ADULT ATTACHMENT PATTERN. INFLUENCE ON PARENTING SKILLS

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Abstract

The role of parents in raising and educating children is fundamental, and, in recent years, there is an increase in mentioning their active participation in maintaining the mental health of children.

Beyond the rational approach to problems in raising the children, different structural factors, personality traits, and personal life experiences, sometimes with traumatic effects, can interfere with adherence to the chosen parenting style. Adopting an inconsistent attitude in the application of self-imposed or recommended educational rules or principles, emotional instability or expression of fluctuating feelings, alternating between guilt and aggression may represent just a few examples of behaviors that launch the hypothesis of a fundamental relationship between the way of exercising the profession of parent and parental attachment pattern.

Specialists in child psychology and psychiatry carefully evaluate the attachment of young individuals, being considered an important determinant of the pattern of subsequent social relationships. The adult attachment is, however, a controversial topic, many authors assimilating it with personality traits while other sustain its substantial impact on social relationships, especially on couple and family relationship.

This paper aims to review the data on adult attachment and its relation to the individual's functionality as a parent.

Key words: adult attachment, parenting, personality traits

The assessment of adult functionality includes the global analysis of several perspectives. The role of parent, with clearly defined goals related to the growth and education of children, is fundamental. There are more and more debates in recent years about the more complex implications of the adult personality in the psycho-emotional development of the offspring, directly and indirectly, the psychological balance of the parent contributing to the maintenance of the mental health of the children.

The parenting style can be considered the result of the educational process to which the adult who became a parent had access. Personal beliefs and parental values influence and delineate the set of rules, expectations of performance, and interventional patterns used in education of children.

Darling and Steinberg, in a 1993 paper, bring clarifications towards distinction between parenting practices and parenting styles; in the author's opinion, parenting practices are defined as specific behaviors that parents use to socialize their children while parenting style as the emotional climate in which parents grow up their children. (1)

Depending on the child's responsiveness and the urgency of the requirements formulated for children, Diana Baumrind (2) defines three different types of parenting styles: democratic style, authoritarian style and permissive style.

Democratic style. The parent has a high receptivity; the requirements and limits set out are clear, allowing children to develop their autonomy, working maturely, independently, and developing appropriate child behaviors. Inappropriate behaviors are sanctioned by coherent, not arbitrary or violent measures. Often behaviors are not punished, but the consequences of the child's actions are explored and discussed, and the child can see that behavior is inappropriate and should not be repeated. (3) However, when a child is punished, the parent will explain the reason for the punishment adopted. Children respond to parental punishment because it is reasonable and fair. As a result, children with democratic education style parents are more likely to be successful, will be appreciated by those around them, generous and capable of self-determination. (2, 4, 5)

Authoritarian style. The parent has a low response capacity and his requirements are absolutist; their children must follow the instructions formulated without any explanation. (3, 4) Body punishment is a common form of discipline. Some supporters of this parental style believe aggression from someone in the outside world will be less shocking for a child who is accustomed to these forms of relationship.

Children raised using this type of parenting may have weaker social skills, tend to be conform, very obedient, quiet, but not very happy, with feelings of self-culpability and being at risk for depression, which may persist until maturity. Those who manage to develop self-confidence can present behavioral changes in teenagers, while under-developed teenagers with low self-efficacy may resort to substance abuse or suicide. (4, 5)

Permissive style. Marked by high reactivity and low absolutist requirements. (3) Studies on pre-school children with permissive parents indicate that they tend to be immature, with poor or absent impulse control (5).
adolescence, they have a three times higher risk for pathological alcohol consumption compared to the same age population. (6)

Parenting (parenting practices) is a specific behavior - taken over or acquired - that a parent chooses to use in the care, growth and education of his child. (2) Attachment and care systems are often activated simultaneously. (7)

Apart from the parental attitudes mentioned above, special attention has been paid to Neglect, these parents have no expectations and do not react adequately to children's interactions, neglect the emotions and opinions of the child, most of the times their parents and children have contradictory behavior; the child will be full of resentment, and the parent will be indignant, lacking in authority. Children get retreated into social situations, with school absenteeism or delinquency. (3, 5)

Literature data shows that there is a strong link between the parent's attachment style and the parenting style to which he / she will adhere, the parent with secure attachment, adopting an autocratic (democratic) educational style, gives the child the opportunity to make choices and to develop in a flexible, democratic, safe and assertive manner, while parents with anxious attachment style tend to develop permissive parenting techniques. (7) Similar results have also been reported by Millings et al., who also emphasized that there are no significant differences between mothers and fathers, the type of attachment being a predictor of the parenting style. (8)

Psychotherapy, particularly psychodynamic and systemic, recognize the importance of understanding the intrapsychic dynamics of the adult becoming a parent and addressing the family. Therefore, we start from recognizing that previous experiences of the individual make their presence felt in all inter-human relationships, including in the parent-child relationship, both at the level of educational principles and at the level of communication and emotional relationship. (9, 10)

Personality traits, individual communication skills, developed and trained coping techniques, assertiveness level, or pre-clinical psycho-emotional conditions all can be considered variables that interfere with the parenting style practiced. (5)

From the perspective of attachment, adequate parenting skills require the congruent action of the areas of sensation and perception, reward, executive functions, motor skills and learning abilities. (10) The authors also talk about the role of working memory in allowing parents to plan their parental actions based on the information transmitted to the child, the context and previous experiences, and correlates them with the mother's ability to focus and keep attention in the tasks as well as her spatial memory. (11)

Personal experiences at the expense of an attachment relationship, such as childhood mistreatment or neglect, can reduce the feeling of safety among peers and may exacerbate reactions to later tensions or conflictual situations. (7, 10) Although it seems to influence the relationship with age equals, the state of insecurity may appear in relation to one's own children, of which, approaching a persistent attitude can be difficult. (12, 13)

In general terms, attachment can be understood as an emotional bond that an individual can establish with another person. Attachment relationship refers to the connection one has developed with the person who represents the primary attachment figure, mainly the person providing the care; toward this person the child reach or maintains the approach in a differentiated and usually preferred way. (14)

There are two concepts of attachment development; on the one hand, the behaviorist, according to which attachment is learned, and the one detached from psychoanalysis, which considers that individuals are born with the ability to form their attachment.

The behaviorist theory argues that attachment patterns are developed through classical or operative conditioning processes, as follows:

- Classical conditioning, in which emphasis is placed on the importance of stimulus - response: children are born with hunger reflexes, and when fed, this reflex is diminished and a well-being, pleasure is established, which is then associated with the person providing the food, searching for that person perpetuating beyond the moments of hunger, which leads to the learning of the attachment.

- Operational conditioning: behavior which leads to rewards will be repeated, unlike the one that draws an unpleasant result that will not repeat itself. Feeding leads to positive feelings that will lead to the perpetuation of the generating behavior and will create a secure attachment. For example, the child will show desire for proximity with a smile, looking for the mother, as she responds with the same type of reaction, thus enhancing his behavior. (15, 16, 17)

Behaviorism therefore supports the idea that any rewarded behavior will be reproduced. (15) The hypothesis was taken up and supplemented by further research which considers that parents teach their children to love them through three mechanisms (Theory of Social Learning):

- Direct training, when asking the child to show his attachment, for example by telling them to embrace them;

- Modeling by mimicking emotional behavior of parents, as when the parents caress the child, and he does the same gesture;

- Social encouragement which parents apply after observing children's behavior towards others, trying to modify behavioral errors by explaining why it is not good to act in a certain way. For example, when a child reacts violently when another takes his toy, parents explain that it is not good to scream and hit the other child. (15, 18)

One of the limitations we can observe regarding behaviorist theory is that it is unable to explain why attachment relationships persist for long periods of time, even when persons to which an individual shows attachment are missing and they don't meet his needs. (9, 15)

Psychoanalytic theory, explaining the mother-child relationship centered on the need for food, sees this feeding relationship as a means rather than as a goal. From the point of view of psychoanalysis, satisfying the basic need of the child gives him the opportunity to shift his attention from the primary needs, for which he knows he will always have support, to the environment, which he begins to discover, and in which gradually establishes its own position, thus achieving a strong affection towards the mother, based on safety and trust, which goes beyond
the physiological dependence relationship. The early mother-child relationship is imperative for the harmonious development of the child’s subsequent personality, the emotional safety that mother transmits to her child being responsible for the cognitive ability of the child and also for his social assessment skills. Supplements to psychoanalytic theory have argued that newborns, like animal babies, are born with a series of abilities which form a psychological system that facilitates the creation of an attachment behavioral system with respect to the primary caregiver. (14, 19)

Growing, the inner work pattern of the Ego and of others is gradually developed, especially of their caregivers, and children can differentiate behaviors and emotional feelings associated with them, simultaneously appropriating some of the observed behavioral reactions. (14, 19)

These behavior patterns end up being biologically rooted and activated throughout their later life by various environmental stimuli and conditions generated by different social circumstances, such as the need for protection and care. The attachment theory emphasizes learning through observation and reinforcement, which children take in their future interactions with their classroom mates, in the classrooms, and ultimately in their family relationships (17, 20), and the role that attachment plays it as a buffer against stress (12).

Moreover, the attachment theory represented other processes by which parents can lead to social competence, arguing that safe relationships with caregivers in early childhood predicted later competence in several areas (21, 22). Social competence is also associated with attachment security, attachment among infants being a good predictor for social competence during childhood and adolescence (20).

Considering the fact that the individual’s interpersonal relationships and experiences are unique, a multitude of variables that relate both to that person and to his / her relational, social and economic background, can influence the development of the attachment. (14, 19)

Depending on the degree of deviation from normality, attachment is classified into two broad categories: secure and insecure.

Secure attachment is the ideal attachment type in which all the information received by the individual has induced the idea of security, self-confidence and freedom of knowledge. Children who have developed such an attachment are those who have always felt that someone is near to help them and that the family is a secure environment. As a form of manifestation, these children are those who get upset when the mother / parents leave, trying to resist, but after a few minutes they can be easily reconciled by someone else and continue their activities because they know that separation is a temporary one and that parents will always come back.

From a relational point of view, these children learn to express their needs and emotions directly, they feel able to create social relationships and enjoy it. The basis of this attachment is a healthy emotional process, which includes empathy, harmony, emotional resonance, all mediated by the brain and associated with a positive affective state (23, 24).

In turn, insecure attachment is divided into three types (12, 16, 19):

1. **Anxious-preoccupied attachment** - Children with this type of attachment have a dual, duplicate attitude towards their parents. They will develop a "sticky" and addictive behavior, but when they interact with their parents, they reject them. (16) They are unable to develop feelings of safety in relation to attachment figures, unable to move away from them to explore the environment.

When a stressful situation occurs, they cannot be dissuaded and do not want to relate to their parents. This is caused by the inconsistency of parents in meeting their needs, these children not knowing when their requests will be heard and when they will be ignored. All these relationship traits between children and parents will gradually lead to the creation of a negative self-image of the child and to a series of exaggerated actions and manifestations to achieve attention (12, 25).

2. **Avoiding attachment** - In this psychological context, children lose their confidence in adults, do not feel that they can provide the help they need and then they start to avoid the significant person. Also, these children do not have the necessary safety to explore the environment in which they live, they are independent of the parents’ presence, both physically and emotionally. (12) They do not seek contact with a person in a stressful situation.

Parents of these children refuse to help when they ask for it, they are insensitive, and evade when facing more difficult tasks, most often their support is missing in emotional stresses situations (26).

Therefore, children with an avoidant attachment are considered unworthy and unacceptable by others because of the parental rejection. (12, 25)

3. **Anxious-avoiding attachment** - This type of attachment is absolutely dysfunctional and installs in children who have been abused and who have been deprived of the presence of an attachment figure. The behavior of these children is unpredictable, it is lacking coherence and predictability towards others. It’s named also a disorganized attachment type. Their reactions are generally difficult to predict. (12, 26)

By reviewing the above attachment types, attachment can be said to be an evolutionary mechanism, developed at the individual’s psychological level, to overcome the stressful situations that they encounter throughout their lives. Among the protagonists of this process are the people who constitute the early universe of the individual, respectively the mother. (26) Their unavailability or abuse will result in an insecure attachment pattern, each defining some subsequent behavior and representing a risk factor for it (27).

The attachment theory, as described by Bowlby in 1969, refers to the attachment of children to the primary attachment figure, (14) but it can be extended to personal relationships developed in adulthood (13, 28).

The child, in the relationship he develops with the caregiver, develops working patterns and relationships with others, influencing the patterns of cognitive, emotional and behavioral response. These attachment models are characterized by two dimensions, called anxiety and avoidance (9, 29).

When the comfort and safety needs are constantly met, the child develops a secure connection to the attachment figure (15) characterized by a positive image of the self. However, if the attachment figure does meet his needs, it develops a relationships pattern in which
individual fears are manifested, and the individual expects rejection from others. People with this type of attachment, named anxious-fearing, feel the anxiety at high level, mostly the anxious preoccupation for relations with others. (12, 30).

If the individual experience is a neglect one, which is repeated consistently enough, the individual can develop the belief that the relationship with others is untrustworthy, considering himself as autonomous and self-sufficient. These people can then avoid, during the development close relationships, fearing that the relationship with others will only bring them disappointment. People with this model of work are at risk for developing the evasive attachment, defined as a tendency to dismiss or avoid intimate relationships (30).

Preoccupation for adult attachment relationships began in the early 1970s with studies on responses toward loses, initially death of partners (31) and marital separation (32). More recently, the interest in adult attachment has been extended to include marital relationships that have translated attachment models described by Ainsworth in models encountered at adults. Thus attachment patterns (security, avoidance or ambivalence) are recognized in terms of romantic relationships, patterns that can also be reported to the parent-child relationship. (19,32)

When discussing the adult's attachment, it is a matter of differentiating it from personality, making it difficult to establish the causal relationship between the two aspects and, above all, their correspondence, if we accept that they exist. (15) There are some individual personality traits that clearly do not come from attachment experiences. These features, called temperamental or constitutional, apparently result from genetic factors or other biological factors. (22,33)

The hypothesis of associating anxious attachment with more interpersonal problems has been the subject of many researches; it was highlighted that avoiding type people generally had problems with offspring care (cold, distant, introverted or competitive attitude) while anxious people had problems with emotionality (intense expression of emotions). (34) Other authors have pointed out that individuals with unreliable attachment were predisposed to loneliness and social isolation and / or couple relationships assessed as less satisfactory, marked by more frequent conflicts, divisions and frequent acts of violence (13,34,35).

Since attachment involves an internal model of social relations, we tend to look for the effect of attachment experiences on relationships rather than on, for example, memory or athletic mode (33). The insecure attachment influences the care and parenting skills when the individual becomes adult, being distant, cold and with the tendency to reject the child. Inhibition is, in these parents, a coping strategy driven by fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, shame, guilt. (10, 12)

The attachment style analysis was examined in many psychodynamic conditions but also with some the psychiatric diagnostic entities.

We mention the proven relationship between avoided attachment and lack of social communication skills, favoring communication via virtual or online social networks (36, 37) and the development of post-traumatic stress disorder in adults with a history of exposure to childhood violence (10, 38).

Anxiety disorders are characterized by dysfunctions of the stress control system and response to fear that develop in the context of life experiences and persist throughout life, generating the idea of involving early attachment to the etiology of subsequent anxiety disorders. (10, 13, 15) Activation of the attachment system accompanies therefore anxiety and stress response. (27, 37)

A comparative analysis of the relationship between communication skills and the parent-child relationship in parents of ADHD's children versus typical children's parents shows that exaggerating personal weaknesses and coercive behavior as well as promoting self-devaluation makes parents with anxious attachment to engage in non-constructive communication in relationship with the child with ADHD (39), while mothers with secure attachment more often have the ability to overcome stressful moments and adapt to parental status requirements (7, 11, 17).

Knowing the association between individual psychological variables and the relational-educational style that an adult develops in parenting provides the possibility of early psycho-educational intervention (primary screening and prophylaxis of psychological disorders and even some of the psychiatric disorders of children and adolescents) as well the implementation of some complex psychotherapies programs that include not only the child's symptomatology but also the modification of the psycho-familial framework.

References:

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