

## Attachment and separation anxiety in young children

### Considerations:

1. Children go through a time of attachment to their familiar adult between 8 months to 18 months of age.
2. Prepare the environment following the child's interest.
3. Establish routines for a child that orientates and familiarises them in their interests.
4. Use positive language when talking about leaving and returning.

Life is a series of separations and attachments, and each time is an opportunity for further development. There are of course physical and psychological aspects of each separation and attachment, for example, giving birth - a major separation between a mother and child. Attachment and separation can be viewed in a positive light, even though many of us have experienced traumatic separations during our lives. Montessori (1989) stated that "Feelings of ownership make them vehemently attached to things and ready to defend them as they would defend themselves" (p.170).

Attachment can be defined as a relationship bond between a child and their primary caregiver. This bond is formed in the early years and has a long-term impact on a child's sense of self, development, growth and future relationships with others. Montessori (1989) said, "Attachment to other people is the first stage which brings all men to work for a common ideal" (p.24).

Separation anxiety is defined as a child's common and normal fear of being away from their caregiver. Separation anxiety has been seen occurring in a child between 8 months to 18 months. Stranger anxiety is when a child (from 7-10 months to 12 months old) can become upset around people they don't know. These anxieties are a normal part of development.

Montessori (1936/2007) stated that there are complaint children whose emotional energies are not quite developed enough to circumvent the adult's encouragement. She said that the child "attaches themselves to an adult who tends to replace their activities by their own - such children become extremely dependent on the adult... setting them whining...grumbling... they have very delicate feelings and sensitive to affection...they attach themselves to someone, as though their vitality depended on others. They ask the grown-up to help them, to play with them, to tell them stories, sing to them, and beg them not to leave them" (p. 167). In addition, Montessori argued that "the child docilely giving way in everything... is a grave danger of the child's falling into apathy" (p. 168).

Montessori (1989) argued that attachment was also a good thing "the children must not be attached to the teacher, but they must have confidence in them. The children must be attached to the material; if they are attached to the teacher, they cannot be independent" (p. 17). She continued, saying that "attachment to other people is the first stage which brings all humans to work for a common ideal" (p. 24). Additionally, she stated that "there are the human instincts which bring humans to attach themselves to one place" (p. 69).

### The science of the theory of attachment:

John Bowlby (1907-1990) developed an Attachment Theory (1969) which was inspired by various animal studies. He stated that:

- At 5-7 months infants begin to exhibit preferential communication with caregivers
- At 9 months attachment behaviours show (clingy, upset when mother figure is absent)
- Around 12-16 months attachment behaviours peak
- Up to 3 years old attachment formation has a sensitive period

- After 3 years old child exhibits less need for proximity and can now operate on more abstract needs such as affection, trust and approval.

Mary Ainsworth (1913-1999) conducted research which found that parenting styles influence attachment style, and a child may have different styles with different caregivers. Attachment by children can also change over time as some children may be more resilient than others and later trust relationships that were formed may also be influential to the child's social outlook.

#### How can we support children with attachment and separation concerns?

- Read books about children separating from caregivers.
- A prepared environment - Montessori (1936/2007) stated that “the child needs ‘an environment where he will be psychologically free and active’” (p. 188).
- Provide work/play for the child - Montessori (1989) argued that children engaging in work/play “their naughtiness disappeared without correction; timidity, capriciousness, disorder, etc., all disappeared like magic. This wonderful fact gave importance to our experiences. Proved a profound fact about children which was not known before. With these naughtiness's go other characteristics, which are considered to be very good in children, namely extreme obedience, attachment to the mother, submission, etc. These too disappear like the naughtiness” (p. 45).
- Gently encourage your child to separate from you by giving them practice. It's important to give them positive experiences of separations and reunions.
- If you need to leave your child in a new setting then orientate and familiarise them by spending some time at the new place with your child before the separation
- Tell your child when you're leaving (in a relaxed/happy way), when you'll be back. Be brief.
- Settle your child to the trusted adult who can engage them with enjoyable activities.

#### References:

Montessori, M. (1936/2007). *The secret of childhood*. England: ABC Clio Ltd.

Montessori, M. (1989). *The child, society and the world*. India: Orient Longman

