



## **The Impact of Attachment to Mother and Father at an Early Age on Children's Psychosocial Development through Young Adulthood**

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### ***Topic***

*Attachment*

### **Introduction**

Bowlby's and Ainsworth's approach to personality development relied on ethology<sup>1,2</sup> and cross-cultural research<sup>3</sup>, preserving the central questions of traditional psychoanalysis<sup>2</sup> and drawing on the concept of mental representation as suggested by cognitive psychology. The ethological approach implies: a) a careful description and classification of infant and child behaviour<sup>4</sup>; b) reference to a posited environment of evolutionary adaptedness for humans, as evidenced by young humans' intense responsiveness to being left alone in a strange environment with strange people; and c) analyzing the function of emotions and behaviours in a social context.<sup>5</sup> Attachment serves to ensure protection and care, and secure attachment serves to relieve distress, restore physiological homeostasis and encourage exploration. Feeling secure is the basis for becoming emotionally, socially and cognitively acculturated.<sup>6,7</sup>

In the early years, attachment relationships are the predominant and most influential relationships in a child's life. They set the stage for emotional and cognitive interpretations of social- and non-social experiences, for language development, for acquiring meaning about oneself and others in complex social situations, and for the child's acceptance and acquisition of his or her culture. As an example, joint attention emerges around nine months,<sup>8</sup> at the height of stranger anxiety. This ensures that the infant learns first about his or her family's culture in the mother tongue. Attachment relationships that were vital for infant survival during human evolution<sup>9</sup> continue to influence thoughts, feelings and motives and therefore close relationships throughout life.

Within the framework of modern evolutionary biology, attachment theory focuses on the "gene-selfish" interest of the child in receiving as much of his or her parents' physical as well as psychological resources as possible.<sup>7,9</sup> In terms of Trivers'<sup>10</sup> parent-offspring conflict, attachment theory focuses on the offspring's side of that conflict, and on the parent's willingness or unwillingness to invest in any particular individual offspring. The

parental viewpoint within their own lifelong perspective may help to explain differences in parental investment in care, differential parental sensitivity towards different children and the fairly low concordance of patterns of attachment even in monozygotic twins.<sup>11</sup>

### **Subject**

Attachment theory posits a causal relationship between individuals' experience with their parents or attachment figures and their capacity to form affectional bonds later on. Reliable, enduring, sensitive and supportive care (i.e. love from at least one parent) is posited to provide a model of an affectional bond between unequal partners. If a child receives tender loving care when in need, and support for autonomy during exploration from mother as well as father, such experiences are assumed to a) give the child a sense of worth, a belief in the helpfulness of others and enable the child to explore the environment with confidence; b) be an optimal precondition for mutually supportive, enduring adult partnerships; and c) provide a model for later parenthood.<sup>12,6</sup> Confident, competent exploration, as Bowlby described it, is our concept of "secure" exploration.<sup>12,13</sup> Longitudinal research is currently investigating this long-term predictor of children's development in non-clinical, not-at-risk two-parent families.<sup>14</sup>

### **Problems**

Originally, attachment research provided only one method to assess quality of attachment in infancy, using a separation-reunion paradigm (the strange situation). However, research results indicated a low validity of the infant-father strange situation assessment for predicting subsequent psychosocial development.<sup>15</sup> Rather, father-child interactive quality during play or exploration and sensitive challenges to the young child's competencies seem to be better predictors of child development.<sup>16</sup> A second challenge is the correlation between secure attachment and secure exploration. Do they reinforce each other? A third challenge to attachment research is a measurement issue: How do behavioural patterns of infant attachment become patterns of verbal discourse about attachment later?

### **Research Context**

Two longitudinal studies of children's social and emotional development in not-at-risk middle-class two-parent families were started in the mid- and late 1970s<sup>14</sup>: the Bielefeld project, or Project 1, which started with the birth of the infants<sup>17</sup>, and the Regensburg project, or Project 2, which started when the infants were 11 months old.<sup>18</sup> The children's experiences in the domains of attachment and exploration were assessed in infancy, childhood and adolescence, with both mother and father using standardized or free observations. Open interviews were conducted with the parents and later with the children. Representations of attachment were assessed at ages 10, 16 and 22, representations of friendship at 16, and representations of partnership at 20 or 22. For the analysis of early influences on the representation of close relationships, data on child attachment and exploratory strategies, maternal and paternal sensitivity and support were aggregated for the periods of infancy (birth to age three), childhood (five to 10) and adolescence (16 to 18)<sup>19</sup>. In addition, we conducted various studies in other cultures,<sup>20</sup> adding to the long tradition of cross-cultural research on attachment.<sup>21</sup>

### **Key Research Questions**

How does the capacity to make affectional bonds develop? How predictive is the quality of infants' attachment to mother and father during the first two years for adolescents' and young adults' capacity to envision affectional bonds? How influential is the young and older child's experience with mother and father on his or her later representation of close relationships? Are secure, supportive attachment relations to parents relevant for secure exploration?

### **Recent Research Results**

Our longitudinal projects revealed several major findings:<sup>19</sup>

1. Security in attachment and partnership representation at the age of 22 was significantly predicted from security of attachment in adolescence and childhood. Precursors of the ability to present a clear discourse about attachment issues were already observable at ages six and 10 years.<sup>22,23</sup>
2. Mothers' as well as fathers' sensitive supportiveness, acceptance of the child and appropriate challenging behaviours, each in its own right and taken together, were powerful predictors of internal working models of close relationships in young adulthood.
3. Mothers' and fathers' sensitivity during joint play with their child in the first six years of life contributed significantly to the child's later quality of partnership representation. Parental sensitivity during play was characterized by parental behaviour that respects and supports the toddler's need to explore autonomously and become competent, as well as parental behaviours that promote cooperation, help the child learn to solve problems independently, pose appropriate challenges and provide guidance and support for learning strategies.
4. In contrast to some other longitudinal studies of attachment development, patterns of attachment shown by the infants in the strange situation to the mother at 12 months or to the father at 18 months did not predict representation of attachment beyond childhood in either project. The single most influential variable in Project 1 was the father's sensitive challenging behaviour with his toddler at 24 months.<sup>19</sup>
5. Project 1 is an example of the complexity of developmental pathways beyond infancy. By the end of the first year, only 33% of infants had shown a secure pattern of attachment to the mother and only 41% to the father in the strange situation. Still, a secure pattern of attachment to the mother predicted more optimal development up to the age of 10. We argued that the high proportion of avoidance in this sample was due to German cultural demands for early self-reliance in the '70s and did not indicate parental rejection. However, supporting Ainsworth's home observations<sup>24</sup>, the North German infants later classified as avoidant experienced less tender body contact, less responsiveness to crying, more abrupt and interfering pick-up episodes and less sensitive as well as less cooperative mothers.<sup>17</sup>
6. An insecure pattern of attachment in infancy was predictive of less optimal subsequent emotional and social development only if the child also lacked the experience of

sensitive, supportive mothering and fathering in the domain of exploration. Even more importantly, parental rejection during middle childhood, traumatic experiences of a close friend, parental separation and parental actual or pending loss were most likely associated with adolescents' insecure representation of attachment.<sup>25</sup>

7. By age 22, however, a number of subjects had reflected thoroughly on their attachment experience such that parental divorce was no longer a major but only a mediating variable. The most powerful predictor of attachment, as well as partnership representation at age 22, was the child's representation of maternal and paternal support during middle childhood age and mothers' and/or fathers' rejection of the child, as indicated in a lengthy interview when the children were 10 years old.<sup>26</sup>

8. The socio-emotional development of the not-at-risk children in both projects was influenced throughout the years of immaturity by many factors that were often independent of each other. Infant attachment quality to mother and father were independent of each other, as was maternal and paternal play sensitivity towards the toddler. Parental rejection during middle childhood was not predicted by infant attachment security, nor was parental divorce or loss. Each factor could divert the child's developmental pathway towards a more adaptive or a more non-adaptive direction. Still, a few children had positive experiences with their parents throughout.<sup>19,27</sup>

Our cross-cultural research on Japanese and Trobriand infants confirmed three of the four core hypotheses of attachment theory<sup>21</sup>: 1. Infant attachment to at least one caring adult is universal; 2. the secure pattern of attachment was also the norm in both groups; and 3. security of attachment is positively related to competence.<sup>7,20</sup> A large recent review<sup>13</sup> as well as a recent study<sup>28</sup> supported the concept of secure exploration and its positive correlation to secure attachment.

### **Conclusion**

Young children's experiences of sensitive, accepting, supportive mothers and fathers start a pathway of positive psychosocial development for the child. Such experiences in the domains of attachment as well as exploration are at the roots of secure models of close relationships. They are likely to be carried forward to other close relationships in childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Changes in parental acceptance or disruption of the family can alter the pathway in either direction, temporarily or permanently.<sup>6,19</sup>

The child's subjective experiences can best be assessed by open-minded, reliable observations of quality of interactions in structured situations and by semi-structured interviews that allow for a discovery of new categories. Analyses of the adaptive functioning of the attachment system must focus on adverse experiences, irritations and negative emotions. Analyses of secure exploration must focus on challenges to the child's competencies. Appropriate emotional responses to real events and attempted appropriate solutions with the help of other trusted persons are reliable indicators of security of exploration.

### **Implications for the Policy and Services Perspective**

Throughout the early years, caregiver sensitivity implies an understanding and correct interpretation of and prompt and appropriate responses to the young child's non-verbal as well as verbal expressions.<sup>24</sup> A prerequisite for sensitivity is pacing the interactions according to the child's rhythms, in both good and bad moods. In addition, calibrating cognitive responses to the developmental achievements of the young child fosters cognitive growth. Such sensitivity was found in mothers and fathers who valued attachments based on their recollections of being accepted themselves and sensitively cared for as a child. In close relationships in which the child feels safe and secure, the child will make ample use of joint attention to social and non-social objects and events. Learning is most effective if the child feels valued by the mediating person.<sup>29</sup>

Parents who have experienced difficult childhoods themselves or who have an infant with special needs deserve help in four pivotal domains: a) understanding child development in all domains; b) learning to respond sensitively to their individual child;<sup>30</sup> c) finding enjoyment and sufficient time for sensitive, supportive interactions with the child in attachment as well as exploration-relevant situations. For subsequent years, d) finding invested, knowledgeable mentors and educators for the child is an additional task that deserves support. This is especially important when parents' own education or acculturation leave too many gaps. Secure attachment is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for becoming a cooperative, valuable and accepted member of one's group and society. Secure exploration must complement secure attachments so that children can successfully meet the many challenges posed by their social relationships.

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