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# Attachment and preschool teacher: An opportunity to develop a secure base

## Abstract

*Relying on a figure that makes us feel loved, safe and protected is a basic necessity of human beings with repercussions in all the aspects of psychological development. Early Intervention is based on knowledge and detection of risk factors and intervention in creating and strengthening protective factor of development. When early relationship between mother and child is altered due to the characteristics of the child, the mother or the context, and insecure attachment is developed, preschool teachers may become secure attachment figures influencing all the fields of present and future development. In this article there are some detection indicators of possible altered affective relations as well as conduct proposals to generate secure affective connections between children and their teachers.*

*Keywords: Attachment, teachers, preschool years.*

## Introduction

Relying on one or various figures that make us feel loved, safe and protected, is a basic necessity of human beings (Bowlby, 1969/1980). This feeling of security (physical and psychological) is built over the establishment of an appropriate affective bond of attachment. The attachment connection generates from the repeated interactions between child and mother through the first three years, it consolidates during childhood and it has a repercussion across the life span (López, 1990, 1993, 2003; Heese & Main, 2000).

The affective relationships of attachment must be understood as a complex framework of bidirectional relationships, to which every component of the dyad contributes with its

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individual characteristics and in which the context where they take place also has a powerful influence. The characteristics of the mother<sup>2</sup> (psychological state, pathologies, addictions, stress or background of insecure affection), of the child (disturbances, premature birth or temperament) and of the context (extreme deprivation or violent environments) leads to the development of a map of risk factors for the establishment of an secure attachment between the child and his/her attachment figure.

Early Intervention is focused on detection of risk factors and the development of strategies for strengthening protective factors. The school, during early years, plays a key role in the development of children at risk. The teacher's role as a attachment figure is essential. He/she has the capacity to create an environment of comprehension and security where the child feels capable and loved, and his/her advances are seen as authentic progress. He/she has the capacity in essence to become an authentic secure base where to return to catch their breath in the difficult journey of learning and development.

When children are immersed in relationships of insecure attachment, they build up an image of themselves as people that don't deserve care and protection, and tend to get isolated or to have an aggressive behavior with other children or adults in a thirst of self-defense. Furthermore, the evolutionary tasks appropriate to their age turn in many occasions into insurmountable pitfalls.

Under the light of a great number of investigations, for children that due to their own characteristics, their mothers' or the context, have affective histories of insecure attachment, an healthy affective relationships with the teacher during preschool can become an important protection factor of development (e.g. Pianta, 1990 or Silver et al.,2005).

The purpose of this article is a brief review of the literature on risk factors for the development of a secure attachment and add some lines of work that guide the teacher in generating secure attachments with children at risk.

This article is divided into three parts. The first is dedicated to show a brief overview of the most common risk factors for the development of an affective bond of secure attachment. In the second part, we will conduct a review of the investigations centered in the study of the teacher's role as figure of child attachment. In the third we present, show some indicators to detect children with altered affective relationships and some proposals of intervention for the classroom.

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<sup>2</sup> Through the article, when referring to the attachment figure as the main care-giver, we will use the term *mother*, following Bowlby (1963, 1980), in the sense that is the mother who usually plays this role. However, this term also collects any other figure that provides care and confort to the child.

### Risk factors for a secure attachment: mother, child and context

According to Isabella (1993) the origin of the type of attachment is found in the *interactional history of the dyad*. From our point of view, the affective connection of attachment must be interpreted from a systematic and ecological perspective (in terms of Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 2005). So: a) attachment relationships concern (at least) two human beings that are, both, growing; b) the interactions are influenced by the psychological and affective characteristics of the mother as well as of the child; and last, c) the affective bond of attachment is built on a context.

The precursor of a secure attachment may generically find in emotional and affective synchronicity between the child's demands and the mother's responses. This affective synchrony has its origin in the *maternal sensitivity* (Ainsworth & Blear, 1978). The concept of maternal sensitivity embraces a collection of aptitudes, attitudes and behaviors that are summarized in the mother's capacity to capture baby's signs, to adequately interpret them and to react in a reasonable and consistent way (Isabella, Belsky & Von Eye, 1989, Cantero, 2003). Ainsworth et al. (1978), defines maternal sensitivity around several attitudes: the first one is *acceptance* of the child in all the fields and dimensions, his/her temperament and limitations. Another attitude is *cooperation* and it refers to a view of the child where the adjustment between control and affection is produced in a natural way. The mother must respect the times and necessities of the child, in a way that does not interfere nor invade, adjusting and keeping in step the actions with the necessities and capacities of the baby. And in third case, a sensitive mother shows herself *accessible and available* when the baby requires her attention. Last, authors point out as a fundamental attitude of sensitivity, the maternal capacity to *express her emotions* and to provide an environment where the child can *express themselves freely* without being judged or punished, being taken care of without reproaches.

The children whose mothers have responded in a sensitive way and that have consistently been accessible and available figures, present greater capacity to explore the, are self-confident and be able to establishing healthy relationship with other adults and in other contexts. However, not always conditions are appropriate to ensure healthy interactions that will result in a secure attachment relationship. Since the mid-20th century, a great part of the studies of attachment carried about early interactions, have focused on the study of risks factors for the establishment of a healthy attachment.

One of the most investigated topics concerns with the mental states of the mother. The mothers' stress from their personal or contextual stories, the suffering of psychological alterations such as depression (e.g. Main & Hesse, 1990 or Quezada & Satelices, 2009) or a history of abuse, negligence or abandonment during their childhood (e.g. Crowell & Feldman, 1990; Ainsworth and Eichberg, 1991 or Moore and Pepler, 2006), are considered predictors of insensitive and inconsistent interactions. In negative emotional situations, mothers respond inappropriately to baby's signals (Caselles and Milner,

2000; Pons-Salvador, Cerezo & Bernabé, 2005 or Cerezo, Trenado & Pons-Salvador, 2006). Such responses are the result of a bad detection or interpretation of the demands, and of the incapacity to respond in a synchronized way (Cerezo, 2001). In conclusion, to show availability and sensitivity.

Howe (2006) points out that the theory of Attachment leaves the responsibility of the interaction on the characteristics of the main care-giver, giving little significance to the characteristics of the other part implied in the dyad: the baby. Some authors such as Poehlman (2000) find a high correlation between subclinical depression, with its origin in the birth of a premature baby, and insecure attachment. The birth of a premature child places the mother in an emotional and psychological situation of vulnerability (greater as the baby's gestation is lower). To the concern and anxiety derived from the maternity experience, the necessity of rethinking her expectations as the care-giver of a "planned" baby is added (Ammaniti, 1989). Other stress factor for this mothers is the auto-perception of incompetence to take care and protect a baby seen as more vulnerable and needed of priority medical attention, for which the mother thinks is not ready.

Several studies (e.g. Olexa & Stern, 1999, Divitto & Goldberg, 1979 or Stern, 2000) show how mothers of premature babies interact less synchronically than other mothers. Due to their lack of maturity, these babies are psychologically and physically less organized, with greater difficulties to demand and appropriately regulate their behavior to interactions, and seen as such by their mothers (Charavel, 2000). The mothers of premature babies, carried away by the representation of the baby as fragile and vulnerable, tend to interfere more in their relationships or, in any case, to not read or interpret appropriately the baby's needs (Cantero, 2003).

Disability is another characteristic of children that is related to the quality of the affective interactions of attachment. Children with disabilities show lower attachment behavior (crying, babble, verbalize, search or tracking, etc.) (Atkinson et al. 1999). Therefore, they have greater difficulties to respond in an appropriate way to the interactions of the mother. All these difficulties are many times the synchronizing of the interactions of the figures of attachment. Mothers are under additional stress when they don't understand their children's demands so that they can't adjust their answers (Johnston et al. 2003), feeling more secure when acting as efficient caregivers (Sloper et al. 2003). These mothers tend to try to "eliminate" deficiencies perceived in their children through over-stimulation and tend to be bossier and to interfere more in their children than the mothers of normal children, which may impact in the attachment (Howe, 2006).

Lastly, another aspect of great study about the origin of attachment is the social contexts of the dyad. In this sense, families (and dyads) immersed in contexts of social risk offer an environment of development and upbringing, where affective connections are more likely to be "troubled" or insecure. Several investigations have demonstrated that the manifestation of hostility by the figures of attachment are more often and have greater consequences in families with social risk. It confirms that situations such as domestic

violence, socio-economical problems or emotional destructure interrupt the conditions for the upbringing and the interactions, creating insecure attachment and more frequently, disorganized attachment, reaching a 34% in families with socio-economical problems and a 77% in mistreated children (e.g. Main & Solomon, 1990 or Moore & Pepler, 2006).

Do not want to conclude this section without pointing out that despite all the risk factors that we draw (maternal psychological state, the characteristics of the child and the context), a large number of research show that acceptance and secure attachment history are better predictors of the type of attachment than isolated characteristics or alterations of the child (Down Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder or other physical or cognitive deficiencies) or depredate context (e.g. Capps et al. 1994; Rutgers et al. 2004). Meanwhile, another group of research maintained that mothers with certain mental disturbances (e.g. the depression) display behaviors most warm and tight to their children after a psychological intervention program (e.g. Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002). These findings bring back the classical interpretation that was earlier discussed, regarding the central role of the attachment figure in early affective connection and show the importance of the mother's sensitivity regardless of the features of the child or the context.

Development is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon where all the fields affect each other. From this ecological and systemic perspective, the quality of the early interactions, the nature of attachment between children and the attachment figure is a key element in the comprehensive development of the child and it has repercussions throughout life.

Preterm infants, with alterations to physical or mental, children of mentally vulnerable mothers or are born in contexts of extreme deprivation, constitute risk groups on which early intervention are key to their development. In general, such interventions are intended to the biological and cognitive areas. In recent decades, however, it has increased the interest in research and early intervention on attachment and more specifically in the study and the intervention of the role of the teacher in the development of attachment in children at risk.

In western societies more and more children of earlier ages and especially those with unfavorable conditions, have in the preschool classroom an allied of integral progress. As note Gútiez (2005) the preschool classroom is an essential context of prevention and compensation especially for children with personal or social disadvantages. This empowerment is supported in the possibilities of an effective scaffolding, and in the early detection and intervention of the professionals of Primary Education. These enabling actions of development can only be carried out by the figure of an adult: the teacher, who becomes a referential point to learn and advance, not only in the cognitive field but also socially and affectively.

## Child's attachment to the preschool teacher

Bowlby's assumptions (1969) about the idea subsidiary figures of attachment, underlies in the notion of Attachment Net (e.g. Thompson, 1999, van Ijzendoorn, Sagi and Lamborn, 1992). This such Net refers to an emotional and affective framework whose center is the mother or the main care-giver but that shares space with other figures that are emotionally relevant for the child, specially those with whom he can constantly interact in time and space. These figures, despite the characteristics of intensity and interactions that are contextually different to those that take place in the didactic and familiar context, also follow a role to provide care and affection with the idea to provide physical and emotional security to the child.

In this sense, Crosnoe et al. (2004) and Levitt (2005) suggest that in these affective structures, children establish a hierarchy that represents the degree of proximity and emotional implication with the people that form this such Net. It not only contains the parents and family, but what really matters to us, the teachers (Kobak, Rosenthal & Servick, 2005).

Following this idea, van Ijzendoorn et al. (1992), conducted a research with children among the ages 3 and 5, with the objective to compare their behaviors with a stranger and with their teachers using the strategy of the Strange Situation. The conclusions of the work show that there is a different behavior of the children with both figures, showing attachment with the teacher, whom they approached and asked for help or comfort.

An interesting study that follows this line is conducted by Howes and Ritchie (1999). The authors analyzed the behavior of children among the ages 3 and 5 in their daily activities and their interactions with their teacher. Looking at their attitudes and behaviors, the authors classify affective relationships with teachers in three groups; a classification that follows the main patterns of basic attachment. They are the following: A group of children show conduct of physical and emotional contact with the teacher. They grab and hug the teacher, and accept his/her caresses, games or talks he/she proposes. At the same time, they can go away to play with the objects and the other children without any problem to participate in activities and to show empathy. When they feel disconcerted they look for the teacher's company and comfort. They adequately manage their frustrations. They are usually happy. They react easily and quickly to the teacher's demands and if he/she lies to them, they adapt their behavior to what is required. They show interest and curiosity for their classmates, toys and new tasks. These children are considered *Secure children with respect to the connection with their teacher*.

Another group of children are constantly distracted. They rarely establish contact with the teacher and their behavior is focused on the objects in the surrounding. When the teacher calls them, they ignore her or slowly move closer, running away quickly to continue playing by themselves. They never ask the teacher for help with complex tasks

or difficult situations. In this last case, when the teacher approaches them they reject his/her comfort and look indifferent. They are cold and distant with other children. They are classified as *Evitativa Insecure Attachment*.

A third group of children that falls under the category of *Resistant Insecure Attachment* towards the teacher, shows an emotional state of irritability and anger. This anger has its center on the teacher even if he/she is not interacting with the child. These children are easily frightened and in constant alert with the teacher, other children or any other happening in their surrounding (noise, movement, etc.), causing them to cry. The teacher's strategies to comfort them show no result, however their demand of attention is constant. They are impatient and they are rough or hostile without any notice.

In a generic conclusion, we can point out that children with insecure attachment are irritable or isolate themselves, making demands that are incoherent and not synchronized with external events. In this occasions, the teacher has greater difficulties to understand these demands and interact with the children efficiently, since in many cases they feel their comforting or scaffolding efforts to be rejected. As we know, some individual characteristics of children or those who live in altered contexts (mental vulnerability of parents, domestic violence or extreme deprivation) have a greater probability to generate insecure attachment.

A secure affective relationship with the teacher may whether restructure the relationship with the attachment figure or build a psychological and affective space to compensate, where he/she can feel secure and confident. Looking at this premise, a secure relationship with the teacher becomes a protective factor for children with insecure attachment or with risk of suffering it (e.g. Howes, 1999; Carrillo et al., 2004 or Maldonado & Carrillo, 2006). This protection has ramifications in very diverse aspects of the child's life. In one hand, children with secure attachment with their Primary School teachers are more sociable, cooperative and have empathy with children and teachers in other levels and educative strata (Rosenfeld, Richman & Bowen, 2000 or Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004), reducing behavioral problems and socio-economical competition (e.g. Kidwell et al. 2010), and increasing the degree of adjustment to the surrounding and the school tasks (Howes & Ritchie, 2002, Davis & Dupper, 2004 or Silver et al. 2005).

In the school as well as in the house, the construction or the affective connection of attachment is a complex framework of mutual interactions and perceptions. Children with secure attachment show, as we have seen, more attention and success with the tasks, a more coherent and empathic behavior and a greater aptitude for warm and steady affective relationships between themselves and the teacher, and other children. Their demands are coherent with the circumstances, their tone is adequate and their reactions to other children's and the teacher's responses are consistent and expected. This leads teachers to a better and more adjusted interpretation of the demands and reactions of the child, to feel satisfied with the cognitive and affective achievements of the child, and therefore, to generate more spontaneous interactions with more frequency, better quality

and duration. Nonetheless, just like in any other didactic relationship, the characteristics of the teacher play an essential role. The teachers that don't properly interpret the needs and demands of children, that are or look insensitive and that don't answer in a synchronized and contingent way to children's demands tend to establish relationships of insecure attachment very similar to the constructing process of the affective relationship of the child with his/her primary attachment figure. In the other hand, characteristics such as sensitivity, receptivity and personal involvement have a prominent role in the establishment of this type of relationship (Howes & Ritchie, 2002) even when the characteristics or initial circumstances of the child are adverse. Barret and Trevitt (1991) consider the figure of the teacher as attachment figure to be especially important for children with insecure attachment for their role to guide and order an affective world that is unsettled, blurry and uncertain. At the same time, just like the first relationships between mother and child generate internal models of the relationship, early experiences with the teacher as attachment figure will generate a relationship model too. Such models contain the representation once again of the child as a competent being for learning in all the fields (curricular, skills, affective and social). They also contain ideas about the sensitivity and availability of the teacher for his/her demands. They also differentiate inferences between the emotion and the affection created in the teacher. At last, these internal models are once again guides to interpret context and future teachers. This way, there is a tendency to maintain the style of affective relationship with teachers in later stages in life and the attitudes towards school context, all its elements and agents (e.g. Howes et al. 2000).

#### How to generate secure attachment at preschool classroom: Some proposals

When the teacher becomes part of the emotional and affective net of the child, this already has or (depending on the age of the child) is building an affective connection with the mother. Researchers show contradictory results. While some authors find that children with insecure attachment with their mothers tend to establish insecure affective relationships with their teachers during Preschool (O'Connor & Kathleen, 2006; Diaz-Aguado & Martinez Arias, 2006), others studies find only a moderate relationship between styles of attachment in children with their mothers and the patterns of attachment generated with the teachers (e.g. van Ijzendoorn, 1990 or Cugman, 2007). At last, an important group of researchers find that while children with secure attachment with their mothers generate secure attachments with their teachers, more than half of the children with insecure attachment with their main care-givers generate secure attachments with their teachers when they are approachable and sensitive (e.g. Silver et al. 2005; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Goossens & van Ijzendoorn, 1990). These findings confirm Bowlby's proposals (1980) and more recently Crittenden's (2002) who says it is possible to generate new healthy attachment relationships or even reshape an insecure internal model.

Therefore, in one hand the children that have generated insecure attachments with their mothers can also generate secure ones with their teachers. And in another hand, a

relationship of security with the teacher has better psychological and academic results from early ages. It seems essential that teachers have among their priorities the construction of a good affective connection based on attitudes and behaviors of sensitivity and warmth, especially with children that have personal or social disadvantages (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

From our point of view, the teacher's knowledge of how the emotional and affective development is produced and how it is influenced by altered circumstances is an essential formative element that would ease in greater manner the detection and comprehension of child progress. Other indicators can be useful to find children that already have a difficult affective relationship or that show high risk of creating it with his/her attachment figures. They are the following:

- Know the personal and social history of the child. It will give essential information about his/her individual and social situation. We know that children with alterations or pathologies, or that live in very deprived social environments or are socially rejected, have a higher risk to generate insecure attachments with their usual care-givers.
- Through a collaborative work with other professional of early attention, have a clear knowledge of the pathology or the child alteration, his/her evolution as well as the repercussions in all areas of development and learning. From this knowledge we will have a fair comprehension of the affectation of the child to be able to deliver or interpret affective and social indicators, routines and demands of the surroundings.
- Observe the patterns of affective behavior towards the attachment figure in daily situations. In many occasions we have the opportunity to take part of the interactions between the child and his/her attachment figure. It is obviously not a diagnosis, but to keep in mind indications that with other signs let us sketch an overview of the affective relationships among them. Situations such as separations, reunions, and chatting moments with the teacher or tutoring can provide valuable information to visualize some features of the relationship.

Some behaviors and attitudes of the child with the teacher can also be useful as signs of insecure affective history and became a risk to be perpetual with the teacher in the classroom. Regarding the didactic interactions with the child, the teacher must be able to appropriately interpret the affective demands of the child. The characteristic behaviors of these children are the hostility and indifference as a characteristic of the relationships with the teacher, the shortage, non-existence or rejection of the physical/verbal/ocular contact, the excessive or too scarce demands, the tendency to be isolated, lonely or little active. They also show tendency to avoid the teacher as a protective and comfort figure. Similarly, indicators of potential affective problems are the controversial interactions with others due to excess (children with violent or hostile behaviors) or shortcomings and isolated children from the environment, children and teacher.

Regarding the tasks, the fact that the child is never interested in a task or game, that never or very rarely feels attracted by something or that his/her behavior shows low self-esteem, distrust or fear to be frustrated even in the easiest tasks, gives us information about his/her view of him/herself as someone incapable and frightened to make mistakes, probably foreseeing negative consequences to his/her acts. We must also worry about the child that compulsively introduces actions and challenges. Children that try to challenge themselves and others with tasks above their possibilities an aptitude, constantly looking for the teacher's approval and to compete among peers. These children are permanently demanding, calling for attention and not doubting to transgress rules or to use dangerous behaviors with the aim to be accepted and appreciated.

The ability to detect the affective configuration of the relationship between the child and the mother is fundamental because as we have seen, the teacher may be a compensatory or reaffirming figure of the altered process of the child, having repercussions not only in the present but also in the future in his/her integral development.

The crucial role of the teacher with children that show in a general and consistent way one or all of the behaviors and attitudes mentioned here, is to revert to this process as long as it is possible. In essence, the sensibility, acceptance, accessibility, availability and cooperation that we have emphasized as precursors of a secure affective relationship between mother and child, are the same than the characteristics that define the affective interactions and relationships between teacher and child. The coherence, the consistency of the answers of the teacher and the productivity are once again the elements to make a foundation of a good affective relationship.

We can summarize some recommendations for action with children with insecure attachments or at risk of suffering.

- One of the keys to the teacher's intervention is the certainty that these children need to feel loved and secure, although their behaviors seem to indicate otherwise. They are extremely vulnerable and dependent on the affection of an adult. That is why it is essential that the teacher openly shows his/her attention and tends to get closer physically (physical, ocular, verbal contact...) and emotionally, even if he/she is rejected or ignored, because we know children have learned to show hostility and lack of enthusiasm as a form of protection. These children need to reshape a model where he/she wasn't taken care of or the responses were cold or even hostile. These children must understand and learn through warm contact.
- Understanding of the feelings, emotions and behaviors of the child from his personal and social history is essential, as well as to turn the classroom into a place of emotional learning. Children with alterations or altered contexts of upbringing have problems to determine their emotions and link them to the events, as well as to express them and of course to do it effectively. For this reason, is essential the teacher's ability to understand the social and emotional behavior of the child in context and provide reconnaissance of the situation and

the labeling of the emotions and the events that cause them. Although the emotional comprehension is a developmental task (Harris, 1989), when some factors don't favor the appropriate interpretation of the emotions and the emotional adjustment, children have more difficulties to be emotionally competent (Saarni, Mumme & Campos, 1998).

- Children with insecure attachment don't clearly understand the clues of cooperative and combined tasks. These must be scaffolded by the teacher in a way that the child doesn't interpret it as a competition for the approval and the praise of the teacher.
- As a consequence to the non-existence or the deprivation of their security, children with insecure attachments tend to be very alert to dissonances between emotional messages in private and in public in respect to them. It is important to find coherence between the emotions and the feelings that the child gets from the teacher in private, as a result of daily interactions, and those transferred to other adults, with special relevance to the parents. The disagreement can commit the confidence in the teacher.
- The physical environment must be able to provide physical and emotional security with simple and approachable areas, predictable activities and coherent and consistent routines to help them reshape their behavior.
- -Finally, developmental calendars and also acquisition and referential calendars in children with alterations or at risk are much more diversified than in normative populations. That is true also for children with a very disturbed or disturbing emotional history. This is why it is important that the expectations on the child are fair and the demands are therefore coherent and adjusted in time. In many occasions these children need simple tasks (even when these are under the expected level and performance) to be accompanied and scaffold. And in this case, is very important to strengthen successes and capabilities even if the child's answer looks indifferent.

Intervention at school, as any other context of early intervention, requires a multidisciplinary approach. Likewise, detection and early intervention in school requires the participation of the significant figures of the various contexts of development: teachers and family. The involvement and coordination of all educational and social actors is essential. It is necessary to create and implement protocols for the detection and intervention and school in the area of attachment.

### Conclusion

The need of affection and protection is, according to Bowlby's proposal (and from that moment it is accepted as such) as primary as the need for food or physical care. The attachment is a dyadic construction between children and a specific figure with provides protection and safety. It is based on the mother tight and consistent response to the demands of the baby, in other words, on the sensitivity. A secure emotional base is a protective factor of development throughout the life cycle.

Early Intervention is based on knowledge and detection of risk factors and intervention in creating and strengthening protective factor of development. Preterm infants, children of mentally vulnerable mothers or children with disabilities must be understood as risk populations in the field of affective bonding attachment. These children are more likely to generate insecure attachments with their mothers. The school can become a safe environment and the teacher in an attachment figure that allows to build new development opportunities. Like Pianta and LaParo (2003) note, the establishment of a positive relationship between child and teacher must be seen as a key aspect when evaluating the quality of an educative program.

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