other people are interacting with them, too, Of course. But so is that something that you're talking about really contributing towards more secure attachments with those adults then?

MH: Well, certainly the amount of time with that person is important to develop any kind of attachment pattern. So, you know, children can have relationships with different lots of different adults, aunts and uncles and, you know, neighbors. And but their attachment system, their biological and physiological system may not be triggered or queued up because they may not have you know, it's really based on experiencing dysregulation or fear. You know, fear is too broad of a word. It's not necessarily even fear in the way that we as adults think of fear, but, you know, sort of novelty or something that's disruptive, you know, and based on a child's temperament. Sounds can be disruptive, you know. Different people have different sensitivities. So it's really about the goodness of fit between the primary care givers, including a child care provider and that particular child's way of learning how to manage the things that are happening in his or her world. And so, you know, the amount of time spent together and that consistency is really important. And then what's nice in a child care setting is because their day is often centered around routines, you know, diaper changes, snack lunch, nap, the child can really internalize in a positive way that schedule. And when it's the same person or couple of people, they know what to expect. They know how to say, hey, I'm done eating or hey, I want some more. Or buy diapers wet one more time before I lay down for my nap. And they know that they've developed a way to communicate with those primary child care providers. That's why having sort of you're a go to person, you know, if you have a room and there's, you know, three babies or toddlers and they know that, you know, teacher Sarah is their primary and teacher, Sarah knows I'm primary for, you know, Abby, that even one teacher, Sarah, is helping, you know, Billy with his diaper when she hears Abby cry in her highchair. It's teacher Sarah who looks at her and says, Oh, you're ready to be done. I'm changing Billy's diaper right now, but then I'm going to come over and help you. It's really about. Can that to what extent can. Can that teacher or parent keep various children's needs in their mind and notice when they're signaling a need and then respond in some way?

BM: So really, what I hear you saying is primary caregiving. If you set that up, it gives more opportunity for that person to develop that clarity with this child's cues and the child to be familiar with the adults response to them. Like how is how does this adult regularly respond to me? Doesn't ensure it doesn't make a guarantee for attachment, but it provides more opportunity for those continuous relationships. The continuity, the predictability we talked about earlier, and even I'm thinking about this usually, though we talked about earlier. So if they're with another child, they're available, but they're not always available readily. So usually they're able to respond in a predictable way and be available. Not every time.

MH: Right. And, you know, teachers, their teachers here might be sick or go on vacation. And it's it's about, you know, in all of the child care providers in the room. Beginning their almost their Detective work with children to figure out what might be going on with that particular child while they're thinking of what's possibly happening. Consider relationship disruption that day or, you know, and consider saying something like you, you know, teacher Sarah is sick today even for children who can't talk yet. And you miss her and she's your person. And I'm here today sort of just knowing that. Children go through the world looking for consistency and predictability and ways to feel safe and manage, you know, fear, novelty, and just like any of us. The more consistent they can be, the better.

BM: So these are really great things to keep in mind when we're early childhood educators about how we can make those connections and think about the way we do things structurally can impact the opportunity to form these relationships that we want to see for children and that sense of security. We're going to stop here, and next time we'll talk a little more about the idea of secure base. And then another topic that we haven't covered, which is really we're partners with parents and families. So how do we support that when we think about attachment, too? So thanks so much, Mary. Thanks for listening. For more resources, visit us at inclusivechildcare.org.