



## **Attachment Relationships**

*Quality of Care for Young Children*

## EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS

*Series edited by Martin Woodhead and John Oates*

Early Childhood in Focus is a series of publications produced by the Child and Youth Studies Group at The Open University, United Kingdom, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

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These publications are intended to be of value to advocates for the rights of children and families, to policy makers at all levels, and to anyone working to improve the living conditions, quality of experience and life chances of young children throughout the world.

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# Attachment relationships

*Editor*

**John Oates**



**EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS 1**

*Quality of Care for Young Children*

We now understand, through painstaking and detailed longitudinal research investigations, more fully than ever before what children need in order to thrive emotionally, socially and cognitively to the benefit of themselves, their families, and their communities. We also know that failing to meet these needs carries enormous health and economic costs. Children need consistent, sensitive and responsive loving care – something that is as important as the need for nutrition. So, while vast funds are needed to address children's needs for food, shelter, and immunisations against the threat of disease, funds and resources must also be invested in educating parents, teachers and public policy officials about the immediate and long-term importance of meeting young children's urgent wishes for attachment security in their relationships with parents or parent substitutes. This need for attachment security, together with the parental causes and beneficent consequences that are likely to follow once attachment security is established or regained, are concisely presented in this landmark document which deserves wide circulation among all those with the power to influence public and social policy as concerns child and social welfare.

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# Preface

In recent years, an extensive body of research has been accumulating, showing that the early care environment has a major role in a child's development, affecting later outcomes and life chances. Central to these effects is the quality of the attachment bonds that a child forms with the persons who provide care, such as parents, other members of the family or community, or professional carers. Within the general field of parenting study, attachment research is a well-theorised and productive approach. It is revealing the features of the care environment that have these long-term effects on children. Furthermore, it is also identifying the most effective targets and methods for interventions to support caregivers in establishing and maintaining positive, nurturing environments. These have an important part to play in reducing the human and social costs of disadvantaging practices in early childhood care.

Although most attachment research has been concentrated in North American and European contexts, the cross-cultural evidence that is now available from studies in other communities points to the development of infant-caregiver attachments as a basic feature of our human species, which is nevertheless significantly modulated by local cultural practices and living circumstances. The term 'caregiver' is used deliberately here, to highlight the many varied ways in which infants are cared for by family and community members in different cultural settings. Although the most significant adults in infants' lives are often the biological parents, attachments that are important for children's development can be established with any persons who provide a measure of ongoing support and care.

Thus, where the words 'parent', 'father' or 'mother' are used in this text, they should be taken to refer to specific roles that male and female adults can play in childcare, not necessarily only to the biological parents. In many societies, cultural patterns mean that these roles may also be shared with older siblings, other relatives or other members of the community. In places affected by adversity, such as where war, natural disaster or disease (notably HIV/AIDS) disrupts traditional practices and where the loss of parents is common, the responsibility of parenting young children may be wholly taken by siblings or other young people.

Focusing on the formation of early attachments and their relation to later developmental outcomes, this publication highlights a set of established research findings with reference to a wide range of recent studies. It has been compiled with the help of many experts in the field and it provides easy access to up-to-date summaries of the key research findings, of value to people working to promote positive early childhood experiences and outcomes around the world. It has been developed especially to support the work of early childhood advocates and policy makers, and it sets out a series of policy-related questions that arise from the research findings in this important area.

**John Oates**  
Editor

## *Early attachment relationships are a crucial consideration in realising children's rights*

*The Committee notes the growing body of theory and research which confirms that young children are best understood as social actors whose survival, well-being and development are dependent on and built around close relationships.*

These relationships are normally with a small number of key people, most often parents, members of the extended family and peers, as well as caregivers and other early childhood professionals. ... Babies and infants are entirely dependent on others, but they are not passive recipients of care, direction and guidance. They are active social agents, who seek protection, nurturance and understanding from parents or other caregivers, which they require for their survival, growth and well-being. ... Under normal circumstances, young children form strong mutual attachments with their parents or primary caregivers. These relationships offer children physical and emotional security, as well as consistent care and attention. Through these relationships children construct a personal identity and acquire culturally valued skills, knowledge and behaviours. In these ways, parents (and other caregivers) are normally the major conduit through which young children are able to realize their rights.

*United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, pp. 4 and 8*

*Today, when early child development is an active item on the policymaking agenda, is a crucial time to bring science to bear on program and policy development as they pertain to supporting early child-caregiver relationships.*

Ultimately, programs that support early child-caregiver relationships must be theoretically grounded, evidence based, rigorously evaluated, faithful to a defined program model, and deliverable on a large scale in a sustainable and cost-effective manner.

Attachment theory and research offer powerful tools for achieving these goals.

*(Berlin et al., 2005, p. xvi)*

# I.

## Attachment relationships: infants and caregivers



*Attachments are the emotional bonds that infants develop with their parents and other key caregivers.*

*These relationships are crucial for children's well-being and for their emotional and social development.*

*In recent years, extensive research based on attachment theory has established a strong evidence base with relevance for early childhood policies.*

*The highly influential theory of human attachment was first put forward by John Bowlby*

## Child–parent attachment

Attachments are the emotional bonds that infants develop with their parents and parent figures. Undoubtedly, the most important person in the initial development of the theory of attachment formation is John Bowlby. In a highly influential series of books and writings (1969–1998), based on his own research and clinical experience, Bowlby set out the core tenets of attachment theory that have since inspired a most productive body of research. He began from the assumption that, in the environment in which the human species evolved, the survival of infants would have depended on their ability to maintain proximity to adults motivated to protect, feed, care for, and comfort them. Unlike the young of most primate species, however, human infants are unable to move closer to adults or to cling to them when they are within reach. Instead, infants must rely on signals to entice adults to approach or stay near them. The usefulness of these signals depends, of course, on their effectiveness in eliciting responses from adults. Adults indeed seem pre-programmed to approach, soothe, and pick up crying babies and to continue interacting with nearby infants who are smiling at them. Over time, Bowlby proposed, infants come to focus their proximity-promoting signals on those who have responded most regularly and with whom they are most familiar, and these people, typically the parents, become attachment figures.

Bowlby's theory offers a clear explanation of why these attachment relationships are of crucial importance for children's subsequent emotional and social development. Building on these ideas, subsequent research is providing strong support for the basic processes that Bowlby described, and is uncovering the details of how attachment relationships are formed and how they affect development into adulthood.

Of central importance is the concept of attachment security, where a child with secure attachment feels able to rely on the parent or parents as a source of comfort and safety in times of upset and stress.

**Michael E. Lamb**, Professor of Psychology in the Social Sciences, Cambridge University, United Kingdom

- *Attachment is a core process in child development.*
- *Attachment relationships form between infants and those who care for them.*
- *Attachments are important for a child's subsequent development.*



# Attachment security

*Infants who have formed a positive attachment to one or both parents can then use them as secure bases from which to explore the environment*

According to attachment theory, infants who have formed a positive attachment to one or both parents should be able to use them as secure bases from which to explore the environment. Stress, caused by events such as encounters with strangers or entering unfamiliar settings, should lead such infants to stop exploring and draw closer to their parents, at least temporarily. If contact with the parent is disrupted, for example if the parent and infant are briefly separated, this should lead infants to attempt to bring them back by crying or searching, and to less exploration of the environment. Following the parent's return, secure infants should seek to re-engage in interaction and, if distressed, perhaps ask to be cuddled and comforted. In fact, this is how about 65 per cent of infants, studied in a number of different countries, behave in the 'Strange Situation', a standardised research measure of attachment security, although there is substantial variation in this figure both within and between countries (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988).

By contrast, some infants seem unable or unwilling to use their parents as secure bases from which to explore, and they are called insecure. Insecure infants usually become distressed if they are separated from their parents, but they behave ambivalently on reunion, seeking contact and interaction, while angrily rejecting it when it is offered. Infants showing this pattern in the Strange Situation assessment are conventionally labelled insecure-resistant or ambivalent. They typically account for approximately 15 per cent of infants (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988).

Other insecure infants seem little concerned by their parents' absence. Instead of greeting their parents on reunion, they actively avoid interaction and ignore their parents' bids. These infants are said to show insecure-avoidant attachments and they typically constitute about 20 per cent of infants (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988).

Main and Solomon (1990) have described a fourth group of infants whose behaviour is 'disoriented' and/or 'disorganised'. These infants simultaneously show contradictory behaviour patterns, and incomplete or undirected movements, and they seem to be confused or apprehensive about approaching their parents.

*(adapted from Oates et al., 2005, p. 28)*

- *Children's attachment relationships are described by attachment researchers as being 'secure', 'insecure' or 'disorganised'.*
- *A child with secure attachment is confident in the attachment figure's availability as a source of comfort and reassurance at times of stress.*
- *Children with insecure or disorganised attachment do not have consistent expectations that their attachment figures will be able to help them to deal with emotional distress.*



## Mothers, fathers and children

*The quality of marital relationships has consistently been found to be linked with parent–child relationships and child outcomes*

Typically, in two-parent families, infants form attachments to each of their parents. For example, Fagot and Kavanagh (1993) found that both mothers and fathers reported that their experience of interacting with insecurely attached infants was less pleasant, and both tended to become less involved in interactions with insecurely attached boys, a factor that may help to explain the greater likelihood of behaviour problems among boys. Once both mothers and fathers are brought into consideration, the complexity of the causes and effects increases substantially, since the quality of marital relationships has consistently been found to be linked with parent–child relationships and child outcomes (Gable *et al.*, 1994). One study found that infants who showed more negative emotionality early in the first year tended to become more positive when they had active, sensitive and happily married mothers, whereas some infants became more negative when their fathers were dissatisfied with their marriages, were insensitive and were uninvolved in their children’s lives (Belsky *et al.*, 1991). In a study of 20 month olds, Easterbrooks and Goldberg (1984) found that the children’s adaptation was promoted by the amount of paternal involvement and the quality or sensitivity of their fathers’ behaviour.

*(Oates et al., 2005, pp. 32–3)*

- *In families where there are two biological parents caring for their children, attachment relationships are usually formed with both parents.*
- *The quality of the parents’ relationships with each other affects their children’s attachments and subsequent development.*
- *Parenting qualities and children’s attachment behaviours interact; each affects the other.*



## Multiple attachments

Babies form attachments to those familiar individuals who have been associated with consistent, predictable, and appropriate responses to their signals. Most babies in two-parent families develop attachments to both of their parents at about the same time (6–8 months) even though most mothers are much more involved than fathers in caring for and interacting with their infants (Lamb, 2002). These differences in levels of involvement do have an impact, however. Most infants establish a hierarchy of attachment figures such that the adults most involved in interaction (typically, mothers) rank higher than secondary attachment figures, including fathers. These preferences are most likely to be evident when infants or toddlers are distressed, sleepy or sick, and can choose which attachment figures to seek.

The quality of infants' interactions and relationships with all members of their family is demonstrably affected by the quality of the relationships that those individuals have with each other (Parke *et al.*, 1979; Cummings *et al.*, 2004). The importance of the infant's social interactions and experiences with an array of other people was recognised only slowly by researchers. This may be in part because most of these researchers lived in, were familiar with, and studied European and North American countries, which are characterised by relatively isolated nuclear living arrangements. These are very different from the living arrangements experienced by most humans, either historically or cross-culturally.

Even in the 'environment of evolutionary adaptedness' stressed by Bowlby in his formulations of attachment theory, infants and mothers are surrounded by and embedded in complex social groups, most of them relatives, who play a crucial role in caring for, protecting, socialising, teaching and feeding infants and youngsters (Hrdy, 2001).

**Michael E. Lamb**, Professor of Psychology in the Social Sciences, Cambridge University, United Kingdom

- *Infants do not necessarily form just one attachment relationship; they can form separate attachments to the different people who may care for them.*
- *However, some attachments tend to be stronger than others, so that when more than one is available, some of these attachment figures are preferred to others, especially when infants are under stress.*



## Attachment and cultural context

*Attachment patterns express flexible adaptations to specific niches in which the child is born and has to survive*

Behaviour genetics has shown that differences in attachment relationships are mainly caused by nurture instead of nature. Although the bias to become attached is inborn, the way in which this inborn tendency takes shape in the first few years of life is determined by the specific socio-cultural context. In fact, attachment behaviour patterns appear to be rather context dependent and to express flexible adaptations to specific niches in which the child is born and has to survive.

... The attachment relationship emerges from myriads of social interactions during the first few years of life, usually with the biological mother or with alternative caregivers who are genetically related to the child and interact with him on a regular basis. As the evolutionary perspective of attachment theory would predict, fathers, older siblings or grandparents fulfil important roles as attachment figures in a variety of cultures (Lamb, 1997; van IJzendoorn and Sagi, 1999; Hrdy, 1999).

... Human infants are evolutionarily built to become part of a network of attachment relationships from which they derive protection and security. Human mothers may be evolutionarily selected to share the burdens of raising their children with biologically related alternative caregivers such as the father, older siblings or grandparents.

... The innate bias to become attached is universal. The environmental input is culturally specific, determining individual and group differences in becoming attached in a certain way, even to the extent that under unusual life events (e.g. low-quality daycare, infants sleeping away from parents at night) normative transmission patterns in parent-child relationships might be interrupted.

... The environment is important because it provides parents with a culturally specific history of attachment experiences and with culturally based child-rearing attitudes, behaviours and norms that influence the parental style of responding to the child's attachment needs, preparing these children for adaptation to the specific niche in which they were born.

*(van IJzendoorn et al., 2007)*

- *Although attachment relationships are universal, they are patterned by the culture in which they are formed.*
- *The specific forms of attachment that develop in particular cultural niches show that attachment has a biological basis and has evolved as a flexible, adaptive process.*



## Childcare matters

Care within the family is important for children's development, but so too is care that is provided by others.

Many children, often from very early in life, are cared for by persons other than their parents for many hours a week and for many months and years before they begin school. Extensive research reveals two fundamental facts about how such rearing affects children's development: when the quality of such non-parental care is high, children flourish, especially cognitively; when it is poor, the opposite is true. High-quality care is care that is attentive, responsive, stimulating and affectionate.

It is difficult for untrained caregivers who are poorly paid and motivated and have too many children to care for to provide growth-promoting care.

Amount of care, especially in groups, also matters. Children who spend a lot of time in group-based care before they start school are more likely to become aggressive and disobedient.

Thus, long hours and many years growing up in group settings that are of limited quality pose clear developmental risks for children's well-being.

**Jay Belsky**, Director, Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

- *In many cultural settings, informal or more institutionalised types of non-parental care are commonplace, often occupying large proportions of young children's waking hours.*
- *The quality of care in non-parental settings is important for a child's subsequent development.*
- *Ample resources and training are needed to ensure that non-parental care is of adequate quality.*
- *If a large proportion of a young child's life is spent in care settings outside of the family, the risk of later behavioural problems is likely to be greater.*

*High-quality care is care that is attentive, responsive, stimulating and affectionate*



# POLICY QUESTIONS



- ◆ What information is available on the attachment patterns that are most adaptive for the specific culture's and environment's strengths, challenges and threats?
- ◆ Are there encouragements for babies to develop multiple attachments as a protection against loss or absence of parents?
- ◆ Do policies exist to support the diversity of cultural norms, attachment patterns and family circumstances?
- ◆ How do employment patterns and regulations, and provision for parental leave, support or interfere with children's attachments?
- ◆ How do the norms of family life, including extended family and community norms, support positive parent-child attachments?
- ◆ How can quality childcare that is attentive, responsive, stimulating and affectionate be promoted?



## II.

# Influences on attachment relationships



*It is now well established that certain key features of caregiving behaviour are associated with positive attachment relationships.*

*Sensitive caregiving, responsiveness to a child's emotional needs, and recognition of the child's own thoughts and feelings are primary factors in promoting secure attachments.*

*Situations of economic disadvantage make it more difficult for carers to provide the conditions and care that promote healthy attachment relationships.*

## Caregiving matters

Our understanding of influences upon children's development has changed dramatically over the past 25 years. Whereas it was once assumed by many professionals that how children were raised fully determined how they developed, in recent times the developmental significance of biological characteristics – like genes, hormones and temperament – is widely appreciated. But it would be a mistake to conclude that it is nature, not nurture, that shapes child development, because it is the interplay of nature and nurture that matters. When it comes to parenting, it is being sensitively responsive that most strongly influences whether an infant or toddler develops a secure attachment relationship with its parent, an emotional foundation of substantial importance to later well-being. A sensitive–responsive caregiver is one who sees the world from the child's point of view and seeks to meet the child's needs rather than just serving their own. The language stimulation that parents provide also makes a difference in terms of the infant's and young child's cognitive–linguistic development. Language-rich environments in which parents read, respond and talk to even the youngest babies promote intellectual development. And, interestingly, cognitive and linguistic skill can protect against the development of behavioural and emotional problems, as children who cannot express their needs verbally often fail in school and many other places in life, in part because they cannot express how they are feeling and make clear what they want.

**Jay Belsky**, Director, Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

- *Biological and environmental influences mutually affect the development of attachment relationships.*
- *Sensitive responsiveness is the most important factor in the quality of caregiving for the promotion of healthy attachments.*
- *Rich communication between caregiver and infant promotes cognitive and language development and can help to reduce the incidence of subsequent developmental difficulties.*

*A sensitive–responsive carer is one who sees the world from the child's point of view and seeks to meet the child's needs rather than just serving their own*



## Adult–child interactions

Adults differ greatly with respect to their responsiveness or sensitivity and this affects the security of the infant's attachments to them (De Wolff and van IJzendoorn, 1997). When adults have been highly and appropriately responsive, levels of trust are high and the attachment relationships that are formed are usually secure. When adults are inconsistently responsive or behave inappropriately, trust is diminished and insecure attachment relationships result. These differences in attachment security shape the child's initial expectation of other people and so can have an important impact on social experiences outside the child–parent relationships (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978).

Ideally, children should have opportunities to interact with parents frequently in a variety of functional contexts (feeding, play, discipline, basic care, limit setting, putting to bed, etc.). The evening and overnight periods may be especially important psychologically for infants, toddlers and young children. They provide opportunities for crucial social interactions and nurturing activities, including bathing, soothing hurts and anxieties, bedtime rituals, and comforting in the middle of the night. These everyday activities promote and maintain trust and confidence in the caregivers, while deepening and strengthening the attachment relationships.

From repeated experiences of face-to-face games and distress–relief sequences, babies learn crucial lessons about reciprocity, effectance, and trust. Specifically, they learn that social partners take turns when interacting (reciprocity), they learn that they can affect the behaviour of others (effectance) in a consistent and predictable way ('when I cry, I make her/him come to pick me up'), and they learn that they can count on or trust specific individuals, typically parents, to respond to their signals and needs. All of these lessons play important roles in early social development, and the third is especially important in the process of attachment formation.

**Michael E. Lamb**, Professor of Psychology in the Social Sciences, Cambridge University, United Kingdom

- *Consistent and sensitive caregiving helps to build mutual levels of trust in caregivers and infants.*
- *It is important for carers to relate sensitively with children in different types of activities such as feeding, care and comfort routines, and settling for sleep.*
- *Secure attachments with caregivers prepare children well for positive interactions with other people.*

*Ideally, children should have opportunities to interact with their caregivers frequently in a variety of functional contexts*



*Secure attachments in children are associated with sensitive caregiving, but sensitivity is not the only important factor*

## Factors promoting secure attachments

Caregiver sensitivity was first defined by Mary Ainsworth as:

... the mother's ability to perceive and to interpret accurately the signals and communications implicit in her infant's behavior, and given this understanding, to respond to them appropriately and promptly. Thus the mother's sensitivity has four essential components: (a) her awareness of the signals; (b) an accurate interpretation of them; (c) an appropriate response to them; and (d) a prompt response to them.

*(Ainsworth, 1969)*

Numerous research studies have consistently shown that secure attachments in children are associated with sensitive caregiving (De Wolff and van IJzendoorn, 1997).

However, sensitivity is not the only important factor. Other studies have shown that a caregiver's capacity to think about the infant's thoughts and feelings is also associated with security of attachment. It has been found that mothers who are 'mind-minded' in their relations with their infants are more likely to have securely attached infants (Meins *et al.*, 2001). A caregiver's 'reflective functioning' ability leads them to show in their behaviour and speech that they are actively thinking about their child's inner world and it has been argued that this can help a child to develop the ability to regulate emotions, an important skill in forming good relationships (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002).

It is important to recognise that these features of positive caregiver–infant relations also critically depend on environmental circumstances providing the time, space and resources needed for these relations to be developed and sustained. Adequate housing, food availability, income and social support are all factors that provide the context in which secure attachments can be formed: 'it takes a village to raise a child' (Clinton, 1996).

**John Oates**, Child and Youth Studies Group, The Open University, United Kingdom

- *Although sensitive responsiveness is the most important single factor in promoting secure attachments, the ability of caregivers to think about a child's thoughts and feelings (to be 'mind-minded') in their interactions with children is also important.*
- *Caregivers need adequate social and physical conditions to support them in providing the type and level of care that promotes positive attachments.*



*Fathers can powerfully influence their children's social and emotional development, 'for better or for worse'*

## Fathers

Fathers and mothers play unique as well as overlapping and complementary roles in children's socialisation. Studies in many cultures have shown how male carers tend to put a greater emphasis on play, on joint and exciting activities and on mentorship rather than on nurturing interactions. However, because male carers are also attachment figures, they can powerfully influence their children's social and emotional development 'for better or for worse' (Phares, 1997).

In our longitudinal study in Germany of children's development up to 20 years of age, in low-risk, middle-class, two-parent families, children's strategies of exploration, qualities of joint play and coping with separation distress were assessed in infancy and childhood with mother and father using standardised assessments and free observations. In later years, interviews assessing attachment and close relationship representations were added (Grossmann *et al.*, 2005).

The sensitive and challenging interactive play of fathers turned out to be of special importance. A father's early play sensitivity with his toddler was found to be a unique and independent predictor of his children's later security of attachment representation at 10, 16 and 22 years of age. Moreover, it had a significant impact on the representations of other close relationships such as close friendships at age 16, and on the young adults' partnership representations. Young adults whose fathers had been more sensitive in their early play interactions had more secure models of attachment as well as partnership when talking about their current romantic relationships (Grossmann *et al.*, 2002a).

As with many other studies, fathers' low play sensitivity with their toddlers was a strong predictor of both boys' and girls' behaviour problems in preschool and early school years as rated by teachers (Grossmann *et al.*, 2002b; Parke *et al.*, 2004; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004a, 2004b).

Thus, a father's early sensitive and supportive interactive play behaviour with his toddler has been shown to serve an important socialising function for the child's attachment and social development.

**Karin Grossmann**, independent scientist associated with the Department of Psychology, University of Regensburg, Germany

- *Male carers tend to behave differently from female carers in their interaction with their children, spending more time in play and other exciting activities.*
- *Studies in Germany have shown that sensitive and challenging play by fathers with their young children is associated with more positive attachment outcomes in children when they become young adults.*



## 'Good-enough' mothering

*A 'good-enough' carer allows just the right amount of delay in meeting an infant's needs to encourage both tolerance of waiting and confidence in ultimate satisfaction*

Although Bowlby believed that healthy attachment in infants is ... based on relatively long-term, stable relationships with carers, he did not see a single attachment (monotropy) as necessarily being the best and only way of achieving this. ... he explicitly recognized that the attachment to a 'father' can complement and support an infant's attachment to their 'mother' and that other people in an infant's social world can also play important roles. He also came to the conclusion that there is nothing sacrosanct about this ongoing care being provided by the biological parents and that it can equally well be provided by other consistently and reliably available people. Indeed, he argued that a variety of attachment objects ... would encompass relations with different people, better preparing the child for forming relationships with a wider range of people later on in life.

...

[Donald] Winnicott in his work with mothers and infants [in the UK in the 1950s], came to see how important it is for a mother to be emotionally available to her infant, and for a 'system' of two-way communication to be built up. At the same time, he did a great deal to challenge the idea of a 'perfect mother'. He strongly believed that an important part of a mother's role is to allow her infant to experience tolerable frustrations. He coined the term 'good-enough mother' to describe a mother who allows just the right amount of delay in meeting an infant's needs to encourage both tolerance of waiting and confidence in ultimate satisfaction (Winnicott, 1964). According to Winnicott, this then leads to a healthy development of independence and sense of self (Winnicott, 1965). He did not believe that a mother was doing the best for her child if her aim was to alleviate all distress, discomfort and frustration at the earliest possible opportunity.

*(Oates et al., 2005, p. 25)*

- *Infants are able to form attachment relationships with several different people; this may better prepare them for relating with a broader variety of people later in life.*
- *'Good-enough' caregiving, which allows an infant to experience some delays in gratification, may help in developing independence and identity.*
- *'Good-enough' caregiving can be provided by persons other than the biological parents.*



## Money matters

Most people are familiar with the notion that ‘money can’t buy you love’. And it is just as true that money cannot – for certain – buy children’s health, happiness and well-being. But make no mistake about it, money matters. Children who grow up in economically disadvantaged households are more likely than children growing up under more advantaged circumstances to have their development compromised. They are more likely to be delayed in their intellectual development, especially their language skills. They are thus less likely to start school ready to learn and more likely to experience academic failure. Socially, they are more likely to develop behaviour problems of the aggressive and disobedient variety. And this is partly if not entirely because their home environments are likely to be less stimulating and emotionally nurturing, typically because their parents are more stressed, more liable to be depressed and thus less able to be attentive and responsive to their children’s needs.

Also compromising the well-being of poor children is that their neighbourhoods are often dangerous – and crowded and noisy – places to live and the childcare centres and schools they attend are poorly resourced and overcrowded with other children from poor families. The fact that many poor children grow up to lead healthy and productive lives demonstrates that not every poor child’s development will be compromised. Nevertheless, no one who cares for children would wish economic disadvantage on them and their families.

**Jay Belsky**, Director, Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

- *Economic disadvantage makes it more difficult for carers to provide the sort of care that promotes healthy attachment.*
- *Impoverished carers may nevertheless be able to provide caregiving that supports the development of positive attachment relationships if they have the understanding, skills and emotional capacity to do so.*
- *Economic disadvantage for carers often goes along with environments that are less conducive to positive child outcomes.*

*Children who grow up in economically disadvantaged households are more likely than children growing up under more advantaged circumstances to have their development compromised*



# POLICY QUESTIONS



- ◆ What is the proportion of children in families below the poverty line?
- ◆ What anti-poverty measures are being taken to support families with young children?
- ◆ How are minimum standards of living conditions, basic services and public health being maintained to allow carers sufficient opportunities for emotional and social care for their infants?
- ◆ What actions are being taken to enable communities to remain strong or become stronger, so that families are raising children within stable environments?
- ◆ How have the particular dynamics of families and the roles that different family members play within the culture been taken account of in policy development?
- ◆ How have policies been developed to engage fathers and other male carers, who often feel marginalised?
- ◆ What forms of information, advice and guidance are provided for parents, family members, and informal and institution-based carers to learn about child development and parenting?
- ◆ Has the balance of effectiveness between direct economic redistribution policies and specific interventions to alleviate the effects of poverty on children been carefully considered?



# III.

## Infant attachment and developmental outcomes



*Secure attachments are a protective factor, reducing the risks of poor developmental outcomes in later childhood and preparing children to be competent parents themselves.*

*Separation of children from carers and disrupted or disordered early attachment relationships can have serious negative consequences for children's development.*

*Without intervention, attachment difficulties may persist from generation to generation.*

# Parenting quality and children's problems

*The lack of a warm, positive relationship with parents, insecure attachment and inadequate supervision of and involvement with children are strongly associated with children's increased risk for behavioural and emotional problems*

Quality of parenting is the strongest potentially modifiable risk factor contributing to early-onset conduct problems. Evidence from behaviour genetics research, and epidemiological, correlational and experimental studies shows that parenting practices have a major influence on many different domains of children's development (Collins *et al.*, 2000). Specifically, the lack of a warm, positive relationship with parents, insecure attachment and inadequate supervision of and involvement with children are strongly associated with children's increased risk for behavioural and emotional problems (e.g. Frick *et al.*, 1992; Patterson *et al.*, 1992; Shaw *et al.*, 1996).

Children who experience a pattern of harsh discipline in which limits are intermittently enforced learn to achieve desired ends through coercive means (Patterson *et al.*, 1989, 1992). This coercive pattern contributes to the development of problem behaviour, and the child fails to learn self-control and positive social skills. These young children are at significant risk for subsequent difficulties with school adaptation and relationships with peers and teachers, further compounding their risk for eventual problems such as substance use, antisocial behaviour, and participation in delinquent activities (e.g. Loeber and Farrington, 1998). On the other hand, when a parent interacts with a young child in ways that involve many warm, responsive, reinforcing, and stimulating exchanges, clear, calm instructions and non-harsh, consistent discipline, a positive and caring relationship between parent and child is more likely to be established, as well as socially skilled repertoires in the child (Ainsworth, 1979; Rutter, 1979a).

*(Sanders and Morawska, 2006, p. 477)*

**Matthew Sanders**, Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

- *Poor parenting and insecure attachments in early childhood are strongly linked with each other and with the incidence of emotional and behavioural disorders in childhood and adolescence.*
- *Harsh and inconsistent discipline in early childhood interferes with children developing good social skills and self-control.*
- *Without intervention, behaviour problems in younger children can spiral into more serious difficulties in adolescence.*



## Separation and young children

Previously, policy concern focused on the effects of marked and prolonged separation of young children from their parents, described as 'maternal deprivation' by Bowlby (1951). More recently, research has also come to understand the vital importance of the quality of care before and during separations from parental figures (Rutter, 1979b). These concerns should be paramount when children are separated from their parents by death, illness, violence or migration. Institutional care needs to make adequate provision for children to form positive attachments to their substitute caregivers. When satisfactory substitute care is provided, separation from parents may be something that a child copes with well. In the case of maltreatment by parent(s), then a separation is mandated by law and, unless care by kin can be found, foster care or adoption is called for. There is a large body of evidence on separation, the implications of which have been summarised by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child:

States parties should respect the primacy of parents. ... This includes the obligation not to separate children from their parents, unless it is in the child's best interests. ... Young children are especially vulnerable to adverse consequences of separations because of their physical dependence on and emotional attachment to their parents/primary caregivers. They are also less able to comprehend the circumstances of any separation. ... The Committee urges States parties to take all necessary steps to ensure that parents are able to take primary responsibility for their children; to support parents in fulfilling their responsibilities, including by reducing harmful deprivations, disruptions and distortions in children's care; and to take action where young children's well-being may be at risk. States parties' overall goals should include reducing the number of young children abandoned or orphaned, as well as minimizing the numbers requiring institutional or other forms of long-term care, except where this is judged to be in a young child's best interests.

*(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p. 9)*

**John Oates**, Child and Youth Studies Group, The Open University, United Kingdom

- *Separation from an attachment figure is potentially a major trauma for a child and can have serious consequences.*
- *Appropriate provision of substitute care arrangements can alleviate the worst effects of separations.*
- *Unless there is clear risk of harm to a child, the aim should be to support parents in providing adequate quality of care for their children.*



*Attachment is an organising core in development that is always integrated with later experience and never lost*

## Attachment and later outcomes

While the evidence is clear that insecure attachments are associated with poorer developmental outcomes, it is important to realise that the development of children is affected by many factors. Some of these may increase risks; others may have a protective or ameliorative function. Given this complexity, there is no inevitability about outcomes for individual children. What is certain, however, is that attachment relationships lie at the core of the development of emotional and social functioning: variations in infant-caregiver attachment do not relate well to every outcome, nor do they relate inexorably to any outcome whatsoever. They are related to outcomes only probabilistically and only in the context of complex developmental systems and processes. Still, the importance of attachment is not trivialized by such considerations.

Within a systemic, organismic view of development, attachment is important precisely because of its place in the initiation of these complex processes. It is an organizing core in development that is always integrated with later experience and never lost. While it is not proper to think of attachment variations as directly causing certain outcomes, and while early attachment has no privileged causal status, it is nonetheless the case that nothing can be assessed in infancy that is more important.

Infant attachment is critical, both because of its place in initiating pathways of development and because of its connection with so many critical developmental functions – social relatedness, arousal modulation, emotional regulation, and curiosity, to name just a few. Attachment experiences remain, even in this complex view, vital in the formation of the person.

*(Sroufe, 2005, p. 365)*

**L. Alan Sroufe**, William Harris Professor of Child Development, University of Minnesota, United States of America

- *Attachment relationships are central to social and emotional development.*
- *It is important to be aware of the complex interplay of factors that affect psychological development, and that it is not possible to predict with certainty how particular experiences will affect an individual child.*



# Attachment disorganisation

*Disorganised attachment is strongly linked with aggressive, externalising behaviour in childhood and with mental health problems in adolescence*

In early childhood some infants, in situations when they need support or comfort, appear unable to make effective use of their caregivers. Such an infant may show incoherent or contradictory behaviours, or may turn to a stranger rather than to the caregiver. In low social risk families, around one in eight infants may show this pattern, but in institutional care or in high social risk families, the rate can be three to four times as high.

Disorganised attachment patterns show strong persistence over time. One cause is believed to be where normal patterns of emotional communication between caregiver and infant are severely disrupted. In particular it is found where caregivers behave in hostile, intrusive ways towards their children or where caregivers themselves withdraw or show fearfulness. Such behaviours are common where there is marital discord, mental illness in the caregiver, or where an infant is suffering from neglect or abuse. Poverty is known to be a risk factor, probably because it increases these conditions. Recent research is suggesting that in attachment disorganisation there is an interplay between innate characteristics of infants and caregiving differences.

Few single factors in early childhood are closely associated with later developmental problems, but studies in Western societies are indicating that disorganised attachment is strongly linked with aggressive, externalising behaviour in childhood and with mental health problems in adolescence. Childhood conduct problems in turn are associated with social and educational failure, thus increasing the risk for antisocial behaviour in adolescence and in adult life.

Some interventions focusing on sensitive parenting have proved to be effective in reducing the incidence of attachment disorganisation, especially if started early (when infants are under 6 months old), in families where children rather than parents are at risk for disorganisation of the attachment relationship (for example where infants are born prematurely, irritable or internationally adopted) and in populations where the prevalence of disorganised attachment is higher.

**Judit Gervai**, Head of the Social Development Group, Institute of Psychology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

- *Disorganised attachment is a substantial risk factor for serious behaviour and mental health disorders in later childhood and adolescence.*
- *Attachment disorganisation is much more prevalent in families in poverty and where parenting is hostile, intrusive, fear-laden or abusive.*
- *Early interventions, with a clear focus on warm and sensitive caregiving, can reduce the incidence of disorganised attachment.*



# Adult attachment

*Adult attachment is important, because it is one of the factors influencing how parents behave towards their children, thus affecting their attachment relationships*

Attachment theory states that the expectations that children develop out of their early attachment relationships with their caregivers become 'working models' that affect how they approach new relationships as adolescents and then as parents themselves.

Main and others (George *et al.*, 1985; Main and Goldwyn, 1994) developed the Adult Attachment Interview to assess an adult's ability to integrate early memories of their relationships with their parents into overarching working models of relationships. According to Main, these working models fall into one of three categories, with adults classified as dismissing of their attachment relationships, autonomous (free to evaluate their early attachment relationships), or preoccupied with their attachment relationships.

A dismissing narrative is one in which the person asserts that what happened in their childhood is not important ...The person gives the impression that personal relationships are not of much significance. The narrative is sparse, with little detail, and events and people are recalled in a rather bland, unemotional way, even where the content suggests that emotions would have been felt. The past is not described as having an influence on the self.

An autonomous narrative is one in which the person acknowledges the importance of relationships to them, both in the present and during their childhood, and talks freely and in some depth about past and present attachments. Richly described examples are given of both positive and negative experiences, and the person shows a capacity to integrate these. Insight is shown into others' motives and feelings, and into influences on the self.

A preoccupied narrative is lengthy, and without a clear structure. The link from one statement to another is often not apparent; points may be repeated. The person acknowledges the significance of past experiences, but does not seem to have resolved these and moved on from them. Past events are talked about with feeling; the person seems to re-experience the feelings in the interview. The person seems to be stuck or 'enmeshed' in unresolved issues from the past.

The style of adult attachment is important, because it is one of the factors affecting how parents behave towards their children, thus affecting their attachment relationships (Grossman *et al.*, 2005).

*(adapted from Oates et al., 2005, p. 38)*

- *Attachment relationships formed in a person's early childhood are linked with their attachment style in adulthood.*
- *An adult's attachment style affects how they relate with their own children.*



## Generation to generation

*Although it is known that attachment patterns can pass from generation to generation, the contributing factors are still not wholly identified, nor are their modes of action fully understood*

Attachment relationships that are formed when children are young affect how they as adults approach relationships, including relationships with their own children. Thus, patterns of attachment are likely to transmit through the generations. Many studies have been carried out looking at how mothers with different adult attachment classifications behave towards their infants, and what types of attachment their infants show.

Three consistent findings have emerged from these studies:

- A mother's adult attachment type is predictive of her infant's attachment, particularly for secure attachment. But the prediction is not 100 per cent accurate; for secure versus insecure classifications it is reasonably strong, but for the two types of insecure attachment, it is weaker.
- Adult attachment is also to some extent predictive of how mothers behave towards their infants: secure mothers are more likely to behave sensitively towards their infants, responding to their bids for attention, comfort and communication. Autonomous adults appear more sensitively responsive to their infants than do adults in the dismissive and preoccupied groups, and their children are more likely to be securely attached (van IJzendoorn, 1995). For example, ratings of British mothers' and fathers' narratives of their attachments to their own parents, collected during the pregnancy, predicted the security of their infants' attachments to them (Fonagy *et al.*, 1991; Steele *et al.*, 1996).
- Sensitive parenting is itself predictive of infant attachment, but it is again only a relatively weak predictor. However, it does seem to have an association with infant attachment that is not wholly explained by the relation between adult attachment and sensitivity.

These latter findings are drawn from a large-scale meta-analysis of attachment research (van IJzendoorn, 1995) which led to the idea of an as yet unexplained 'transmission gap' highlighting the fact that the factors contributing to the intergenerational transmission of attachment are still not wholly identified, nor are their modes of action fully understood.

*(adapted from Oates et al., 2005, pp. 40–1)*

- *Patterns of attachment can pass from generation to generation.*
- *This 'intergenerational transmission' happens because infants' attachments are linked to their subsequent adult attachments, which in turn affect their parenting styles.*
- *However, the processes involved in this transmission are not yet fully understood.*



# POLICY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What 'safety-net' provisions are there for children who become separated from their parents through death, illness, abandonment, conflict, displacement or risk of harm?
- ◆ Are the risk and protective factors in the environment in which children are raised understood and applied to support families?
- ◆ What systems are in place to identify families where the risks for attachment problems are high, particularly before children are born?
- ◆ Are parenting education and support programmes being delivered that are theory-based and that are taken up by those who will most benefit?
- ◆ What arrangements are there for the early identification, intervention and monitoring for emotional and behavioural disorders in young children?
- ◆ What policies are there to prevent the use of harsh disciplinary measures for young children?
- ◆ How is the effectiveness of services for family support measured?



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## Photography

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- Back cover – South Africa, Mtata, Eastern Cape. Early learning development within family household by the grandparents. © Paul Weinberg



*This powerful document brings together an international group of first-rate child development scholars. ... This landmark document deserves wide circulation among all those with the power to influence public and social policy as concerns child and social welfare.*

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