and of social functioning. In the human domain, attachment is the pursuit and preservation of proximity, of closeness and connection: physically, behaviorally, emotionally, and psychologically. As in the material world, it is invisible and yet fundamental to our existence. A family cannot be a family without it. When we ignore its inexorable laws we court trouble.

We are creatures of attachment, whether or not we are aware of it. Ideally, we should not have to become conscious of attachment. We ought to be able to take its forces for granted: like gravity keeping our feet on the ground, like the planets staying in orbit, like our compasses pointing to the magnetic North Pole. One doesn’t have to understand attachment or even know that it exists to benefit from its work and its power, just as one doesn’t have to understand computers to use them or to know about engines to drive a car. Only when things break down is such knowledge required. It is primarily attachment that orchestrates the instincts of a child as well as of a parent. As long as attachments are working, we can afford to simply follow our instincts—automatically and without thought. When attachments are out of order, our instincts will be, too. Fortunately, we humans can compensate for skewed instincts by increasing our awareness of what has gone awry.

Why must we become conscious of attachment now? Because we no longer live in a world where we can take its work for granted. Economics and culture today no longer provide the context for the natural attachment of children to their nurturing adults. From the point of view of attachment we may truly say that as a society we are living in historically unprecedented times—and in the next chapter we will discuss how the social, economic, and cultural bases for healthy child-parent attachments have become eroded. To find our way back to natural parenting that best serves healthy child development, we need to become fully aware of the attachment dynamic. In a world of increasing cultural turbulence, a consciousness of attachment is probably the most important knowledge a parent could possess. But it is not enough to understand attachment from the outside. We must know it from within. The two ways of knowing—to know about and to experience intimately—must come together. We must feel attachment in our bones.

Attachment is at the core of our being, but as such it is also far removed from consciousness. In this sense, it is like the brain itself: the deeper into it one goes, the less consciousness one finds. We like to see ourselves as creatures with intellect: Homo sapiens we call our species, “man who knows.” And yet the thinking part of our brain is only a thin layer, while a much larger part of our cerebral circuitry is devoted to the psychological

WHY WE MUST BECOME CONSCIOUS OF ATTACHMENT

What is attachment? Most simply stated, it is a force of attraction pulling two bodies toward each other. Whether in physical, electrical, or chemical form, it is the most powerful force in the universe. We take it for granted every day of our lives. It holds us to the earth and keeps our bodies in one piece. It holds the particles of the atom together and binds the planets in orbit around the sun. It gives the universe its shape.

In the psychological realm, attachment is at the heart of relationships

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dynamics that serve attachment. This apparatus, which has been aptly called the “attachment brain,” is where our unconscious emotions and instincts reside. We humans share this part of our brain with many other creatures, but we alone have the capacity to become conscious of the attachment process.

In the psychological life of the developing young human being—and for many grown-ups, too, if we’re honest about it—attachment is what matters most. For children, it’s an absolute need. Unable to function on their own, they must attach to an adult. Physical attachment in the womb is necessary until our offspring are viable enough to be born. Likewise, our children must be attached to us emotionally until they are capable of standing on their own two feet, able to think for themselves and to determine their own direction.

**ATTACHMENT AND ORIENTATION**

Closely related to the orienting instinct introduced in the previous chapter, attachment is crucial to parenting, to education, and to the transmission of culture. Like attachment, the orienting instinct is basic to our nature, even if we rarely become conscious of it. In its most concrete and physical form, orienting involves locating oneself in space and time. When we have difficulty doing this, we become anxious. If on waking we are not sure where we are or whether we are still dreaming, locating ourselves in space and time gets top priority. If we get lost while on a hike, we will not pause to admire the flora and fauna, or to assess our life goals, or even to think about supper. Getting our bearings will command all of our attention and consume most of our energy.

Our orienting needs are not just physical. Psychological orientation is just as important in human development. As children grow, they have an increasing need to orient: to have a sense of who they are, of what is real, why things happen, what is good, what things mean. To fail to orient is to suffer disorientation, to be lost psychologically—a state our brains are programmed to do almost anything to avoid. Children are utterly incapable of orienting by themselves. They need help.

Attachment provides that help. The first business of attachment is to create a **compass point** out of the person attached to. As long as the child can find himself in relation to this compass point, he will not feel lost. Instincts activated in the child impel him to keep that working compass point ever close. Attachment enables children to hitch a ride with adults who are, at least in the mind of a child, assumed to be more capable of orienting themselves and finding their way.

What children fear more than anything, including physical harm, is getting lost. To them, being lost means losing contact with their compass point. Orienting **voids**, situations where we find nothing or no one to orient by, are absolutely intolerable to the human brain. Even adults who are relatively self-orienting can feel a bit lost when not in contact with the person in their lives who functions as their working compass point.

If we as adults can experience disorientation when apart from those we are attached to, how much more will children. I still remember how bereft I felt when Mrs. Ackerberg, the first-grade teacher to whom I was very attached, was absent: like a lost soul, out adrift, aimless.

A parent is by far a child’s best compass point—or another adult, like a teacher, who acts as a parent substitute. But who becomes the compass point is a function of attachment. And attachment, as we all know, can be fickle. The crucially important orienting function can be bestowed on someone ill-suited for the task—a child’s peers, for example. When a child becomes so attached to her peers that she would rather be with them and be like them, those peers, whether singly or as a group, become that child’s working compass point. It will be her peers with whom she will seek closeness. She will look to her peers for cues on how to act, what to wear, how to look, what to say, and what to do. Her peers will become the arbiters of what is good, what is happening, what is important, and even of how she defines herself. That is precisely what had occurred in Cynthia’s case: in her emotional universe, her peers had replaced her parents as the center of gravity. She revolved around them—a complete subversion of the natural order of things.

Only recently have the psychological attachment patterns of children been well charted and understood. Absolutely clear is that children were meant to revolve around their parents and the other adults responsible for them, just as the planets revolve around the sun. And yet more and more children are now orbiting around each other.
Superficially, one could argue that their attachment with peers is serving them well if it keeps them from being lost and bewildered. In reality, it does not save them from getting lost, only from feeling lost.

**THE SIX WAYS OF ATTACHING**

If we are to nurture our kids successfully, we must come to terms with attachment. The following discussion is intended to help parents gain a working knowledge of this crucial dynamic. "If you don't understand your kid," said one mother interviewed for this book, "you can't stand your kid." Understanding attachment is the single most important factor in making sense of kids from the inside out. It also enables us to identify the warning signs when a child is becoming peer-oriented.

We can identify six ways of attaching, each of them providing a clue to the behavior of our children—and, often, to our own behavior as well. These six ways ascend from the simple to the more complex. Notice that peer-oriented kids tend to employ only the most basic modes when attaching to each other.

**Senses**

Physical proximity is the goal of the first way of attaching. The child needs to sense the person he is attached to, whether through smell, sight, sound, or touch. He will do whatever he can to maintain contact with that person. When closeness is threatened or disrupted, he will express alarm and bitter protest.

**Sameness**

The second way of attaching is usually well in evidence by toddlerhood. The child seeks to be like those she feels closest to. She attempts to assume the same form of existence or expression by imitation and emulation. This form of attachment figures prominently in learning language and in the transmission of culture. It has been noted that since the Second World War the vocabulary of the average child has diminished significantly. Why? Because children now acquire language from each other. Peer-oriented children model one another’s walk and talk, preferences and gestures, appearance and demeanor.

Another means of attaching through sameness is identification. To identify with someone or something is to be one with that person or thing. One’s sense of self merges with the object of identification. This entity may be a parent, a hero, a group, a role, a country, a sports team, a rock star, an idea, or even one’s work. Extreme nationalism and racism are based on identifying one’s sense of self with one’s country or ethnic group.
Belonging and Loyalty
The third way of attaching also makes its debut in toddlerhood—if all is unfolding as it should. To be close to someone is to consider that person as one’s own. The attaching toddler will lay claim to whomever or whatever he is attached to—be it mommey or daddy or teddy bear or baby sister. In the same way, peer-oriented kids jealously seek to possess one another and to protect against loss. Conflicts generated by possessiveness can become vicious and intense. Who is whose best friend occurs as a life-or-death question to many adolescents. This immature mode of attaching predominates much of the interaction of peer-oriented children, especially between peer-oriented girls.

On the heels of belonging comes loyalty—being faithful and obedient to one’s chosen attachment figures. Peer-oriented kids are just following their natural attachment instincts when they keep each other’s secrets, take each other’s side, and do the other’s bidding. Loyalty can be intense, but it merely follows attachment. If a child’s attachment changes, so will the sense of belonging and loyalty.

Significance
The fourth way of pursuing closeness and connection is to seek significance, which means that we feel we matter to somebody. It is human nature to hold close what we value. To be dear to someone is to ensure closeness and connection. The attaching preschooler seeks ardently to please and to win approval. He is extremely sensitive to looks of displeasure and disapproval. Such children live for the happy face of those they are attached to. Peer-oriented children do the same, but the countenance they want to shine is that of their peers. Those they call “nice” are usually the ones who like and approve of them, even if the same “nice” person is nasty to others.

The problem with this way of attaching is that it makes a child vulnerable to being hurt. To want to be significant to someone is to suffer when we feel we don’t matter to that special person. Seeking someone’s favor leads to feeling wounded by signs of disfavor. 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. Most parents, though imperfect, are far less likely than peers to keep on hurting children this way.

Feeling
A fifth way of finding closeness is through feeling: warm feelings, loving feelings, affectionate feelings. Emotion is always involved in attachment, but in a preschooler who can feel deeply and vulnerably, the pursuit of emotional intimacy becomes intense. Children who pursue connection in this way often fall in love with those they attach to. A child who experiences emotional intimacy with the parent can tolerate much more physical separation and yet hold the parent close. If attaching via the senses—the first and most primitive way—is the short arm of attachment, love would be the long arm. The child carries the image of the loving and beloved parent in his mind, and finds support and comfort in it.

But now we are getting into dangerous territory. To give one’s heart away is to risk it being broken. Some people never develop the capacity to be emotionally open and vulnerable, usually due to early perceptions of rejection or abandonment. Those who have loved and suffered hurt may retreat to less vulnerable modes of attaching. As we will show, vulnerability is something peer-oriented children seek to escape. When deeper forms of attachment appear too risky, the less vulnerable modes will predominate. Emotional intimacy is much less common among peer-oriented kids than in parent-oriented kids.

Being Known
The sixth way of attaching is through being known. The first signs of this final way of attaching are usually observable by the time a child enters school. To feel close to someone is to be known by them. In some ways, this is a recapitulation of attaching by way of the senses, except that being seen and heard are now experienced psychologically instead of strictly physically. In the pursuit of closeness, a child will share his secrets. In fact, closeness will often be defined by the secrets shared. Parent-oriented children do not like to keep secrets from their parents because of the resulting loss of closeness. For a peer-oriented child, his best friend is the one he has no secrets from. One cannot get much more vulnerable than to expose...
oneself psychologically. To share oneself with another and then be misunderstood or rejected is, for many, a risk not worth taking. As a result, this is the rarest of intimacies and the reason so many of us are reluctant to share even with loved ones our deepest concerns and insecurities about ourselves. Yet there is no closeness that can surpass the sense of feeling known and still being liked, accepted, welcomed, invited to exist.

Six ways of attaching but only one underlying drive for connection. If development is healthy, these six strands become interwoven into a strong rope of connection that can preserve closeness even under the most adverse circumstances. A fully attached child has many ways of staying close and holding on, even when physically apart.