



Attachment

This Factsheet summarises what an attachment is, why and when we form attachments and individual and cultural differences in attachment.

A. What is an attachment?

An attachment is the strong and long-lasting emotional bond between two people, mainly between an infant and its primary caregiver. The caregiver can be its mother, father, grandparent and so on. Attachments form across the entire lifespan, but the first human attachment occurs between the infant and its primary caregiver. Attachment generally begins in first year of life.



Maccoby (1980) identified four characteristics of attachment:

1. The infant seeks proximity, trying to stay near the caregiver.
2. Both the infant and caregiver feel distressed when separated.
3. Both the infant and caregiver feel pleasure when reunited.
4. The infant is generally always aware of the caregiver and makes frequent contact.

B. Why do we form attachments?

What function does attachment have? Some ideas are:

- ♦ As babies are helpless at birth, they need caregivers for food and protection, which helps them to survive. Attachment is an **innate** behaviour (see glossary) which increases the infant's chances of survival. Attachment behaviour is **selected** because it increases reproductive success.
- ♦ Attachment in the first year of life forms the basis for emotional relationships later on. There is evidence that early attachment experiences do influence later relationships. For instance, Grossman and Grossmann (1991) found that a child who is securely attached to its mother as a baby is more likely to enjoy close friendships later in childhood.
- ♦ Bowlby (1969) proposed the first theory of attachment in the 1950s. He proposed that humans evolved the need for this close relationship – see explanations of attachment below.



Explanations of attachment

Some explanations of attachment include:

1. Psychodynamic theory

- ♦ Freud (1924) proposed that as the mother is a source of food and comfort, the infant will want to be with her. Freud proposed that childhood has five stages, the first stage being the oral stage. In this stage, the infant gets pleasure from oral stimulation (e.g., breastfeeding). As such, the mother is associated with pleasure and an attachment forms.
- ♦ Freud considered that the infant-mother attachment is the prototype for all future relationships. In psychodynamic theory, childhood experiences shape adult personality.
- ♦ Some evidence does not support Freud's view. We now know that infants are most likely to become attached to adults who are responsive to them, not just the ones providing food. For example, Schaffer and Emerson (1964) found that the person who fed and bathed the infant was not always the infant's primary attachment, the mothers were still the main attachment. Also see textbox *Harry Harlow's monkeys*

1. Harry Harlow's monkeys

Harlow (1959) examined whether baby rhesus monkeys that had been separated from their mother would prefer feeding or comfort. He placed monkeys in cages with two surrogate 'mothers'; one was made from wire and one was wire, covered in cloth. He found that the monkeys spent most of their time with the cloth mother, even when only the wire one gave food (milk). The cloth monkey provided comfort.



2. Learning theory

- Learning theory considers all behaviour to be learnt rather than innate. Infants learn to associate their mother, who provides food, with pleasure. For instance, Dollard and Miller (1950) proposed that hunger and thirst are primary drives which motivate behaviour. The mother provides food which reduces these drives; therefore the infant seeks this person because they are a source of reward.
- Some evidence does not support this view. For example, infants form attachments with adults who do not provide their food. Therefore learning theory does not provide a complete explanation. It is also criticised for being **reductionist**, reducing attachment to just stimulus and reward.

3. Bowlby's theory

- John Bowlby proposed that humans have evolved the need for attachment because it aids survival. He views attachment as an innate and **adaptive** behaviour.
- Attachment helps survival in several ways:
 - It maintains proximity between the caregiver and infant, therefore keeping the infant safe.
 - It enables the infant to learn how to have healthy emotional bonds. This happens through the development of a mental 'internal working model', which is used as a template for future relationships.
- The infant can use the adult as a secure base for exploration, which is important for development.
- He proposed that the baby's instinctive behaviours (e.g., crying, smiling) act as **social releasers**. These social releasers elicit parenting behaviours, resulting in the infant being looked after well and so promoting survival. The parenting responses and social releasers interact to build attachment.
- He believes that our 'internal working models' of relationships are passed down through genes from one generation to other.
- Bowlby argued that we have a critical period for attachment, which is between one- and three-years-old.
- He argues that not forming an attachment harms the child's development.

Exam Hints: You must be able to define attachment, and describe what secure and insecure attachments are. You should also be able to discuss one/more explanations of attachment.

C. Stages of attachment

Table 1: Bowlby's (1969) stages in the development of attachment

Phase	Age	Behaviour
1	Birth – 8 weeks	Infant's behaviour is oriented to all people. Infants do not discriminate one special person.
2	8/10 weeks to 6 months	Infant orients more to one or more special people, beginning to show a marked difference in behaviour to one person.
3	6 months – 1 to 2 years	Infant maintains proximity to one special person, using them as base from which to explore. Infant is less friendly to other people and regards strangers with caution.
4	Starts around 2 years	The child gains insight into their mother's behaviour and begins to form a real partnership.

Table 2: Schaffer and Emerson's (1964) stages in the development of attachment

Stage	Age	Behaviour
Asocial stage	0-6 weeks	Infant smiles and cries, but behaviour is not aimed at any specific person.
Indiscriminate attachments	6 weeks – 7 months	Infant seeks attention from different individuals.
Specific attachments	7 – 11 months	Infant shows strong attachment to one person. Attachments to others follow.

Schaffer and Emerson (1964) conducted a longitudinal study over two years, using 60 infants aged from five to 23 weeks at the start. They observed the infants' protest on separation and anxiety when approached by a stranger. They found that:

- Fifty per cent of children showed their first specific attachment between six- and eight-months-old. Their fear of strangers appeared a month later.
- The intensity of attachment was greatest at the first month after the attachment first appeared, but there were large differences between individuals.
- The children had multiple attachments; they became attached to other people soon after their main attachment appeared (e.g., by 18-months-old, 31% of children had five/more attachments).
- In 39 per cent of cases, the mothers remained as the main attachment even if they were not the person who fed, washed and changed the child.



D. Individual differences in attachments

Individual differences in attachment are the differences in the degree to which a child is attached to its primary caregiver. Mary Ainsworth and colleagues developed a way of classifying these different types of attachment using the Strange Situation.

The Strange Situation procedure

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) developed the Strange Situation procedure to examine how individuals differ in their attachment. The Strange Situation is a laboratory observation where the child is separated from, and reunited with, their primary caregiver (usually the mother). The infant's reaction to being separated and reunited is used to assess and classify their attachment type'. The procedure generally involves the mother and child being taken to unfamiliar room and experiencing a set of scenarios, such as:

1. Mother and child enter the room which has toys in it, and the child can explore and play while the mother is there.
2. A stranger joins the mother and child.
3. The mother leaves the child with the stranger.
4. The mother returns and re-settles the child, the stranger leaves.
5. The mother leaves and the child is alone.
6. The stranger enters and interacts with the lone child.
7. The mother returns again and the stranger leaves.

The main classification is whether the child has a secure or insecure attachment. Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified three main types of attachment for children up to 20-months-old (Table 3).

Exam Hint: Can you write about the procedure and findings of one study into individual differences in attachment? You can write about Ainsworth et al's (1978) study for this.

Table 3. Ainsworth's attachment types

Attachment type	Description
Secure	The child plays happily using the mother as a base for exploration. Child is distressed by separation and shows positive gestures/smiles when reunited. The child tries to get close to and/or interact with the mother. This child does not mind stranger contact but treats strangers differently from mother.
Insecure-avoidant	The child shows little secure behaviour. The child ignores the mother and is not affected by her leaving or returning. The child actively avoids and ignores mother when reunited. Although the child is distressed when alone, he/she is easily comforted by strangers.
Insecure-resistant	The child is fretful or passive when with the mother. The child is distressed when she leaves, but angry with the mother on reunion or not easily soothed by the mother. The child may resist contact with the mother and stranger.

E. Cross-cultural research on attachment

- If attachment is innate, then we would expect attachment behaviour to be similar across all cultures.
- Ainsworth and Bell (1970) found that 71% of American children have secure attachment, 12% are insecure-resistant and 17% are insecure-avoidant.
- Sagi, Van Ijzendoorn and Koren-Karie (1991) found similar figures to Ainsworth and Bell (1970) for American children. Table 4 shows what they found for other cultures.

Table 4: Sagi, Van Ijzendoorn and Koren-Karie's (1991) findings

Country	Percentage of children with secure attachment	Percentage of children with insecure-resistant attachment	Percentage of children with insecure-avoidant attachment
Israeli	62	33	5
Japanese	68	32	0
German	40	49	11

- Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988) found that secure attachments are also the most common type in other cultures, but there is a higher rate of insecure-avoidant attachment in Western Europe and of insecure-resistant attachment in Israel and Japan.
- Explanations for cultural differences include that Israeli children who live on a kibbutz are cared for collectively whereas Japanese mothers rarely leave their children with strangers.
- Overall, there appears to be less variation between cultures than within them.
- It is important to note that there is more variation in childrearing practices within cultures than between them, which makes it problematic to compare across cultures.

Exam Hint: Can you describe cross-cultural research into attachment? Can you explain what it tells us?

F. Evaluation

- Much of attachment theory is supported by research evidence.
- Better understanding of attachment has had practical applications. For example, parents can be trained to be more sensitive to children's behaviours in order to increase the chances of the child forming secure attachments (e.g., to help adoptive parents form attachments with a child).
- Early research into attachment led to changes in day care as it was understood how important it was for the child to form relationships with the carers.
- There is evidence that the Strange Situation is a reliable procedure (i.e., it reliably measures attachment). For instance, Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) tested children when they were 18-months-old and again at six-years-old. They found that 100 per cent of the children classified as secure at 18-months-old were still classified as secure at six-years-old. The procedure is also valid (i.e., it measures something real). It appears that early attachment behaviour does predict later social and emotional development.
- There is evidence that early attachments have consequences for later relationships. However, there are many other factors that also influence what later relationships are like (e.g., loss of a parent, experiencing divorcing parents in childhood).
- Harris (1998) argues that the infant can distinguish that they have different internal working models for different people, so there is not just one internal working model.
- Ainsworth regarded the critical part of parenting to be the parent's/mother's sensitivity (maternal sensitivity) to the child's needs. This is criticised by feminists because, if anything goes wrong, it lays the responsibility and blame with the mother.
- Early attachment theory ignored the role of a person's temperament. Temperament is our genetically influenced personality. It is possible that our innate temperament determines how well we form relationships. If we are innately bad at forming relationships, then we form bad early ones and bad later ones. We now know that type of temperament a person has does contribute to their type of attachment.

Glossary

Adaptive: a behaviour which increases reproductive success and therefore survival

Innate: Inborn.

Reductionist: Reducing a complex behaviour to overly simple ideas.

Selected: In evolutionary theory, the process by which individuals with favorable characteristics are more likely to survive and reproduce.

Social releasers: A behaviour/characteristic that brings about parenting behaviour.

Worksheet: Attachment

Name _____

1. Define what attachment is.

2. What is one possible function of forming attachments?

3. Which explanation of attachment proposes that it is innate? Which explanation(s) do not propose this?

4. Outline Bowlby's evolutionary theory of attachment.

5. At which age do specific attachments begin?

6. What are secure and insecure attachments?

7. In table 4, which shows cross-cultural differences in attachment, how do the figures for Germany differ to other cultures?

8. Give one strength and one weakness of research into, and theories of, attachment.

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