ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Attachment in Early Childhood: Comments on van IJzendoorn, and Grossmann and Grossmann

Greg Moran, PhD

Western University, Ontario, Canada

September 2020, Éd. rév.

Introduction

Attachment theory and research has established for itself a central place in the study of human social and affective development, building on the foundational concepts of Bowlby[1] and on Ainsworth's[2] translation of these into a framework for empirical study. Researchers worldwide have used attachment as a vehicle to increase our understanding of the life-long consequences of the human infant's first relationship and of the factors in the mother's own childhood that are central to the shaping of that relationship.

Karin and Klaus Grossmann and Marinus van IJzendoorn are outstanding representatives of the researchers who have built on the legacy of Bowlby and Ainsworth. They have taken different but complementary approaches to their tasks. van IJzendoorn provides a straightforward, authoritative overview of attachment theory and a description of patterns of attachment relationships.[3] His description of research findings focuses on the question of whether variation

©2020-2026 ABILIO | ATTACHMENT

in attachment is a function of early social experience with the caregiver or a product of genetic factors. He cites recent behavioural genetic analyses of attachment in twins that convincingly support the experiential side in this debate. This evidence is all the more notable because it contrasts sharply with the results of parallel studies of the origins of many behavioural and personality traits and attitudes for which evidence of substantial genetic influence has been found.[4]

The Grossmanns, on the other hand, take a more personal approach to their task, beginning with an account that stresses attachment's role, both in evolutionary and developmental time, in providing the infant with a social apprenticeship with the caregiver – an opportunity to acquire the social and emotional skills required to adapt to the society and culture of his or her birth. Their review of research involves extracts from two extensive longitudinal studies carried out in Germany by the authors and their colleagues. These results stress both life-long continuity and the potential for change, for better or worse, as a result of substantial fluctuations in the social environment.

Research and Conclusions

A critical element in both contributions is the rightful emphasis they place on the role played by the caregiver in determining the quality of the attachment relationship and thus in shaping the future social and emotional development of the child. In addition to the results of twin studies, van IJzendoorn also cites experimental evidence for the critical place of caregiving in development, citing the results of intervention studies that have been successful in improving the quality of the attachment relationship through manipulations that enhance the mother's sensitivity and responsiveness.[3]

Neither author comments at length on research on the developmental consequences of variation in early attachment relationships. An extensive body of research over the past two decades and more has established a clear link between secure patterns of attachment in infancy and early childhood and later social adaptation.[5] Secure attachment has been associated with better developmental outcomes than non-secure patterns in areas that include self-reliance, self-efficacy, empathy and social competence in toddlerhood, school-age and adolescence. Infants with non-secure attachments have been shown to be more prone to later problems in adaptation that include conduct disorder, aggression, depression and anti-social behaviour. It is important to note, however, that much of the research relating attachment to later developmental

©2020-2026 ABILIO | ATTACHMENT

outcomes was performed prior to the use of the disorganized category,[6] a pattern of attachment that has been linked compellingly to more extreme maladaptive developmental outcomes. An unknown number of disorganized relationships, therefore, were included in these analyses within the secure and non-secure attachment groups. Additional research is needed to clarify which, if any, of the associations previously attributed to non-secure patterns are in fact a function of disorganization.

Implications for Social Policy and Services

The Grossmanns' emphasis on both the ability of early attachment quality to predict later social and emotional adaptation and on discontinuities in this process reflects a fundamental aspect of the role of attachment in development as originally conceptualized by Bowlby. That is, attachment influences development in a probabilistic rather than a simple deterministic fashion. This notion is especially important for those hoping to use an understanding of attachment to develop services or implement social policy. Briefly, rather than directly determining a particular adaptive or maladaptive outcome, early attachment experiences are thought to predispose the infant to act and react in a manner that serves to shape subsequent social experiences, thus launching the child on one developmental pathway rather than the other. The actual developmental outcome, however, remains the product of continuing experience, even though these experiences are, in part, made more or less probable by the quality of the early attachment relationship. The trajectory can be changed by subsequent social experience, including deliberate intervention.

Bowlby captured the most important implications of attachment theory and research for social policy and services in a report that was written well over half a century ago:

> *"Just as children are absolutely dependent on their parents for sustenance, so in all but the most primitive communities, are parents, especially their mothers, dependent on a greater society for economic provision. If a community values its children it must cherish their parents."*
>
> John Bowlby, 1951, p.84, WHO Report
> Cited by Inge Bretherton (1992)[7]

Bowlby's comment to some extent reflects the language and culture of the day but remains urgently accurate. Research on attachment over the past four decades has confirmed his central hypothesis: the sensitivity and responsiveness of the caregiver are instrumental in shaping the human infant's first relationship. This relationship, in turn, has been shown to be a powerful predictor of later important social outcomes. Our efforts to ensure that this outcome is adaptive rather than maladaptive for both the individual and society must, therefore, focus on our support of the infant's caregiver, most often the mother. In today's society, this translates most urgently, at a policy level, into ensuring that families at developmental risk, including single mothers, are provided with the social and financial resources necessary to provide their children with a supportive social environment – the prerequisite of a healthy attachment relationship. As suggested by van IJzendoorn, in many cases this will mean the provision of quality daycare for these same families. For service-providers, attachment theory and research call for a focus on early social interaction and on the primary mediator of such interaction, the mother. Patterns of attachment behaviour and mental representations become less flexible and less open to change with developmental time. Investment through social policy and service delivery in the earliest years is thus a more efficient and feasible approach than reactive intervention delayed until the negative consequences of inadequate early experiences become apparent.

An appreciation of this critical dependence of a child's adaptive development on the supportive environment provided by the parent is nowhere more important today than in the lives of the 79.5 million persons worldwide who were living forcibly displaced from their homes in 2019 – including millions of families with young children.[8] These families live under unusual levels of stress from a variety of sources, including poverty, poor nutrition, disease, lack of health care, inadequate housing, threats of physical violence and a generally uncertain future over which they have little control. These conditions leave parents with few psychological or physical resources to provide the developing child with the environment they need and, for many, now stretch across generations. The arguments of van IJzendoorn and the Grossmanns make it clear that the consequences of forced human displacement for the development of individual, for their communities, and for the world will be profound and endure across generations.

References

1. Bowlby J. *Attachment*. London, England: Hogarth Press; 1969. Attachment and loss; vol 1.
2. Ainsworth MS, Blehar MC, Waters E, Wall S. *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; 1978.

©2020-2026 ABILIO | ATTACHMENT

3. Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ, van IJzendoorn MH, Juffer F. Less is more: Meta-analyses of sensitivity and attachment interventions in early childhood. *Psychological Bulletin* 2003;129(2):195-215.

4. McGuffin P, Riley B, Plomin R. Genomics and behavior: Toward behavioral genomics. *Science* 2001;291(5507):1232-1249.

5. Carlson EA, Sampson MC, Sroufe LA. Implications of attachment theory and research for developmental-behavioral pediatrics. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 2003;24(5):364-379.

6. Main M, Solomon J. Procedures for identifying infants as disorganized/disoriented during the Ainsworth Strange Situation. In: Greenberg MT, Cicchetti D, Cummings EM, eds. *Attachment in the preschool years: Theory, research, and intervention*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press; 1990:121-160.

7. Bretherton I. The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. *Developmental Psychology* 1992;28(5):759-775.

8. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*. UNHCR UN Refugee Agency, June 2020.

©2020-2026 ABILIO | ATTACHMENT