

Attachment

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the psychological theory of attachment, as well as the different ways attachment occurs during development.

The specific areas of focus include:

1. Attachment Theory
2. Styles of Attachment
 - a. Secure Attachment
 - b. Insecure-Avoidant Attachment
 - c. Insecure-Ambivalent Attachment

1. Attachment Theory

As you learned in a previous lesson, a psychologist named Harry Harlow embarked on a series of somewhat controversial experiments in the 1960s that showed the importance of forming attachments of love and affection towards a parental figure.

IN CONTEXT

In Harry Harlow's experiments, he took baby rhesus monkeys away from their mothers and put them in a room with surrogate mothers made of different materials. One surrogate was made of wire, but had a bottle to provide milk. The other was made of terry cloth, so it felt a bit more like a mother monkey. What Harlow found was that the baby monkeys tended to gravitate more towards the surrogate mothers that were covered with terry cloth.

He postulated that the baby monkeys needed a certain contact comfort, which is a pleasant, reassuring feeling from touching or clinging to something soft and warm. This contact comfort would normally come from the mother, but in this case, it was from the surrogate mother covered in terry cloth.

When fear stimuli were introduced, meaning something frightening was put into the cage, Harlow

found that the baby monkeys would cling to the mothers and wouldn't explore the room or move away from the mothers even when there wasn't anything frightening around. The fact that the baby monkeys tended to stay close to the surrogate mothers expanded on the idea that attachment played an important role in early development.

As you can probably tell from this context, attachment is a close emotional bond that an infant forms with either a parent or caregiver of some sort.

There is a sensitive period during that first year of life when children need to form certain attachments. They begin to prefer their mother over other people very early on in life, but they establish those close emotional bonds with both parents initially.

Essentially, the mother or the father, or any caregiver, acts as a sort of home base--a place where children feel safe and secure, and from which they can go out and explore the rest of the world.

A normal sign that attachment has occurred is **separation anxiety**, or a certain distress that a child displays when his or her caregiver is taken away. When children are separated from their parents or their caregiver, they may exhibit separation anxiety by crying, flailing, or showing signs of fear. Separation anxiety is a normal behavior in children, and it shows that attachment is occurring in the correct way.



TERM TO KNOW

Separation Anxiety

Signs of distress displayed by infants when they are separated from their parents or caregivers, i.e., crying or flailing

2. Styles of Attachment

Around 1967, the psychologist Mary Ainsworth published an article discussing the different qualities of attachment that children can develop. One of these styles of attachment is a successful one, whereas the other two are unsuccessful ones. Let's take a look at each of these categories in a little more detail.

2a. Secure Attachment

The best style of attachment that Ainsworth recognized is called **secure attachment**. This is a healthy emotional bond in which the parent and the child successfully form a positive relationship with each other. This means that the child will use the parent as a sort of home base, or a place from which the child can go to explore the rest of the environment around him or her.

The child also shows separation anxiety when the parent or the caregiver leaves the room, as well as showing relief and desire to reunite with the parent or caregiver when that person returns to the room.

Forming a secure attachment requires the parent to show an appropriate, as well as a consistent, sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of the child. In other words, when the child cries out because he or she wants something, the parent doesn't ignore those cries. The parent responds, but in a way that's appropriate for the specific situation.



TERM TO KNOW

Secure Attachment

Stable bond, infants who use their parent as a safe home base from which they can explore their environments

2b. Insecure-Avoidant Attachment

Conversely, the other two styles of attachment are not successful. The first of these is **insecure-avoidant attachment**, which is an anxious emotional bond.

This style is marked by the tendency for the child to ignore the parent when he or she returns from being away. This means that the child doesn't necessarily show any of separation anxiety when the parent or the caregiver leaves the room, as well as no desire to reunite with that person.

The child also doesn't show any affection when playing with or being held by the parent; he or she tends to treat the parent as a stranger. There are no signs of distress when the caregiver leaves the room.

Insecure-avoidant attachment is caused by little or no responsiveness from the parent to the child's needs. If the child is calling out or crying because he or she needs something, the parent generally ignores the child. This style of attachment is often caused by parents who are trying to encourage independence in their children. The parents are trying to let the children develop on their own, and as a result, the children develop a negative attachment.



TERM TO KNOW

Insecure-Avoidant Attachment

Don't show distress when the caregiver leaves; when the caregiver comes back, the child continues to play instead of seeking out the caregiver

2c. Insecure-Ambivalent Attachment

The final style of attachment is insecure-ambivalent attachment. This is an unsuccessful emotional bond between the parent and the child in which the child shows some distress when the parent leaves the room, but no desire to reunite with the parent upon his or her return.

In other words, this style of attachment is a bit hot and cold in terms of the child's responses to the parent or caregiver. The child might be constantly preoccupied with the caretaker's availability, and try to seek contact with that person. However, the child can also show that he or she is a bit uncaring towards the parent as well. It can take time for the child to warm back up to the parent when he or she returns.

Insecure-ambivalent attachment is caused by inconsistent responses from the parent, so you can see how the hot and cold responses from the child relate to those of the parent. The parent might sometimes respond to the child when the child is in distress, and sometimes not. In other words, it's difficult for the child to figure out the parent in this attachment style.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **attachment theory** describes how the emotional bond that a child forms with a parent or caregiver can have a significant effect on the child's development.

According to the findings of psychologist Mary Ainsworth, there are three **styles of attachment**: **secure attachment**, **insecure-avoidant attachment**, and **insecure-ambivalent attachment**. While secure attachment is considered a positive form of attachment, the other two styles are seen as negative.

Good luck!

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR ERICK TAGGART.



TERMS TO KNOW

Insecure-Avoidant Attachment

Don't show distress when the caregiver leaves, when the caregiver comes back the child continues to play instead of seeking out the caregiver.

Secure Attachment

Stable bond, infants who use their parent as a safe home base from which they can explore their environments.

Separation Anxiety

Signs of distress displayed by infants when they are separated from their parents or caregivers, i.e. crying, flailing.