



**NATP**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF THERAPEUTIC PARENTS



*Centre of Excellence in*  
**CHILD TRAUMA**

*Note from NATP- Please note, there are different forms of attachment disorder. There is pressure from some psychotherapists and specialists to use the term 'developmental Trauma Disorder'. In the UK, Reactive Attachment Disorder is normally described as Disorganised Attachment.*

## **What is Attachment Disorder?**

### **An Introduction**

Reactive Attachment Disorder is a very real illness. Children with Reactive Attachment Disorder are reacting to events in their early life that may include neglect, abuse, or something more subtle (see causes below). Due to these events, many children are unable to attach to a primary caregiver and go through the normal development that children must go through in order to function in relationships. My explanation is somewhat simplified but may be helpful to you. It does not replace a diagnosis from an attachment therapist.

In the first two years of life, children go through healthy attachment cycles - the first year and second year attachment cycles. A healthy first year attachment cycle looks like this:



As the baby has a need and signals that need by crying, the mother (primary caregiver) comes and soothes her baby and meets his needs. If this cycle is repeated over and over again and the baby's needs are consistently met in the proper way by the same caregiver, the baby often learns to trust. He will then be able to continue on in his development. Now, take a look at the disturbed attachment cycle:

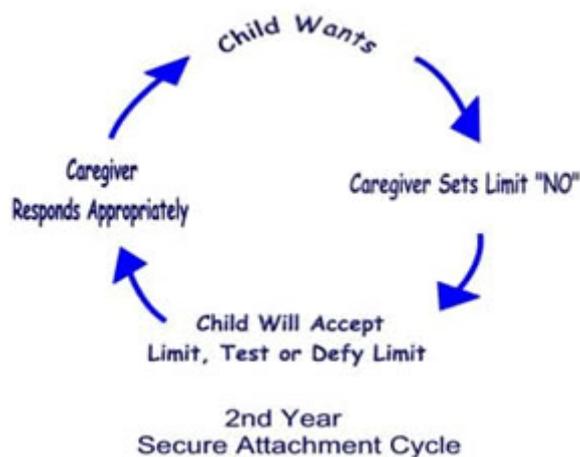
## NATP 26 What is Attachment Disorder?



As you compare the Healthy Attachment Cycle to the Disturbed Attachment Cycle, you can see how the baby has a need, cries, but this time, the need is not met by his mother (primary caregiver). Sometimes, the need is met but it is inconsistent, or there are different caregivers who are not attuned to this particular baby. Sometimes the baby's cries go unanswered as in the case of neglect or the baby's cries are met with a slap as in the case of physical abuse. Whatever the cause, the baby's needs are not met in a consistent, appropriate way. (See [Potential Causes](#))

Instead of learning to trust as the baby who experiences the Healthy Attachment Cycle, this baby learns that the world is an unsafe place, that he must take care of himself, that he can trust no one to meet his needs. He learns that he cannot depend on adults. Instead of trust developing, rage develops and is internalized. He learns that he must be in charge of his life for his very survival. Is it a wonder that a child with reactive attachment disorder feels the need to be in control? He thinks his very life depends on it.

If the child has been able to successfully go through the Healthy Attachment Cycle during his first year of life, then he most likely will be able to go through the next which is the Second Year Secure Attachment Cycle:



## NATP 26 What is Attachment Disorder?

**It is only by going through this Second Year Secure Attachment Cycle that the child will ever be able to learn to accept limits on his behaviour. It is by going through these two attachment cycles - the Healthy Attachment Cycle in the first year and then the Second Year Secure Attachment Cycle - that the child learns to trust, engage in reciprocity, to regulate his emotions. It is back there that he starts to develop a conscience, self- esteem, empathy, the foundations for logical thinking are laid down, etc. The breakdown of these two attachment cycles will damage all of the relationships he has for the rest of his life unless interventions are made.**

**When the first cycle breaks down, the child cannot do the second year. To expect the child to function as a typical child when his normal development was completely stunted back in infant/toddlerhood is not rational. We must take them back and help them redo these steps.**

([www.attachmentdisorder.net](http://www.attachmentdisorder.net))