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# *Abilities and Relationships*

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# *Abilities and Relationships*

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## **Abstract**

The development of the abilities of children, starting from the day of their birth, depends on the quality of their relationship with important attachment figures; this assumption is not new. However, qualified carers in early childhood and teachers in primary school also have important functions in relationships in order to promote the development of learning of each individual child: all too often this is not yet sufficiently taken into account. In this text we give reasons why learning and the unfolding of abilities can only be successful on the basis of emotionally meaningful relationships, in which children feel safe and protected and experience support when exploring as well as assistance when learning.

## **Content:**

1. The development of learning and emotional relationships
2. Emotional security and the unfolding of abilities
3. Educational challenges for the emotional security of children
4. How do positive relationships with children come into being?
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## ***1. The development of learning and emotional relationships***

*When children trust their parents, kindergarten teachers and teachers they are better able to communicate and to learn.*

The results of modern brain research have shown that learning can only take place effectively when deeper emotional centres in the brain are activated. This happens especially within the context of personally meaningful interpersonal relationships (Hüther 2003; 2011; Spitzer 2011). The results of several empirical studies show that children pay more attention to adults, learn from them more intensively and communicate more effectively when they have an emotionally trustful relationship with them (see Ahnert, Harwardt 2008; Piante 1999). On the background of such relationships, the younger the children are the better they can devote energy and attention towards learning. The reason is that learning requires freedom from fear and insecurity, very young children can only feel this when a person they trust is present.

*Relationships should fulfil 5 needs of children:*

*The need for*

- 1. attention*
- 2. security*
- 3. reduction of stress*
- 4. assistance with learning*
- 5. support when exploring*

Family relationships, but also relationships between kindergarten teachers or teachers and the child (ideally) fulfil at least five functions necessary for learning and the individual development of children. They offer to the child attention, security, reduction of stress, assistance to learn and support when exploring (Booth et al. 2003; see also Ahnert, Harwardt 2008). On the basis of relationships that transmit security and reduce stress, the support when exploring and the assistance to learn enable the special social integration of the development of learning necessary for the acquisition of cultural knowledge and values (see Drieschner 2011). In educational relationships the functions that transmit security and reduce stress move to the background when the children get older.

## ***2. Emotional security and the unfolding of abilities***

*Attachment behaviour triggered by fear and insecurity is in natural opposition to the behaviour of inquisitiveness and exploration.*

Younger children especially (less than three years) must be certain that they can establish physical closeness to a person they trust at any time or find protection and help when they feel unsettled by something. Looking for closeness triggered by fear and insecurity – research into attachment speaks of “attachment behaviour” (see Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1969) – is innate and is in natural opposition to the behaviour of inquisitiveness and exploration (“explorative behaviour”), which is an important basis for intellectual development. The following illustration shows this antagonistic relationship. One speaks of an “attachment-exploration-balance” that the child must establish in interaction with persons she/he trusts in order to develop positively.

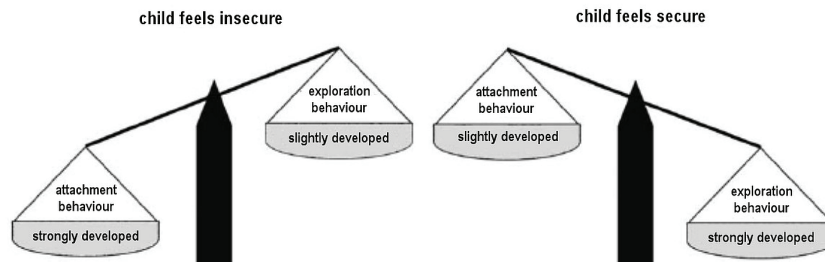


Figure: Antagonism between attachment behaviour and exploration behaviour (from: Bolten 2009, p. 61)

“Attachment figures” must provide a “secure base” (Ainsworth et al. 1978) so that the child is able to keep up an attachment-exploration-balance from where to conquer the world.

Depending on the experiences of interaction that children have with their attachment figures from birth, they develop relationships with them whose qualities can be recognized at the end of their first year as a reaction to short times of separation (de Wolff, van Ijzen-doorn 1997; Ainsworth et al. 1978). So called “patterns of attachment” (Ainsworth et al. 1978) are nothing else but expectations based on experiences that are not yet conscious at that age. Children who have a “secure attachment” to a primary caretaker feel “secure” because of their previous experiences that this person would do everything possible to protect the child if she/he were in danger. Children acquire this attitude of expectation because their attachment figures respond sensitively when they express fear, insecurity or discomfort and seek physical closeness. If children feel uneasy because of a short separation from an attachment figure they have a secure bond with, in an environment they don’t know, they will afterwards look for direct contact with that person and will quickly and effectively be calmed.

There are different patterns of insecure or even highly insecure relationships that children can develop towards their attachment figures. If there is a highly insecure relationship the child will expect some form of danger that comes from that person (Crittenden, 1994; Crittenden et al. 2007). Within the framework of research on attachment, behaviours that can be identified as secure, insecure or highly insecure have been analyzed with the help of videos and described in great detail (Crittenden, 1994; Crittenden et al. 2007). Empirical studies have shown that a secure attachment is not only very favourable for the social-emotional, but also for the cognitive development of children (viz. Arend et al. 1979; Erickson et al. 1985; Main, Cassidy, 1988; Suess et al. 1992; Stams et al. 2002). Highly insecure relationships have very negative effects on the development of the children’s personality and the acquisition of knowledge (Geddes, 2007; Howes, Ritchie, 2002; Zulauf-Logoz, 2008).

Patterns of attachment that children develop within the context of the family determine the way they make contact and form relationships with adults (and children) outside this context. We can see that there are more than random analogies between patterns of attachment of children with their parents and

*Patterns of attachment are sub-conscious attitudes of expectation of children that relate to the way attachment figures treat their need for protection, care and attention.*

*Patterns of attachment that are not secure have negative effects on children’s development of their personality and learning.*

*Studies show that deprived children and those with insecure patterns of bonding profit considerably from positive educational relationships.*

*Frühe Bindungserfahrungen werden auf spätere Beziehungen übertragen.*

other persons who care them in early childhood (Ahnert et al. 2006). Patterns of bonding that children develop with their kindergarten teachers also show a tendency to be 'transferred' to further educational relationships. This trend towards the 'reproduction of patterns of relationships' can still be seen in primary school in relationships between teachers and pupils (Howes et al. 1998; Pianta, Stuhlman 2004). Although an obvious tendency towards a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' is inherent in patterns of relationships, every individual relationship contains the chance of modifying experiences or one that changes patterns. Some – even some large – studies show that especially for children in pre-school or primary school age with very problematic behaviours and/or difficult family conditions much depends on whether kindergarten or primary school teachers succeed in building a relationship built on trust despite the negative expectations these children are burdened with. If this is successful, the prediction concerning their further social-emotional and academic development improves considerably (Burchinal et al. 2002; Hamre, Pianta 2001). On the basis of extensive case studies Howes & Ritchie as well as Geddes (Geddes 2007; Howes, Ritchie 2002) describe how teachers can succeed in establishing positive patterns of relationship with 'difficult children' in spite of their negative expectations.

### ***3. Educational challenges for the emotional security of children***

*Emotional insecurity is accompanied by physical reactions of stress (cortisol reaction) which have a negative effect on the development of the brain.*

*Attachment figures need not only be physically present but also be attentive in order to provide small children with emotional security.*

When children feel emotionally secure in a relationship, one of the basic conditions for learning has been fulfilled. As we explained before, this condition has to be taken into account more carefully and is more difficult the younger the children are and the more insecure the patterns of relationships are that developed within the context of the family. If there is no success in providing the children in kindergarten or in school with emotional security within the framework of educational relationships, it can be assumed that the children are restricted in turning towards their surrounding with interest. More than that, the processes of physical stress that accompany emotional insecurity have direct negative effects – especially through the stress hormone cortisol – on neuronal processes in the brain, that are connected with the development of learning (e.g. Hüther 2003).

Children who are less than three years old are especially in danger as at this age everything that is unknown can easily trigger fears of an existential quality. It is not enough that a person they trust is physically present and imparts security to the child. In order to fulfil a "secure base" function she/he must continually turn part of her/his attention towards the child so that she/he can adequately react to signals of re-insurance. Depending on the number of

children that have to be looked after, in some situations this can be a difficult task in early childhood. Therefore the regulation of cortisol can easily be influenced in a negative way when young children (especially children younger than three years of age) have secondary caretakers responsible for groups of children (Watamura et al. 2003).

The transition to care by secondary caretakers presents an especially sensitive situation for the emotional security of small children. Most of the experts who care for very young children know the Berliner Eingewöhnungsmodell (Berlin model of familiarisation; Laewen et al. 2003) that is justified by the theory of attachment and affirmed by empirical research. The model provides practical guidelines that support the forming of a relationship with a carer during the critical phase of familiarisation in kindergarten. It sets great store by the presence and collaboration of a person the child trusts for a time span that differs individually and who enables the child to transfer the psychological function of a safe basis that she/he has to another person. To achieve this it is necessary that the child can watch the verbal and non-verbal behaviour between the person she/he knows and the one she/her does not know and that it is congruently communicated to the child that the person they trust wants the transfer and trusts the child to be able to cope with the separation.

Of course emotional security is not only a theme during the first years of life. There are many situations that can trigger severe and lasting reactions of stress in children and they need help and support to re-establish a feeling of emotional security. Even in primary school, pressure and fear of achieving can reach a dimension that endangers the feeling of security of children. As soon as formal learning begins children are confronted for the first time with the possibility of 'failing' in the eyes of others. Empirical studies prove that confrontation with tasks that can't be solved in a social-evaluative context provoke strong and lasting cortisol reactions (Dickerson, Kemeny 2004). In view of the negative impact that stress has on the physiological processes of the brain that are related to the development of learning, excessive demands in the area of learning and evaluation that endanger self-esteem, should be compensated and finally be avoided by individual promotion.

*The Berlin model of familiarisation provides guidelines for a successful transfer to care by a secondary caretaker.*

*Educational relationships are meant to protect children from pressure and fear of achieving.*



*A child can develop a positive relationship with a person when she/he reacts sensitively to her/his communication and behaviour.*

## 4. How do positive relationships with children come into being?

We have already emphasised that a carer must react sensitively to the emotional communication of a child so that she/he can develop security in the relationship and that the quality of the intercourse with signals that express fear, uneasiness, insecurity and stress is especially important. When these fundamental needs in relationships are fulfilled, a sensitive support when exploring and assistance with learning go on contributing to a positive relationship. The meaning of "sensitivity" when dealing with children was defined by Mary Ainsworth (see Ainsworth et al. 1974) at the beginning of the research on attachment.

Sensitivity when dealing with children includes

- a) perceiving,
- b) interpreting correctly,
- c) reacting appropriately,
- d) reacting directly and
- e) reacting reliably

to the signals of the child (Ainsworth et al. 1974).

*In groups of children, the way an attachment figure treats the other children influences the quality of the relationship an individual child develops to her.*

Ainsworth's definition of sensitivity was developed on the background of observation of the interactions between mothers and children in their first year of life. Therefore it first of all refers to the handling of the needs of the child that must be fulfilled. However, with increasing age the setting of limits becomes an important theme between the attachment figure and the child. Children do not directly voice their need for structure and rules, and for consequence when dealing with sticking to or transgressing rules. These needs easily clash with other needs and wishes that the child may have at that time. Therefore, conflicts naturally arise with their attachment figures, that push the development of the competence of self-regulation, e.g. the ability to postpone the fulfilment of wishes to a later time or even to abstain from them at all. After the first year the sensitive handling of the necessary setting of limits by attachment figures plays an increasingly important role for the quality of the relationship and for the emotional security of children as well as the appropriate fulfilment of needs and wishes.

On the basis of our observation of children in everyday life in kindergarten we would like to add another aspect to the original definition of sensitivity. As soon as children are cared for in groups, the quality of the relationship of an individual child to her/his attachment figure is probably influenced by the way this person treats the other children. Children watch that very carefully. On the basis of results of research on how to learn from models (viz. Bandura 1976) one has to assume that while observing they identify with the other children and – depending on how the carer behaves towards other



children – form expectations relevant for the relationship. The “fairness” concerning the amount of attention will probably decisively influence the quality of the relationship of the individual child to her/his attachment figure. These assumptions correspond with the results of a meta analysis of studies on the relationship between kindergarten teachers and the child, which showed that the quality of attachment of kindergarten children to a kindergarten teacher under certain circumstances (a large group of children) is affected more by their sensitivity concerning the group than by their sensitivity when dealing with an individual child (Ahnert et al. 2006).

The concept of sensitivity does not describe which needs of children at different levels of their development and in different contexts are best fulfilled or regulated by which behaviours and by which limits. If one transfers the concept to didactical situations one could for example understand a sensitive support of exploration or assistance to learn as a sensitive adaptation of playful challenges or tasks to the concepts that have already been developed by the child or by her/his ability to learn. Such a sensitive adaptation would have the effect that the child feels neither over challenged nor is there a lack of challenge and she/he develops a feeling of self-efficacy and competence when dealing with achievement issues (see Drieschner 2011; Vygotsky 1987).

Human beings have at their disposal an intuitive knowledge when dealing with children (see Papousek, Papousek 1987) that works across cultures and that suggests the right impulses to act when the children are watched attentively. However, they also automatically act in accordance with the experiences specific to their culture and their individuality that they had with their attachment figures when they were children (viz. Keller 2011; Ainsworth et al. 1974; van Ijzendoorn 1995). As intuitive impulses can easily be superimposed or adulterated by false conceptions of education that are inappropriate for a certain situation or through the impact of unfavourable patterns of relationships depending on experiences, it is essential – especially for educational experts – to acquire a good knowledge of the psychological development of children, of the needs depending on their age and of the best way of dealing with that. As cultural influences form the earliest mother-child-interactions and therefore modulate the development of needs and the way needs are expressed from the start, educational experts that care for children from different cultures should have a good knowledge in this area, too (Kärtner, Keller 2011).

*The assistance to learn contains the sensitive adaptation of challenges to the competencies of a child.*

*Educational experts should have good knowledge of the psychological development of children, of their emotional needs depending on their age and of cultural specificities of the evolving needs.*



*Children accept adults as role models more easily and adopt their norms and values if they have a close and emotional relationship with them.*

*In order to turn abilities into achievements, competencies to regulate oneself are necessary.*

*Self-competencies develop in social relationships by taking part in well regulated interactions.*

## 5. Relationships, learning and self-competence

On the basis of a secure, emotionally positive relationship basal mechanisms of informal or formal learning are more effective. In that way children identify more easily with adults and imitate them, the more intensive the relationship is (viz. Bandura, 1969). Besides social norms and values are more easily adopted by children within a context of close and affectively warm relationships (viz. Rohner, 1986).

A greater joy of exploring and learning and a lasting effect of the basal mechanisms of social influence are not only the result of positive emotional relationships – there is also a basic principle of development of the human brain which explains why social relationships and positive experiences of interaction play a central role for the development of abilities of children.

In order to transform potential or abilities into achievements, competencies to self-regulate (self-competencies) are necessary, for example the abilities to have a sense of self, to contain, to motivate or to calm oneself (see Kuhl, Küne, Aufhammer, 2011). The acquisition of these abilities is associated with the slowly maturing of the pre-frontal cortex during childhood and youth (Stuss, Benson, 1986). Much speaks in favour of the fact that the process of the maturing of the brain of this kind is based on an alternating interaction of genetic factors and experiences of interaction (Nelson, Bloom, 1997; Siegel, 2001). This means that the development of the abilities to self regulate requires the participation with well regulated processes of interaction. Interactions of attachment figures with children that are well regulated are the condition as well as the consequence of a safe and emotionally positive relationship. If children experience within this context that they are realistically noticed and are encouraged or calmed in a way that fits the situation, they learn to use these elements of control when dealing with themselves (vgl. Kuhl, Völker 1998). As a consequence, self-competencies when solving problems may manifest in the ability of overcoming obstacles and in frustration tolerance. The growth of these abilities supports the development of learning of children enormously and increases the profit they can get from these contexts of learning, in which methods of individual promotion are used.



## **6. Summary**

Children learn and develop mainly within the interaction with emotionally important persons. Support when exploring and assistance when learning can be seen as didactic functions of relationships which are in the foreground in educational contexts and directly support the development of abilities. The necessary condition for these didactic functions of relationships and other processes of social learning to become effective in the most optimal way are more fundamental functions of relationships that convey emotional security to the child. These are fulfilled by a sensitive regulation of stress and by a suitable response to emotional needs. By experiencing a sensitive regulation of emotional needs – in situations of groups as well – children in addition develop competencies of self regulation that are central for the transformation of abilities into achievement.

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*The Research Centre for Promotion of Abilities is part of the Institute for Education and Development in Early Childhood of Lower Saxony (nifbe), founded in 2007. It is chaired by Prof. Dr. Claudia Solzbacher (educational science) und Prof. Dr. Julius Kuhl (psychology).*

*The research centre works interdisciplinary and deals with questions of the promotion of abilities in elementary as well as primary education and approaches these questions from the perspective of education science, psychology and social science. The present focuses of research are ability and relationship, self-competence and the development of self-competence as well as individual promotion. The methods of re-search comprise videography, quantitative techniques (questionnaires and on-line questioning to be analysed with SPSS), qualitative procedures (investigation with expert interviews, group discussions and other forms of personal interviews procedures of analysis along the analysis of content and grounded theory).*

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