

## **Can the failure of childhood attachment cause detrimental effects long term?**

### **Abstract**

The primary aim of this research project is to explore and analyse findings to determine whether failure of creating a positive attachment bond within the earliest years of a child's life leads to long term detrimental effects. Fearon and Roisman (2017) state Bowlby's theory of attachment refers to young children seeking out comfort from a familiar adult or caregiver during times of upset, anxiousness, worry and to have their basic survival needs met such as feeding and drinking, but what are the effects of a child who does not experience these crucial needs being met and the experience of a secure attachment. The planned research will entail using a mixed method approach of both observations and interviews that will be carried out. Participants will be chosen through purposive sampling, consisting of a small group of 20 children, 10 of those in an early year setting and 10 children who have been identified as experiencing trauma in the early years of their lives. The ages of the children will range between the age of 9 months-4 years old, interviews with five paediatric psychiatrists as well as interviews with ten current foster carers to assemble an in depth understanding of the topic and reach a more accurate conclusion to the question at hand. The highest ethical practises will be followed during the proposed research project and will be conducted using informed consent and confidentiality. Statistics provided by Welsh Government recorded in March 2021, 7263 children were currently in the care system in Wales. This displayed an average increase of over 2% from the current year (Welsh Government, 2021). The proposed research project will collect relevant data to reach a conclusion on whether children who experience the failure of a secure attachment are further exposed to possible long-term effects within their childhood.

### **Literature Review**

Kerr, Muir, and Goldberg (2009) suggest that Bowlby's theory of attachment stated a secure attachment is fundamental for children to be able to emotionally thrive. American Psychological Association (2023) defined attachment as the emotional link formed between a young child or a young non-human and its parent figure or carer, this is developed as a step towards creating a sense of security and is evidenced by tranquillity in the presence of the parent or carer. Over several decades research has indicated the importance of a secure attachment within the early years of a child's life. Studies carried out by Fitton (2012), and Rees (2007) concluded both socio emotional and cognitive skills presented significantly higher in those who have experienced a secure attachment within the earliest years of life. With the positive

effects of attachment widely highlighted globally, the rationale for this research project is to determine, explore and analyse possible long-term effects of the failure of a secure attachment present within the early childhood. Erozkhan (2016) shared findings from recent studies gathered in Turkey. Research was conducted with the aim to determine if there was a link between attachment formed and previously experienced trauma in childhood. Findings from the study presented evidence that concluded children who had experienced trauma and abuse within their life had also been rejected from a nurturing, positive attachment.

According to Breidenstine (2014) the presence and quality of an attachment in a child's early life is crucial to their holistic development. Offering further explanation Breidenstine (2014) states that although relationships and bonds can be negatively affected through the failure and rejection of such attachment in the early years, as well as the possible links between the poor presence and quality of attachment and reactive attachment disorder further research is paramount to gain an accurate understanding of the full effects. However, in contrast to this Harris's theory of attachment disputes that parents and carers do not have a huge influence on their children's personalities or character as they mature and further implies the peers around a child play a significant part in shaping their growing personality (Harris, 2009). In March 2021 there were currently 7080 children in care in Wales alone, the current statistics provided by Welsh Government (2021) has been taken into consideration for this research project prompting interviews with 10 foster carers. Further statistics revealed that 52 percent of children in care had previously experienced some form of neglect, abuse as well as not having their needs met by the parent/caregiver.

Wilkins (2011) states that links have been identified between maltreatment and disorganised attachment in children, to gain an in depth understanding of this further the ADAM (assessment of disorganised attachment and maltreatment) project devised by David Shemmings was implemented in 2011 to ensure those working in the social care sector were equipped and competent in assessing children displaying behaviours indicating possible disorganised attachment. Madigan *et al* (2013) believes that failure to form a secure attachment in early childhood can cause detrimental effects lasting into the years of adolescent, effects within the developmental years can be displayed as poor problem solving, social and emotional skills with some displaying aggressive behaviours. Dozier *et al* (2008) states that although there is limited evidence, failure of attachment withing a child's earliest years of life have been linked to reactive attachment disorder and without prompt and necessary treatment can have detrimental and lifelong effects.

Rees (2007) states when a secure attachment is formed, this supports a child's well-being, emotional development, sense of belonging and resilience, Failure of a secure attachment could result in failure for a child to thrive. As displayed by Welsh Government (2016) the national minimum standards for regulated childcare for children up to the age of 12 years quality of care regulation 20 (safeguarding and promotion of welfare) states all childcare settings should provide care that enables children to form positive attachments with caregivers and offer an enabling

environment that nurtures each child with adults who are fully responsive to their needs. In addition, UNICEF (1989) states within The United Nations convention on the rights of the child article 19 outlines that governments must do all they can to ensure children live a life free from all forms of abuse including neglect by their parents or anyone else responsible for looking after them.

The curriculum for non-maintained settings is in agreement. Written with children at the heart of the framework and recognising the importance of a nurturing environment with responsive adults being crucial in supporting a child's holistic development (Welsh Government, 2022).

## **Methodological Considerations**

Archarya *et al* (2013) suggests that during any research project the investigator will use a sample of the population to gain an insight and in depth understanding to the subject at hand, although accuracy would be greater using the entire population and this would be the strongest strategy although this is not always possible. According to Etikan *et al* (2015) gathering sufficient data is vital in any research project and shares similar beliefs that the research undertaken will provide a thorough understanding of the subject. The planned research will use purposive sampling to ensure the appropriate collection and analysis of data gathered. Campbell *et al* (2020) believes that purposive sampling is a research method that has been used for decades, a method that many people believe is simple and easy as opposed to those who consider it more complex. Purposive sampling has been used to better match the sample to the researcher's goals and objectives during the proposed research subject. American academy of child and adult psychiatry (2017) states those who display possible signs of attachment disorders have experienced trauma within the early years of life, probable causes may be abuse both emotional and physically and neglect stating although definitive causes are unknown, research suggests inadequate care is a possible cause. This sampling strategy was chosen for the following reasons, when issues emerge it is through evaluation and assessment by a psychiatrist that an official diagnosis of attachment disorders are concluded. (Turner, Beckwith and Duschinsky, 2019). During the proposed research, qualitative data will be collected through interviews with five paediatric psychiatrists in order to analyse the findings.

The planned research proposes a mixed method approach of overt observations with ten children with no known background of trauma and ten children who have been identified as experiencing trauma within the earliest years of their lives and are currently under the care of paediatric psychiatrists along with interviews using standardized open-ended questions to collect qualitative data, to analyse and investigate findings to substantiate a conclusion. Bakerman and Gottman (1997) suggest that through the use of observations, the researcher gains information, and data that they may not gain through the use of other methods. Further stating by using observations, the researcher is able to see an individual's personal

characteristics, how they interact with others, how they adapt to situations and can document any behaviours they may see as well as what they listen to in a natural environment. Palaiologou (2012) states when observing children's behaviours, the observer should have clear intentions of the aim of the observation, through observations an in-depth picture is created of the behaviours displayed in a natural environment. Pearce (2017) explains the behavioural variations displayed by those who have experienced a secure attachment maybe observed confidently exploring environments at ease, displaying the world around them as safe place and will be content when their attachment figure leaves their view as well as displaying excitement upon their return. As opposed to this a child who has not experienced a secure attachment could potentially be described as a disorganised or disorientated child displaying behaviours that may consist of incomplete motions and emotional displays as to freeze when lifting their arms to be held and be observed failing to seek out a familiar adult at times of upset or distress.

Arthur et al (2012) defines interviews as when significant interactions occur in which the researcher attempts to learn about the person's knowledge and thoughts on the current issue. As part of the study interviews will be conducted using standardized open-ended questions. As cited by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) Malinowski a classic ethnographer described interviews as crucial to grasping perspectives of others. Further stating in depth interviews are one of the primary data collection strategies used in qualitative research. Fox (2006) shares similar views and states interviews play a vital role in collecting data and consists of verbal communication between the researcher and chosen participant. Fox (2006) further states that the use of standardized open-ended questions allows comparability across the sample and a method of research that ensures the researchers thoughts and opinions are not voiced.

Queiros, Faria, and Almeida (2017) state that with any method used during the collection of data and research there is strengths and limitations. Additionally stating that when using qualitative methods in the form of observations, some advantages include researcher is not reliant on the response of others and data is able to be collected simultaneously during the occurrence of the event. Limitations may include requiring extensive preparation, the actual observation can be time consuming, and the researcher may not observe what they originally anticipated. Anderson (2010) agrees that all methods of data collection have advantages and disadvantages. Describing strengths of using a qualitative method as issues being able to be fully investigated, interviews are not always limited to specific questions and can be directed and guided by the researcher. Human experience provides convincing evidence that is sometimes even more convincing than statistical facts. Edward (2010) shares similar views and agrees that when collecting data, human experience is invaluable. Edward (2010) suggests that limitations during observational research may be the element of bias when an exposure of interest is highly correlated with another exposure that is also related to the result.

Boso (2020) agrees and elaborates further by stating when using a qualitative method of collecting data during research, a specific limitation that should be

considered is the one of a bias judgment, also known as the halo effect. A simple definition of this is a cognitive bias, when the researcher during either interviews or observations makes an overall judgement of a person based on one aspect which causes them to form an opinion. Zilberstein (2013) implies that children who are suffering with aspects of attachment issues can be seen as complex. Bornstein (1948) suggests that those who work closely with the children with possible complex issues should be aware of the possible emotional strain this may have on the individual. As cited by Merret (2006) a widely referred to term during research is the Hawthorne effect, this is commonly used to explain unexpected outcomes that in this instance the researcher may observe or encounter, for example an alteration of the behaviour witnessed if the participants are aware they are being observed this could impact the data recorded. Kompier (2006) argues that a methodological quality test cannot be applied to the Hawthorne research. Even if methodological issues are ignored, the preliminary data do not indicate the existence of a Hawthorne effect.

For the proposed research project, it was felt a quantitative method approach was not needed nor beneficial. As previously cited by Etikan *et al* (2015) through the use of purposive sampling participants chosen have been identified as having a better understanding of the subject and question proposed. Marshall (2005) suggests although data collection through quantitative approaches have advantages in this instance the need for flexibility with respondents to share their knowledge was vital for the research. In addition, quantitative methods can have a poor response rate with no way to identify those who have not responded. Heale and Forbes (2013) state that through the use of multiple research methods to gather a conclusion on the question at hand is known as triangulation, the objective is to increase reliability and eliminate any potential bias that may arise from a single method use. Through combining findings from two methods of data collection, provided an encompassing view of the results as opposed to a single method. Heale and Noble (2019) are in agreement and suggest triangulation is used to avoid bias during research and to be able to offer readers with a more thorough explanation, triangulation examines and explains complex human behaviours in a variety of ways.

## **Ethical Considerations**

As cited by Resnik (2015) explains the most widely used definition of "ethics" is as a set of guidelines for behaviour that identify between suitable and unsuitable behaviour. Offering further explanations Resnik (2015) states ethics and law are not the same, even though most countries utilise laws to uphold widely accepted moral norms and ethical and legal principles employ comparable notions. Although an individual's actions may be legal, they may be unethical or maybe illegal but could still be ethical. British Educational Research Association (2019) supports those undertaking educational research and ensures researchers are conducting their research with the highest standards of ethics as set out in the framework. As cited by

Coleman and Briggs (2002) Pring (2000) describes the principles within research as the respect, dignity and privacy of the participants shown by the researcher. Burgess (2005) suggests that amongst the concerns of methods used to collect data in research, confidentiality, informed consents as well as the right to privacy and information are highlighted as the most significant. In agreeance Ethical Research Involving Children (2013) states in line with article 16 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states all children have the right to privacy. Souza and Toquette (2022) believes when any research is conducted that involves human participants, the researcher should ensure that all participants are fully informed about the research taking part and appropriately educated on the risks and benefits, but also ensuring that any agreement to participate was not pressured.

As cited by National Health Service (2023) the proposed research will be conducted with the agreement of informed consent, participants will receive an information pack along with the necessary consent forms should they wish to accept participation. Any participants under the age of 18 years will require the consent of the relevant parent or carer. The information sheet will outline the aims and objectives along with sources to provide any further questions. The information pack will be printed on headed paper with the University crest. All possible risks that could arise during the conducted observations and interviews will be highlighted with relevant information regarding the storage of data (University of Cambridge, 2023). In agreeance Gertz (2008) and Gordon and Prohaska (2006) state in line with the BERA guidelines, all participants that are taking part in the research will be fully informed that they have the right to withdraw from participation in the research at any time and for any reason. As part of the proposed research children between the ages of 9 months old to the age of 4 years will be observed, 10 of the children in a mainstream setting with no known history of previous trauma along with ten children who are currently under the care of paediatric psychiatrist having been identified as experiencing trauma within the early years of their lives. During the research, at the time of conducting observations, should any child display behaviour that indicates distress or being uneasy the researcher will refrain from observing this child and these behaviours will override the parent or carers consent for the child to participate. At all times throughout the proposed project, the welfare and well-being of those participating will be paramount. Necessary steps will be taken to ensure the research causes no harm to those participating (Buchanan and Warwick, 2021). Lowman and Palys (2013) is in agreeance and states when any form of research is conducted that involves the participation of humans, the basic ethical duty of a researcher is to protect research subjects from harm. Elaborating further by stating during specific forms of research participants details such as name will be known by the researcher, although these personal details will be concealed from readers. The highest ethical standards shall be observed when conducting research during the proposed study, in accordance with the data act 2018 and the research and ethics integrity code provided by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD, 2022). Prior to the interviews with both paediatric psychiatrist's and ten current foster carers who have children who have been discovered to have experienced past trauma, an in-depth conversation

will be held where the researcher will inform participants of the information they are seeking and why.

Coffelt (2017) suggests that during quantitative studies an approach using anonymity is usually the preferred method of data collection as opposed to confidentiality when using qualitative data. During the collection of data during the proposed research project an agreement of confidentiality between researcher and participants will be formed. The timing and setting for interviews will be sensitively thought about to ensure no breach of confidentiality. Affirmed by Holland (2019) stating confidentiality is about safeguarding the participant's individually identifiable information. Abiding by the highest ethical standards the participants personal information including identity, responses and personal information will not be disclosed or accessible to any other person other than the researcher themselves. Any information disclosed by participants during these interviews will be in a third-party, ensuring that the patients' details are anonymous, behaviours and past experiences and backgrounds discussed will be done via child A and child B (Gumbriem *et al*, 2012). Stahlke (2018) states when using the method of qualitative research to gather data, carries the potential for ethical difficulties. Although many risk factors of qualitative research focuses on potential risks that participants may face, there is an increasing awareness risks that the researcher may encounter both personally and those that pose a risk to the institution in where the researcher is currently situated. Below we attempt to identify several risks.

### **Risks to the participant.**

During the observation of children consent will be attained by the responsible parent or carer. As cited by Bourke and Loveridge (2013) implies although children's role is crucial during the research project, not all children want to participate in the research or are aware of how to decline. Mallion and Elliot (2019) further state when the topic is that of sensitive topic participants are at increasing risk of suffering emotional distress when discussing such sensitive subjects. In addition, Sanjari *et al*, (2014) explains that during qualitative research that involves families, there is potential risks of causing disagreements between members, especially if the topic of research is that of a delicate subject. Another possible risk that may occur during the observations of children taking place is the fear and effects it may have on the children during a stranger being in their natural environment (Brooker, 2013). Boso (2020) suggests that the Halo effect is additional risk to participants by elaborating this occurs when the researcher makes a bias judgement upon the participant along with the Hawthorne affect occurring by stating this can occur when participants adapt and alter the behaviour, they display based on being aware of the observer being present (Merret, 2006).

### **Risks to the researcher**

United Kingdom Government (2019) states to ensure all settings are working in line with statutory requirements and best practise, they have a safeguarding policy and procedure to follow. The researcher will provide their DBS prior to observation and will work in line with the settings safeguarding policy and procedures. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2023) suggest anyone working with children should know how to respond to a disclosure from a child. This is a risk to the researcher, and should this occur, the researcher will respond to this in line with setting's safeguarding procedures.

When hearing previews of the backgrounds of children who have undergone trauma, the researcher could feel distressed and run the danger of experiencing emotional discomfort (Mallion and Elliot, 2019). Swift *et al* (2008) identifies other potential risks to the researcher during sensitive topics using qualitative research as a form of accusation being made towards the researcher themselves. Rowley (2012) recognises a further risk as being the researcher not receiving the necessary facts and information, they require to conduct the research.

### **Risks to the University of the researcher**

UWTSD (2022) suggests that the risk of research misconduct is a potential risk when conducting data collections using a qualitative method. In the event of research misconduct, the consequences of this could have a significant impact on the University, suggesting the credibility of the University could be affected as well as possible legal actions. Harman and Sherwell (2010) believe that another risk during research for the university or institute is the breakdown of relationships, this could be between the university and sponsors who are supporting the research or personal relationships.

United States Office of Research Integrity (no date) states the process of acquiring and analysing information on relevant variables is known as data collection. Offering further information and reasoning behind the collection of data and suggesting data is collected during research to ensure the research's integrity is upheld. The proper gathering of data decreases the likelihood of errors such as misleading conclusions, which result in lost resources. In line with the Data Protection Act (2018) all data collected during the proposed research project will be stored securely. Data that contains sensitive and personal data will be stored with higher levels of security with password protection. Details of participants will also be stored separately to ensure participants are unidentifiable. The Data protection Act further states within the seven principles data will only be kept long enough for its stated purpose. National Health Service (2023) suggests that all participants should be offered a summary of the findings after the research product. All participants involved in the proposed research project will be provided with an information sheet at the end of the study that will conclude the findings.

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