



Attachment, Separation, and Emotional Experiences in Early Experiences: Reframing Practice in Infant, Toddler, & Early Childhood Contexts

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1










2

Acknowledgments...*learning together*

Thank you to the children who have learned with us.
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3

HEAD, HEART, HANDS
Umesh Sharma, Ph.D.
Monash University



Heads



Hearts



Hands

4



5



What does this seedling
need to grow?

6



Imagine that this is your garden, and you have learned how to support the growth of:

-  California poppies
-  Lupine
-  Indian paintbrush
-  Baby blue eyes
-  Clarkia
-  Coreopsis

7



And then a dandelion appears...

What does it mean for your garden?

- What is your immediate reaction? What is that based on?
- Am I trying to remove, control, or understand?
- How might my response shape what happens next?

8



9



10

Learning together...

A word about terminology...

- Autism in infants, toddlers, preschoolers
- Attachment in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Emotional regulation in ASD
- Separation distress as a signal
- Developmental over diagnostic lens
- Regulation across systems
- Regulation before learning
- Inclusion is learning is belonging

TM
Pappus
CoLab

11

Early Autism Profile

Interactional Effect of Autism Spectrum Disorders

12

Infancy: Biology of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Premature birth risk
- Differences in brain development
- Object-focused attention at 2-3 months
- Rarely detected by caregivers



13

One Year: Social Learning

- Reduced eye contact
- Reduced facial expressions
- Reduced gestures
- Reduced vocalizations
- Reduced attention to caregivers



14

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ASDDetect

ASDDetect

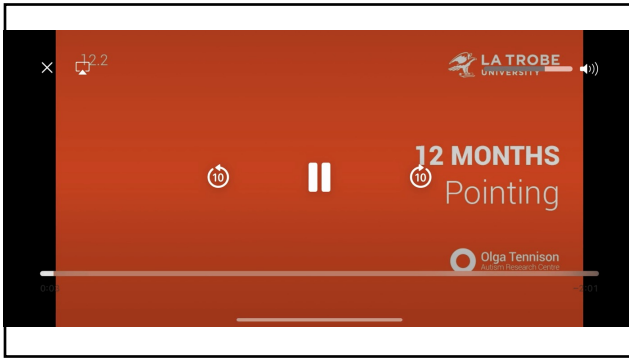
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

Olga Tennison
Autism Research Centre

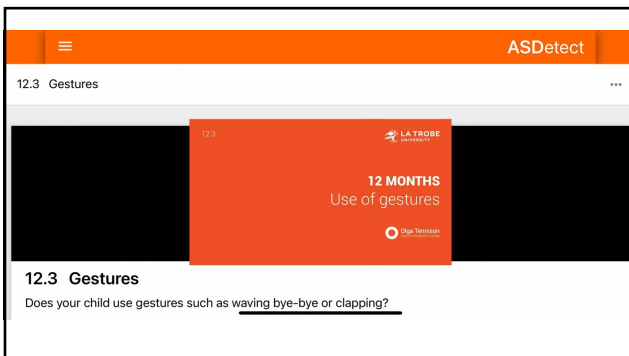
Credible, award-winning
early autism detection with
ASDDetect.

[Learn more about the importance of early diagnosis and ASD management at the](#)

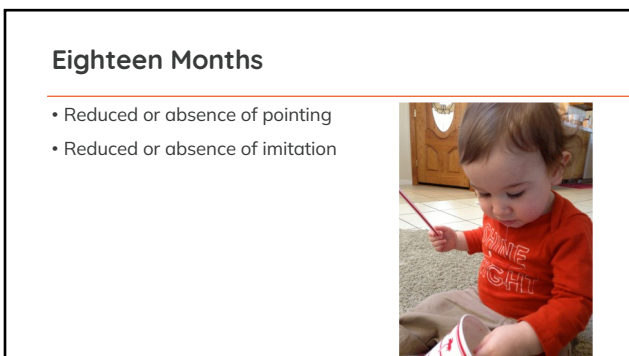
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16



17



18



19

Two Years

- Speech and language development delay: not necessary!
- Emerging social delays



20



21



22



23

Preschool Age

- Most common age of diagnosis in California
- Parents report **1 in 6** children with Autism Spectrum Disorder have been expelled from preschool (average age 3.3 years)



24

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25

Early Attachment in ASD

- Capable of forming selective, secure attachments
- Risk and protective factors range from child to caregiving environment factors
- Evidence for attachment-based therapies is mixed



26

Attachment in Autism

- Attachments are present
- Signals may differ

Autism changes presentation, not the need for attachment

These differences should not be misinterpreted as lack of attachment.

The attachment system is present; its signals may simply look different.

Autistic children may show attachment activation through:

- 🕒 Delayed protest
- 🔴 Shutdown
- 👁️ Object fixation
- 🔥 Intense reunion reactions
- 👊 Aggression during transitions

27

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28

Emotional Experience is Present, but Often Differently Expressed

Core finding:

Young children with ASD experience a full range of emotions, but expression and signaling may differ.

Infants and toddlers with ASD show **joy, distress, interest, and attachment-related emotions**. Differences are often in:

- **Intensity**
- **Timing**
- **Clarity of expression** (facial, vocal, gestural)

Implication:

Emotions are not absent—they may be **harder for adults to read**, leading to misinterpretation.

29

Emotional Understanding Develops, but Along Different Pathways

Core finding:

Children with ASD develop emotional understanding, though often:



More slowly



Through different cues
(e.g., routines, patterns,
explicit teaching)

Joint attention and shared affect may be:



Less frequent early on



But can increase with supportive interaction (e.g., ESDM research)

30

Emotional Dysregulation & Co-Regulation

Definitions & Concepts

Emotion dysregulation:
Difficulty changing or controlling
intense emotions or duration of
emotional response

31

Dysregulation Types

ESCALATION



Heightened emotional and
behavioral response,
outbursts, intense energy

COLLAPSE



Withdrawal, reduced energy,
shutting down,
unresponsiveness

Understanding different manifestations of emotional dysregulation

32

Emotional Dysregulation & Co-Regulation

Emotion Dysregulation Index (EDI):
Scale of both reactivity and
dysphoria (ages 2-5)

Key Findings in ASD (Ages 2-5)

Children with ASD = very high:
🔥 58% reactivity (meltdowns)
☁️ 46% dysphoria (shutdowns)

Parents report similarly at home, but
ASD children have higher EDI scores
outside the home.

33

Difficulties Regulating Emotional States

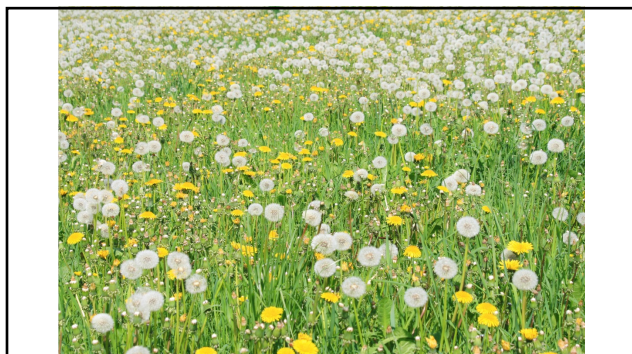
Research shows higher rates of:

-  Distress during transitions
-  Difficulty recovering from upset
-  Prolonged arousal states

Regulation is closely tied to:

-  Sensory processing differences
-  Predictability and routine
-  Co-regulation from adults

34



35



36



What care is needed
when transplanting?

37

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38

Why Separation Matters

Reveals attachment system

They are negotiating:

- ☐ Safety
- ☐ Uncertainty
- ☐ Loss
- ☐ Regulation

Visible distress does not mean failure.
Absence of distress does not mean safety.

The task is understanding the signal, not eliminating the behavior.



39



40

Separation Responses

- Withdrawal
- Freezing
- Object fixation
- Delayed distress
- Hypercompliance

41

When Adults Rush Separation

Avoid protest:

- Distraction
- Fast drop-offs

42

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43

Developmental or Diagnostic Lens?

✓ Developmental needs

✓ Repetition

✓ Predictability

✓ Continuity

✓ Time and safety



44

Regulation Happens Inside Systems

The child is not the only nervous system involved.

Attachment dynamics exist across:

- child
- parent
- teacher
- program
- leadership
- organizational structure

When adults become dysregulated, programs often move toward:

control

correction

rigidity

over-verbalization

Children mirror adult regulation

45

Adult Self-Regulation is Foundational

Supporting children's regulation starts with the adult

- Co-regulation: child borrowing the adult's regulation
- Adults must be emotionally regulated—not just behaviorally controlled

Authentic adult regulation

- "Neutral face" ≠ regulated
- Suppressed affect can still signal dysregulation to children

Burnout

- Driven more by unresolved anxiety than workload
- Dysregulation reduces flexibility and problem-solving



46



47

A Regulated Environment

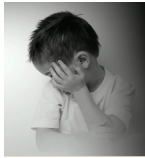
- Regulated adult presence
 - Attuned to pacing
- Predictability
 - Transitional objects/activities
- Rhythm (structured routine)
 - Not rigid but safe
- Sensory load
 - Adapted as necessary



48

Identity Isolation

- Ability to communicate
- Extra independence
- Hyperfocus
- Being in the periphery
- Referring to adults
- Taking and giving
- Behavioral and regulation challenges
- Repetitive behaviors
- Collaborative
- and much more

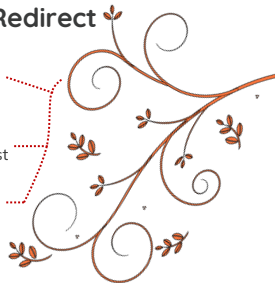


Isolation affects the ability to participate

49

Join, Don't Redirect

- Join their moment, their play
- Build connection within their interest
- Gradually expand from there



This reflects:

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBI)

Attachment-based practice

This approach also challenges deficit-based thinking.

50

Regulation Comes Before Learning & Participation, Participation Before Belonging

Exploration, play, and learning emerge only when a child feels regulated.

Regulation may look like:



closeness
repetition



movement
sensory modulation



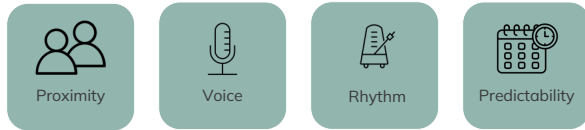
predictable routines

Dysregulation may appear as escalation or withdrawal.

Participation cannot be demanded before safety is established.

51

Regulation is Relational



52

Regulation Leads to Engagement, Which is the Mechanism of Learning

The Mechanism of Learning:

- Learning does not occur through exposure alone
- Learning emerges through **active, meaningful engagement**
- Engagement includes:
 - Exploring materials
 - Sharing attention and affect
 - Initiating and responding in interaction
 - Participating in both familiar and new experiences

Key Shift:

- Engagement is not a prerequisite skill
- Engagement is the developmental process

Implication for Practice:

- Participation follows engagement—not the other way around
- Our goal is not to gain compliance, but to support engagement

53

Rethinking Disengagement

What looks like:

- Avoidance
- Resistance
- "Non-compliance"

May reflect:

- Low motivation
- Unclear expectations
- Dysregulation
- Sensory or emotional overload

Guiding question:

What is this behavior organizing around?

Practice Shift:

- From: "How do we get the child to participate?"
- To: "What conditions are needed for engagement?"

Implication:

Disengagement is not a problem to fix, it is **information to understand**

54

Supporting Engagement Through Relationship

Adults support learning by:

Observing
Observing the child

Joining
Joining the child's focus

Following
Following the child's lead

Scaffolding
Scaffolding just beyond current ability

Key Principles:

- Follow before you lead
- Join before you teach
- Build from motivation, not compliance

Adult Role:

- Not directing behavior toward outcomes
- But co-constructing meaningful learning experiences

Outcome:

- Increased connection
- Sustained engagement
- Expanded learning and participation

55



56

Inclusion Requires Containment, Not Just Access

Inclusion is not simply placement in a classroom.

It requires:

- 🛡️ relational safety
- 📅 predictability
- 👤 adult capacity
- 🔗 community structure



57

What Does it Mean to Have a Child Participate and Contribute?

Participate

- Being present
- Joining activities
- Following instructions

Contribute

- Adding value
- Active engagement
- Sharing ideas
- Taking ownership

58

What might
change...

...if, instead of pulling the
dandelion...

...we paused to understand
what it is telling us about
the garden?

59



May we raise children
who love the unloved
things—the dandelion, the
worms & spiderlings

Children who sense
the rose needs the thorn
& run into the rainswept days
the same way they
turn towards the sun...

And when they're grown &
someone has to speak for those
who have no voice

May they draw upon that
Wilder bond, those days of
Tending tender things
And be the ones

Nicolette Sowder

60

HEAD, HEART, HANDS
Umesh Sharma, Ph.D.
Monash University



Heads



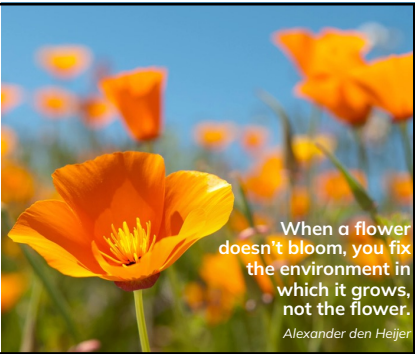
Hearts



Hands

61

Thank you!



When a flower
doesn't bloom, you fix
the environment in
which it grows,
not the flower.
Alexander den Heijer



62

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63

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