

Developmental Psychology – Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis

What is the Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis?

A theory associated with the developmental work of the psychologist John Bowlby, who was responsible for the theory of attachment. He is well known both within and outside Psychology for his argument that significant loss of contact between the child and the primary care-giver during the critical period lasting from about 6 months to about 3 years of age would have especially negative consequences for the child's later emotional and social development. In this concept of the "critical period" we can see the influence both of Sigmund Freud and of Ethology on Bowlby's thinking.

Evidence Against Bowlby

Koluchova twins

- Twin boys – mother died in childbirth leaving the father as the primary care giver
- The father found this difficult and quickly remarried with the sole intention of the stepmother being the primary caregiver
- The stepmother locked the children away in the attic
- This continued until they were 11 years old
- At 11, a neighbour contacted Social Services
- Someone from Social Services came to the children's house and the father revealed what was going on
- The twins were taken away and placed in an orphanage
- The twins showed the following symptoms:
 - Not good at walking
 - Own unique language of communication between the twins
 - Would NOT be separated ever
 - Incapable of forming relationships
 - Intellectually immature
- Over the next four years, their mental capabilities developed and their intelligence became average
- Language skills developed and social development improved

The Koluchova twins cast enough doubt on the evidence of "critical periods" because they recovered and led a normal life.

Bulldog Banks Study, Freud & Dann

- Orphans in WW2 with no adult contact
- Roaming the countryside in a large group
- The orphans had multiple attachments with those in the group and there was separation protest with any member of the group

This evidence of multiple attachments questions Bowlby's ideas of monotropy.

Shaffer & Emerson

Multiple attachments found in their studies.

Rutter

Rutter had concerns that Bowlby's theory was "too simple". He spent many years doing his own research and reviewing the research of others in order to discover what could cause the many adverse symptoms which Bowlby and research supporting Bowlby had said would result from Maternal Deprivation. These ranged from bed wetting, dwarfism, low intelligence, inability to form relationships, emotional immaturity and even affectionless psychopathy.