

# Attachment Patterns: How Early Bonds Shape Your Future

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Much of attachment theory was informed by Mary Ainsworth's innovative methodology and observational studies, particularly those undertaken in Scotland and Uganda. Ainsworth's work expanded the theory's concepts and enabled empirical testing of its tenets. Using Bowlby's early formulation, she conducted observational research on infant-parent pairs (or dyads) during the child's first year, combining extensive home visits with the study of behaviours in particular situations. This early research was published in 1967 in a book titled *Infancy in Uganda*. Ainsworth identified three attachment patterns, or styles, that a child may have with attachment figures: secure, anxious-avoidant (insecure) and anxious-ambivalent or resistant (insecure). She devised a procedure known as the Strange Situation Protocol as the laboratory portion of her larger study, to assess separation and reunion behaviour. This is a standardised research tool used to assess attachment patterns in infants and toddlers. By creating stresses designed to activate attachment behaviour, the procedure reveals how very young children use their caregiver as a source of security. Carer and child are placed in an unfamiliar playroom while a researcher records specific behaviours, observing through a one-way mirror. In eight different episodes, the child experiences separation from/reunion with the carer and the presence of an unfamiliar stranger.

Ainsworth's work in the United States attracted many scholars into the field, inspiring research and challenging the dominance of behaviourism. Further research by Mary Main and colleagues at the

University of California, Berkeley identified a fourth attachment pattern, called disorganized/disoriented attachment. The name reflects these children's lack of a coherent coping strategy.

The type of attachment developed by infants depends on the quality of care they have received. Each of the attachment patterns is associated with certain characteristic patterns of behaviour, as described in the following table:

### **Child and Caregiver Behavior Patterns before the age of 18 months**

#### **Secure**

Uses caregiver as a secure base for exploration. Protests caregiver's departure and seeks proximity and is comforted on return, returning to exploration. May be comforted by the stranger but shows clear preference for the caregiver.

Responds appropriately, promptly and consistently to needs. Caregiver has successfully formed a secure parental attachment bond to the child.

#### **Avoidant**

Little affective sharing in play. Little or no distress on departure, little or no visible response to return, ignoring or turning away with no effort to maintain contact if picked up. Treats the stranger similarly to the caregiver. The child feels that there is no attachment; therefore, the child is rebellious and has a lower self-image and self-esteem.

Little or no response to distressed child. Discourages crying and encourages independence.

#### **Ambivalent/Resistant**

Unable to use caregiver as a secure base, seeking proximity before separation occurs. Distressed on separation with ambivalence, anger, reluctance to warm to caregiver and return to play on return. Preoccupied with caregiver's availability, seeking contact but resisting angrily when it is achieved. Not easily calmed by stranger. In this relationship, the child always feels anxious because the caregiver's availability is never consistent.

Inconsistent between appropriate and neglectful responses. Generally will only respond after increased attachment behavior from the infant.

#### **Disorganized**

Stereotypies on return such as freezing or rocking. Lack of coherent attachment strategy shown by contradictory, disoriented behavior such as approaching but with the back turned.

Frightened or frightening behavior, intrusiveness, withdrawal, negativity, role confusion, affective

communication errors and maltreatment. Very often associated with many forms of abuse towards the child.

The presence of an attachment is distinct from its quality. Infants form attachments if there is someone to interact with, even if mistreated. Individual differences in the relationships reflect the history of care, as infants begin to predict the behaviour of caregivers through repeated interactions. The focus is the organisation (pattern) rather than quantity of attachment behaviours. Insecure attachment patterns are non-optimal as they can compromise exploration, self-confidence and mastery of the environment. However, insecure patterns are also adaptive, as they are suitable responses to caregiver unresponsiveness. For example, in the avoidant pattern, minimising expressions of attachment even in conditions of mild threat may forestall alienating caregivers who are already rejecting, thus leaving open the possibility of responsiveness should a more serious threat arise.

Around 65% of children in the general population may be classified as having a secure pattern of attachment, with the remaining 35% being divided between the insecure classifications. Recent research has sought to ascertain the extent to which a parent's attachment classification is predictive of their children's classification. Parents' perceptions of their own childhood attachments were found to predict their children's classifications 75% of the time.

Over the short term, the stability of attachment classifications is high, but becomes less so over the long term. It appears that stability of classification is linked to stability in caregiving conditions. Social stressors or negative life events--such as illness, death, abuse or divorce--are associated with instability of attachment patterns from infancy to early adulthood, particularly from secure to insecure. Conversely, these difficulties sometimes reflect particular upheavals in people's lives, which may change. Sometimes, parents' responses change as the child develops, changing classification from insecure to secure. Fundamental changes can and do take place after the critical early period. Physically abused and neglected children are less likely to develop secure attachments, and their insecure classifications tend to persist through the pre-school years. Neglect alone is associated with insecure attachment organisations, and rates of disorganized attachment are markedly elevated in maltreated infants.

This situation is complicated by difficulties in assessing attachment classification in older age groups. The Strange Situation procedure is for ages 12 to 18 months only; adapted versions exist for pre-school children. Techniques have been developed to allow verbal ascertainment of the child's state of mind with respect to attachment. An example is the "stem story", in which a child is given the beginning of a story that raises attachment issues and asked to complete it. For older children, adolescents and adults, semi-structured interviews are used in which the manner of relaying content may be as significant as the content itself. However, there are no substantially validated measures of attachment for middle childhood or early adolescence (approximately 7 to

13 years of age).

Some authors have questioned the idea that a taxonomy of categories representing a qualitative difference in attachment relationships can be developed. Examination of data from 1,139 15-month-olds showed that variation in attachment patterns was continuous rather than grouped. This criticism introduces important questions for attachment typologies and the mechanisms behind apparent types. However, it has relatively little relevance for attachment theory itself, which "neither requires nor predicts discrete patterns of attachment".

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