

# UNDERSTANDING ADULT ATTACHMENT STYLES

Attachment styles are understood to be formed early in life, first through our interactions with our early caregivers. It is through these parent-child interactions that we develop our first ideas and feelings about ourselves, others, and the world. Your own attachment history plays a crucial role in determining how you will relate to your children. This Tip Sheet describes the four styles of adult attachment. Think about what style or combination of styles describes how you interact in close relationships. Then, consider how that might relate to how you will parent a child who brings an insecure attachment style, and/or how you might want to use this self-awareness in your relationship with the child.

## Autonomous (Secure)

***“It is easy for me to get close to others, and I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.”***

- Is comfortable in a warm, loving, and emotionally close relationship.
- Depends on partner/loved one and allows partner/loved one to depend on them; is available for partner/loved one in times of need.
- Accepts partner/loved one’s need for separateness without feeling rejected or threatened; can be close and also independent (“dependent–independent”).
- Is trusting, empathic, tolerant of differences, and forgiving.
- Communicates emotions and needs honestly and openly; attuned to partner/loved one’s needs and responds appropriately; does not avoid conflict.
- Manages emotions well; not overly upset about relationship issues.
- Has insight, resolution, and forgiveness about past relationship issues and hurts.
- Is sensitive, warm, and caring parent; attuned to child’s cues and needs; children are securely attached.

## Dismissive (Avoidant)

***“I am uncomfortable being close to others. I find it difficult to trust and depend on others and prefer that others do not depend on me. It is very important that I feel independent and self-sufficient. My partner wants me to be more intimate than I am comfortable being.”***

- Is emotionally distant and rejecting in an intimate relationship; keeps partner/loved one at arm’s length; partner/loved one always wanting more closeness; turns off attachment needs, feelings, and behaviors.
- Thinks of intimacy as loss of independence; prefers being on own to togetherness.
- Is not able to depend on partner/loved one or to allow partner/loved one to “lean on” them; independence is a priority.
- Communication is intellectual, not comfortable talking about emotions; avoids conflict, then explodes.
- Is cool, controlled, stoic; compulsively self-sufficient; narrow emotional range; prefers to be alone.
- Is good in a crisis; non-emotional, takes charge.
- Is emotionally unavailable as parent; disengaged and detached; children are likely to have avoidant attachments.



## Preoccupied (Anxious)

***“I want to be extremely emotionally close with others, but others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t love or value me and will abandon me. My need for closeness scares people away.”***

- Is insecure in intimate relationships; constantly worried about rejection and abandonment; preoccupied with relationship.
- Needs a lot; requires ongoing reassurance; wants to “merge” with partner/loved one, which scares partner/loved one away.
- Fixates about unresolved past issues from family-of-origin, which intrudes into present beliefs and relationships (fear, hurt, anger, rejection).
- Is overly sensitive to partner/loved one’s actions and moods; takes partner/loved one’s behavior too personally.
- Is highly emotional; can be argumentative, combative, angry, and controlling; poor personal boundaries.
- Communication is not cooperative; unaware of own responsibility in relationship issues; blames others.
- Is unpredictable and moody; connects through conflict, “stirs the pot.”
- Has inconsistent attunement with own children, who are likely to have anxious attachments.

## Unresolved (Disorganized)

***“I am uncomfortable getting close to others and find it difficult to trust and depend on them. I worry I will be hurt if I get close to my partner.”***

- Has unresolved mindset and emotions; frightened by memories of past traumas; losses from the past have not been not mourned or resolved.
- Cannot tolerate emotional closeness in a relationship; argues a lot, rages, unable to regulate emotions; abusive and dysfunctional relationships recreate past patterns.
- Has intrusive and frightening traumatic memories and triggers; emotionally detaches to avoid pain; severe depression, PTSD.
- Is antisocial; lacks empathy and remorse; aggressive and punishing; self-absorbed; no regard for rules; substance abuse and criminality.
- Is likely to maltreat own children; believes relationships with children are like relationships from the past; triggered into anger and fear by parent–child interaction; own children often develop disorganized attachment.

Attachment Styles have been developed and well researched by Dr. Mary Main, Dr. Mary Ainsworth, and others. Information for this tip sheet comes from the article *Four styles of adult attachment* by Dr. Terry Levy: PhD, DAPA, BCFE, a licensed clinical psychologist and the Director of the Evergreen Psychotherapy Center and the Attachment Treatment and Training Institute, posted on May 25, 2017, and retrieved from: <https://www.evergreenpsychotherapycenter.com/styles-adult-attachment/>

