

The importance of attachment

Guidance for parents and caregivers



Emotional bonds can form before the babies are born. However, some child carers find it difficult to feel and create this bond due to mental health issues or don't have a family support network during this overwhelming period of life. This is a perfectly normal feeling that new parents experience and this leaflet can help improve wellbeing and provide positive outcomes for both the child and their caregivers.

Do you want to strengthen the bond between you and your baby?

What is attachment?

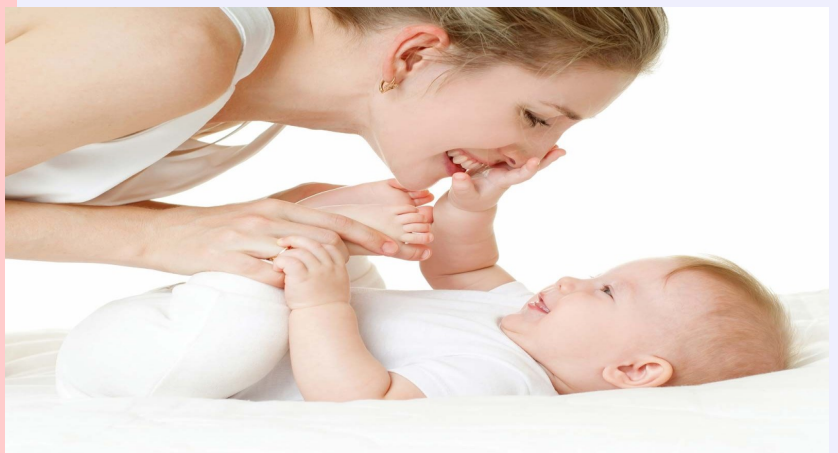
Attachment is the emotional relationship bond that forms between the caregiver and the infant. It involves a special connection between them which develops over time, that also provides the infant with a safe place, unlimited affection and support.

How do children develop attachment?

From the moment a baby is born, the baby communicates emotional and physical needs to their primary carer. If the parent responds positively towards them and is willing to care for their child, the infant associates the parent with fulfilling their needs. This is the beginning of a positive attachment as they feel safe and provide the infant with a stable base for exploring. 'The infant knows that they are safe to venture out and explore and that the caregiver will always be there to welcome them back and provide comfort in times of stress or anxiety' (Freud, 2022). Secure attachment is crucial for when the child attends school, as they should see their teachers as approachable and should be able to form good relationships with their teachers and other members of the school.

Why is attachment important?

The attachments the child forms in these early years may be critical indicators for their later childhood and adulthood development. Attachment has an impact on the child's future relationships with others, their development and it will precept the way they feel about themselves. 'Attachment essentially can establish a positive or negative path for childhood development that will impact the way children form bonds and interact with others into adulthood' (Florida Tech, 2018).



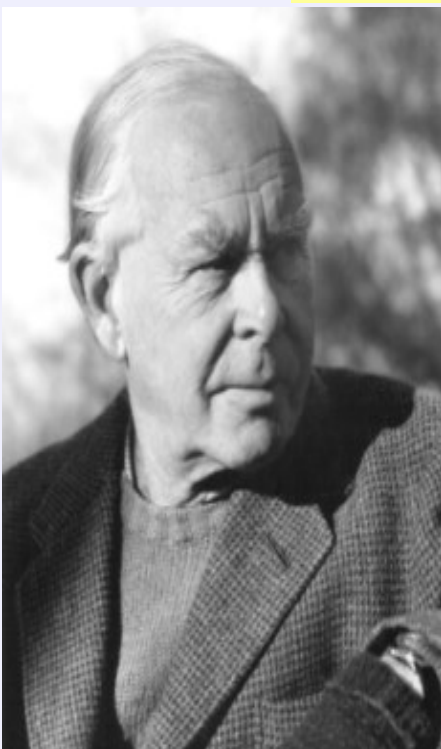
Bowlby states attachment as 'a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' (Attachment and child development, 2021).



What is attachment theory?

The attachment theory focuses on the bonds created within humans, whether it's between parents and their child or between romantic partners. 'It is a complex psychological concept, which originated with the work of **John Bowlby**, who highlighted the importance of a child's relationship with their primary caregiver, usually their mother in terms of their social, emotional development and their ability to learn' (Freud, 2020). This theory suggests that humans are born with the need to make bonds with parents as children to survive life, knowing they have a safe place.

Bowlby

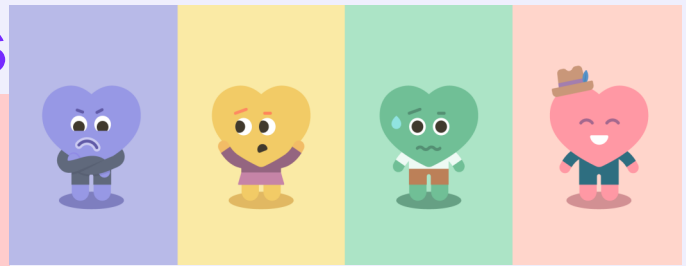


'Bowlby was interested in understanding the anxiety and distress that children experience when separated from their primary caregivers' (Cherry, 2022). The British psychologist found that attachment was expressed by motivational and behavioral patterns. For example, when children are frightened, they automatically run to their parents as they know they'll receive comfort and affection, as the child knows they'll survive if they're protected.

The Four Stages

Secure attachment

Children at this stage see others as supportive and are aware of the importance of respect. Knowing they have a safe place to go back to in case danger, they decide to venture out of their comfort zone. This may include gaining trust from other children and interaction with them, which leads to more success in the classroom. This stage often occurs at ages 6-8 months until 18 months-2 years old. Babies start to develop separation anxiety during this stage and become upset when their parents leave them, even for a short period.



Anxious-resistant attachment

These children are likely to be shy, fearful and lack self-confidence. They often struggle to complete group tasks, which involve other people. They keep their distance from things they're unfamiliar with, especially when experiencing new environments. They tend to stay close to their parents, so they have constant safety reassurance.

Anxious-avoidant attachment

This form of attachment shows that children aren't able to manage stressful and uncomfortable situations alone. This enables them to build healthy relationships with others as they're not willing to ask for support when they need it. Characteristics of this stage would be antisocial and aggressive behaviour, which would be demonstrated through bullying and lying to others. The anxious avoidant attachment style usually develops in the first 18 months of the baby's life.

Disorganized attachment

Children with a disorganized attachment style usually fail to develop an organized strategy for coping with separation distress, and tend to display aggression, disruptive behaviors, and social isolation. They are more likely to see others as threats than sources of support, and thus may switch between social withdrawal and defensively aggressive behavior' (Ackerman, 2018).

Phase 4: From 3 Years Until Childhood Ends

At this stage, the child becomes used to the idea of their parents being in a different room and doesn't need their presence as urgently as before. They learn that their caregivers have goals and priorities of their own.

Phase 3: From 6 Months to 3 Years

At six months old, the child may start to develop separation anxiety from their favourite person. This may include continuously crying when their caregiver is in a different room or when babies learn to crawl, they may try to follow them too. From around 7/8 months, the child begins to fear strangers and new environments. The child seeks affection and protection from their caregiver in these stressful situations.

Phase 1: Birth to 3 Months

'The baby encourages attachment with caregivers through behaviors like babbling, crying, grasping, and sucking. Each behavior brings the infant in closer contact with the caregiver and further promotes bonding and emotional investment' (Vinney,2019).

Phase 2: From 3 to 6 Months

'When infants are about 3 months old, they start to differentiate between people, and they begin to reserve their attachment behaviors for the people they prefer' (Vinney,2019). When babies cry, they have a preference to whom they'd rather fulfill their needs. The child tends to have at least three people who they would choose. According to Bowlby, the child would usually favor a particular individual, that being their mother.

Attachment phases

Insecure attachment

Attachment is an emotional bond formed between mother and baby within the baby's everyday life. However, when the baby is raised into a household with abuse and neglect, children are at 'high risk of developing emotional, behavioral, social and intellectual disabilities' (Hawley,2000). When a child's carer and home environment is fearful rather than a source of affection and safety, this can be highly toxic to a child's development and can affect them negatively later in life. 'Some children facing these experiences may behave in ways which are designed to promote their survival, but which may be difficult for school staff to understand and manage' (Freud,2022).

Characteristics often displayed by children exposed to negative attachment

- 'Find it difficult to ask for help, manage their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, form positive relationships with staff and peers, concentrate and take part in learning
- struggle to calm themselves down
- be both demanding and rejecting at the same time
- become quickly or disproportionately angry or upset, at times with no clear triggers
- fear being vulnerable
- avoid getting close to others and appear withdrawn or disengaged from school activities
- struggle to ask for help
- show little emotional response or confused and confusing responses (such as laughing when they or others are hurt) .
- daydream, be hyperactive or constantly fidgeting and finding it difficult to focus and concentrate in class' (Freud,2022).



Suggestions to consider if you're struggling to find a bond with your child.

Reading

'Research also shows that reading with children stimulates patterns of brain development responsible for connection and bonding. This makes sense when we consider that story time usually involves cuddling, eye contact, and shared emotion' (Pruess,2020).

Play

'Play is how children learn vital life skills. Play is the language of children, so it only makes sense that we should try to connect with them through something that comes so naturally. Research has shown that playing with children decreases attention-seeking behaviors and separation anxiety by fulfilling their

Physical Touch

'Studies have found the importance of skin-to-skin contact for the newborn (Webster-Stratton,2011) and that humans are able to identify specific emotions of love, gratitude, and compassion through blind touch. It's easy to see how touch plays a major role in forming strong connections between parent and child (Pruess,2020).

The relationship-building system: The NBO

The NBO is a relationship-building instrument that can be used to refine parents to the capacities and the individuality of their newborn infant and to help improve the relationship between parents and infants. 'NBO aims to capture the infant's uniqueness or individuality with the goal of fostering the bond between parent and infant' (Nugent et al., 2007).

These are a few of many ways to help strengthen the bond with your child. It is perfectly normal to feel lonely and overwhelmed within the first few weeks or months of parenting but it's important to seek support when you need it. Your mental health matters too. You are not alone in this. For further information on the importance of early childhood development, visit the Bonding with your baby website for more information:

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/bonding.html>

Reference list:

About The Bowlby Centre. (n.d.). The John Bowlby Centre Psychotherapy Training.
<https://thebowlbycentre.org.uk/about-the-bowlby-centre/>

Ackerman, C. (2018, April 27). *What is Attachment Theory? Bowlby's 4 Stages Explained.*

<https://positivepsychology.com/attachment-theory/#:~:text=Examples%3A%20The%20Types%2C%20Styles%2C>

Attachment and child development. (August 10, 2021). NSPCC Learning.

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/attachment-early-years#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20one%20sign%20of>

Attachment Styles. (n.d.). Mental Mint. Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <https://www.mentalmint.com/mental-health-information-tips-tools-techniques/attachment-styles/>

Beckes, L. (2019). attachment theory | Features & Types. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/science/attachment-theory>

Cherry, K. (2022, December 16). *What is Attachment Theory?* *Verywell Mind*.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-attachment-theory-2795337>

ERGONOMIC PARENTING: BEST WAYS TO PREPARE OR ADAPT YOUR NURSERY. (n.d.). Champion Performance & Physical Therapy. Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <http://www.kcchampionperformance.com/news/2017/1/11/ergonomic-parenting-best-ways-to-prepare-or-adapt-your-nursery>

Florida Tech. (2018, June 28). Florida Tech Online. Florida Tech Online.
<https://www.floridatechonline.com/blog/psychology/the-importance-of-attachment-in-early-child-development/>

Freud, A. (2022). Attachment and child development: Mentally Healthy Schools.
Mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk.

<https://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/attachment-and-child-development/>

Hawley, T. (2000, January). Starting Smart: How Early Experiences Affect Brain Development. (P 59).

Nugent, K., Keefer, C., Minear, S., Johnson, L., Blanchard, Y. (2007). Understanding Newborn Behavior and Early Relationships. The Newborn Behavioral Observations (NBO) System Handbook. (P 18).

Pruess, A. (2020, June 3). *10 Simple Ways to Build an Unbreakable Bond with your Child.* Parents with Confidence. <https://parentswithconfidence.com/10-easy-ways-bond-child-even-theres-no-time-day/>

Vinney, C. (2019, October 23). *What Is Attachment Theory? Definition and Stages.* ThoughtCo.
<https://www.thoughtco.com/attachment-theory-4771954>

Webster-Stratton, C. (2011). Incredible Babies: A Guide and Journal of Your Baby's First Year. (P 18).

When Compassion Becomes Self-neglect | *Gladeana McMahon*. (n.d.). Gladeanamcmahon.com. Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <http://gladeanamcmahon.com/when-compassion-becomes-self-neglect-2/>

Screen printed from word document.