

# Attachment: Bringing childhood behavior theory to real life

One of the greatest challenges to teachers is the child who seems to have no heart, the child with whom the provider cannot seem to build a close or warm relationship. As an infant, this child is often anxious and fretful. This child seems to have little empathy for another child who may be hurt or in trouble. The child appears to have no respect for others, or their property, and is often the center of difficulties within the group.

Psychologist John Bowlby recognized these antisocial behaviors in a group of young teens he was treating in a clinic in London shortly after World War II. These young men had been committing crimes and were exhibiting antisocial behaviors. Bowlby and his colleagues conducted a study in which 44 adolescent thieves were observed, using a control group of another 44 adolescents who had been referred to Bowlby's clinic but as yet had not committed any crimes. The goal of the study was to compare the adolescents' behaviors with a "systematic

investigation of possible adverse effects in the young child's environment ... and in particular that part of it comprised by the parent" (Van Der Horst 2011).

Bowlby found that these delinquent young men had experienced disrupted childhoods, in which they had been separated from their mothers for at least six months during their first five years of life. This condition he referred to as **maternal deprivation**. His paper about the study was his first step toward developing a new and phenomenal approach to explaining certain childhood behaviors—**attachment theory**. Until this time psychologists relied on the methods of treating antisocial behaviors in children by psychoanalysis that had been developed by Sigmund Freud.

Bowlby, a scientist whose specialty was biology during his undergraduate studies, began to study animal behaviors, especially those that involved the relationship between mother and offspring. It was through **ethology** (study of behavior in the natural environment, especially in animals) that Bowlby first arrived at some of his conclusions about mother-infant bonding. He was especially inspired by Konrad Lorenz's 1935 studies that included the "imprinting" of baby geese. Bowlby equated the behaviors of the baby geese to that of human babies. He believed that the human infant had built-in behaviors that kept the parent nearby for the baby's protection (Bowlby 1951).

## Bowlby's challenge to Freud's psychoanalysis

John Bowlby was the son of a famous London surgeon, Major General Sir Anthony Bowlby, who had at one time successfully operated on one of Queen Victoria's sons and was rewarded with a knighthood (Holmes 1993). Wanting to follow in his famous father's footsteps, Bowlby entered medical school and studied at University College Hospital. He



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found the tedium of becoming a medical doctor was not to be his life's work, and he entered the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Wanting to become a child psychiatrist, he threw himself into psychoanalytic studies. He became a student of Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis. Studying under the *grande dame* of child analysis, Melanie Klein, Bowlby intuitively began to follow another route to the problems of behavior in childhood. He began to discover there was a more realistic reason for a child's behavior, which was beyond the fantasies prescribed by Freud's theory.

## EARLY ATTACHMENTS OF AN INFANT PREDICT HOW THOSE INFANTS WILL BEHAVE LATER IN LIFE.

Bowlby expressed in his own writings on attachment, "What had deceived me was that my furrows had been started from a corner diametrically opposite to the one at which Freud had entered and through which analysts have always followed" (1982). The innovator Bowlby started a new dimension in treating children with behavioral problems.

While studying with Klein, he observed a mother and child whom he had been treating for hyperactivity and anxious behaviors five times a week. He noticed that the mother also was quite anxious. Bowlby reported to his supervisor (Klein) that he felt that there was a correlation between the child's behaviors and the mother's anxiety.

Klein responded to these concerns by clarifying, "Dr. Bowlby, we are not concerned with reality, we are only concerned with the fantasy" (Kagan 2006). As Bowlby's studies on attachment were being published, Klein "openly ridiculed his notions about the mother-child bond having a lifelong impact on individual development" (Maroda 2012).

### What is attachment?

The bond between the mother and the child (or one primary and permanent caregiver and the child) is the basis of attachment theory. It was Bowlby's idea that a close bond between a mother (caregiver) and

her child at the earliest stages of the child's life may determine the child's mental health and emotional stability. He had experienced a detached relationship with his own taciturn, aloof mother. He also had experienced some extreme negative feelings when separated from his favorite, loving nanny. He summarized attachment in this statement: "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment" (1951).

Bowlby's first assumption was the nature of the child's tie to the mother. He proposed that a 12-month-old has unmistakable behaviors that function to bind the child to the mother. Among those elements are sucking, clinging, following, as well as those (signaling) behaviors like smiling and crying (Bretherton 1992).

The second core assumption was the importance of **separation anxiety**. Bowlby took issue with Freud's claim that maternal over-gratification is a danger in infancy. Bowlby felt that Freud failed to realize that maternal "pseudo-affection" and overprotection may derive from a mother's unconscious hostility. In his view, separation anxiety was directly due to adverse family experiences like continual threats of abandonment or actual rejection from parents.

Separation anxiety could also be related to a parent's or sibling's death for which the child felt responsible (Bretherton 1992). Bowlby claimed that a well-loved child might protest separation at first, but that later the child might develop more self-reliance.

The third core assumption of attachment theory dealt with grief and mourning in infancy and early childhood. Bowlby questioned Anna Freud's theory that infants cannot mourn due to immature ego development. Anna Freud (Sigmund's daughter) contended that infants experience no more than brief bouts of separation anxiety if an adequate substitute caregiver is provided. On the contrary, it was Bowlby's contention that grief and mourning processes in children and adults "appear whenever attachment behaviors are activated but the attachment figure continues to be unavailable." He also suggested that "an inability to form deep relationships with others may result when the succession of substitutes is too frequent" (Bretherton 1992).

Later in life Bowlby determined a fourth core assumption to attachment theory, this one related to

psychotherapy. He encouraged the reappraisal of inadequate, outdated working models of *self*, in relation to attachment figures. As most psychoanalysts know, if a person has inadequate, rigid working models of attachment, it is highly likely that the person will transfer or impose those models onto the therapist. This is called **transference**. Bowlby had reported that transference should be remodeled in such a way that the therapist would be the secure base on which the patient could build an internal working model (Bretherton 1992).

## Mary Ainsworth and the strange situation study

In 1950 Mary Ainsworth, a developmental psychologist, joined Bowlby's group at the Tavistock Clinic, during which time she became interested in the ethological approach to attachment theory. In 1953 she observed infants from ages 12 to 18 months in an experiment that came to be called "strange situation." In the study, the parent of the child would leave the room briefly and then return to the child. From this study, Ainsworth was able to observe secure attachment and different types of insecure attachment. She concluded that the early attachments of an infant predict how those infants will behave later in life.

In **secure attachment** the child uses a primary caregiver as a secure base from which to explore. The child actively seeks contact with the parent, avoids strangers, and is easily comforted by the primary caregiver after being absent. The child will

engage in activities with a stranger as long as the mother is in the room, but when the mother leaves the child will not engage in activities with strangers.

In **resistant attachment** the child is anxious and fretful with strangers even if the mother is in the room. When the mother leaves the room, the child is extremely upset. When the mother returns, the child will remain close to the mother but seems resentful. The child may even push or hit the mother upon her return.

In **avoidant attachment** the child avoids the mother or primary caregiver and seems ambivalent when she leaves the room. The child will often run away from the mother upon her return. The child does not cling to the mother and has the same emotions with strangers as the child has to the mother (Bretherton 1992).

Ainsworth's colleagues subsequently came up with another type, **disoriented or disorganized attachment**. In this category, the child is confused or demonstrates contradictory behaviors (looking away, showing a dazed facial expression) when the mother or primary caregiver leaves and then returns to the room.

## Developing secure attachment in early childhood classrooms

The behaviors of children vary by individual. Teachers want each child to explore the world within the classroom freely and without hesitation. They want the child to accept peers and teachers, feeling comfortable with each relationship. The child could be outgoing and relaxed, shy and reserved, timid, or cautious but with a strong emotional tie—secure attachment—to a primary caregiver.

Experienced teachers realize that secure attachment does not mean dependency but rather reflects an attitude of liberation toward exploring the world (Bergin and Bergin 2009). Secure attachment is quite obvious when a child protests separation (separation anxiety) from the attachment figure. This type of behavior is more prevalent in younger children, while older children are less likely to feel insecure when separated (Bergin and Bergin 2009).

The beautiful thing about secure attachment is that most children may feel attached to more than one person. The securely attached child is often highly selective of attachment figures (such as family members), and the young child is likely to be attached to

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just a few figures (Ainsworth 1979).

In working to create a loving and attached relationship with a child in the classroom, a teacher must allow the child the freedom to choose the attachment figure. For instance, if a child is a new member of the class, the teacher may allow the child to warm up to her and not overwhelm the child with smothering behaviors. The securely attached child will have little problems, in time, relating to the other members of the class and will find an attachment figure within the new world.

The child who is not securely attached to a primary caregiver or parent may instead exhibit antisocial behaviors. This child, in coming into a classroom, often will not even look back as the family member leaves. This child will not feel comfortable with peers and will often seem belligerent when asked to perform simple tasks within the classroom. The insecure child will display no preference for an attachment figure and will be unresponsive to the classroom culture (Bergin and Bergin 2009). Insecure toddlers will often turn their backs toward their teacher or caregivers and will lean away from a proposed attachment figure. These children seem to be angry, insensitive, intrusive, and even rejecting (Ainsworth 1979, Crittenden 1992). The child who is not securely attached is one who will often need the most respectful attention from the teacher.

A teacher will be more effective by displaying warmth, respect, and trust to an insecure child. A teacher or caregiver can be that important attachment figure for a child who may not have experienced the secure attachment enjoyed by other members of the class. It is important that the teacher spend ample time with the child and attempt to establish an attachment relationship by being responsive to the child's needs, interpreting signals and behaviors sensitively, expressing positive regard, and allowing the child to set the pace and direction of social interactions.

## Contributing to a child's emotional stability

The history of attachment theory has undergone sometimes turbulent modifications and redirections. Even so, the research has consistently focused on how children form trusting relationships with others.

Teachers, while being responsive and emotionally available to children, also need to understand attach-

ment relationships from a child's and the family's perspective, history, and circumstance. Whatever the family relationship, early care and education professionals can contribute to children's emotional stability and help set the foundation for later relationships and the ability to function as an autonomous adult with trust and security.

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## About the author

Sarah Karamati has a master's degree in child development from Texas Woman's University and is an Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) coach working with autistic children at Easter Seals North Texas. She is currently pursuing doctoral work at Texas Woman's University where she is a graduate assistant. Ms. Karamati's research interests are in parenting, attachment relationships, and social and emotional development. She regularly presents at local and regional professional conferences. ■