
Sir Richard Bowlby gave a verbal presentation on the theme of Attachment to the Quality of Childhood Group in the European Parliament on 8th January 2008. Notes taken during the presentation were formulated into the report below, which has been checked and approved by Sir Richard.

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Attachment, what it is, why it is important and what we can do about it to help young children acquire a secure attachment

by Sir Richard Bowlby from the U.K.

SUMMARY

What is attachment theory? Attachment theory is based on findings from empirical research, from observational studies and from clinical examples; it's a framework for understanding the nature of the enduring family bonds that develop between children and their parents – their attachment figures. The theory focuses mainly on relationships during early childhood, and the impact that these have on the emotional development and mental health of children as they grow up.

Babies and toddlers have a powerful survival reaction to sense danger whenever they are in unfamiliar places and have no access to an attachment figure, preferably to their primary attachment figure (who is usually but not necessarily their biological mother). This sense of danger frightens children and triggers their attachment seeking response, and this response will be terminated only when they reach proximity to their attachment figure. The attachment response starts at about 6 months, peaks between 12 and 24 months, and by 36 months the intensity has reduced sufficiently that most children can tolerate a few hours separation from attachment figures without distress – during pre-school nursery for example.

A secure attachment is likely to develop when an adult is sensitive and attuned to the baby's communications, and when the adult provides consistent and predictable care which meets the needs of the baby quickly and reliably.

An insecure attachment is likely to develop when the adult is insensitive and not well attuned to the baby's communications, and when the care is inconsistent and unpredictable and does not satisfy the baby's needs quickly or reliably.

How to change from insecure to secure attachment.

To my knowledge, no one has found a "magic bullet" for instantly switching insecure attachment into secure attachment. The most common origin of children's insecure attachment is the intergenerational transmission of insecure relationships. Most of the effective interventions (such as attachment based family psychotherapy) aim to resolve old attachment issues from previous generations.

Changing from insecure to secure attachment is slow, expensive and takes very skilful therapists, and the cure is never complete – at times of stress, "ghosts from the nursery" return to haunt people. Prevention is infinitely preferable to cure.

The age that a young child is ready to leave the home: 33 months

Maria Montessori, in the 1930's in Italy, found that children were ready to go to pre-school nursery at the age of 2 years and 9 months. Present day brain research indicates that at this age the right brain is ready for emotional and intuitive activity and the left brain enables the child to speak with three words and it can remember the past (for instance that "mum will come back").

When we look at this situation it becomes clear that developments in society will force us to go back (or forward) to a situation where the child will again receive care of a good quality during the first phase of his /her life. This may be an inconvenient truth, but we have to face it.

What Is Attachment Theory?

Before talking about attachment theory, I need to tell you what attachment is. My father used the term "attachment " to describe the affectional bonds that develop between babies and their mothers. Most people call these family bonds "love" – the sort of family love that's different from sexual love'.

Based on empirical research

Attachment theory is based on findings from empirical research, from observational studies and from clinical examples; it's a framework for understanding the nature of the enduring family bonds that develop between children and their parents – their attachment figures. The theory focuses mainly on relationships during early childhood, and the impact that these have on the emotional development and mental health of children as they grow up. Is the mental health of children today better than 50 years ago? Many psychologists respond with 'no'.

In times of danger babies and toddlers seek their mother/ primary attachment figure

Babies and toddlers have a powerful survival reaction to sense danger whenever they are in unfamiliar places and have no access to an attachment figure, preferably to their primary attachment figure (who is usually but not necessarily their biological mother). This sense of danger frightens children and triggers their attachment seeking response, and this response will be terminated only when they reach proximity to their attachment figure. Attachment seeking is a specific response requiring a specific termination – proximity to an attachment figure. Similar behaviours (usually called imprinting) can be observed in the young of many other species and it's a very successful survival strategy. For example, if you watch a herd of elephants protecting newly born baby elephant from a group of lions, they do such a good job that: the lions do not have not a chance.

Attachment response: when it starts and when it peaks

The attachment response starts at about 6 months, peaks between 12 and 24 months, and by 36 months the intensity has reduced sufficiently that most children can tolerate a few hours separation from attachment figures without distress – during pre-school nursery for example.

The quality of this enduring mother/child bond will have a significant impact on the child's developing personality and future social, emotional and mental wellbeing

By their fifth birthday most children can manage five short days of school. Attachment theory concentrates mainly on the bond that a mother has with her child, and on the attachment that a child has with their mother or the person who raises them. The quality and nature of this enduring mother/child bond will have a significant impact on the child's developing personality and future social, emotional and mental wellbeing – for better or for worse.

The quality of the attachment has a very significant influence on how children build future relationships

A child's primary attachment figure is usually the biological mother, but the biological link is not essential. In many cases someone else raises the child and becomes the primary attachment figure – such as when a child has been adopted or raised by the father or grandmother. A baby sometimes becomes primarily attached to a temporary carer, a nanny for example, instead of to their own mother, and the child experiences a traumatic loss if the nanny leaves and the primary attachment bond is broken. But most people have an enduring attachment bond with their mother that lasts a lifetime, and the quality of this relationship has a very significant influence on how they build future relationships.

The development of babies' primary attachment bond can be compared to the development of speech.

Human babies have a natural propensity to talk, but they need to have the experience of hearing speech in order to acquire the words and to learn to speak the language of the adult. Similarly, babies have a natural propensity to become attached, but they need to have regular interactions with a consistent adult in order to develop an attachment relationship with them. The quality of the relationship will depend on the adult's capacity for making secure or insecure attachments.

Secondary attachment figures can promote self-esteem in children

In appropriate circumstance and given sufficient time and attention, children can develop enduring secondary attachment bonds to affectionate and responsive people such as grandmothers, nannies, aunts, neighbours or child-minders. Three or more secondary attachment figures in addition to a primary attachment figure can promote self-esteem in children, and is a psychological protective factor that can reduce the probability of mental

health problems in the future. Being part of a big family is a protective factor. An isolated mother, alone with a child, is a risk factor.

Why is attachment theory important?

Attachment theory has helped researchers to identify the causal links between people's childhood experiences of adverse attachment relationships, and their subsequent social, emotional and mental health problems. Understanding the nature and effects of childhood attachments has been extremely valuable to health care professionals who try to promote good parenting practice and to support disadvantaged families.

It assists therapists to help people and it helps policy makers to promote good parenting practices

Attachment theory has been especially valuable to professionals trying to treat people who have suffered from the negative effects of dysfunctional or broken attachments in childhood, and who as adults are struggling with emotional or mental health problems. Attachment theory is beginning to have an influence in various spheres:

- the law in child custody cases;
- the decision by the UK government to provide longer, paid, maternity leave;
- the introduction of legislation requiring babies and toddlers in day-care to be cared for by a secondary attachment figure, or a "key-person" as they are called. It is even written down in the law in Britain that anybody caring for a baby must love the child and build up a genuine bond with the child and its parents. It may be difficult to implement this, perhaps undeliverable, but the wording of the law text is as it is.

A secure attachment is an advantage for a whole life time

Most children develop relationships with their parents that make them feel safe and give them a sense of security and confidence. Such children will have a subconscious psychological model of their parents as being available and loving, and a complementary model of themselves as being worthy of their parent's support and love. This positive expectation of relationships is part of "secure attachment" and is an advantage to children and a protective factor. Not all relationships are the same. Some less positive attachment relationships are classified as insecure, and this sort of relationship can be a disadvantage to children and a risk factor that contributes to future mental health problems.

Attachment is a characteristic of the relationship

A child can form a secure attachment to one parent, and an insecure attachment to the other parent. Attachment is not a characteristic of either the child or the parent, it is a characteristic of the relationship. The parent's sensitivity to the needs of the child is a major determinant in whether a secure or insecure attachment will develop. It has been found that the parent's ability to provide a secure attachment will be heavily influenced by the quality of care that they received during the first two or three years of their own life.

The nature of the attachment bond is passed on to the next generation

There is an inter-generational transmission of attachment styles. If the care that the parents received when they were children was sensitive and well balanced and provided them with a secure attachment, they are likely to provide similar parenting for their own children. If the care the parents received was insensitive and unbalanced and provided them with an insecure attachment, they are also likely to provide similar parenting for their children.

In both the first and second case, the style of attachment is repeated with their own children because it feels familiar to the parent, but in the second case the parents either justify their parenting behaviour as "it never did me any harm", or they may over-react and try to provide the complete reverse of their own experience, but they provide equally unbalanced and insensitive care, and again an insecure attachment will develop. For example, if the parent was abused or neglected as a child, they may over-protect their own child and restrict play and exploration – providing unbalanced and insensitive care.

There is a tendency for the quality of early attachments to continue into adulthood

In the absence of any significant life-changing events, there is a tendency for the quality of early attachments to continue into adulthood, and this can have an influence on future relationships. Some positive experiences in life, such as psychotherapy or meeting a secure partner, can alter a person's expectation of how relationships develop, and their model for making relationships can become more secure. But someone's model of relationship can become less secure if they have a negative experience such as untimely separation from or loss of an attachment figure.

Attachment bonds are extremely powerful and can yield great benefits or the inverse

Throughout life, attachment bonds are extremely powerful, and like any powerful system the benefits can be very great when the system is optimal, well balanced and working smoothly, but very painful if the system is sub-optimal, out of balance or broken. Attachment theory has highlighted the social and emotional consequences of a range of problems associated with the making and breaking of attachment bonds.

How can we achieve secure attachments?

It takes babies several months to develop an attachment to an adult, yet an adult can form a bond to a baby very quickly – sometimes even before it's born – but most parents develop a bond gradually during the first few weeks. Although the great majority of mothers love their babies, some parents have a problem that prevents them bonding with their baby at all, and the baby is then very unlikely to be able to form a secure attachment to them. 35 – 40% of babies develop an insecure attachment to their mothers. The insecurity of these relationships means that babies are anxious about their mother's ability to comfort them emotionally.

Important concepts we need to understand about attachment:

- how babies develop a primary attachment.
- how babies develop a secure attachment.
- how to maintain a secure attachment.
- how to avoid harming a secure attachment.
- how to change from an insecure to a secure attachment.

Virtually every culture throughout the world strives for a stable family life

Virtually every culture throughout the world strives for a stable family life, but rapid change in the Western lifestyle over the past two generations has led to many cultural values being abandoned – they seem old fashioned and inconvenient to many of us. One recent change is that many extended families have become fragmented into several "nuclear families", and this has had a profound impact on family life and child rearing practices. We may find it helpful to have a more cognitive understanding of how these family bonds develop, so we can make better informed choices about work / life balance and the care of our young children.

Raising securely attached children is very demanding on parents. Sensitive attunement (the cornerstone of secure attachment) takes a great deal of parents' time and attention. Knowing the personality and understanding the individual communications of a baby is very difficult if parents don't have sufficient time, and even more difficult for working single parents raising children on their own

How do babies develop a primary attachment?

From birth, babies are learning to recognise different people and are developing their mental capacity to form attachments. By about 6 months most babies are beginning to show a preference for one person, and by about 9 months their primary attachment bond to this person – usually the birth mother – is well advanced, and by about 12 to 14 months the primary attachment is usually well established. At the same time the baby's ability to differentiate between familiar people they know and unfamiliar strangers they don't recognise will have developed.

There are many features of care that influence babies' choice of who becomes their primary attachment figure, but the two main ones are:

- being comforted when they cry,
- being played with.

These two experiences help babies select the one person who most frequently and predictably brings them both comfort and joy, and that person becomes the baby's primary attachment figure. In the English language there is a saying which illustrates the above:

"Families that play together stay together."

How do babies develop a secure primary attachment?

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Playing – providing positive feelings.

A secure attachment is likely to develop when an adult engages sensitively in playful interactive games that hold the baby's attention and bring them joy. The adult's play needs to be appropriate to the baby's capacity to enjoy the game, and the adult must be sufficiently attuned to know when to start, stop, repair or re-engage with the baby.

An insecure attachment is likely to develop when the adult is not sufficiently sensitive when playing interactive games and does not engage with the baby or bring them joy. The activities may be beyond the baby's capacity for excitement, or the adult may be careless, neglectful or intrusive and misjudge the baby's abilities or mood, and not know when to start, stop, repair or re-engage with the baby.

NOTE. At the same time that babies are developing their primary attachment (either secure or insecure), they are usually developing secondary attachments to other familiar people. These secondary attachments can be either secure or insecure depending again on the adult's ability to relate, so a baby can develop a secure attachment to one adult and an insecure attachment to another adult.

How to maintain a secure attachment?

One of the most important and complex tasks for parents of securely attached children is to maintain boundaries that are realistic and appropriate to the child's developing competence and within the parents' resources. Considerable time and attention is required to maintain these limits for children who have grown to expect supportive and sensitive care and are eager to explore and learn about their environment. The challenge for parents is to find a balance between restraint and safety on one hand, and encouraging new and challenging experiences on the other.

An important research finding is that the most socially adept young men and women had mothers who had provided an enduring secure base throughout their childhood, and also had fathers who were sensitive when playing challenging and exciting interactive games. Young adults who had been provided with a secure base and exciting activities by parents who expressed satisfaction with their partner relationship, had the highest social skills at age 22 years.

Maintaining a secure attachment to the primary attachment figure during childhood promotes stable intimate relationships in adulthood, and having exciting and challenging activities promotes social competencies at school and in young adulthood.

How to avoid harming a baby's and a child's attachment

The key to maintaining secure attachments throughout childhood is to avoid any experience, however well intentioned, that overwhelms the attachment bond. Maintaining children's security of attachment requires that their attachment figure provides them with a sense of safety and protection at all times. Children who are frightened, whether by parents who are abusive, neglectful or violent, or by being separated from their attachment figures for an inappropriate amount of time (even when they're in perfectly "safe" situations) can become insecurely attached.

Extreme experiences of separation that are known to harm young children are: spending weeks or months in residential care or, as used to happen in the UK in the 1950's, spending two weeks in hospital with only brief visits from an attachment figure. An experience which seems safe to adults but not to babies, is spending each day without access to an attachment figure in certain forms of non-parental daycare. The circumstances in which babies cannot access a secondary attachment figure are found most frequently in group child-care settings such as day-nurseries.

I believe that many babies and toddlers develop a risk factor in daycare without an attachment figure, and babies from disadvantaged families where insecure attachment is common are particularly vulnerable. Babies with an insecure attachment at home, who then spend time in daycare without an attachment figure, will have their negative model of relationships reinforced.

These babies need daycare from a long-term secondary attachment figure who is consistent throughout the years of daycare, is sensitive to their individual needs, and is always available to them. In this way a more positive model of relationships can develop. Although we know that this is what babies need, it seems to be extremely difficult to provide this in group daycare settings.

I am against the British habit of sending 6 year old children to boarding school. They are not ready for it: it is overwhelming and harmful for them. Secure attachment is attained when the attachment figures provide the child with a sense of safety and protection at all times. It is typically the mother that provides the emotional security and the father that provides the physical security. Today in the UK 50% of co-habiting couples (40% of all couples) split up before the child is 5 years old.

How to change from insecure to secure attachment.

Attachment theory is concerned with the quality of the relationships that babies and toddlers develop with their primary attachment figures. Although the security of the

babies' attachment may be influenced by their temperament, the greatest influence will come from the adult's ability to form secure relationships. Therefore changing the adult's ability to relate to the baby is going to be the focus of early intervention programmes.

To my knowledge, no one has found a "magic bullet" for instantly switching insecure attachment into secure attachment. The most common origin of children's insecure attachment is the intergenerational transmission of insecure relationships. Most of the effective interventions (such as attachment based family psychotherapy) aim to resolve old attachment issues from previous generations.

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Neuroscientists discover the impact of a good early childhood environment on the brain. Today neuroscientists are discovering that they cannot explain the rapid neurological developments in the brain of a child without reference to the interaction between the baby and his/her environment. This discovery was triggered by research on the Romanian orphans from the Ceausescu regime, which were intensely studied. These orphans had been severely deprived of interactions with a primary caregiver. It turned out that certain parts of their brains were non-existent (black holes on the brain scans). It furthermore turned out that the harm was least for those children who had endured this for a shorter period. Professor Mike Rutter is one of the people who carried out this research.

Cortisol levels in the blood of a toddler

When toddlers are in a daycare centre the cortisol levels in their blood increase. When the primary attachment figure fetches the child at the end of the day normally the cortisol level drops. However some primary attachment figures do not succeed in comforting the child sufficiently and the child's cortisol level remains elevated throughout the night. I am not aware of studies regarding the long term effects of prolonged high cortisol levels in the blood of a toddler. I do not think that it will be beneficial for the child, but this needs to be researched.

Good behaviour of toddlers can disguise the fact that a child has shut down

Children in many daycare centres seem to be happy. From the outside they seem to be children that behave well and do what the daycare workers tell them. The parents are happy: they don't have any complaints, either about their children or about the daycare centre. But the situation only seems to be good. When we take a deeper look we can see that some children have shut down and are withdrawn in themselves, and we should be aware of this phenomenon.

The age that a young child is ready to leave the home: 33 months

Maria Montessori, in the 1930's in Italy, found that children were ready to go to pre-school nursery at the age of 2 years and 9 months. Present day brain research indicates that at this age the right brain is ready for emotional and intuitive activity and the left brain enables the child to speak with three words and it can remember the past (for instance that "mum will come back").

When we look at this situation it becomes clear that developments in society will force us to go back (or forward) to a situation where the child will again receive care of a good quality during the first phase of his /her life. This may be an inconvenient truth, but we have to face it.

Sir Richard Bowlby is the son of the well-known Dr. John Bowlby, who in 1958 was the first to publish the theory of attachment. This theory was based on his work with young children in London in the 1940's, when he observed how distressed babies and toddlers became when their primary attachment figure, normally the mother, was separated from them. Sir Richard Bowlby himself was born in 1941. He furthered his father's work and the subject of children's attachment and in this way he became one of the key-note speakers on attachment both in Britain and internationally.