

A look at disorganized/controlling attachment



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WHAT IS DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT?

Disorganized attachment reflects a child's inability to organize attachment responses to a parent during times of stress or distress. Instead, the child demonstrates a range of atypical, contradictory or disoriented behaviour toward the parent.



The parent exhibits many types of frightening or atypical behaviour (e.g., emotional withdrawal, dissociation, etc.) which are a source of alarm for a child.



The parent often presents several social and economic risk factors which constitute major stressors for the individual and interfere with his or her ability to respond to a child's needs in a sensitive manner.

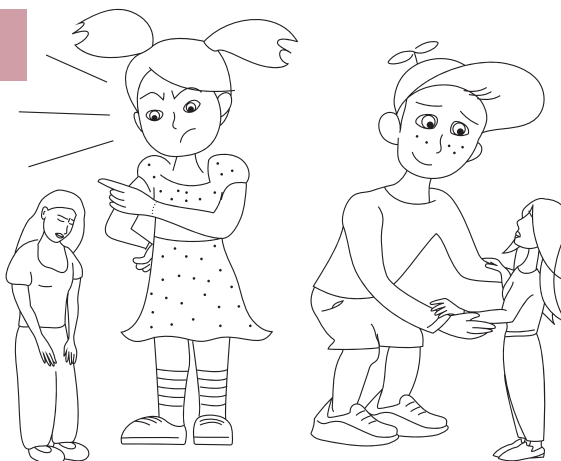
DISORGANIZED/CONTROLLING ATTACHMENT

Beginning in preschool, the behavioral disorganization present in early childhood evolves in some children and gives way to controlling strategies toward the parent. Disorganized/controlling attachment has also been documented at school age. These children attempt to direct the parent's attention and behaviour in an effort to control their otherwise unpredictable environment. By taking charge of the interactions, the child adopts a sort of parenting role toward the parent, which refers to parentification. Two subtypes of disorganized/controlling attachment have been observed:

CONTROLLING-PUNITIVE

The interactions with the parent tend to:

- be hostile for the purpose of control
- be degrading
- be very controlling
- humiliate and belittle the parent



CONTROLLING-CAREGIVING

The interactions with the parent tend to:

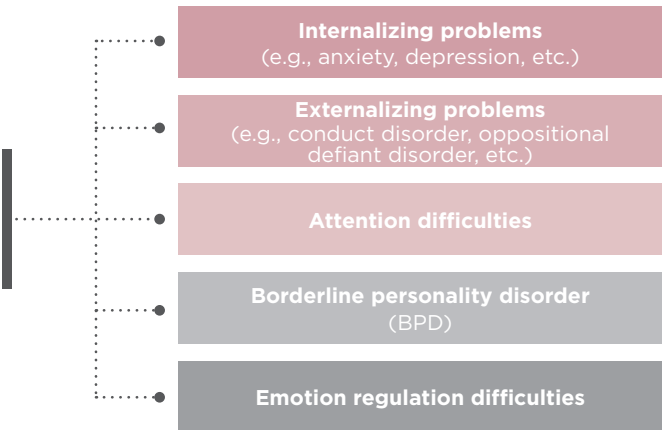
- provide comfort and entertain
- organize and guide the parent's emotions
- be attentive to the parent's needs
- manage the parent's distress in order to decrease his or her own feelings of distress



In both cases, the parent "accepts" this role reversal and does not necessarily intervene in the child's controlling behaviour. The parent often feels helpless. Several family and environmental factors are associated with disorganized/controlling attachment, including the parent's mental health problems, domestic violence, unresolved past traumas and socioeconomic stressors such as poverty.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

According to recent studies, disorganized/controlling attachment is associated with a variety of negative developmental consequences both in childhood and adolescence, such as the following:



EMOTION REGULATION IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Because their parent is often dysregulated, unpredictable, frightening or distant, these children often have few opportunities to acquire adequate emotion regulation strategies. From school age onward, children who adopt punitive or caregiving strategies appear to show distinct patterns of emotional functioning.



CONTROLLING-PUNITIVE CHILDREN

These children who are repeatedly hostile toward their parent tend to exhibit emotional instability, have difficulty communicating emotions, and express negative emotions intensely, whether verbally or non-verbally.



CONTROLLING-CAREGIVING CHILDREN

These children are used to regulating their parent's emotions, therefore they tend to have a good awareness and knowledge of emotions. They are particularly attentive to the emotions of others, although sometimes at the expense of their own negative emotions.



Although these children may seem mature, attentive to others and relatively well adjusted in different contexts (e.g., school), this does not mean that they do not have difficulties regulating their emotions. Such difficulties have indeed been documented, especially when it comes to their own needs.



CONTROLLING-PUNITIVE ATTACHMENT IS ASSOCIATED WITH SIGNIFICANT COPING DIFFICULTIES IN ADOLESCENCE DUE TO MAJOR DEFICITS IN EMOTION REGULATION, AMONG OTHER FACTORS.



CONTROLLING-CAREGIVING ATTACHMENT IS ASSOCIATED WITH SUICIDAL THOUGHTS, SELF-HARM AND DYSFUNCTIONAL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD.

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION GUIDELINES FOR THE PARENT-CHILD DYAD

ADDRESS THE PARENT'S INDIVIDUAL RISK FACTORS

- Integration of past traumatic experiences
- Mental health
- Marital relationship
- Network around the parent
- Substance abuse

INCREASE THE PARENT'S SENSITIVITY TO FOSTER A SENSE OF SECURITY IN THE CHILD

- Detection and accurate interpretation of the child's signals
- Adequate response to the child's needs
- Comforting proximity

EMOTIONAL REGULATION (PARENT AND CHILD)

- Adequate identification of their emotions
- Understanding and acceptance of their emotions
- Appropriate expression of their emotions

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT AND COMPETENCE

- Notions of stability and routines
- Supervision and clear boundaries
- Importance of play and following the child's interests

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