

## Attachment Theory

by Maria Hewett

*“Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another person across time and space.”*

*(Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969)*

*It wasn't supposed to turn out like this.* The cliché runs like a ticker tape through my mind. But it's the best description for the past three years, which have passed like a series of car crashes. Each crash renders a new appendage inoperable. Eventually, every limb is damaged, and I become immobile, paralyzed in a reality I do not recognize but cannot escape. *It wasn't supposed to turn out like this.*

It has been three years since he joined our family at age thirteen. Three years since he boarded a plane for the first time and landed 9,000 miles from the only place he had ever known. My husband and I had waited so long; we wanted this.

Now, every morning, I balance a banana and bowl of cereal in one hand while unlocking the deadbolt on the hallway door with the other. I set the bowl on the floor and rap firmly on his bedroom door. “Okay, time to wake up.” My voice is intentionally robotic. The sheets on his bed rustle. I slip out of the hall and return the deadbolt to the locked position.

Six months ago, he returned from a supposedly therapeutic boarding school for troubled, violent, out-of-control boys. Which means my routine with the doors and locks is six months strong—one locked door between him us at all times. Six months of navigating the house with a wristlet of color-coded keys that I begrudgingly dub my warden keys. Six months of being perpetually on edge. I can feel my nerves fraying, but I need them to be sharp, alert, aware. Six months in, and the ordeal still feels as absurd as it sounds.

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Growing up, the only adopted kids I knew were of a different race than their adoptive parents. My five-year-old brain concluded that this was true of all adoptions. Childish ignorance aside, I never—even then—wanted biological children. If I were to become a mother someday, it would be through adoption. One Christmas, I begged my parents for the American Girl doll, Addy. It was 1994, and Addy was the brand's only non-white doll. I took Addy everywhere, pretending she was my adopted daughter. In hindsight, I'm shocked that my mom obliged the wish.

For the entirety of my childhood, any viewpoint I held that diverged from my mother's was quickly dismissed as a phase. "You'll grow out of that—wait and see," was my mom's chorus. In my teen years, I mentioned that I wanted to adopt some day and was met with an eye roll. "Why do you have to make everything so difficult? Always drawing attention to yourself. What's wrong with living a normal life?" she bemoaned. I assume she filed the interaction under *Obstinate Teenager Phase*.

When my husband and I adopted, my mother's opinion had not changed, but she could no longer shelve my deviance as a phase. And now my husband was an accomplice. Two villains for the price of one. Time had sharpened her words from condescension to daggers. Time had sharpened her words from condescension to daggers. But I had donned armor to blunt her attacks. More importantly, her critiques taught me a valuable lesson: Biology does not guarantee a bond. Her disapproval and viciousness helped prepare me for what awaited. For that, I owe her gratitude.

*Never let your guard down. Never show weakness. He'll see you as soft.* The refrain has echoed from therapists, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, my husband...over and over. The words are branded in my brain. *No softness? But I'm his mother.* I want to disagree with them, but then my memory fires. It jolts me back: me in a fog lying on the pavement while he glowers from the top of the porch steps. The flashback ends. My cheeks burn—from anger? Shame? I'm unsure. My heart races, and I want air. No. I need air. So, I agree. No softness. Got it.

At first, therapists and social workers did everything they could to squeeze our family's "growing pains" into the tidy box of attachment disorder issues common among

adoptive families. I wanted our experience to fit in that box. Attachment is the process of a child bonding to his or her caregiver. The optimal window for forming secure attachments is the first two years of life. At thirteen, our son was long past the optimal stage. Add trauma into the mix, and the attachment process becomes even more complicated. All the right ingredients were there; the attachment disorder explanation made sense. Struggling to attach was a hurdle we had anticipated. Before he ever set foot in our house, I read every book available on the subject. But sometimes you mix the same ingredients together and get a different result. As it turned out, his ability to *form* an attachment was not a problem.

He bonded to me almost immediately. Internally, I celebrated our attachment win. In fact, when we met with the social worker for our first mandatory post-adoption meeting, she raved about his “secure attachment.” She shrugged off his dishonest and sneaky behaviors, rebranding them as resourcefulness. My husband and I nodded amiably. Other warning signs were beginning to flash, but we stayed tight lipped about those. He’d only been with us for three months; our level of cautious optimism remained high. At least attachment—which we expected to be one of our largest hurdles—was one less thing to worry about.

We did not yet understand the threat that his version of attachment posed.

I’ll never forget the day when he realized that American men don’t habitually and openly beat their wives. It was nearly Thanksgiving. He had been in our home for about four months. I don’t know why or how this epiphany struck him, but something sparked the question, “Why Dad no hit you?” I put on my best I’m-not-shocked-face and explained why violent behavior was never acceptable. He did not buy it. Instead, he asked, “No, really. Why? Because Momma is too strong?”

Thinking of my spaghetti-noodle arms, I choked back a laugh. “No, because it’s never okay,” I replied.

Still not convinced, he tried again. “Because Momma is too fast?”

I explained that despite what he saw in the village where he grew up, it is never okay for people to treat one another that way. Hoping to drive home the theme of respect, I added sternly, “Men and women are equal.”

This prompted hysterical laughter, thigh slapping, and vigorous head shaking. The way he saw it, a man must show a woman that “he is the boss” (which apparently means that he beats her). Tracing his logic, he crossed his arms and smiled smugly. “That means Dad isn’t a real man.”

In that moment, I found this exchange to be ridiculous and mildly comical. Sure, it upset me, but a boy who was raised by Catholic nuns and grew up without male role models was attempting to educate me on the definition of manhood. It was at least a *little* funny. Apparently, my very large, former special ops husband didn’t pass the manhood test. Why? Because he does not beat me.

Later, the gravity of his worldview sunk in. A woman is an object to dominate and control, and the idea of treating a woman as an equal was utterly disgusting to him. Knowing that his dad held an opposing view was inconceivable, and he lost a perceptible amount of respect for my husband as a result. While I found this disturbing, another of his takeaways posed a more immediate threat. He concluded that if my husband wasn’t in charge of me, then no one was. And a woman displaying independence was both repulsive and absurd. He struggled to articulate this belief, but his actions spoke volumes. He was determined to right the wrong himself.

This was when the possessiveness began. I was his. Therefore, I belonged to no one else. He desired to choreograph how, when, where, and most importantly, with whom I spent my time. It became a frantic, daily attempt to guarantee that nothing competed with him for my love and attention. The less successful his attempts were, the more desperate and out of control his efforts became. Shouting. Throwing objects. Breaking things. A toddler’s tantrum in a fourteen-year-old’s body. His rage-filled fits were awful, but the subtler moments unnerved me even more. Whenever a friend hugged me hello or goodbye, he shot her a look that could pierce body armor. “*No. She’s mine, not yours,*” he communicated wordlessly. His behavior sent chills through my friends, and some were so unsettled that they distanced themselves.

But his jealousy of my husband was the worst of all. He loathed weekends and evenings when his dad was home, when my time and attention would not exclusively be his. Any signs of affection between my husband and I were met with his icy, piercing stare. But his frustration with his dad’s audacious desire to spend time in his own home

was always directed at me, never at his dad. While he may have questioned my husband's manliness, the male stature and gender were inherently more respected and feared than any female. I didn't even need to speculate about his jealousy; he'd confirmed his feelings multiple times during furious diatribes, one of which shattered a recently assembled Star Wars Lego set. Another resulted in shredding family photos featuring the three of us. Multiple times, I fled his flying fists already feeling the throbbing ache of not-yet-visible bruises.

I was initially so grateful that he formed an attachment that it gradually blinded me to reality. I trusted that the jealousy would subside. Eventually, he would stop seeing external factors as threats. But this emotional naivety burned me.

Things deteriorated quickly. The more his character came into focus, the less comfortable it was to be alone with him. Then, when he had been with us for nine months, he turned everything upside-down. The curveball of all curveballs.

The scene is chiseled in my memory. He had just come inside from jumping on the trampoline. Then, between sips of water, he recounted in vivid excruciating detail how he'd molested younger children, both boys and girls, while he lived in the orphanage. Stated as fact and without a flicker of remorse. I can picture his expression clearly—the distant coldness of his eyes and a self-satisfied smirk. The smirk made me nauseous. He felt *power* in the retelling. Shivers ran up my spine; I couldn't move. The human before me morphed from boy to monster with every sickening detail.

Patterns of abuse are especially high in institutional environments such as orphanages. Data suggests that he was likely a victim of similar abuse. When asked, he has repeatedly denied that anything of the sort happened to him. It is possible that he was never abused or that he was too young to remember. Or maybe, his denial preserves the power he feels from *his* version of the narrative—one in which he is the perpetrator only. Abuser equals power; victim equals powerless. He had grown up a victim of his world, whether or not he was the victim of another abuser.

And then, recounting how he had abused other children, he provided the gut punch, the five words that changed everything and shaped every day of my life since: “I

will do it again,” he said. Then, as if issuing a challenge, he added, “when Momma’s not looking.”

My brain froze, echoing my body’s inability to move, as if yet another limb had truly been severed. Was this a power play—an empty threat in search of a reaction? Or did he mean it? I could not know for certain. If he ruined someone’s life on my watch, I would never forgive myself. The dangers he posed inside our home now paled in comparison to what he threatened to do beyond it. When I could form words, I told him that he could ever hurt or touch someone like that again, and refusing to let him see me upset, I left the room, the only action I could summon. Away from him, I collapsed under the gravity of his words. I felt crushed by the weight of his past actions. Of these new threats. How could I call such a person my son? I contemplated his attachment to me. My attachment to him. Both felt sickening. I had a new job: to *never* let him act on his threats.

After that day, I have never looked at him the same way.

It was about a month later that I woke up on the concrete patio after he shoved me from the porch stairs. When I regained consciousness, his silhouette towered above me. He had lived in the home we had tried to create for almost a year, and the incident was the proverbial last straw for my husband. The debate was over: Our home was now officially unsafe. My husband thought that a boarding school for troubled boys seemed like the best of the bad options. I was hesitant, but after he was kicked out of two local schools, we’d run out of choices.

A few weeks later, we dropped him off. I expected to be sad. Instead, I felt relieved.

Things did not improve at the boarding school. Rarely did he interact or participate in earnest; an ulterior agenda was always close at hand. He often sat alone surveying the room, homing in on weaknesses to exploit, like a lion assessing the herd. He returned home more out of control than when he left—more violent, angry, volatile, calculated. During one of our scheduled check-ins, the onsite therapist bluntly described him as

“dangerous, manipulative, and predatory.” What every parent wants to hear about their child.

After months at the school, he hadn’t made a single friend. “A bully. Not a nice kid,” the dean said. We waited and prayed for something to click, for some sort of breakthrough. None occurred. Because he’d not shown any progress, after eighteen months, the school kicked him out. He left a path of destruction in his wake. His list of documented wreckage was lengthy, including injuring another student so severely that the boy needed reconstructive plastic surgery. The other student’s family opted not to pursue charges. Sometimes, I think they should have. Being expelled let him off easy.

While away, he’d grown into a man’s body and was now six inches taller. He towered over me, and he knew it.

Almost overnight, the psychologists’ and psychiatrists’ language shifted; the vocabulary associated with attachment disorders and repeated trauma disappeared. Scarier words like sociopathy and antisocial personality disorder replaced them, spoken with the practiced distance and ease of seasoned diagnosticians, as though his conditions were simple and resolvable like an ear infection or a fractured wrist. One clinician pointed out minute differences between the two conditions. The other equated them. I wasn’t interested in minutiae, but I did want to know why two independent professionals abruptly arrived at the same conclusion at the same time. Sociopathy was a far cry from an attachment disorder. What had they seen? What changed? Neither would address my question directly. Both offered diluted explanations that an official diagnosis wasn’t possible prior to age eighteen. “Why not?” I contested. “That’s ridiculous!” There would be no psychiatric diagnoses until then, I was told. “But teens are diagnosed with depression and anxiety all day long,” I pushed back. “How is that any different?” Based on one clinician’s tired sigh, I sensed that he agreed but was too professional to admit it.

Manipulativeness, narcissism, desire for power and control, volatility, dishonesty, inability to make friends, lack of remorse, uncontrolled anger, impulsiveness...the same ingredients, different recipe. The human brain is less of a math equation and more of a choose-your-own-adventure. However, this adventure wasn’t what I chose.

*Sociopath.* What does one do with that information? There's no medication. No vaccine. No proven treatment. I want someone credible to lay out a plan and say, "Here's what you do..."

Attending functions with family and friends now poses too high of a risk. So, I politely decline invitation after invitation. When pushed, I sidestep an explanation. "Trust me, if you knew the whole picture, you wouldn't want us to come." I force a laugh for levity's sake. I am always assured that we are welcome, but by now, the evidence is stacked in my favor. The few who know the whole picture no longer extend invitations open to all three of us. Then they reach out less frequently all together. Some admit they don't know what to say. I get it. I don't know what to say either. With few places for us to go and the reality and fear of what could happen if we did, I am tethered to the house. "*I will do it again.*" His words haunt me.

My house has become a labyrinth of locks, keys, protocol, precautions, and cameras. So many cameras. Kitchen knives, scissors, nail files: locked away in a safe. Any object big or hard enough to cause injury if thrown or wielded: removed. The ever-shrinking list of harmless objects has depopulated shelves and emptied drawers. The number of items that, in the wrong hands, could be sharpened into a weapon or used for other nefarious purposes is staggering. Security cameras in every room document bouts of rage, violence, and sneakiness. The one benefit of a narcissistic personality is a hatred of being held accountable, and the cameras hold him accountable. He despises them, which also makes them a moderately effective deterrent.

I used to love this house. Old and charming, I thought we might live here forever, or until the stairs became too much for our knees. When we remodeled the kitchen, I had tile custom-made to replicate those uniquely found in my family's ancestral Sicilian town. The tiles create a bright colorful pattern that covers an entire wall; the next owner will probably rip it out. I used to love that wall, but now, like the rest of the house, it is tainted. I will not grow old here. Our craftsman bungalow is now a prison, of which I am both its warden and prisoner.

When is a parent no longer responsible for their child's actions and choices? The law says eighteen. That answer is too simple. Sometimes my dreams play out

impossible scenarios where I desperately race to protect the kids in the orphanage from him. In each iteration of the dream, I never make it in time. I think of the boy at the boarding school who he beat to a bloody, unconscious pulp. The incident feels as much my fault as his, yet I wasn't there. If he hurts someone again ten years from now, twenty...I doubt I will feel differently. Will I ever?

*I am his mother.* I am the reason he now lives 9,000 miles from his birthplace. One moment, I am terrified of him; the next, I am terrified for him. Attachment is not a one-way street. It's a connection. Neither a choice nor automatic. It can soothe; it can sicken. It is a double-edged sword that defies logic, time, and space. Weapon or comfort? Even biology cannot guarantee which form it takes. Yet, once forged, the bond is inseverable. Attachment, the thing I worried he might never develop, now permanently binds us. Him to me. Me to him.



**Maria Hewett** is an unabashed word-nerd living in the Seattle area with her family of three humans and three dogs. A perpetual student of the natural world and the creatures in it, she draws no shortage of inspiration from her surroundings, whether close to home or across the globe. When she isn't writing Middle Grade fiction or devouring novels and memoirs, Maria can be spotted running with her dog at an unreasonably slow pace or exploring the trails of the Pacific Northwest by mountain bike, foot, or ski.