

# Imprinting and human attachment behaviours



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian ethologist (a scientist who studies animals in their natural environment) was one of the first to study this aspect of animal behaviour. Imprinting refers to an inbuilt tendency for a young animal to follow a moving object with which it forms an attachment.

Lorenz conducted his original observations with greylag goslings who were reared from the egg by human keepers and did not mix with any other geese. He noted that they followed after human beings in the way that goslings follow their parents. Also, once these goslings became sexually mature they directed their sexual approaches to humans rather than to other greylag geese,

The greylag gosling appears to be imprinted to the first fairly large moving object that it sees. This process seems to be confined to a very definite period of life and to require only a brief exposure. Greylags imprinted to Lorenz followed him about and peeped in distress when he moved away. Such a gosling placed with its own parents and in a brood that was following the parents in the normal way, showed no tendency to stay with the parents and brood but ran off to Lorenz or any other passing human. Further research has shown that imprinting occurs in many bird species, in some insects and fishes and in some mammals such as sheep and deer. P. 14

### Human Attachment

Although imprinting probably does not occur in human infants, it is undoubtedly the case that babies do form close relationships with others. From the second or third month on, the infant behaves differently with his mother than with others. For example, he may smile and vocalise with her

<https://assignbuster.com/imprinting-and-human-attachment-behaviours/>

more readily, constantly follow her movements and quieten sooner when picked up by her after crying. Clearly the infant can now recognise his mother.

Bowlby suggests that the infant possesses a number of inborn behaviour patterns, such as following, clinging, sucking, smiling and crying, which serve to bind the child to his mother from the beginning. He calls this attachment behaviour. This can be defined generally as the tendency for the infant to seek the closeness or proximity of certain others and feel more secure in their presence. It is still widely debated whether this need to seek the proximity of others is innate or not.

It's important to distinguish between ATTACHMENT AND ATTACHMENT BEHAVIOURS.

Attachment is the child's enduring tendency to prefer a particular person whereas attachment behaviours are the specific behaviours which the child displays in order to maintain their proximity to this particular person.

There is a clear evolutionary significance to attachment behaviours. In the past it was always necessary for infants to remain close to their mothers in order to enable them to survive. It was because separation was such a potentially life, threatening situation that it was such a traumatic frightening experience. P15

Just the ability to recognise the mother is apparently not sufficient to constitute the formation of an attachment bond as Schaffer and Callender demonstrated when examining the reaction of infants to hospitalisation.

<https://assignbuster.com/imprinting-and-human-attachment-behaviours/>

They found that infants did not protest at being separated from their mothers until approximately seven months of age, long after they were able to recognise her. P16

### Factors Necessary for Attachment Behaviour

An important factor involved in the formation of attachments appears to be that the child realises that objects exist when he can no longer see them. Up to the age 6 months or so when an object drops out of the sight of an infant he makes no attempts to look for it.

By the age of 8 or 9 months a child will look to see what has happened to the toy that has fallen out of his sight and he will realise that the toy that covered by a cloth is still really there and has not ceased to exist. This marks an important stage in development and is called object conservation or object permanence by the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget. p. 16

Before an infant understands object permanence he will reach for an object he can see and ignore it when it disappears from view.

Separation protests tend to start occurring at approximately the same time as the infant acquires the ability of object conservation. It appears he realises that the person to whom he seeks proximity has a separate existence and thus separation protests occur when the attachment figure is no longer with the child. It seems that, generally, a child forms specific attachments during the third quarter of the first year. p. 16

It is important to note that although researchers have placed emphasis on the infant forming one close attachment with the mother, this need not

<https://assignbuster.com/imprinting-and-human-attachment-behaviours/>

necessarily be the case. Schaffer and Emerson found that a substantial minority of their subjects formed several attachments, with the father being an important one of these., also siblings. We'll return to this issue again. P17

### Secure and Insecure Attachment

Ainsworth has distinguished between infants who are securely attached and those who are insecurely attached. The basic difference between the mothers of these two different types of infants was their sensitivity. By this Ainsworth means the extent to which the mother could detect her infant's signals, interpret them correctly and respond promptly and appropriately.

The need to be securely attached appears to be of significant importance since security of attachment in infancy is a good predictor of later emotional and social adjustment. P. 17

### Attachment Across the World

The widespread existence of attachment behaviour has been shown in many different studies conducted in countries and cultures as far apart as Scotland and Africa.

Schaffer and Emerson followed the progress of 60 Scottish infants from a few weeks old to 18 months. They noted the responses of the infants to being left alone by their mother in several situations, for example being left alone in a room or being put down after being held. They found that at the age of about 7 months specific attachments emerged which became more intense during the following 3 or 4 months. However, they also noted pronounced individual differences. Once infant displayed attachment behaviour as early

<https://assignbuster.com/imprinting-and-human-attachment-behaviours/>

as 22 weeks old, whereas 2 of the infants did not exhibit such specific behaviour until later their first birthday.

During the course of this study, Schaffer and Emerson found it possible to identify some of the variables which were related to the intensity of an infant's attachments. P. 18

The degree to which the mother was ready to attend to her infant's crying by picking him up and attending to him immediately.

The amount of time and attention the mother gave her infant besides the routine caretaking activities.

This is clearly echoing Ainsworth's remark regarding the need for sensitivity to ensure secure attachment. P. 18

Mary Ainsworth conducted a cross-cultural study into the development of attachment behaviour among the Ganda people of Uganda in East Africa and Americans. This was a longitudinal study conducted over 9 months of 28 babies aged between 0 and 24 months. She found that crying and attempts to follow the mother occurred in one infant as early as 15 and 17 weeks respectively.

Ainsworth noted that both sorts of behaviour were common by 6 months of age amongst the Ganda children. All but 4 of the infants attempted to follow their mother as soon as they could crawl.

It would appear that attachment behaviour exists across many different cultures. It is also relevant to the study of adults as well as children, as

Bartholomew has shown. Bartholomew gathered evidence that adults also feel a desire for closeness with an attachment figure, especially under stressful conditions, and a sense of security derived from that attachment. P. 19

### Problems involved in Cross-cultural Studies

At this point it would be useful to consider some of the problems involved in cross-cultural studies.

They are very expensive to conduct.

It is difficult to ensure that the same variable is being studied in each of the cultures.

We have seen that Schaffer and Emerson found that it was not necessary for a person to be involved in the infant's routine caretaking in order for them to become attachment figures. This is contrary to what was, until recently, probably the crudest but most widely held belief that the infant attaches to the mother because she is his source of food.

Harlow and his colleagues have provided probably the best-known evidence that certainly attachment amongst infant monkeys and their mothers is more than just 'cupboard love'. P. 19

Harlow separated infant monkeys from their mother shortly after birth and placed them with two artificial, 'surrogate' mothers, both of which had tubes attached to them from which the infants could obtain food. The difference between the 'mothers' was that one was made of wire mesh so that

although the infant could cling to it whilst obtaining its milk, it was certainly not very comfortable or 'cuddly'. The second 'mother' was made of terry-towelling over a sponge rubber base which was clearly much cuddlier.

The experiment attempted to discover whether the 'mother' that was always the source of food would be the one to which the young monkey would cling. The results were quite clear: no matter which mother provided food, the infant monkeys spent most of their time clinging to the cloth mother. Harlow concluded that 'contact comfort' was an important factor in the development of affection. p20

The experiment attempted to discover whether the 'mother' that was always the source of food would be the one to which the young monkey would cling. The results were quite clear: no matter which mother provided food, the infant monkeys spent most of their time clinging to the cloth mother. Harlow concluded that 'contact comfort' was an important factor in the development of affection.

Harlow also demonstrated the attachment of infant monkeys to their surrogate mothers in other experiments. For example, he placed moving toy animals in their cage. This would typically provoke a reaction of fear in the infants which did not stop if only the wire mother were present. If the cloth mother was present, however, they still showed the initial fear but quickly calmed down when clinging to her and would soon begin to explore the strange object from the security of their cloth mother base. P20

We should note here that more than a strong mother-child bond is necessary for healthy social development. Harlow found that monkeys, who had been

<https://assignbuster.com/imprinting-and-human-attachment-behaviours/>



reared apart from other monkeys, grew up to be poorly socialised adults. Some of the monkeys reared with surrogate mothers themselves made poor mothers. Harlow discovered that if the separated infants were allowed to play with their peers (other monkeys of the same age); they grew up much more normally, being able to mate satisfactorily. P21