

Understanding Shona's Development

Applying Bowlby's Attachment Theory in an Early Years Nursery

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Module code and title: LCHS4010

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Assessment: Individual presentation (10 minutes)

1. Understanding Shona's situation

- Shona is 3 and has recently started nursery.
- She becomes anxious when separated from her carers.
- She uses limited verbal communication.
- She finds it difficult to join group play.
- Our role: observe, build trust and plan support with her carers.

Important

These behaviours are signals to understand—not proof of an attachment disorder.

Scenario provided in the assessment brief.

2. Bowlby's Attachment Theory

- Children are biologically prepared to seek closeness to familiar caregivers for safety.
- A secure base helps a child feel safe enough to explore and learn.
- When worried, a child may seek proximity, cry, cling or become quiet.
- Responsive, predictable care can help a child build trust over time.
- Attachment relationships can form with more than one consistent caregiver.

Key idea

Feeling safe supports exploration. A child can return to a trusted adult for reassurance and then try again.

(Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978)

3. Applying the theory to Shona

- Separation anxiety may mean Shona needs more time and reassurance during transitions.
- Limited speech may make it harder for her to explain worry or ask for help.
- Difficulty joining group play may reflect uncertainty in a new environment—not lack of interest.
- Observe when she feels calm, who she approaches and what helps her settle.
- Do not label her attachment style from these behaviours alone.

Practitioner focus

Ask: 'What might Shona be communicating through her behaviour?'

(Bowlby, 1988; Fearon and Roisman, 2017; NICE, 2015)

4. Nature and nurture

- Nature: temperament, sensory differences, health, sleep and individual developmental pace can affect responses.
- Nurture: familiar routines, caregiver responsiveness, family experiences and nursery relationships also matter.
- Shona may be adjusting to change, but other explanations should be explored respectfully.
- Work with carers to understand routines, interests, language and experiences.
- Avoid blaming the child or family; consider the whole context.

Balanced view

Development reflects interactions between the child and their environment—not one single cause.

(Bowlby, 1988; Keller, 2018; Fearon and Roisman, 2017)

5. Practical nursery support plan

- Assign a consistent key person to greet and comfort Shona.
- Use a predictable, gradual settling-in routine agreed with carers.
- Create a short, calm goodbye ritual; avoid carers disappearing without explanation.
- Offer a familiar comfort item where nursery policy allows.
- Respond warmly to distress; praise small steps towards exploration.
- Review observations with carers and adapt the plan.

Example

The key person welcomes Shona, helps her choose a familiar activity, and stays nearby while she explores.

(Department for Education, 2024; NICE, 2015)

6. Supporting all areas of development

- Emotional: name feelings, offer comfort and reassure her that her carer returns.
- Social: begin with one trusted adult or one peer before larger group play.
- Communication and cognition: use simple phrases, pictures, gestures, songs and choices.
- Physical: offer blocks, outdoor movement and sensory activities.
- Use Shona's interests and home language where possible; allow time for responses.

Keep it child-centred

Small, achievable steps are more useful than forcing participation.

(Department for Education, 2024; NICE, 2015)

7. Critical evaluation

- Strength: explains why emotional security and trusted relationships can support exploration.
- Strength: gives practitioners a practical focus—consistent, sensitive and predictable care.
- Limitation: behaviour can have many causes, including language development, neurodiversity, health or unfamiliar routines.
- Limitation: attachment concepts can be interpreted too narrowly across cultures and family structures.
- Use the theory alongside observation, family knowledge and appropriate referral.

Professional judgement

Do not diagnose an attachment disorder. Seek advice if concerns persist or affect wellbeing.

(Keller, 2018; Fearon and Roisman, 2017; NICE, 2015)

8. Conclusion

- Shona needs time, consistency and emotionally responsive support.
- Bowlby's theory helps explain why security may support her confidence to explore and play.
- A key person, predictable transitions and individualised play can support her wellbeing.
- Nature and nurture both matter; no single behaviour gives a complete explanation.
- Partnership with carers and ongoing observation will guide next steps.

Remember

Understand the child before interpreting the behaviour.

Key message: build safety first, then support exploration.

References (Harvard style)

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