

“Sideways Approach” with Avoidant Attachment Patterns

A - Avoidant Attachment Adaptation

- Children who rely on avoidant attachment strategies have learned that showing emotion or seeking comfort can lead to rejection, shame, or punishment
- When adults display strong emotions or probe for feelings, these children often withdraw further, appearing distant, detached, or unresponsive

Core Principles

- The sideways approach offers a way to connect without overwhelming the child
- It emphasizes calm presence, gentle curiosity, and safety before insight
- Rather than confronting emotional experience directly, the adult invites reflection and trust gradually, through consistent and predictable interaction
- This approach helps the child’s nervous system learn that connection can be safe, and that adults can remain steady and available without demanding emotional exposure
- Over time, this gentle consistency can restore trust and increase the child’s tolerance for closeness

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Therapeutic Goal	Avoidant Child’s Reaction	“Sideways” Response
Regulate arousal	Shuts down when the adult shows strong emotion	Maintain a calm, matter-of-fact tone. “It’s okay, we’ll take a moment”
Invite reflection	Feels invaded by direct emotional labeling	Use tentative language: “I wonder if that felt a bit hard?” rather than “You’re angry”
Build trust	Fears being read or controlled	Normalize autonomy: “You don’t have to talk right now. I’ll be here when you’re ready”
Model co-regulation	Avoids seeking comfort	Offer quiet presence and predictable, steady routines rather than intense emotional focus