

McConnell, R. A. (2017).

Designed for and by love: Working
with families from an attachment and
interpersonal neurobiology
framework. In: McMillan, L.,
Penwarden, S. & Hunt, S. (Eds). Stories
of Therapy, Stories of Faith. Wipf and
Stock, Oregon, USA.

Designed for and by love:

**Working with families from an
attachment and interpersonal
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Introduction

In this chapter I present an overview of my parent consulting work incorporating research from attachment theory and interpersonal neurobiology framed within a trinitarian, incarnational, theological anthropology. My original training as a counselling psychologist, in Aberdeen, Scotland, has been further supplemented by my training with Gordon Neufeld,¹ a Vancouver-based psychologist who uses an attachment-based developmental paradigm to understand parent/caregiver-child relational dynamics.

Attachment theory and interpersonal neurobiology can, I believe, offer helpful insights into human relationality. Before I address these fields of research, I will present a trinitarian, incarnational theological anthropology as the ontological foundation to the work that I do with clients.

A Trinitarian Incarnational Theological Anthropology

Trinitarian, incarnational theological anthropology offers insights into what it means to be made in the image of a triune relational God, *imago Dei*, providing a basis for understanding love, an appreciation of the distinctiveness and particularity of persons as well as their relatedness and embodiment in communion or community. In Gunton's words, "to be human

¹ Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*; Neufeld, *Power to Parent Parts 1–3*.

is to be created in and for relationship with divine and human others.”² Boff highlights the relational communion found in the Trinity:

For there to be true communion there must be direct and immediate relationships, eye to eye, face to face, heart to heart. The result of mutual surrender and reciprocal communion is community. Community results from personal relationships in which each is accepted as he or she is, each opens to the other and gives the best of himself or herself³

Boff refers to the Trinity’s mutuality and reciprocity, in terms of what I understand to be a non-judgemental, emotionally safe attachment, as well as adding an embodied dimension.

A trinitarian incarnational anthropology celebrates the uniqueness of persons where “self is never lost in the face of the other.”⁴ As Moltmann explains, “the three divine Persons exist with one another, for one another and in one another. They exist in one another because they mutually give each other space for full unfolding.”⁵ This mystery of unique particularity as well as mutual indwelling of the Persons of the trinity has been described as the Greek word, *perichoresis*; it describes the reciprocity of giving and receiving found in the perfect and eternal trinitarian relationship.⁶ The word *perichoresis* has been translated as a circle dance,⁷ or the mutual interpenetration of relationships.⁸ Rohr goes so far as to contend that “[t]he unending flow of giving and receiving between Father, Son, and Spirit is the pattern of reality. God is not only a dancer, but the Dance itself! We as Christians are invited to participate in rhythms of this dance of New Creation.”⁹

² Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 222.

³ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 3.

⁴ Balswick et al., *Reciprocating Self*.

⁵ Moltmann, *Coming of God*, 298.

⁶ Goff, “Measuring the Clergy/laity.”

⁷ Rohr and Morell, *Divine Dance*.

⁸ Kruger, *Great Dance*.

⁹ Rohr and Morell, *Divine Dance*.

When we take these suggestions as the basis of our anthropology, we can also see that we are made in the image of a relational God who characterises perfect love (absence of fear and defensiveness), respect and reciprocity, glad submission, mutual deference and joyful intimacy;¹⁰ who both wills the good of the others and is humbly open to her influence too. These characteristics are reflected within a good counselling relationship and a healthy adult-child attachment, for the full unfolding of each persons' growth into wholeness.

Trinitarian anthropology values the doctrine of the incarnation which emphasises holism, including the role of embodiment (our physiological and mental structures) as well as our relational nature (including our desire for meaning making and storied identities). This trinitarian emphasis on the incarnation, in my opinion, can be applied to counselling practice with the aid of insights from inter-personal neuroscience as well as attachment theory, which places the desire for relationship, or attachment hunger,¹¹ at the core of our embodied humanity. This can be particularly relevant when we reflect on the role our embodied selves play in the emotional healing experienced in therapy. Participation in the trinitarian life has an effect in and on our embodied existence; I would posit that this is mirrored in the effect that attachment has on our neurological development. In counselling especially, there is relational potential to heal wounded minds, at the embodied level, involving brain process (i.e., mirror neurons, synaptic connections and neural networks) as well as at the emotional and relational level. Could this be one way the incarnational reality of the Trinity shows up in the counselling encounter? Could this be one way we get to participate in the Divine Dance of the Trinity? I posit that whenever there is neuronal healing through secure attachment

¹⁰ Shaw as cited by Seamands, *Ministry*, 35.

¹¹ Neufeld, *Power to Parent 2*. Neufeld has coined the term 'attachment hunger' to describe the instinctual basis of our emotional and psychological need to connect; it follows similar laws of nature to natural physical hunger.

(healthy love), this is the work of the Trinity and a movement towards our true humanity in Christ. As the Apostle Paul says, where there is love, there is God, for God is love.¹²

Having established that trinitarian incarnational anthropology offers an analogy of persons centred on loving reciprocal relations between embodied individuals, I will now highlight insights from attachment theory and interpersonal neurobiology which resonate with the view that the Trinity invites us to participate in relational lives that are shaped by cruciform, other-centered giving and receiving love.¹³ I believe that the Trinity offers more than just a helpful template for humans to emulate if they want to love well; it also includes participating in the Divine nature of the Triune God, in whom we live and move and have our being.¹⁴

Attachment theory

Now let us turn our attention to attachment theory and how it may fit within this outlined theological anthropology. Attachment theory has become a crucial paradigm for the study of parent-child and adult romantic relationships,¹⁵ offering a scientifically grounded basis for understanding how we become who we are as relational beings.¹⁶ To put it more poetically, attachment theory highlights, “the primal dance of finding ourselves in another, and another in ourselves.”¹⁷ We can hear echoes of the divine dance metaphor here. It provides a powerful account of the formation of relational bonds that ensure our physical

¹² 1 John 4: 7, KJV.

¹³ Volf, “Social Program.”

¹⁴ Acts 17:28, KJV.

¹⁵ Johnson, “Attachment Perspective....”; Holmes and Johnson, “Adult Attachment.”

¹⁶ Robert, *Becoming Attached*.

¹⁷ Saltman, “Attachment Theory.”

survival and psychological security throughout our lifespan.¹⁸ Attachment theory has also led to new perspectives on thinking about and approaching our clients' spirituality.¹⁹

Attachment theory provides insights in to the suffering, vulnerabilities, and common feelings like anxiety, anger, grief and sadness that our clients bring to us.²⁰ It has an exceptionally strong empirical base, providing a lifespan developmental framework often absent in current treatment models.²¹ I have found that Attachment theory has helped me bridge the gap between research and practice as it underscores the centrality of relationships not just for healthy human well-being, but also the core relational dynamics central in therapeutic healing. It focuses on the need for physical and emotional proximity to an emotionally attuned caregiver in childhood, and a romantic partner in adulthood²² who provides a sense of security and a 'safe base' from which to explore and emerge into the world.

A caregiver's sensitivity to a child's distress appears to be a significant factor in determining the 'attachment style' that the infant develops,²³ identified as secure (representing about 70 per cent of the general population), and three insecure patterns – avoidant, anxious, and disorganized (representing approximately 10 percent each).²⁴ Insecure attachment styles have been understood to be 'survival strategies' to adapt to suboptimal caregiving environments, however, they can have an adverse effect on adjustment in later relationships, increasing one's vulnerability to psychopathology.²⁵ According to Bowlby, the

¹⁸ Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*; Bowlby, *Secure Base: Parent-Child*.; Lewis et al., *General Theory*.

¹⁹ Hall, "Psychoanalysis," 14.

²⁰ Wallin, *Attachment in Psychotherapy*.

²¹ Connors, "Attachment Theory."

²² Finkel and Eastwick, "Attachment and Pairbonding."

²³ Weinfield et al., "Individual Differences."

²⁴ Ainsworth et al., *Patterns*.

²⁵ Goodwin, "Relevance of Attachment Theory."

therapeutic relationship can be construed as an attachment relationship; effective therapy can repair early attachment failures by engendering ‘earned security.’²⁶ He conceptualised the major goal of therapy to help the client move from insecure to more secure attachment by providing a ‘corrective emotional experience.’²⁷ Since Bowlby's seminal paper²⁸ authors from a range of different therapeutic schools have developed these ideas further but, to date, there have been no systematic reviews of how attachment theory can inform the practice of psychotherapy.²⁹

One of the tenets of attachment theory is that attachment hunger, or our longing to experience a deep emotional connection to an “other,” is universal and as valid as physical hunger and as vital for our psychological well-being as food is for our physical well-being.³⁰ Rather than being a pathological childhood dependency that we outgrow, the desire to be attached in relationships is normal and remains with us throughout our lives.³¹ This inherent dependency also set us up for vulnerable wounding. Bowlby argued that more universally than the trauma of separation and loss, it was the ongoing, everyday interactions of children and their parents that shaped their psychological development.³²

Another important principle in Attachment theory is the concept of Internal Working Models (IWM), or mental representations/schemas, which develop from early relationships, guiding our feelings, thoughts and expectations in later relationships.³³ If a child is securely attached to their caregiver then their IWM would predispose them to see themselves as lovable

²⁶ Bowlby, “Affectional Bonds II.”

²⁷ As cited in Berry and Danquah, “Attachment-Informed Therapy,” 18.

²⁸ Bowlby, “Affectional Bonds I.”

²⁹ Berry and Danquah, “Attachment-Informed Therapy.”

³⁰ Neufeld, *Aggression*.

³¹ Greenberg and Johnson, *Emotionally Focused Therapy*.

³² Bowlby, *Secure Base: Clinical Applications*.

³³ Main and Solomon, “Insecure Disoriented Attachment.”

and others as trustworthy and accessible to care for them.³⁴ If insecurely attached, the child's IWM may lead them to believe they are not worthy of love (often resulting in low self-esteem) and are not able to trust others.³⁵ These internal thought processes and relational dynamics are now being able to be studied in greater detail due to recent advances in the field of neuroscience.

Before I progress, I need to clarify that I would not consider myself a classical attachment therapist for a number of reasons: firstly, I am not inclined to offer a diagnostic classification as rigidly defined by the four classically labelled attachment styles. I do not administer the AAI (Adult Attachment Inventory³⁶) and I resist diagnosis due to its reductionist, totalising potential. Secondly, my preference is to understand attachment along a continuum from secure to insecure³⁷ as I believe there to be more fluidity in relational styles across the lifespan and even within daily interactions; changes in attachment patterns can happen in either a positive or a negative direction, due to life stressors and changes in key relationships.³⁸ When I encountered Neufeld's attachment-based developmental approach (which is applied to parenting and teaching relationships) I could see its applicability to my therapeutic work as a children's counsellor, a family therapist and psychotherapist with adults suffering from anxiety, depression and relational distress.

The more I learn about Attachment theory the more I believe that when secure attachment is shaped in terms of triune love it has the potential for intrapsychic, interpersonal and spiritual healing. Attachment theory can be helpful for making sense of not just inter-

³⁴ Beardseele et al., "Affectively Ill Parents."; Main and Solomon, "Insecure Disoriented Attachment."

³⁵ Bowlby, *Affectional Bonds*.

³⁶ Griffin and Bartholomew, "Models of the Self," 430; Besharat, "Adult Attachment Inventory."

³⁷ Cowan and Cowan, "Seven Unresolved Issues."

³⁸ Waters et al., "Attachment Security."

personal relational dynamics,³⁹ but also the intra-psychoic elements and transcendent (spiritual) elements of our lived experience. My interpretation and application of attachment theory includes three dimensions: *inter-personal attachment* (how I relate to the other), *intra-psychoic attachment* (how I relate to my ‘self’; e.g the nature of my self-talk, the view I have of my identity and self-esteem, which form the basis of our Internal Working Models⁴⁰) and a *transcendent dimension* (which includes the spiritual, our relationship to God, our view of our place in the cosmos and our relationship to land and creation, which resonates with indigenous and especially a Māori ⁴¹worldview).

Interpersonal neurobiology

Since the 1990s, scientists greatly advanced our understanding of the brain, developing powerful tools to move from the study of neurons to circuits and, ultimately, to behaviour and emotional distress.⁴² How attachments change the architecture and functioning of the brain are questions examined by the field of interpersonal neurobiology⁴³ which involves the application of neuroscientific data to parenting, psychotherapy and education.⁴⁴

Research into the neuroscience of attachment sheds light on the embodied nature of human relationality. There is mounting evidence that seems to suggest that we are hardwired for connection;⁴⁵ it is the power of being with others that shapes our brains;⁴⁶ our

³⁹ Karen, *Becoming Attached*.

⁴⁰ Bretherton, “Updating.”; Macfie et al., “Intergenerational Transmission.”

⁴¹ Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Māori cosmology holds to an understanding of the land as being the placenta or the mythical place of the origin of humankind, therefore they do not introduce themselves from an individualistic Western identity position, but rather in relation to the land of their forebears.

⁴² Insel, “Decade.”

⁴³ Cozolino, *Neuroscience of Human Relationships*.

⁴⁴ Siegel, *Developing Mind*; Siegel and Hartzell, *Parenting*; Siegel and Goleman, *Mindsight*.

⁴⁵ Cozolino, *Neuroscience of Human Relationships*; Tatkin, *Wired for Love*; Goleman, *Social Intelligence*.

⁴⁶ Cozolino, *Neuroscience of Human Relationships*.

relationships shape our biology as well as our experiences.⁴⁷ Early nurturance plays a vital role in the development and integration of the diverse systems within our brains. Our embodiment, in the form of our brain-to-brain link (mirror neurons) allows our strongest relationships to shape us⁴⁸ and certain relationships can continue to repair our wounded minds throughout our lifespan.⁴⁹ So we can see that the fields of interpersonal neurobiology and attachment theory are very closely related.

Healing through relationship: Introducing Neufeld's model of attachment

Now that I have introduced some of the basic tenants of classical attachment theory, I will now introduce a second significant factor in the development of my attachment-based psychotherapeutic approach. I was introduced to Neufeld's work at a time in my life when I had two young daughters whom I was parenting with traditional behaviour-modification techniques, which I had been taught in my psychological training and had used in my work as a children's and family counsellor for years. However, when it came to the application of these principles to my own precious daughters, not only was I finding them less and less effective as they grew older, but I realised that I was causing damage to my relationship with them. One day a friend introduced me to Neufeld and Mate's book *Hold on to your kids*⁵⁰ which gave me insights into an attachment based understanding of parenting that revolutionised not only my relationship with my children, my partner and God, but also how I practiced counselling.

⁴⁷ Goleman, *Social Intelligence*; Siegel and Goleman, *Mindsight*.

⁴⁸ Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 56.

⁴⁹ Badenock, *Brain-Wise*; Cozolino, *Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*.

⁵⁰ Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*.

Like myself, I found that Neufeld has synthesised many developmental theories and has come up with a model which not only helped me make sense of my own human relationships but also my relationship with God. Neufeld presents a model of how healthy attachment may develop in the early years and continues to develop and strengthen across the lifespan. He outlines six ways that children attach to their caregivers, but it also applies to how all attachment forms across the life stages. Neufeld notes that ‘although [attachment] begins in infancy, the hunger for physical proximity never goes away.’⁵¹ I would add that our hunger for spiritual and emotional intimacy also never goes away.

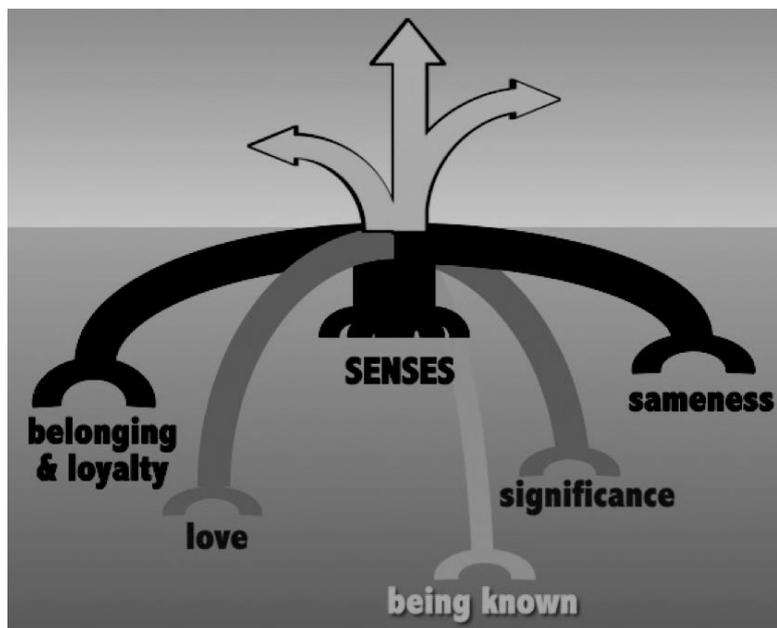


Figure 1. Source: Neufeld, G. (2008). *The Power to Parent: Attachment the vital connection*. DVD course, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Neufeld’s six levels of attaching progress sequentially involving increasing depths of intimacy and greater capacity for vulnerable, authentic relating. The levels move from being physical present, the least vulnerable form of connection, to emotional and psychological

⁵¹ Ibid., 21.

intimacy, the most vulnerable forms of relating. As the person develops increasing capacity for relational connection, by deepening their ‘attachment roots’, or having more ‘ways to hold on’ to another, as Neufeld⁵² says, so too do they develop greater capacity for emotional and psychological maturity.

Attachment level one: Senses. Attachment *through the senses*, involves physical proximity, or being with the attachment figure. This form of attachment begins from birth⁵³ through the first year of life and is mediated through the five senses. When the infant can’t be with their attachment figure, or closeness is threatened or disrupted, she will naturally express alarm, anxiety and protest.^{54 55}

Infants who were able to attach through the senses in their first years develop enough trust⁵⁶ and can start to internalise their relationships.⁵⁷ This also develops their capacity to progress in their developmental journey. I work with many parents who feel that their children have not securely attached to them or have detached due to some stress or emotional mis-attunement. My focus is to help them become the parent to whom their child will securely reattach. The kind of nurture a child at this stage of psychological development needs is primarily sensory-rich attachment: lots of hugs, lots of reassuring eye contact, a deeply reassuring tone of voice that doesn’t trigger displeasure (which might be perceived as a precursor to further rejection, emotional distancing or separation) and allowing the child to ‘shadow’ (hover very close) to the caregiver.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Some would argue that attachment actually begins in utero; Pollock and Percy, “Antenatal Attachment.”

⁵⁴ Bowlby, *Affectional Bonds*; Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss 3*.

⁵⁵ Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*, 20.

⁵⁶ Erikson, *Identity*.

⁵⁷ Bazzano, “Intersubjectivity.”; Bowlby and Fry, *Child Care*.

Many foster parents I work with have noticed this need in their foster children. I remember a foster parent of a twelve year old girl,⁵⁸ who had experienced extreme neglect and multiple attachment disruptions in her short life. In one of our sessions the foster mum expressed exasperation that her foster child was extremely clingy; she said she was starting to feel ‘really crowded’ and didn’t know what to do. I explained that this is ‘normal’ for a child who has had such deep attachment ruptures and neglect from early infancy. If we perceive her according to her chronological age, we may get alarmed and interpret her clinginess as a sign of pathology. We may be inclined to push her away to help her ‘stand on her own two feet’. However, in this case, pushing her away would be disastrous as it may lead to more attachment wounding and further detaching.

Neufeld contends that we all grow older but we all don’t necessarily grow up: he calls this developmental stuckness.⁵⁹ In the case of this twelve year old girl, the Educational Psychologist’s assessment of her cognitive and emotional development was at the level of a six year old. According to Anda and colleagues, the neglected, maltreated child is all too often an infant emotionally, who requires the kind of one-to-one interaction that normally only babies get.⁶⁰ This level of attachment may have been missing in this foster child’s infancy. In order to unfold into her natural developmental potential, she needed to be ‘fed’ metaphorically, at this level from a safe attachment figure, in order to become ‘satiated’⁶¹ and be able to progress to the next level of attachment.

⁵⁸ Examples throughout this chapter are composite clients based on work with a variety of clients in different contexts and in different times.

⁵⁹ Neufeld, *Power to Parent Part 2*.

⁶⁰ Anda et al., “Enduring Effects.”

⁶¹ Neufeld, *Power to Parent Part 2*.

The foster mother came to reframe this clingy behaviour as legitimate attachment hunger which had not been satiated (rather than ‘attention-seeking’), so she turned to try and meet these needs rather than turning the child away. According to Neufeld, children will naturally progress to the next level of development once they have had their attachment hunger satisfied at those earlier levels of attachment.⁶² The key to satiating a child’s attachment hunger is to give more than is being pursued.⁶³ From my perspective, the foster mother needed to lean into the child’s hugs and offer an even bigger hug so that the child comes to psychological rest, feeling satiated in the provision of healthy attachment. Over time the foster mother found that the child became less clingy and ‘let go’ of her spontaneously. Together we witnessed the process of maturation that was fuelled by a child’s attachment hunger being satisfied at this first level of attachment, by keeping someone we love close. However, ‘out of sight, out of mind’ is a very fragile way of being attached so as the child develops (starts walking, following after the attachment) the child progresses onto the next level of attaching so that they have more than one way of staying attached.

Attachment Level Two: Sameness. The second level of attaching is through *sameness*, “usually in evidence by toddlerhood... the child seeks to be like those she feels closest to.”⁶⁴ She attempts to copy and be as similar as possible to whom she is attaching, which features “prominently in learning language and in the transmission of culture.”⁶⁵ To attach by wanting to be like the attachment figure is what Neufeld refers to as identification: “to be one with that person or thing.”⁶⁶ This involves one’s sense of self merging with the object of

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*, 22.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

identification (e.g. parent, a hero, a group, a role, a country/nationalism). The more “dependent a child or person is, the more intense these identifications are likely to be.”⁶⁷

When I work with parents and caregivers of children who are insecurely attached, once they have mastered level one, attaching by *senses: being with*, I then encourage the parents to work at level two, *attaching through sameness*. By getting the parent to be able to find as many areas of similarity or sameness (“me too”) as possible with the child, reinforces this level of attachment: for example: “oh, you like that kind of music... me too!” or “you like watching that show...me too!”; “you and I both have blue eyes”.

Attachment Level Three: Belonging and Loyalty. If all is going well with the child’s attachment system, by the third year of life a child is able to have a third way or level of attaching: through *belonging and loyalty*. This is characterised by possessiveness, as well as desiring to be obedient to whom they are attached.⁶⁸ Neufeld states that “the attaching toddler will lay claim to whomever or whatever he is attach to – be it mummy, daddy, teddy bear or baby sister.”⁶⁹

The desire *to belong* and *be loyal* to one another is a natural attachment instinct; loyalty can be intense (e.g. gang-members’ behaviour) but it merely follows attachment instincts.⁷⁰ The key intervention to get a child re-attached is to have established levels one and two and then work at helping the child to develop a deep sense of *belonging* to the *whānāu*⁷¹ or family unit. Pre-schoolers are often fascinated by stories of what it was like for

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Māori: extended family unit.

them to join the family: were they anticipated or a surprise? Were they welcomed? They get great pleasure looking through baby photos and hearing early stories of their inclusion in the family unit. Once a child has securely attached to the caregiver at this level, they offer incredible loyalty, which manifests itself as being willing to be instructed (obedience rather than rebellion and secrets) and willingly following the caregiver's values and ideals.

Attachment Level Four: Significance. The fourth way of attaching is to seek to be *significant* or to matter to the one we are attaching to, which ensures emotional closeness, not just physical proximity.⁷² If all is going well with the other levels of attachment, then this stage usually happens at around age four to five. The attaching pre-schooler “seeks ardently to please and to win approval... is extremely sensitive to looks of displeasure and disapproval.”⁷³ The problem with this way of attaching is that it makes a child vulnerable to being hurt, because to want to be significant to someone who makes us feel that we don't matter results in an attachment wound. A sensitive child can be easily crushed “when the eyes he is scanning for signs of warmth and pleasure do not light up in his presence, be they the eyes of parent or peer.”⁷⁴

One of the phrases Neufeld uses to describe what attachment is all about is “being invited to exist in the presence of the other”⁷⁵ connoting hospitality, acceptance and love, and here we see another connection with trinitarian incarnational anthropology, which Jesus so concisely describes in the parable of the lost son.⁷⁶ Children who are attaching at level four

⁷² Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*, 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Neufeld, *Power to Parent Part 1*.

⁷⁶ Luke 15, KJV.

(wanting *to be significant*) are constantly looking for signs that they matter to the caregiver (e.g. “did you miss me when I was gone?”; “am I special to you?”).

I was working with a mother whose eight year old daughter was very anxiously attached to her. The mother was preparing to go on a business trip and knew that this would be hard for her daughter so we focused on how to help her daughter keep a sense of connection even while separated from her mother. The mother decided that she would put a note in the daughter’s diary for each day that she would be away (level four: *significance*), as well as one of her t-shirts with her perfume on it (level one: *senses* – smell) and daily phone calls home (level one: *senses* – hearing), saying lots of “I miss you too” (level two: *sameness* and acknowledging emotional connection). For anxiously attached children, tangible and sensory object (notes in lunch boxes, little gifts to be unwrapped each day, a stone or a shell from a walk together to keep in child’s pocket to touch regularly, a handkerchief or item of clothing with the caregiver’s scent/perfume on it) keeping the sense of connection and significance strong even in times of physical separation.

Attachment Level Five: Love/emotional intimacy. By the fifth year of life, a child is expected to be able to develop the fifth way or level of attachment: *through loving feelings* (emotional intimacy). If attaching via *the senses*, the first and most primitive way, is the short arm of attachment, *emotional intimacy or love*, would be the long arm.⁷⁷ For a five year old, who can feel deeply and vulnerably, the pursuit of emotional intimacy becomes intense. Experiencing this level of emotional intimacy with the parent results in higher resilience; the child can tolerate much more physical separation and yet hold the parent close, metaphorically, in their heart. The children carries the image of the loving and beloved parent

⁷⁷ Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*. 23.

in his mind (as an Internal Working Model), and finds support and comfort.⁷⁸ This is why Schore describes Attachment theory as an Emotional Regulation Theory.⁷⁹

Consider another example from my parent-consulting work: a mother who had an extremely anxious eight year old daughter who was defensively detached from her. She would often dictate to her mother rather than comply with her requests, becoming an *Alpha* child.⁸⁰ Neufeld describes the *Alpha complex* as the dynamic where a very anxiously attached child will go into a dominant, bossy and often bullying stance to try to regain power and take the lead in the child-caregiver relationship. In this case, the daughter's dominance of the mother disempowered her, which further exacerbated her daughter's anxiety. When an *Alpha* child sees their caregiver as impotent to protect them from a scary world, they often move into the lead rather than the dependent follower role. The daughter had taken the lead in the relational dance to the point of terrifying her mother with her aggression and overwhelming emotional "meltdowns". The focus of our work was to help the mother reclaim her rightful, benevolent, *Alpha* leader position in order for her daughter's anxiety levels to reduce.

Over a few months we worked at re-establishing a secure attachment, firstly by removing all the extra-curricular activities that were exhausting them both and over-stimulating their highly sensitive natures.⁸¹ A simplified life with more time to connect at home after school was my recommendation (*level one – attaching through the senses/being with*). Next we worked on level two, finding lots of way to attach through *sameness*; they

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ A Schore, "Attachment and the Regulation of the Right Brain," *Attachment & Human Development* 2, no. 1 (2000): 23–47.

⁸⁰ Neufeld, *Alpha Children*.

⁸¹ Both the mother and daughter would describe themselves as Highly Sensitive Persons; Aron, *Highly Sensitive Person*.

both loved crafts and quietly reading together. With level one and two in place, the daughter felt a more secure attachment to her mother, which moved her to level three: *attaching through belonging*. As the daughter let her mother take the lead more in the relationship, she moved to a more dependent position and came to more psychological rest in the relationship, which meant her anxiety levels reduced.

As the daughter's *Alpha dominance* abated, so too did the mother's hyper-aroused amygdala, the fight-flight response centre of the brain, which was always scanning for danger, expecting a 'meltdown' with her daughter. A core part of my therapeutic work is attending to the embodied aspects of the care-giver's attachment dynamics. Much of my work with the mother was to help her regulate her own anxiety levels (which were a residual aspect of her own attachment needs not being met in her childhood)⁸². The mother's more calm demeanour helped the daughter self-regulate so her outbursts and tantrums diminished. At the neurological level the mother was able to regulate the child through limbic resonance and attunement.⁸³ This meant the daughter felt less alarmed and anxious, so was able to relinquish her *Alpha* lead position in the dance, becoming more dependent and able to receive care rather than dictating how to be taken care of.

Within a few months the mother reported that the eight year olds bossy, aggressive behaviour and anxiety levels had reduced significantly and that she was receiving drawing of hearts and little "I love you" notes. This was an outward sign of an inward change: a sign of a

⁸² This is the intrapsychic attachment healing work that I do with the parent/caregiver as well as the focus on interpersonal attachment healing work between care-giver and child. For more on the subject of intergenerational transmission of attachment wounds see Macfie et al., "Intergenerational Transmission"; Clarke and Dawson, *Growing Up Again*.

⁸³ Schore, "Attachment and Regulation."; Schore, *Affect Regulation.*; Lewis et al., *General Theory*.

child *attaching through love, or emotional intimacy* (level five) and coming to more psychological rest in the secure attachment with her mother.

Attachment Level Six: Being known/psychological intimacy. Finally, the sixth way or level of attaching is through *being known* (psychological intimacy), which is usually observable by the time a child enters school. To feel close to someone is to be known by them; this is a recapitulation of level one attaching (*by the senses/being with*), except that being seen and heard are now experienced psychologically instead of strictly physically.⁸⁴ This emotional and psychological intimacy can involve sharing secrets, making the attachment bond very close and exclusive. Some of these secrets may even involve aspects of the self that may be seen as shameful, so when they are offered to the other and received with non-judgemental acceptance, this deepest level of attachment is secure.⁸⁵ Along with psychological intimacy come increased feelings of vulnerability if this bond is broken or secrets are betrayed. As a result, this is the rarest of intimacies; many of us are reluctant to share even with loved ones our deepest concerns and insecurities about ourselves, or our most shameful shadow side. Yet there is no closeness that can surpass the sense of feeling known and still being liked, accepted, welcomed, and fully, unconditionally invited to exist.⁸⁶

When we are able to relate at this depth of intimacy, in a therapy session or in our own relationships, this for me, is like walking on holy ground. This can be seen as a reflection of the Trinity's joyful intimacy⁸⁷. When we reach this level of depth and safety in human relationships it provides a fertile ground for our full psychological and emotional

⁸⁴ Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*, 23.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Shaw as cited in Seamands, *Ministry in the Image*.

maturation.⁸⁸ This echoes Moltmann's description of how the members of the trinity "give each other space for full unfolding."⁸⁹

With each new level of attachment, deeper vulnerability is involved. However, this increased capacity for vulnerable attaching leads to greater psychological maturity. The less mature the child is the more infantile his attaching. If there is only one way of holding on (i.e. *through being with/senses*) then the clinging is likely to be intense and desperate. The quest for *sameness (level two)* and *being with each other (level one)* are among the least vulnerable ways of attaching. If development of the attachment is healthy, these six strands become interwoven into a strong rope of connection that can preserve closeness even under the most adverse circumstances.⁹⁰ A securely attached child has many ways of staying close and holding on, even when physically apart.

Along with vulnerable attaching come many vulnerable feelings. In my work with parents, I find that much of their unresolved childhood attachment dynamics often start to heal, through the attachment that is created between us, the therapist and the client. For example, I saw this kind of healing with a mother who had been eroded by her eleven year old son's *Alpha* dominance: bullying her, threatening her with a knife, erupting in aggression, impulsivity and displaying obsessive tendencies. She had sought help in the adolescent mental health system but had mostly been given diagnoses. Then she 'fell out of the system' and came to see me. She became aware of Gordon Neufeld's work when she attended a day seminar on *Making Sense of Anxiety*.⁹¹ She came to realise that many of the behaviours that

⁸⁸ Neufeld, *Power to Parent Part 2*; Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*.

⁸⁹ Moltmann, *Coming of God*, 298.

⁹⁰ Neufeld and Mate, *Hold On*, 23.

⁹¹ Neufeld, *Anxiety*.

she saw her son displaying could be due to anxiety, and the answer may lie in his attachment with her. Sadly, she did not believe that she would be enough of an answer for him: she had lost her *Alpha* lead in the relationship. For a few sessions we focused on what it would look like for her to *become an answer* for her son, not necessarily *to have all the answers*; taking care of her son's attachment needs, especially for contact and closeness (level one: *senses*) when he was most anxious.

After a few sessions I could see an internal shift had taken place; she seemed more confident, less anxious and more grounded. She was moving into her legitimate *Alpha* position. I asked her if she had noticed this in herself and she beamed and nodded. "Where did you get your beautiful *Alpha* from?" I asked. She replied without missing a beat: "From you; you have become my safe place." She went on to say that she had come to realise that she needed to help her son feel safe in the world: "I try to be safe for him as you have been to me." This is an example of the power of a corrective emotional experience in the therapeutic encounter which leads to a secure attachment within the client-counsellor relationship. This, in turn, emanates into the parent-child subsystem in the family, offering hope for the next generation, to be loved well and to go on to loving well.

Conclusion

In my counselling and parent-consulting work I believe I love others through helping them parent from a healthy attachment base, mirrored in the secure attachment I offer in therapy. My ability to love and metaphorically 'hold' my clients in a secure attachment comes from my experience of the love at the heart of the Trinity. This love ripples out incarnationally as I love my clients and they love their children.

According to Wallin, if early relationships ‘promoted an insecure attachment pattern then subsequent relationships can offer us second chances, perhaps affording us the potential to love, feel and reflect with the freedom that flows from secure attachment. Psychotherapy, at its best, provides just such a healing relationship.’⁹² I posit that this is an example of the power of incarnated love in relational healing; through embodied love, even after neglect or abandonment in early life, synaptic connections can be rewired if a child receives secure attachment in later life, or an adult client in a therapeutic encounter.

Thus, love in its embodied form (neural connections and attachment dynamics) is present in each counselling encounter. Love embodied leads to healing hearts, minds and relationships, as we are “invited to exist in the presence of the other.”⁹³ In counselling, we love as a reflection of the Trinity’s relational dance, characterised by reciprocity, mutuality, particularity, separateness as well as in emotionally safe community, offering hospitality and embrace for the healing and restoration of our clients. The Trinity loves through incarnation, through embodiment. We have all been invited into the divine dance; to share the divine privilege of partnering with the Trinity in this beautiful Kingdom project of healing love.

⁹² Wallin, *Attachment in Psychotherapy*, 14.

⁹³ Neufeld, *Power to Parent Part 1*.

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