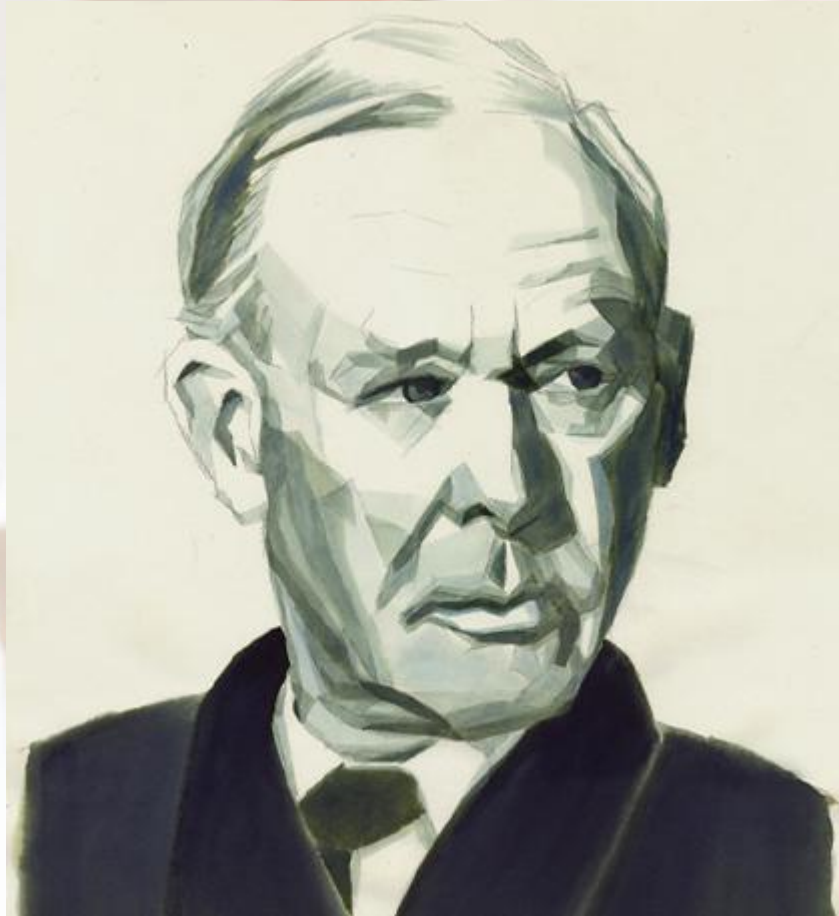




ANDREA BERRY (2506999)
LCHS4010
PSYCHOLOGY IN HEALTH AND
SOCIAL CARE
LECTURER: WAFA NASIR



Topic: Bowlby's Attachment Theory in early childhood

Case study: Shona, aged three, newly attending nursery

Separation anxiety, limited verbal communication and difficulties in joining group play

Aim: To develop an evidence-based support plan for Shona

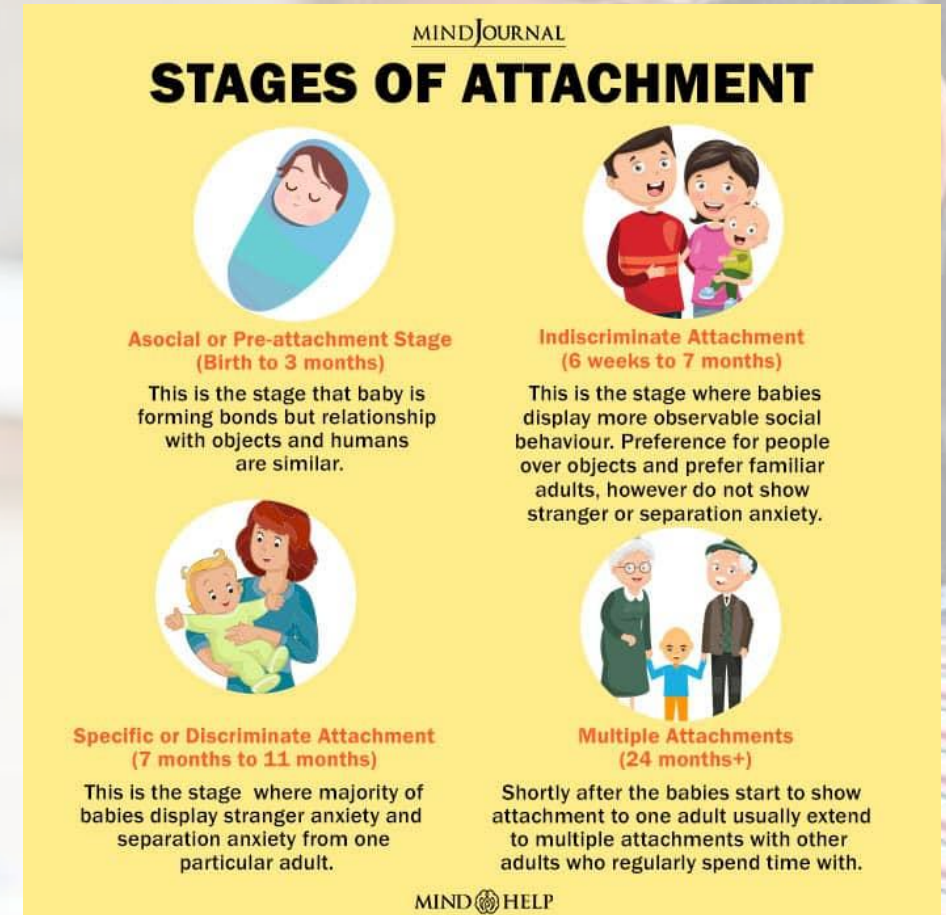
Developed John Bowlby in 1988.

Attachment is "a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1997). Helps children to feel secure and gives them confidence to explore their surroundings. Sensitive and consistent responses can support the child's emotional security.

- **Secure base – A trusted caregiver provides the child with enough security to explore, play and learn.**
- **Safe haven – The trusted caregiver provides comfort and reassurance when the child is frightened, anxious or upset.**
- **Sensitive period – The window of around five years when key attachments are formed.**

Children develop an internal working model based on early experiences with caregivers during the first years of life, this can influence how children view themselves, trust others and form relationships.

(Bowlby, 1951; Bowlby, 1988; Bowlby, 1997)





According to Prior and Glaser (2006), the first two years of life are particularly important for the development of attachment relationships. Bowlby's work also suggests that early relationships can influence a child's sense of trust, self-worth and confidence in social situations

Shona becomes anxious when separated from her carers. Uncertainty in a new environment/unfamiliar surroundings, needs reassurance from a trusted adult. Her behaviour communicates the need for comfort and security.

Shona has limited verbal communication, will find it difficult to explain her feelings or ask for help. May communicate through crying, gestures, changes in behaviour and facial expressions.

If Shona feels insecure or overwhelmed she may prefer to stay close to a familiar adult or observe other children before joining in.

(Bowlby, 1988; Prior and Glaser, 2006)

Practical Strategies and Interventions

- 1. Establish a consistent key person.** Welcomed by the same practitioner everyday, develops trust and makes her feel safer.
- 2. Introduce a settling routine.** Consistent hello and goodbye routines. Allow a familiar comfort item. Helps her become comfortable.
- 3. Support communication.** Use of simple words, pictures, gestures, stories. Allow for enough time for responses without putting pressure on her.
- 4. Build social participation.** Parallel play, sharing and turn taking. Small and short activities. Gradually increases involvement with other children.
- 5. Monitor progress alongside carers.** Communicate regularly with Shona's carers and share observations, progress and concerns.

NICE guidance (2012) highlights the importance of supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing during their early years. For Shona this means providing a safe and predictable environment in which she can feel comfortable in receiving reassurance from familiar caregivers and build confidence during social interactions.

Nature and biological influences:

- **Temperament**
- **Sensitivity regarding change**
- **Language development**
- **Sensory processing and developmental differences**
- **Physical wellbeing**

Nurture and environmental influences:

- **Relationship with parents and practitioners**
- **Familiarity with surroundings**
- **Social interaction**
- **Play**
- **Family and culture**

Research indicates that temperament and attachment are distinct but related therefore a child's behaviour should not be explained by only one factor alone. (Groh et al., 2017).

A child's temperament is the way in which they respond and react to different situations. Some children may be naturally shy, cautious or sensitive to new and unfamiliar environments whilst other children may be more confident and sociable.

Shona may have a naturally cautious temperament meaning she will need more time to become comfortable around unfamiliar adults and children. Starting nursery will be an unfamiliar experience causing her to feel uncertain.

Practitioners should observe Shona's behaviour over time in order to understand her temperament and emotional needs so that she may build confidence. It is extremely important to consider biological and environmental influences when supporting children's development.

Supporting holistic development

Attachment-informed care should be alongside the appropriate early years learning activities and developmental observation as attachment theory does not explain every single area of development. “Having positive interaction and play with caregivers can help a child’s brain to develop healthily.” (NSPCC Learning, 2021)

- **Emotional wellbeing: Respond sensitively to distress, acknowledge feeling and build trust through consistent care strategy.**
- **Social development: Encourage parallel play, turn taking, shared activities and gradually increase participation with peers.**
- **Cognitive and language development: Use stories, songs, puzzles and pretend play during conversations to support understanding, vocabulary and problem solving.**
- **Physical development: Provide safe indoor and outdoor movement, age-appropriate fine-motor activities, nutritious food and sufficient rest.**

A Critical evaluation of Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Strengths:

- Explains why children seek comfort and reassurance during distress.
- Emphasises stable, responsive relationships and emotional security.
- Offers practical guidance for settling-in routines that can be implemented and key-person relationships.
- Encourages practitioners to interpret behaviour as communication rather than misbehaviour.
- Highlights importance of early relationships and the need for consistent responsive care.

Limitations:

- Cannot explain every cause of separation anxiety, language delay or social withdrawal.
- Cultural expectations of caregiving and independence vary.
- Temperament, disability, neurodevelopment and wider social conditions also affect behaviour.
- Potentially underestimates the ability of a child's capacity to adapt. Early attachment is important by Bowlby (1951) assumes relationships cannot be developed later.

In regards to Shona, Bowlby's Attachment Theory is more suitable than Piaget's theory for understanding Shona's separation anxiety and special emotional needs. Bowlby's theory highlights the importance of secure relationships with caregivers (Bowlby, 1988) whereas Piaget's theory focuses more on the cognitive development and learning through exploration of surroundings, which Shona is not yet ready to do (Piaget, 1952; McLeod, 2024; McLeod, 2026).

In conclusion...

The overall aim is to help Shona develop emotional security at nursery, communication skills so that she may express her needs and feelings and positive relationships with both adults and other children around her at nursery.

- **Practitioners should work alongside Shona's carers and regularly review her progress**
- **Provide a safe and predictable environment**
- **Apply Bowlby's Attachment Theory by building secure relationships with key people**
- **Allow Shona to develop confidence at her own pace**
- **Support Shona's communication using encouragement and aids**
- **Maintain communication between both home and nursery for consistent support**
- **Monitor Shona's individual needs to identify whether additional support is needed**

Reference List

- Bowlby, J. (1951) *Maternal care and mental health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- Bowlby, John (1997) *Attachment and loss*. Volume 1: attachment. London: Pimlico.
- Bowlby, J. (1988) *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books
- Groh, A.M., Narayan, A.J., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J., Roisman, G.I., Vaughn, B.E., Fearon, R.M.P. and van IJzendoorn, M.H. (2017) 'Attachment and temperament in the early life course: A meta-analytic review', *Child Development*, 88(3), pp. 770–795. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12677>.
- McLeod, S. (2024). *Piaget's Sensorimotor Stage of Cognitive Development*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/sensorimotor.html>
- McLeod, S. (2026). *Piaget's Theory And Stages Of Cognitive Development*. Available at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Piaget.html> (Accessed: 01/10/2026)
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2012) *Social and emotional wellbeing: Early years*. Public health guideline PH40. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph40>
- NSPCC Learning (2021). *Attachment and child development*. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/attachment-early-years> (Accessed: 01/10/2026)
- Piaget, J., & Cook, M. T. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York, NY: International University Press.
- Prior, V. and Glaser, D. (2006) *Understanding attachment and attachment disorders: Theory, evidence and practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Simply Psychology (2026) *John Bowlby's Attachment Theory*. Available at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html> (Accessed: 03/10/2026)