

Developmental Psychology - Attachment

Is the Attachment Relationship a Result of Nature or Nurture?

For Nature – all primates appear to be born with the innate ability to engage in primitive social interaction. Simple example: young infants are more attracted to human facial features than to other shapes. Nature appears to provide the basic building blocks for social development. Whether social development occurs or not depends on “nurture”, the experiences after birth.

Observation of attachment in Baltimore and Uganda

Mary Ainsworth is one of the leading names in attachment research. She spent time in Uganda (1967) and then in Baltimore, USA (1964), observing infants and mothers in their own homes. Her observations led to her conclusion that there are two distinctive features of attachment, both of which have adaptive value. First, infants seek to be close to their mothers, especially at times when they are threatened by something in the environment. This is called proximity-seeking behaviour and you can imagine that it would help an infant to survive. Second, exploratory behaviour is also important from an adaptive point of view. Individuals who are interested in exploring novel aspects of their environment will be quicker to learn about their environment. Infants who are close to an attachment (and safety) figure will be more willing to explore in the knowledge that they are safe. They use their caregiver as a secure base.

Why an innate ability?

- Infants need safety
- To act as a secure base for exploration

Types of Attachment

- Secure attachment – refers to those who seek and are comfortable with social interaction and intimacy. The securely attached infant is able to function independently because his/her caregiver acts as a secure base;
- Insecure/avoidant attachment – characterises those children who tend to avoid social interaction and intimacy with others;
- Insecure/resistant – characterises those who both seek and reject intimacy and social interaction;
- Disorganised – not fitting into any of the above three categories.

The Strange Situation

Ainsworth devised a method of controlled observation called the Strange Situation. The aim was to see how an infant behaves under conditions of mild stress and also novelty. Stress is created in the Strange Situation by the presence of a stranger and by separation from a caregiver. This tests stranger anxiety and separation anxiety respectively. The Strange Situation is novel and this aims to encourage exploration and test the secure base concept.

The Strange Situation consists of 8 episodes, each one lasting about 3 minutes. Three people are involved: a caregiver, her infant and a stranger.

1. Mother and baby enter room.
2. Mother sits quietly on a chair, responding if the infant seeks attention.
3. A stranger enters, talks to the mother then gradually approaches infant with a toy. The mother leaves the room.
4. The stranger leaves the infant playing unless he/she is inactive and then tries to interest the infant in toys. If the infant becomes distressed this episode is ended.
5. Mother enters and waits to see how the infant greets her. The stranger leaves quietly and the mother waits until the baby settles, and then she leaves again.
6. The infant is alone. This episode is curtailed if the infant appears to be distressed.
7. The stranger comes back and repeats episode 3.
8. The mother returns and the stranger goes. Reunion behaviour is noted and then the situation is ended.