

The Importance of Parent-Child Relationships: What Attorneys Need to Know About the Impact of Separation by Kathryn Kuehnle and Tracy Ellis

Children who develop secure attachment relationships with their parents are at an advantage cognitively, socially, and emotionally compared to peers who have not developed secure attachments.¹ Within the family law arena, the relationship between a parent and child is a sign determining residential placement and reunification (see F.S. §61.13(3) and F.S. §39.4085). Examining the formation of parent-child relationships and how attachment is impacted by parental contact can assist the court in determining the parameters of visitation in family law and dependency cases.

Formation of a Parent-Child Attachment Bond

When discussing the relationship between parents and children, attorneys and judges often use the terms “bonding” and “attachment”; however, these terms typically are used in a loose and imprecise manner. It may assist the legal professionals in their consultations and decision making if they gain an understanding of the precise social science meaning of affectional and attachment bonds. A child’s affectional “bond” is determined by five factors: 1) persistent; 2) enduring; 3) linked to a specific person (not interchangeable with anyone else); and 4) emotionally significant. The child must also 5) maintain proximity to or contact with the significant person because distress will likely be experienced at involuntary separation.² The attachment bond that forms between a child with his or her parent includes these five criteria, plus an additional critical factor, which is the child’s pursuit of security and comforting in the relationship. Seeking security is the defining feature in the parent-child “attachment bond.”³

The attachment bond between child and parent is often described in layman’s terms as “strong” or “weak.” The bond more accurately is classified as “secure” or “insecure.” Security is established when the child has confidence in the primary caretaker as an available and responsive provider.⁴

Maintaining Attachment Bonds

Most young infants are thought to form more than one attachment bond.⁵ Generally, the mother and father have primary roles as attachment figures early in an infant’s life.⁶ During their first year of life, children may have two or three attachment figures, who are usually family members or individuals closely involved in the child’s care. These attachment figures are not equivalent, nor are they interchangeable.

Infants tend to prefer a principle attachment figure for comfort and security, but if the principle figure is not available, the infant is likely to seek and derive comfort from other attachment figures, but not from strangers. The attachment hierarchy may be determined by the following set of factors: 1) how much time the infant spends with each caretaker; 2) the quality of care each provides; 3) each caretaker’s emotional investment in the child; and 4) the repeated presence across time of the attachment figure in the child’s life.⁷

To ensure safety and security, close physical proximity to the attachment figure is the set goal of the attachment system for very young children. Infants and toddlers use physical contact with the attachment figure as a secure base from which to explore and learn about their world. In school-age children the availability of the attachment figure, rather than the physical proximity, becomes the set goal of the attachment system. This attachment behavioral system is no less important

than for infants or toddlers, in that school-age children still are not competent to make decisions completely on their own regarding their activities, supervision, or protection. Secure attachments for both younger and older children are based on children's confidence in their primary caretakers as available, responsive, and protective providers.⁸

The Importance of Attachment Bonds

Attachment theory underscores the importance of early intimate relationships and holds that through primary relationships children develop expectations about their capability to acquire and maintain secure relationships, as well as beliefs regarding others' trustworthiness in relationships. There is a significant link between insecure attachments and inadequate styles of parenting, such as disturbed family interactions, parental rejection, inattentive or disorganized parenting, child maltreatment, and marital violence.⁹

Children who develop secure attachment relationships are found to score higher on intelligence and academic achievement tests, be more popular with their peers, and have better internal emotional controls compared to children who have developed insecure attachments. Chronically chaotic environments, which include family violence (e.g., spouse or child abuse) or frequently changing primary caretakers, are associated with children's insecure attachments to their primary caretakers.¹⁰ The chronic stress or trauma caused by experiencing family violence or loss can ultimately result in the child's impaired attainment of control over attention span, regulation of emotion, and self-control over behavior.¹¹

Serious mental disorders, which impact children's capacity to develop intimate relationships throughout their lives, have their foundation in impaired and disrupted attachments. For example, reactive attachment disorder (RAD) is a psychiatric disorder attributed to children receiving grossly pathogenic care.¹² According to the DSM-IV-TR, "grossly pathogenic care" is evidenced by one of the following: "(1) persistent disregard of the child's basic emotional needs for comfort, stimulation, and affection; (2) persistent disregard of the child's basic physical needs; (3) repeated changes of primary caregiver that prevent formation of stable attachments." The main feature of RAD is a markedly disturbed social relatedness by the child, which occurs across settings, begins before age five, and impairs the child's ability to develop stable affectional and attachment bonds.

Maintaining Bonds Through Visitation Rights in Custody and Relocation Cases

When addressing issues of visitation in custody or relocation cases, the consequences of disrupted parent-child relationships are often at the heart of the dispute.¹³ When parents do not live in one home as a family unit, children optimally benefit from ongoing relationships with both parents who are supportive of the child's dual attachment.¹⁴ Furthermore, infants and toddlers optimally benefit from daily visitation with each parent, or, at a minimum, visitation every two to three days.¹⁵ Because physical proximity is the set goal of the attachment system for infants and toddlers, schedules involving alternating longer blocks of time, such as five to seven days, for very young children are not advised.¹⁶ School-age children can endure slightly longer periods of separation with the use of other interventions, such as the telephone, because the availability of the attachment figure, rather than the physical proximity, is their set goal for attachment.

Relocation cases present a special challenge to maintaining the attachment bond between the child and the parent left behind.¹⁷ The younger the child the greater the challenge because, as previously explained, the first two factors in the child's development of the primary attachment hierarchy are how much time the child spends in each person's care and the quality of care each person provides. Given these facts, the parent left behind most likely will not be the parent with whom the child has the primary attachment bond. However, an affectional bond or secondary attachment bond can be maintained long distance with adequate contact, and might be aided by new technologies such as video-telephone conferencing between parent and child. For example,

such technology allows the child both visual and auditory contact with a geographically distant parent.

Allegations of child sexual abuse also present special problems to a child's attachment bond with a parent. It is not uncommon for the court to temporarily suspend all visitation between the child and accused parent during the lengthy period of time often required for legal resolution of the abuse issue.¹⁸ This is true whether the abuse complaint identifies the mother or father as the perpetrator or, in some cases, when false allegations of abuse are claimed. Facilitating supervised visitation may protect the child's attachment bond with the accused parent until final legal decisions are ordered. Visitation in cases of alleged child sexual abuse should require a highly structured level of supervision, including specific rules (e.g., subjects discussed, parameters of physical touching)¹⁹ and professional supervision (e.g., family visitation center, child protection team facility, or private therapist).

Recommendations

Relationships with parents are the foundation upon which children define themselves as adequate, and develop the capacity to have meaningful and intimate relationships throughout their lives. Children's relationships with their mother or father are determined by the quantity and quality of care offered by each parent and the repeated presence across time of the parent in the child's life.

Knowing about these important relationship issues pertaining to children separated from their parents in cases such as custody or dependency may offer some direction to the legal system in addressing children's "best interests." By providing frequent physical proximity or accessibility to a parent and teaching parents the skills to create in their children secure attachment bonds, the legal system can assist children's development and provide them the ability to value themselves, and develop enduring and intimate relationships throughout their lives.

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³ J. Cassidy, *The Nature of the Child's Ties*, *Handbook of Attachment* 3–20 (J. Cassidy & P.R. Shaver eds., 1999).

⁴ C. Wekerle & D.A. Wolfe, *Windows for Preventing Child and Partner Abuse: Early Childhood and Adolescence*, *Violence Against Children in the Family and the Community* 339–369 (P.K. Trickett & C.S. Schellenbach eds., 1998).

⁵ J. Bowlby, I Attachment and Loss: Attachment (1969); J. Bowlby, II Attachment and Loss: Separation (1973); J. Bowlby, III Attachment and Loss: Loss (1980); I. Bretherton, *Young Children in Stressful Situations: The Supporting Role of Attachment Figures and Unfamiliar Caregivers*, *Uprooting and Development* 179–210 (G.V. Coelho & P.I. Ahmed eds., 1980).

⁶ M.E. Lamb, *Fathers and Child Development: An Introductory Overview and Guide*, *The Role of the Father in Child Development* 1–18 (M.E. Lamb ed., 1997); M.E. Lamb, *Non-custodial Fathers and their Impact on the Children of Divorce*, *The Post Divorce Family: Research and Policy Issues* 105–125 (R.A. Thompson & P. Amato eds., 1999); J. Belsky, B. Gilstrap, & M. Rovine, *The Pennsylvania Infant and Family Development Project: Stability and Change in Mother-Infant and Father-Infant Interaction in a Family Setting at One, Three, and Nine Months*, *Child Development* 55: 692–705 (1984).

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⁸ R.S. Marvin & P.A. Britner, *Normative Development: The Ontogeny of Attachment*, *Handbook of Attachment* 44–7 (J. Cassidy & P.R. Shaver eds., 1999).

⁹ P.A. Jarivs & G.L. Creasey, *Parental Stress, Coping and Attachment in Families with an 18-month-old Infant*, *Infant Behavior and Development* 14: 383–395 (1991); M. Main, *Introduction to the Special Section on Attachment and Psychopathology: Overview of the Field of Attachment*, *J. Consulting and Clinical Psych.* 64: 237–243 (1996).

¹⁰ M.F. Erickson, L.A. Sroufe & B. Egeland, *The Relationship Between Quality of Attachment and Behavior Problems in Preschool in a High-risk Sample*, *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 50(1-2): 147–166 (I. Bretherton & E. Waters eds., 1985); M.F. Erickson & B. Egeland, *Developmental View of the Psychological Consequences of Maltreatment*, *School Psychology Review* 16(2): 156–168 (1987); M.E. Lamb, C.P. Hwang, R. Ketterlinus & M.P. Fracasso, *Parent Child Relationships*, *Developmental Psychology: An Advanced Textbook* 411–450 (M.H. Bornstein & M.E. Lamb eds., 1999).

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¹⁴ E.M. Hetherington & M.M. Stanley-Hagan, *The Effects of Divorce on Fathers and Their Children*, *The Role of the Father in Child Development* 191–226 (M.E. Lamb ed., 1997).

¹⁵ J.B. Kelly & M.E. Lamb, *Using Child Development Research to Make Appropriate Custody and Access Decisions for Young*

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¹⁶ J. Bowlby, *I Attachment and Loss: Attachment* (1969).

¹⁷ J. Gould, *Conducting Scientifically Crafted Custody Evaluations* (1999).

¹⁸ K. Kuehnle & R. Reed, *Evaluating Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse: What Are in the Best Interests of the Child*, *The Family Law Commentator* (1996).

¹⁹ Hillsborough County Children's Justice Center, *Manual for Structuring Supervised Visitation Between Children and Their Parents* (2000).

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²¹ R. Kobak, *The Emotional Dynamics of Disruptions in Attachment Relationships: Implications for Theory, Research, and Clinical Intervention*, *Handbook of Attachment* 21–43 (J. Cassidy & P.R. Shaver eds., 1999).

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