

Chapter

Attachment

In this chapter, we will be looking at:

- the nature of attachment and its development
- explanations of attachment
- secure and insecure attachment
- cultural variations in attachment
- disruption of attachment and privation
- day care and social development
- the implications of research for childcare practices



Unit 1

The nature of attachment and its development

Attachment can be defined as a strong and reciprocal emotional bond with another person. This is particularly evident in the attachment of babies to their mothers or other major caregivers. Maccoby (1980) suggested that there are four key behaviours that indicate that an attachment has been formed:

Key behaviours demonstrating attachment

- Seeking to be near the attachment figure.
- Being distressed when separated from them.
- Showing pleasure when reunited with them.
- Orientation towards them, being aware of their presence and frequently making contact with them.

Chapter 3 Attachment

The development of this attachment has been described by Schaffer and Emerson (1964) as taking place in three stages: indiscriminate attachment, specific attachment and multiple attachments (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 *The development of attachment (Schaffer and Emerson, 1964)*

Stage	Approximate age range	Characteristics
Indiscriminate attachment	Up to about 6 months	It doesn't matter who is holding the baby. The baby smiles at anyone and protests when put down, whoever is holding them.
Specific attachment	From about 7 months to a year	One specific attachment emerges, usually to the mother or major caregiver. In the earlier period, the baby is distressed when separated from this person (separation anxiety) and is wary of strangers (stranger anxiety).
Multiple attachments	From about a year onwards	Attachment to another person is shown, and then to a number of other people who are important in the child's life.

However, there is quite a lot of individual variation. Schaffer and Emerson found that the second stage of specific attachment could start at any time between 6 months and a year, and the number of multiple attachments formed, and when they were formed, also varied. Only half of the 60 babies studied formed their main attachment with the mother, with a third showing a preference for the father, and others with a grandparent or with a brother or sister.

Explanations of attachment

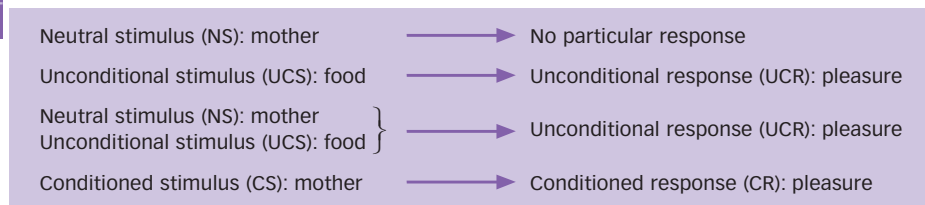
Several theories have been put forward to explain why infants form and maintain attachments. We will now look at those based on learning theory and on the ethological perspective.

Learning theory

You will remember from Chapter 1 that behaviourists believe that all behaviour is learned, through either classical or operant conditioning. Both forms of conditioning have been used to explain the development of attachment.

Within a classical conditioning framework, food produces a sense of pleasure. The person providing the food — usually the mother — is linked to food, and so she becomes a source of pleasure (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 *Attachment as classical conditioning*





This explanation has been further developed in the **secondary drive hypothesis** proposed by Dollard and Miller (1950). They proposed that we have **primary drives**, that is, motivational states arising from basic physiological needs, such as hunger. Since this basic need is repeatedly met by the mother, her presence becomes associated with the satisfaction of the need and so becomes a **secondary** (or **learned**) **drive**. The infant is therefore motivated to seek the mother's presence and to become distressed if she is not there.

Operant conditioning also suggests that attachment is learned. Feeding is reinforcing to a hungry child. As the mother is close to the child during feeding, feeding positively reinforces attachment.

However, there are problems with theories that explain attachment in terms of feeding. Schaffer and Emerson found that quite a large proportion of infants formed their primary attachment with someone who seldom, if ever, fed them, so attachment cannot adequately be explained by feeding alone. This has been further demonstrated in animal research (see Box 3.1).

Box 3.1 Harlow and Zimmerman (1959)

Aims: To investigate the basis of attachment in rhesus monkeys.

Procedure: Infant monkeys were separated from their mothers shortly after birth and raised in isolation. They had access to two surrogate mothers: wire frames that looked similar to an adult monkey. One was covered in soft terry cloth, and the other was left bare but had a teat through which the infant could obtain milk. The infant monkeys were deliberately frightened by introducing a clockwork teddy bear beating a drum, into the cage.

Results: The infant monkeys showed their extreme distress through behaviours such as screaming, rocking, crouching in a corner and thumb sucking. Most of the time, they clung to the cloth mother, even though it did not give milk. They also clung to her when frightened by the teddy bear. There was no attempt to cling to the wire monkey.

Conclusions: Mothering is not just about feeding. Young primates also need a source of psychological warmth (Harlow called it **contact comfort**), which here was provided by the cloth mother.

However, this study presents some weaknesses. Firstly, there are ethical concerns, as the infant monkeys clearly suffered as a result of this experience. Secondly, there are methodological issues, i.e. with the way that the study was carried out, given that the two surrogate mothers differed in ways other than being covered in cloth or giving milk. For example, they had somewhat different head shapes, and this kind of difference cannot be ruled out as an influence on the behaviour of the infants. Thirdly, there is the issue of **extrapolation**: though monkeys are genetically quite similar to humans, can we assume that what is true of monkeys is also true of humans? Nonetheless, the series of studies that Harlow carried out adds weight to the idea that attachment cannot be explained purely in terms of learned behaviour based on feeding.

The ethological perspective: Bowlby's theory of attachment

A different kind of explanation of attachment was put forward by **John Bowlby** (1907–90). His theory was much influenced by **ethology**, the study of animals in their natural surroundings, and in particular by **imprinting**. Imprinting is the phenomenon observed in some birds, such as geese, which follow the first moving object that they see on hatching. In most cases, this is the mother, but Lorenz, an ethologist, demonstrated that goslings would also imprint on him if he was there when they first hatched. Once this bond was formed, it was irreversible: the goslings never learned to follow the mother.

It was initially thought by ethnologists that there was a **critical period** when imprinting had to occur, a brief period of time within which it had to take place. If it did not happen then, it would not happen at all. This principle was later modified, with the suggestion that instead there is a **sensitive period**, when imprinting is more likely to take place, though it can still occur outside this restricted window of time. However, the idea of a critical period was still accepted when Bowlby developed his attachment theory.

Imprinting has obvious survival value. The mother will protect the young from predators and make sure that they are fed and cared for. She will also help them to acquire the skills they need for survival. However, Lorenz demonstrated that successful imprinting has wider implications. He found that goslings that did not successfully imprint on an appropriate carer had serious social and sexual problems as they matured, and he believed these problems to be irreversible. This was supported by Immelmann (1972), who found that zebra finches that had imprinted on Bengalese finches preferred to mate with this species rather than their own.



Konrad Lorenz walking with 'his' goslings



Bowlby extended these ideas to attachment in infants, proposing that human infants have an innate predisposition to form a strong attachment to one individual, who will most usually be the mother. The bond between mother and infant is **reciprocal**, with the mother also being predisposed to bond with her infant. In evolutionary terms, infant attachment is **adaptive**. In our evolutionary past, those infants genetically predisposed to form a strong attachment would be more likely to survive to maturity and reproduce, passing on their genes, including those coding for attachment, to their offspring. For the mother, attachment is adaptive in that it will motivate her to care for the infant and so promote its survival, and ultimately the survival of her genes when the infant reaches maturity and reproduces successfully.

Attachment in the infant is adaptive in several ways:

Attachment is adaptive because:

- It promotes **safety**: the infant wishes to be close to the mother, and both are distressed by separation.
- It promotes the development of **healthy emotional relationships**: within this first relationship, Bowlby suggests that the infant develops an **internal working model (IWM)** of the self, the mother and the relationship between the two, which acts as a template for future relationships.
- It provides a **secure base for exploration**: exploration is an important factor in mental development, but this needs to be balanced by the security offered by returning from time to time to the mother.

Bowlby proposed that there is an innate sequence in the development of attachment, with the infant moving through the phases as he or she matures (see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2 The development of attachment (Bowlby, 1969)

- 1 Birth–8 weeks**: The infant is friendly towards other people, but shows little discrimination between them.
- 2 8 weeks–6 months**: While still generally friendly, the infant starts to show a preference towards one primary caregiver.
- 3 6 months–2 years**: The infant seeks proximity to the attachment figure and uses him or her as a secure base. The infant is distressed when separated from the attachment figure (**separation anxiety**), is less friendly towards others and is wary of strangers (**stranger anxiety**).
- 4 2 years onwards**: The infant develops insight into the primary caregiver's behaviour and can consciously influence what he or she does. This marks the beginning of a relationship that is a more equal partnership between child and caregiver.

As a trigger for the attachment process, Bowlby claimed that the infant displays **social releasers**, such as smiling, crying, sucking and clinging, to which others are innately predisposed to respond.

Chapter Attachment

Bowlby also suggested that there is a **critical period** for this attachment to be formed. If it had not formed by the age of around 3 years, it would be impossible for the child to form a strong attachment. There would be long-term and irreversible consequences for an infant's social and emotional well-being if an attachment was not formed by this time.

There were a number of influences on Bowlby's theory. He was a trained psychoanalyst and therefore recognised the importance of childhood experience for later development. However, the findings of ethological research were a major influence, which raises the issue of **extrapolation**, i.e. in this instance applying findings relating to non-human animals to human development. It is problematic to extrapolate from goslings to humans. Imprinting is a reflex, leading to following behaviour, whereas attachment is to do with the development of emotions, so imprinting may not be an entirely appropriate model for human attachment.

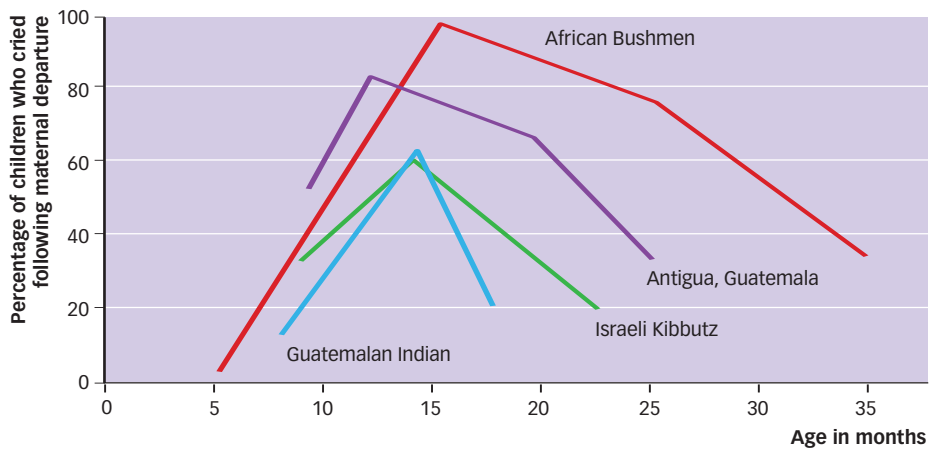
However, research evidence suggests that, like those identified in birds, there are serious long-term social and sexual problems in monkeys — genetically much closer to humans than goslings — when they are reared without a mother. Harlow and Harlow (1962) found that rhesus monkeys reared in isolation had severe social and sexual problems when they were older. When put with normally reared monkeys, they were unable to interact in a natural way. Some were extremely withdrawn, rocking back and forth repetitively; some were aggressive towards others; and some were self-harming, biting their own limbs until they bled. Males could not mate successfully, and females, if they did mate, were cruel and rejecting mothers, refusing to let their infants nurse. Of course, these monkeys had not only been separated from their mothers but also raised without any kind of social contact, so their extreme behaviour clearly cannot be accounted for solely by the lack of attachment. However, given the similarities between monkeys and humans, this suggests that an early close relationship with the mother is crucial to human social and emotional development.

Further support for Bowlby's theory comes from cross-cultural research. Kagan et al. (1978) carried out research in a range of different cultures. They found that the pattern of development of **separation anxiety** in different cultures was similar, with only relatively small variations (see Figure 3.2): it emerges in the second half of the first year and increases until approximately 15 months; it then declines steadily.

Bowlby believed that separation anxiety indicates that a bond has been formed with the mother, the fear of strangers that occurs at around the same time preventing another bond being formed. He used the term **monotropism** to describe the child's need to become attached to one particular person. This would also be adaptive, in terms of protecting the infant from possible harm, and since the Kagan et al. study suggests that it is universal, there is support for it being innate.

Further support for Bowlby's ideas, and in particular the internal working model (IWM) as a template for future relationships, comes from research looking at links between the nature of early attachment and later characteristics. This will be examined in the next section.

Figure 3.2 The development of separation anxiety (Kagan et al., 1978)



However, there are also some problems with Bowlby’s theory. First, it rests on evolutionary ideas, and as we discussed in Chapter 1, ideas associated with this theory are speculative — it is not possible to test them directly. Second, Bowlby suggests that the early attachment with the mother acts as a template for future relationships: if a good relationship is established with the mother, then future relationships should also be sound. However, even if this were the case, there are ways in which this could be explained other than by the establishment of an IWM. For example, it could be explained in terms of the temperament of the child: a child with an easy temperament is likely to form a secure attachment with the mother, and it may be that this kind of temperament also makes it easy for him or her to form good relationships with others later in life, rather than the pattern of relationships being laid down in infancy.

Summary

- Bowlby’s theory of attachment was influenced by **ethology** and in particular by **imprinting**.
- Imprinting was thought to take place within a **critical period**, later adapted as a **sensitive period**.
- Imprinting has **survival value**, and failure to imprint appropriately leads to poor social and sexual development.
- Bowlby applied these principles to the attachment between a mother and her baby. It is **reciprocal**; both are innately pre-programmed to form a bond.
- As with animals, this attachment is **adaptive**, in that it is likely to promote survival.
- For the infant, this attachment is **monotropic** and is different in kind from other attachments. It allows the infant to develop an **internal working model (IWM)** of relationships.
- Animal research supports these ideas, although **extrapolation** from non-human animals to humans is problematic.