

# Attachment/Connection

Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities are known for their deep understanding of interconnectedness. Connections to family, community, culture, spirituality, storylines and Country have sustained our children to grow up strong in culture for thousands of years. We have deep wisdom about child-rearing and how to support children with extended support and networks – yet we are living in two worlds, and this knowledge is not always valued or understood.

Attachment has become the dominant theory of children's socioemotional development since its formulation by John Bowlby during the 1960s.

It is often used to refer to the relationship between an infant or young child and their parent (usually the mother) or preferred caregiver, during the first years of life. Attachment theory believes that children develop expectations about the extent to which they will build trust and security and when stressed, and how these expectations will shape the relationships they form later in life. However, attachment theory increasingly assumes that the child forms one primary relationship, mainly with the mother, which contrasts with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing ways of knowing, being and doing.

'Family is seen as a strength because it provides children with a wide group of people who care about them. It also means children socialise from a very young age and have multiple sources of guidance from people who are considered responsible for that child. The wider Aboriginal community is also seen as providing children with a sense of belonging, connection and relationships based on common experiences and historical connections.'

**Protective factors** There are many protective factors which can help you support families to lay strong foundations in the important early years of their children's lives.

**For families, protective factors include:**

- cultural traditions, especially around the birthing process and perinatal period
- interconnectedness of cultural practices, spirituality, identity, family and community and connection to Country
- strong family relationships and connections
- a personal sense of wellbeing, satisfaction with life, and optimism
- a high degree of confidence in parenting ability
- the presence of social support systems
- access to appropriate support services
- economic security
- strong coping abilities and problem-solving skills; and
- adequate nutrition.

**For babies, protective factors include:**

- good infant health
- nurturing and sensitive caregiving, including sensitive interaction, age-appropriate stimulation, good sleep habits, and the physical care of the infant such as feeding

- a safe and secure base with positive attention from a supportive, caring mother/ family
- strong mother–infant connection
- strong father–infant connection
- family harmony
- a sense of belonging and connectedness; and
- strong cultural identity and pride.

Recognising different ways of understanding attachment is important in distinguishing between cultural differences and attachment issues: this will help you when working with (or advocating for) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and their children.