

Understanding Early Childhood Development: Application of Bowlby's Attachment Theory

**Module: Psychology in Health and
Social Care (LCHS4010)**

Student name: [Ahamadunnisha Sheik](#)

ID: [2528582](#)



Scenario and Context

Role: As an early years practitioner in a nursery setting, I am supporting Shona, a 3-year-old child who has recently joined the nursery.

Profile of child and identified problems:

- Shona is upset when left alone by her carers.
- She shows little verbal communication.
- She struggles to engage in group play activities.
- The above observations could suggest issues regarding her emotional well-being, communication, and social engagement, but they shouldn't be seen as attachment disorder.



Selected theory: In this presentation, I will discuss Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which offers an explanation of how responsive caregiving relationships can help children feel safe and explore (Deneault, Hammond and Madigan, 2023; Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Presentation focus: Attachment theory will be used to analyze Shona's behavior. Nature vs. nurture will be considered, and some possible practical recommendations based on the theory of attachment will be proposed.

Introduction to Bowlby's Attachment Theory

- The Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby, states that children are biologically inclined to form emotional attachments due to their protective, comforting and safe nature (Bowlby, 1982).

Concepts of Attachment Theory

Attachment relationship

- A child wants to be close to an individual who is familiar with them especially in stressful, fearful or uncertain situations (Bowlby, 1982).

Secure base

- An attachment figure gives a child a secure base which enables them to explore the surroundings confidently (Bowlby, 1982; Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Safe haven

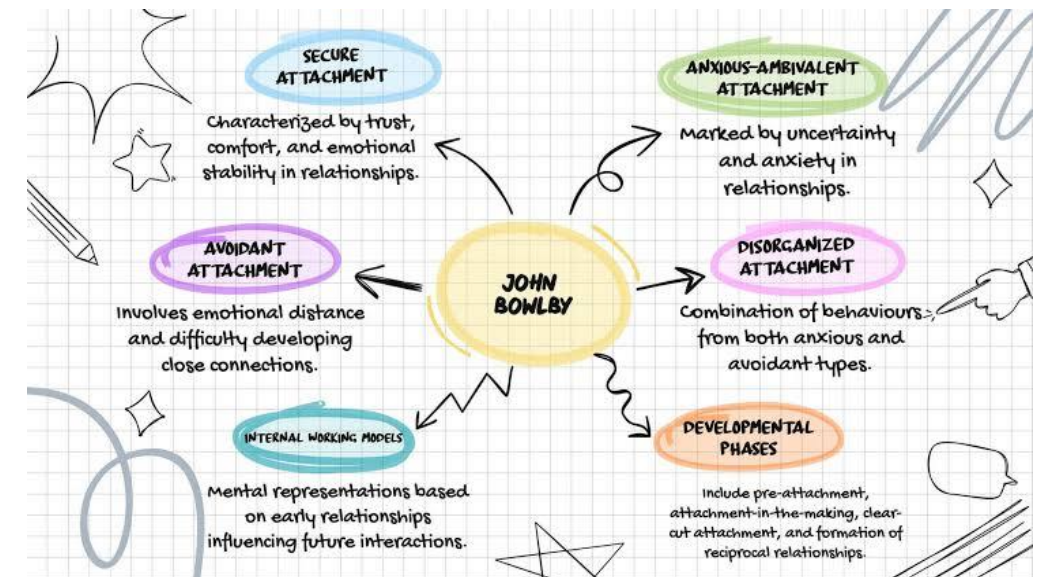
- Distressed children look for assurance and comfort in their trusted attachment figure (Bowlby, 1982; Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Internal working model

- Experiences within relationships in childhood shape the expectations of children concerning themselves, others and the relationship (Bowlby, 1982).

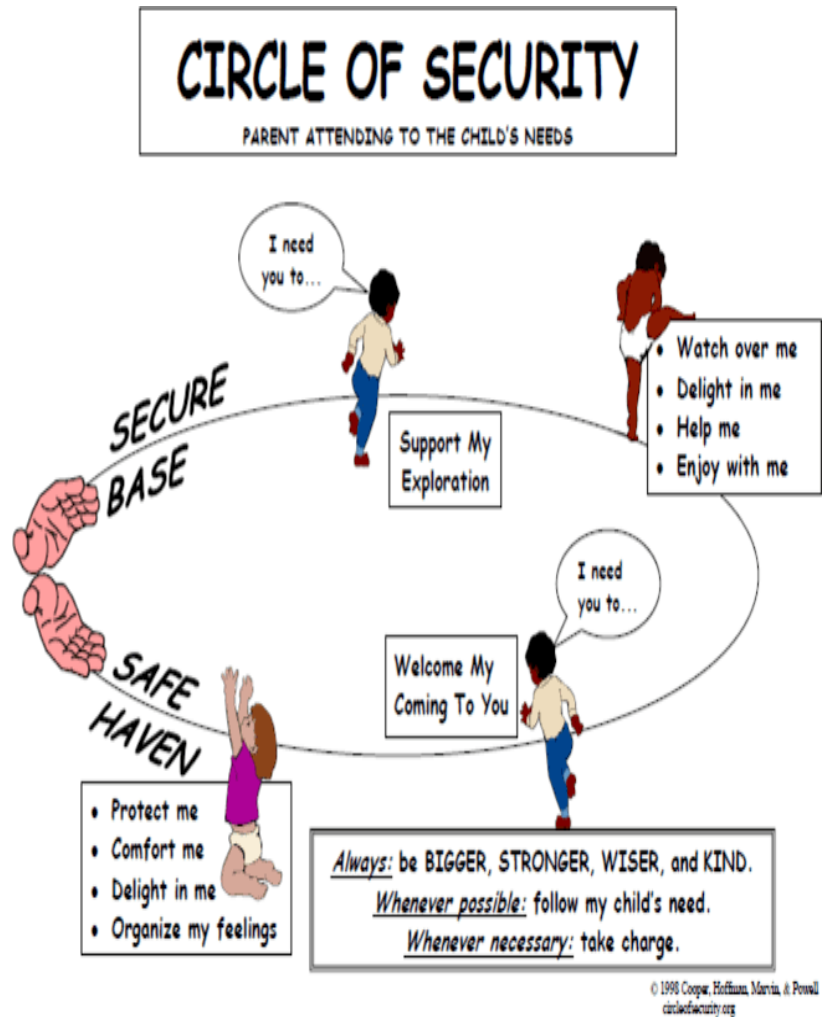
Why the Theory Is Relevant to Early Years

- Early years contexts often mean that children have separation from their parents or carers and the development of attachments to other adults. There is evidence that positive relationships between teachers and children can act as secure base and safe haven functions (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).



(Orben, 2019)

Why Bowlby's Attachment Theory Is Relevant to Shona



(Hoffman, 2006)

Shona's observation	Relevant attachment concept	Application to Shona
Anxiety when carers leave	Separation and safe haven	Shona may experience separation from familiar carers as stressful and seek reassurance from a trusted adult. A predictable and responsive nursery relationship may help her feel emotionally secure.
Limited verbal communication	Responsive relationship attachment	Anxiety may reduce Shona's willingness to communicate in an unfamiliar setting. Sensitive adult interaction can provide repeated opportunities for communication without pressuring her.
Difficulty engaging in group play	Secure base and exploration	If Shona does not yet feel secure in the nursery, she may be less confident exploring the environment and approaching peers.
Recently joined nursery	Transition and relationship formation	The transition from home to nursery introduces unfamiliar adults, routines and peers. Building a consistent relationship with a key practitioner may help Shona adjust (Zhu et al., 2023).

Applying Bowlby’s Attachment Theory to Shona’s Development

Area	Shona’s observation	Attachment-based interpretation
Emotional	Anxiety when carers leave	Separation may increase her need for reassurance and emotional security (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).
Social	Difficulty joining group play	Feeling less secure in a new environment may reduce confidence to explore peer relationships (Zhu et al., 2023).
Communication	Limited verbal communication	Anxiety may reduce communication; responsive one-to-one interaction can provide supportive opportunities to communicate (McIntosh et al., 2024).
Exploration	Difficulty engaging in nursery activities	A consistent adult can provide a secure base, helping Shona gradually explore and participate (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).
Physical wellbeing	No physical concern identified	Physical development should continue to be monitored rather than assumed to be affected by attachment.

Shona’s initial concern is to establish her emotional security in the new setting of the nursery. A responsive caregiver can assist her in slowly building up the courage to communicate, interact, and play with others (Andersson Søre, Schad and Psouni, 2023).

Practical Attachment-Informed Support Plan for Shona



Shona's need	Practical nursery strategy	How it applies to Shona
Separation anxiety	Consistent key-person approach	A familiar practitioner greets Shona, supports her at arrival and provides reassurance during separation (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).
Unfamiliar routines	Predictable transition routine	Use the same arrival sequence, visual cues and simple explanations so Shona knows what will happen next (Andersson S�e, Schad and Psouni, 2023).
Limited communication	Responsive interaction one-to-one	Follow Shona's communication attempts, allow processing time and model simple language during play (McIntosh et al., 2024).
Difficulty with group play	Gradual small-group play	Begin with one familiar child and a structured activity before gradually increasing group participation (Zhu et al., 2023).
Emotional distress	Co-regulation and reassurance	Name Shona's feelings, remain calm and help her settle before redirecting her towards an activity (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Nature and Nurture Influences

Nature : biological influences

Temperament: Children differ naturally in their emotional reactivity and sensitivity to unfamiliar situations, which may influence how they respond to separation and change (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Individual developmental differences: Children's biological and neurodevelopmental characteristics can contribute to differences in communication and social behaviour. These should be assessed rather than assumed from Shona's limited speech (McIntosh et al., 2024).

Stress sensitivity: Biological differences in children's responses to stress may influence how strongly they react to separation or unfamiliar situations (McIntosh et al., 2024).

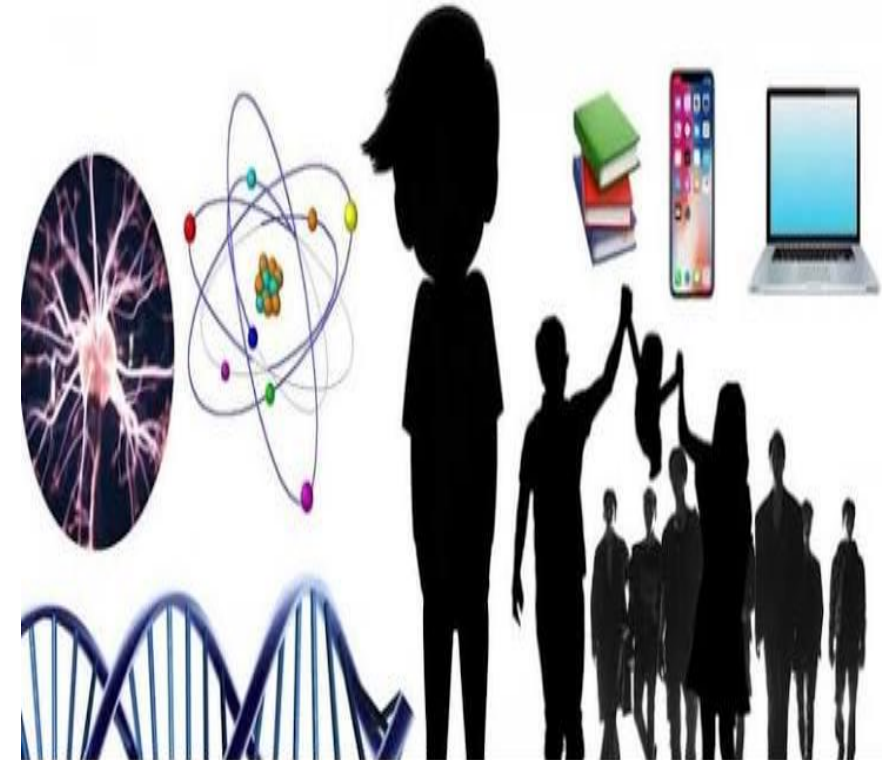
Nurture : environmental influences

Caregiving relationships: Consistent and responsive caregiving can support children's emotional security and social development (McIntosh et al., 2024).

Nursery transition: Shona has recently entered a new environment with unfamiliar adults, routines and peers, which may temporarily increase uncertainty and separation distress (Andersson Søre, Schad and Psouni, 2023).

Adult responsiveness: Sensitive responses from nursery practitioners can help Shona feel secure and gradually participate in exploration and social activities (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Nature Vs Nurture



(Borole, 2020)

Critical Evaluation of Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Strengths

- Useful in explaining Shona's separation anxiety due to the significance of emotional security and adult relationships.
- Favors the use of a consistent key person system where Shona will have an adult to assure her (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).
- Demonstrates the way responsive adult-child relationships can facilitate social adaptation and engagement (Zhu et al., 2023).
- Provides a secure base that will be used to encourage Shona to engage in various activities in the nursery (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Limitations

- Cannot fully explain Shona's limited verbal communication and inability to engage in group play.
- They could also be linked to language development, temperament, neurodevelopment or moving nursery (McIntosh et al., 2024).
- Attachment theory might not consider enough peers, learning opportunities and more than one caregiver (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).
- Insecure attachment cannot be concluded for Shona until more assessment is conducted.



Complementary Approach: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

- The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky would be complementary to the Bowlby theory in explaining the role of adult interaction, language and peer interaction in helping Shona learn. Attachment theory will therefore help explain her emotional security, while sociocultural perspective can help explain her communicative skills.

Conclusion

- The theory of attachment by Bowlby is a useful model that explains the feelings of separation anxiety and emotional insecurity of Shona. But her inability to communicate and join group activities cannot be fully explained with attachment theory since there are other factors that influence her development and environment that might have an impact. A stable key worker, routine, good communication and gradual exposure to peers can aid Shona in becoming confident and involved in activities at the nursery.

THANK
YOU! 😊

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