 Attachment theory

Attachment theory is a psychological theory of human development. [Attachment and loss](https://archive.org/details/attachmentlossvo00john) by psychiatrist John Bowlby was central to much of the early work in this area. He looked at relationships from an evolutionary perspective. He suggested that when children seek proximity with their familiar caregiver when they are alarmed, they are displaying an **evolutionary-based behavioural response**.

Infants are born completely reliant on caregivers for the first years of their lives. Attachment theory recognises that infants instinctively attach to their caregiver and will display behaviours which try to keep the caregiver close to them particularly when they feel distressed or under threat. ​

Those who meet the attachment needs of an individual are **attachment figures**.​ This relationship is referred to as an attachment.

​High-quality and consistent early caregiving, particularly during times of distress, leads to attachment security. Early inconsistent, rejecting, or absent caregiving by attachment figures during times of distress leads to attachment insecurity.​

# Attachment cycles and implications for school

A threat to an infant leads to the release of stress hormones and the activation of what Bowlby called the ‘**Attachment Behavioural System**’.

Following the threat the infant displays attachment behaviours to bring the caregiver close.

When sensitive caregiving is then received the infant is comforted and is soothed. The stress hormones in the child are reduced and beta endorphins are produced. Over time the infant starts to learn that they are safe and that adults are secure and reliable. They develop **secure attachment** behaviours.​

In the **insecure attachment** cycle the infant does not receive comfort and is not soothed on a consistent basis following a threat. They are flooded with stress hormones and will either tend to hide their distress to keep the caregiver available or to escalate their behaviour to get a response.

These insecure behaviours are a response to the caregiving received and are not intrinsic to the child. While these insecure attachment behaviours have been developed to work in this caregiving relationship, they are not helpful when the child makes these responses in other settings such as nursery or school.​

Securely attached children and young people are; better able to learn, to make new attachments more readily (e.g. to their teachers)​, ready to seek help when experiencing difficulties (academic or social)​, more willing to share the attention of adults with their peers.

Insecurely attached children and young people can ​have difficulty focusing attention on learning, depend on others to regulate their emotions​, be emotionally self-contained and detached, ​have difficulties working with others in a group​, show extreme reactions to others​, give up quickly and find it difficult to accept help or encouragement.

# Safe haven

This refers to adult behaviour in response to a child who is distressed by a stressor in the environment or has an unmet need. The adult calms the child thus becoming their safe haven.

# Safe base

To be able to learn and explore a baby needs to develop an attachment bond with a caregiver and feel that the care is consistent and predictable to develop trust and then begin to feel safe to go out and explore the world. The safety and security developed with an adult is termed a safe base and allows infants, children and young people to explore and learn.

# The development of internal working models

Attachment figures and our types of attachments to them (secure vs. insecure) shape our internal working models (mental representations) of the self and others.

Internal working models consist of preverbal and verbal memories, which shape cognitions, perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviours toward the self, others, and the world more generally.​

Experiences that contradict existing internal working models can lead to changes in our internal model.​

# Why attachment matters

Attachment security during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood has been shown to be a **protective factor** against psychopathology and related symptoms such as anxiety, depression, dissociation, and antisocial behaviours.

In contrast, internalised representations of self and others developed in response to insensitive caregiving are thought to increase the risk of developmental maladaptation across the life span. Therefore, although attachment insecurity is not considered a disorder in and of itself, it is viewed as an important **risk factor** for adult mental ill health[[1]](#endnote-2).

Secure attachment is also associated with the presence of resilience[[2]](#endnote-3).​

# Secure and insecure attachments in class

Children who have experienced a secure attachment are ready to seek help from adults when required, are ready to explore the world, take risks in learning, build friendships and trust.​

Children who have not experienced a secure attachment are liable to struggle with impulse control and regulation of stress. They will probably be unable to express their internal states through language. They are likely to regularly experience shame and anxiety. They are less able to be playful, curious and joyful.​ Rather than having an open interest in others they may view others in terms of what use the person is to them.​

# How education practitioners can help

Adults who can be physically and emotionally present, attentive, attuned and responsive can offer new learning for children and young people. This new evidence for the brain, produced by these experiences, can influence internal working models and the learner’s sense of safety. A child or young person who feels safe is then able to explore and learn. These children need second chance learning through positive relationships with adults.​

# Further Learning

The modules on attunement and resilience complement this learning.

1. Pascuzzo, K., Moss, E., & Cyr, C. (2015). Attachment and Emotion Regulation Strategies in Predicting Adult Psychopathology. SAGE Open, 5(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015604695 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Darling Rasmussen, P., Storebø, O. J., Løkkeholt, T., Voss, L. G., Shmueli-Goetz, Y., Bojesen, A. B., Simonsen, E., & Bilenberg, N. (2019). Attachment as a Core Feature of Resilience: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. Psychological Reports, 122(4), 1259-1296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294118785577> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)