

AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of Copilot and Google editor in line with the guidance given by UWTSD for Module ECEY5009 - 18/05/2026 & 13/06/2026.

I used the prompt(s):

1. Use of Google Editor to check spelling and grammatical errors
2. Put my Harvard references into alphabetical order.
3. Help me reduce the word count without losing the content

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Building Bonds, Shaping Futures:

Attachment And Its
Impact On Health,
Wellbeing And
Lifestyle In The Early
Years

'Early experiences affect the development of brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health.'
(Harvard University, 2012)



- Define what attachment is
- Examine the theory behind it
- Critically explore its impact on children's health, wellbeing and lifestyle
- And consider the role early years practitioners play in supporting this

So What is 'Attachment'?

- Consistent and responsive care giving that underpins emotional security and healthy development (Bowlby, 1988).
- Builds trust and security, enabling a child to form positive attachments (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012)
- Underpins later emotional security, resilience and social competence, demonstrating its foundational role in development (Ainsworth et al, 1978).



The Theory behind the concept

Theorist	Key Contribution	Main Ideas	Relevance to Practice
John Bowlby (1905-1982)	Founder of attachment theory	Attachment is biological and evolved to ensure infant survival, involving internal working models and secure base	Foundation for understanding early relationships and secure base
Mary Ainsworth (1913-1987)	Empirical research	Attachment theory: Situation identified attachment styles	Helps identify attachment behaviours in children
Donald Winnicott (1896-1971)	Emotional caregiving	Concept of 'good enough parenting'	Emphasizes importance of responsive caregiving
Schaffer & Emerson (1964)	Multiple attachments	Children form more than one attachment figure	Supports less career approach in early years
Mary Main & Solomon (1985)	Extended attachment categories	Identified disorganised attachment and ASD	Links attachment to trauma and ASD
Harry Harlow (1905-1981)	Experimental research	Attachment based on comfort and feeding	Demonstrates importance of emotional care
Erie Erikson (1902-1994)	Psychosocial development	Trust vs. Mistrust shaped by early relationships	Links attachment to emotional development stages
Cassidy & Shaver (2010)	Life-span research	Attachment influences relationships, regulation, and health	Shows long-term impact on mental health
Shonkoff & Garner (2012)	Public health / Neuroscience	Early relationships shape brain development and health	Supports early intervention policy
Daniel Siegel (2002)	Neuroscience	Attachment affects brain development and emotional regulation	Explains biological processes behind attachment
Alan Schore (2001)	Neuropsychology	Attachment shapes stress regulation systems	Links attachment to mental health and resilience
Fonagy et al. (1998)	Mentalisation theory	Carer's attachment builds emotional understanding	Helps explain behaviour as communication
Carolee Howes (1988)	Childcare attachment	Children form attachments in early years settings	Strong link to secondary attachment formation
Markus & O'Connor (1995)	Trauma-focused model	Attachment adults to design and deliver care	Useful for adults and children's relationships
Van Ickxsteem & Koomenbergh (1986)	Cross-cultural research	Attachment varies across cultures	Highlights need for culturally sensitive practice
Vanessa Reed (2016)	Practice-based theory	Nurturing the nurturers	Emphasizes supporting carers and environments

Internal Working Model

How you view yourself
↓
How you view others
↓
Impact on relationships through life

INTERNAL WORKING MODEL

(Early Years TV, 2013)

Secondary Attachment : Children

In attachment theory, secondary attachments are the additional emotional bonds a child forms beyond their primary caregiver. These can include:

- Grandparents
- Siblings (in some cases)
- Nursery staff / Key workers
- Childminders or Foster carers

Secondary Attachment : Adults

Nurturing the Nurturers supports:

- Strong caregiver support
- Emotional security
- Parental Resilience
- Positive long-term outcomes
- Reduces impact of adversity (ACEs)
- Breaks cycles of trauma

(Reed, 2014)

What are the benefits of attachment on a child's health?

Research across attachment and mental health highlights that strong, positive relationships with one or more caregivers play a crucial role in both children's physical and emotional development, particularly within the first five years (NSPCC, 2021).

- Better Sleep Patterns
- Reduced Stress Levels
- Reduced Psychological Arousal Levels
- Stronger Immune Functioning
- Lower Cortisol Levels (less fight or flight responses)

Wellbeing

The World Health Organization and Harvard University define childhood wellbeing as the overall quality of a child's life, encompassing physical health, environment, happiness, security, and a sense of belonging, all of which underpin brain development and learning (WHO, 2021; Harvard University, 2024).

Positive Attachments support

- Develop a strong Self-esteem
- Emotional stability
- Resilience
- Develop empathy
- Express needs and feelings more clearly
- Engage in conversations
- Feel emotionally secure

Attachment also plays a key role in shaping children's lifestyle behaviours and long-term health outcomes. Early relationships influence children's ability to regulate stress, develop routines, and engage in positive behaviours such as sleep, physical activity, and social interaction

(Hutchings and Williams, 2023)

Positive Attachments support

- Trust others
- Form friendships
- Explore social environments
- Try new experiences
- Manage stress better
- Be more open to help and support
- Cope with challenges
- Bounce back from setbacks
- Engage in learning
- Achieve academically

Social Development and Lifestyle

The Circle of Security

The Circle of Security is an attachment based model developed by Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman and Bert Powell in 2007 that supports caregivers in understanding and responding to children's emotional needs, ultimately promoting secure attachment relationships.

(Circle of Security International, 2020)

The Role Of Practitioners

Benefits

- Keyworker systems support attachment between practitioner and child
- Secondary attachment support for parents and caregivers
- Children feel safe and emotionally secure
- Children learn to manage emotions through responsive adults
- Practitioners model calming strategies and co-regulation

Securely attached children are more likely to:

- develop positive behaviour (Holder and Coleman, 2015)
- form friendships show empathy
- explore their environment
- engage in play and learning
- Supports children experiencing instability at home

Challenges

- Changes in staff can disrupt attachment relationships
- Limited time for one-to-one interaction when working to ratio
- Work pressures makes it harder to provide responsive, attuned care
- Practitioners must balance multiple attachments which requires careful support to ensure attachments are complementary, not conflicting
- Building attachment relationships requires emotional investment which can lead to burnout
- Varying parenting styles and expectations
- Differences between home and setting approaches (e.g. discipline, comfort)

Separation from parents

- Young children may experience:
 - anxiety
 - distress during transitions
- Practitioners must manage attachment without replacing parental bonds



Slide 1,2,3 – Introduction

Hello, my name is Laura.

In this presentation, I will critically explore attachment and its impact on the health, wellbeing, and lifestyle of children under five.

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Attachment, as defined by John Bowlby in (1988), refers to the enduring emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver. These early relationships are not just emotionally significant but are increasingly recognised as central to brain development, emotional regulation, and long-term health outcomes.

Bowlby argued that early attachment experiences shape how children see themselves, how they see others, and how they see the world around them.

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In this presentation I aim to:

- Define what attachment is.

- Examine the theory behind it.
- Critically explore its impact on children's health, wellbeing, and lifestyle
- And consider the role early years practitioners play in supporting this.

Attachment has been chosen as the focus of this presentation because it provides a holistic framework for understanding how early relationships shape children's emotional, physical, and social health, as well as influencing long-term lifestyle behaviours and wellbeing. A belief shared by Ho and Rahaman (2026).

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Slide 4 – What is Attachment?

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby (1988), proposes that attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond between a child and their caregiver. This bond is formed through consistent, sensitive, and responsive caregiving, which underpins emotional security and healthy development.

For example, when a baby cries and is comforted by their caregiver, they begin to internalise the message: 'I am safe and my needs matter.'

Similarly, within a nursery setting, a key person who consistently soothes a distressed child helps to build trust and security, enabling that child to form positive attachments both at home and within the childcare environment.

Bowlby (1988) described this relationship as a 'secure base,' which allows children to explore their environment with confidence and to learn who they can trust and seek out for emotional support.

Importantly, attachment is not formed through one-off interactions but develops through consistent patterns of care over time. Mary Ainsworth's work in (1978) highlighted that it is not singular events, but repeated patterns of sensitive caregiving within everyday routines such as feeding, comforting, and play that enable children to develop secure attachments. She believed that these early relational experiences contribute to emotional security,

resilience, and the development of positive relationships that children can carry forward into later life (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

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Slide 5&6 – Attachment Theory

Attachment theory has significantly influenced child development policy across Wales and the UK, underpinning frameworks such as Flying Start and the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care strategy. These emphasise nurturing relationships, responsive caregiving, and early intervention to support children's long-term health and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2024; 2026).

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Originally developed by Bowlby, and later supported by Ainsworth and Winnicott, attachment theory proposes that children are biologically predisposed to form attachments for survival. Through consistent and responsive caregiving, children develop an 'internal working model,' a mental framework formed in early childhood through interactions with caregivers, which shapes how individuals view themselves, others, and relationships throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1969; 1988).

This perspective is supported by Cassidy and Shaver (2016), who emphasise that early attachment experiences influence emotional regulation and relationship patterns across the lifespan. Shonkoff and Garner (2012) extend this further, highlighting within a public health framework that early relationships shape brain development, stress regulation, and long-term health outcomes.

However, attachment is now understood much more dynamic than originally thought. Research by Cassidy and Shaver in 2016 suggests that attachment patterns can change over time and develop through new relationships and interventions. In addition, it is important to consider the value of some research. Ainsworth's 'Strange Situation' research undertaken in the 1960s has been criticised for cultural bias, as it was based primarily on Western, middle-class families. Cross-cultural research by Van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988) demonstrated that attachment behaviours can vary widely across different social and cultural contexts.

Furthermore Howe (2011) also believes that attachment is often oversimplified, and influences such as poverty, trauma and family stress should always be considered in this context.

Switch

Slide 7 - Secondary Attachments

Children first form a primary attachment; this is usually their primary caregiver at home. They then often develop secondary attachments with others. These can include:

- Grandparents
- Siblings
- Nursery staff
- Key workers
- Childminders
- Foster carers

These secondary attachment relationships:

- provide additional security.
- support confidence and independence.
- function as protective factors, especially in the context of ACEs.

Although we often think of attachment as a relationship between an adult and a child it is important to consider the place 'Secondary Attachments' have.

The concept of 'nurturing the nurturers' (Read, 2014) emphasises that supporting caregivers is key to promoting secure attachment. Strengthening caregivers' emotional wellbeing enhances both primary and secondary attachment relationships. This is reflected in Flying Start guidance (Welsh Government, 2026), which promotes integrated support such as parenting programmes, health visiting, and childcare. A preventative approach, highlighted in the Flying Start Health Programme (2017), recognises that supporting caregivers early can

improve long-term outcomes, particularly in reducing the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

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Slide 8 – Attachments impact on a child's health

Research across attachment and mental health such as that undertaken by The NSPCC in (2011) highlights that strong, positive relationships with one or more caregivers play a crucial role in both children's physical and emotional development, particularly within the first five years.

Secure attachment has been linked to improved sleep patterns, lower stress levels, and stronger immune functioning. Shonkoff and Garner (2012) emphasise that sensitive, responsive caregiving plays a critical role in regulating children's biological stress systems, particularly cortisol levels, which are closely associated with overall health outcomes. This is supported by Holmes and Slade (2019) and McIntosh et al. (2023), who found that securely attached children demonstrate more effective stress regulation, resulting in better sleep quality and reduced physiological arousal with children experiencing insecure attachment more likely to develop sleep disturbances, increased susceptibility to illness, and difficulties with emotional regulation.

Large-scale reviews by Madigan and Nivison (2026) further reinforced this.

In practice, Welsh Governments Care inspectorate Wales NMS (2023) tell us that this can be observed in high quality early years settings. Securely attached children are more likely to settle quickly, engage confidently in play and learning, and display fewer stress-related behaviours such as emotional dysregulation and frequent illnesses.

However, it is important to recognise that these outcomes are not determined by attachment alone. Shonkoff and Garner tell us that a caregiver's ability to provide consistent and responsive care may be influenced by factors such as stress, mental health, and access to support highlighting the importance of early intervention and family support programmes (Shonkoff and Garner, 2012).

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Slide 9 - Wellbeing

The World Health Organization and Harvard University define childhood wellbeing as the overall quality of a child's life, including health, safety, happiness, and a sense of belonging, all which support brain development and learning (WHO, 2021; Harvard University, 2024).

Cassidy and Shaver (2016) emphasise the significant role of relationships, highlighting how early interactions with caregivers significantly shaped emotional wellbeing and that Secure attachment was associated with improved emotional regulation, resilience, and a positive sense of self (Sroufe et al., 2005).

This aligned with Neurobiological research undertaken by Schore in 2001 that showed that early attachment relationships influenced brain systems responsible for emotional regulation and stress responses, highlighting that attachment is both an emotional and biological process (Schore, 2001; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012).

In practice, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2015) highlights that securely attached children are more likely to express emotions verbally, whereas children with insecure attachment may withdraw or display challenging behaviour, reinforcing that behaviour often reflects unmet emotional needs.

However, the OECD highlights that wellbeing is multifaceted and shaped by wider environmental factors such as safety, relationships, and inclusion (OECD, 2026; Holder and Coleman, 2015). While attachment is important, it is not deterministic, as supportive relationships and interventions can positively influence outcomes (Allen, 2011). This reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), which emphasises that child development is shaped by multiple interacting systems, from close relationships to wider social contexts.

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Slide 10 – Social Development and Lifestyle

Attachment plays a key role in shaping children's lifestyle behaviours and long-term health outcomes. Early relationships influence children's ability to regulate stress, establish routines, and engage in positive behaviours such as sleep, physical activity, and social

interaction. Research highlights that caregiver responsiveness supports behavioural regulation and wider development (Hutchings and Williams, 2023).

This aligns with Welsh policy, including the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care framework (Welsh Government, 2024), which places wellbeing at the centre, and the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022), which aims to develop healthy, confident individuals. The Early Intervention and Prevention Framework (Welsh Government, 2026) also emphasise the importance of supporting family relationships early to improve long-term outcomes.

Attachment is also central to social development. Securely attached children are more likely to form positive relationships, show empathy, and communicate effectively, often seen in cooperative play. In contrast, insecure attachment may present as withdrawal or controlling behaviours, highlighting that behaviour reflects relational experiences rather than fixed traits (Bowlby, 1988).

These patterns continue into later life, influencing coping strategies and stress regulation. Secure attachment is linked to healthier behaviours and help-seeking, while insecure attachment is associated with less adaptive coping. From a public health perspective, attachment is therefore significant, shaping mental and physical health across the lifespan. Supporting secure attachment early can help reduce health inequalities, reinforcing the value of early intervention programmes such as Flying Start (Welsh Government, 2026).

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Slide 11 – Circle of Security

So how can we support caregivers to ensure attachment is supported?

Caregivers can support attachment by using the Circle of Security, developed by Cooper, Hoffman, and Powell (2007), which bridges attachment theory and practice. It provides a clear framework to help adults understand and respond to children's emotional needs, promoting secure attachment relationships.

The model highlights that children need both a secure base from which to explore and a safe haven to return to for comfort. When this is in place, children feel confident to explore their

environment while knowing they can check back with a trusted adult and return if they feel distressed.

The caregiver's role is to be available, tune into children's cues, and support both independence and emotional comfort. This reflects key attachment principles, including Bowlby's concept of the secure base and Ainsworth's emphasis on caregiver sensitivity.

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Slide 12 – Role of Practitioners

The circle of security program believe that Childcare Practitioners play a vital role in supporting children's attachment, particularly where early relationships may have been disrupted. The early childhood, play learning and care pathways 2024 tell us that within early years settings, practitioners function as secondary attachment figures, providing consistency, emotional security, and support for both children and their families.

This can be seen in everyday practice, when children are greeted warmly, supporting separation from caregivers, they build trusting relationships over time and through these consistent interactions, practitioners help children feel safe and secure within the setting.

They also support attachment through key approaches, including building consistent relationships, responding sensitively to children's needs and working in partnership with parents as well as creating predictable routines and emotionally safe environments helping develop a sense of stability and belonging.

As a result, practitioners can function as important protective factors by providing secure, supportive relationships where these may be lacking elsewhere.

However, in 2012 Goldschmied and Selleck explored the practical challenges in applying attachment theory within early years settings. They reported that Factors such as high staff turnover, large child-to-adult ratios, and limited time can restrict the ability to form consistent, secure relationships raising questions about how achievable attachment-informed practice is within current systems.

Read's (2014) concept of "nurturing the nurturers" is therefore particularly important, as it highlights that practitioners themselves require emotional and professional support to

provide consistent, responsive care. This reinforces the need for training, supervision, and supportive workplace environments to enable practitioners to effectively promote secure attachment relationships.

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Slide 13 – Conclusion

In conclusion, research into attachment and its impact on children's health, wellbeing, and lifestyle demonstrates to us that attachment influences key f a child's life including:

- physical health outcomes
- overall wellbeing
- social relationships and future lifestyle

These interconnected factors shape how children respond to stress, form relationships, and develop the behaviours that underpin long-term health and lifestyle outcomes.

However, while early experiences are significant, outcomes are not fixed. With the right support, children can develop resilience and achieve positive outcomes, even where early attachment relationships have been disrupted.

For example, something as simple as consistently comforting a child can contribute to the development of trust, confidence, and emotional security, influencing their relationships, wellbeing, and future life outcomes highlighting the vital role of early years practitioners.

Therefore, attachment-informed practice plays a crucial role in supporting not only children's immediate wellbeing, but also their long-term health and life outcomes.

Thank you for listening.

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