

Early attachment relationships affect on young children



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The study of child development is a complex undertaking. As with any study of human interaction, the examination of how children form intimate relationships in their formative years raises concerted argument and debate. In sociological terms it has long been accepted that the social relationships which one forges from an early age directly serve to affect development in adolescence and adulthood (Berk, 2008). However, given that young children are often unable to accurately describe or explain their feelings and sentiments', then proffering supportable assumptions regarding childhood relationships is a relatively irksome task.

Nonetheless, although the study of childhood development engenders considerable protraction, numerous theories have been offered. One such theory established and developed by John Bowlby centres on the idea of attachment. Indeed, Bowlby's attachment theory now serves as a central thesis in the ongoing debate over childhood development (Mercer, 2006).

Given the above, the purpose of this work is to critically assess the degree to which early attachment affects children's later outcomes in terms of engendering positive ideas about themselves and those around them. Such assessment will require a detailed analysis of Bowlby's attachment theory and the extent to which this theoretical prescription allows one to offer effective practical judgements. It will be shown that attachment can be utilised as a very effective way of conceptualising relationship formation in children. As such, it can be argued that attachment relationships directly serve to affect children capacity to develop positive ideas in later life. In addition to Bowlby's assessment, other similar outlooks will also be addressed including those offered by Freud and Eriskson. However, a degree

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of comparative assessment is clearly required. As such, this work will also offer reference to other theoretical outlooks on child development such as those proffered by Piaget and Bruner.

The primary tenet of attachment theory is that young children need to develop a close attachment with at least one adult in order for effective personal development to occur (Brooker, 2008). Generally this attachment occurs with one or both parents; however parental attachment is not exclusively necessary. Indeed, Bowlby (1969, p. 12) adopts the term “caregiver’ as a means of defining the role of the adult in the attachment and development process. Bowlby suggests that children in infantile years seek proximity with a caregiver. This proximity is particularly prevalent during times of stress and generally occurs between the ages of six months and two years. Towards the end of this period children develop close attachment ties with the caregiver on the basis of the proximity and closeness that has been present during times of difficulty (Bowlby, 1969). From this foundation, models of development can be derived which directly serve to impact upon the assumptions, opinions and feelings of the child. As such, although Bowlby’s analysis does involve a strong element of psychoanalytical assessment, the central emphasis is placed on early social relationships with adults in a close proximity. Furthermore, attachment theory also relies heavily on concepts relating to evolutionary biology, leading Bowlby to argue that childhood behaviour in the early stages of development could in some measure be attributed to evolution within a specific social setting (Grossman & Jackson, 2004).. In supporting this claim Bowlby (1969) utilised the case study example of Inuit societies to highlight how specific modes of

development differ from one social setting to another. However, the central thesis that children develop strong attachments with a caregiver and that these emotional bonds directly serve to affect later development remains unchanged.

With regards to the positive formation of ideas and assumptions, attachment theory suggests that positive development generally occurs because of an effective attachment process in the formative years suggested above.

Moreover, the development of positive thoughts is not only enhanced as a result of the attachment process itself, but also when the attachment to a caregiver ends. Thus, the positive developments brought about as a result of early attachment continue into adolescence and adulthood create what Bowlby (1969; p. 194) describes as “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings”.

Therefore, the opportunity to forge a close relationship with a caregiver on both the social and psychological level creates a strong possibility for the development of positive assumptions on the part of the child. Firstly, the innate knowledge that the caregiver will be there in times of distress creates confidence in the child to explore their surroundings and develop interactions with other children and adults (Dwling, 2009). Meggitt (2006) suggests that confidence in the social atmosphere with which one is surrounded is possibly the most significant benefit of the attachment process. This confidence and security which arises from the attachment to a caregiver thus provides the child with an effective psychological model on which to base later relationships (Meggitt, 2006).

As such, the above discussions have highlighted the essential tenets of attachment theory. What is clear is that the concept of attachment is heavily reliant on empirical observations of development in childhood. Although this empiricism does inevitably rely on a measure of social understanding, it nonetheless remains firmly rooted in the psychoanalytical tradition. For example, although Freud's assessment of early childhood development centred on the stage theory of psychosexual development in children, his assessments were based on empirical observations (Gopnik et al, 1999). Furthermore, Erikson's utilisation of psychosocial crisis in conjunction with Freud's theory of stage development equally emphasises the role of social forces in the development of young children and also relies on a strong element of empiricism (Meggitt, 2006). Given this, it is possible to see the degree to which attachment theory forms part of a wider psychological approach to early child development which is ultimately founded on a socio context.

This social foundation is however mirrored in other theoretical outlooks. For example, although thinkers such as Piaget and Bruner focus heavily on the social aspect of early child development, they chose to analyse the social environment through the use of cognitive development as opposed to observations (Berk, 2008).

Therefore, it is possible to see the degree to which attachment theory forms part of a broader school of thought with regards early childhood development. When attempting to proffer concerted arguments regarding the effectiveness of attachment theory it is useful to assess the problems which emerge when attachment with a caregiver is lacking. Indeed, such <https://assignbuster.com/early-attachment-relationships-affect-on-young-children/>

analysis does much to bolster the attractiveness and validity of the attachment thesis. Bowlby's assessment of delinquent children highlighted the extent to which the tendency for behavioural problems among young significantly increases when attachment to caregiver is lacking (Mercer, 2006). Therefore, Bowlby forged an effective link between attachment and behaviour, an analysis which was expanded heavily in the 1970s by Mary Ainsworth. Ainsworth's Strange Situation developed Bowlby's account of behaviour and how attachment affects both positive internal development, and positive emotions for a child's social environment. Empirical investigations carried out by Ainsworth (1979) led to the formation of a thesis which highlighted three different styles of attachment; secure attachment; ambivalent-insecure attachment and avoidant insecure attachment. These three potential styles of attachment allow for differing levels of attachment with a caregiver and can thus account for how low attachment levels affect feelings, emotions and behavioural patterns among children (Mercer, 2006). Through the use of empirical investigation Ainsworth discovered that children who exhibited avoidant insecure attachment generally experienced greater emotional difficulty in terms of forging effective social relationships (Gernhardt, 2004). Furthermore, although effective testing of positive assumptions proved somewhat irksome, Ainsworth's studies revealed how positive thinking among young children can be directly correlated with the establishment of effective attachment at an early age (Gernhardt, 2004). Thus, Ainsworth comprehensively proved that Bowlby has been correct to suggest a link between attachment and general mental well being, confidence and positive outlook in young children.

The work carried out on attachment by both Bowlby and Ainsworth has been developed and expanded over the recent decades. Indeed, a plethora of research has reinforced the central thesis that attachment directly serves to affect the positive outlook assumed by children. In instances where attachment is lacking a variety of problematic issues has been shown to arise. For example, the presence of behavioural problems as personified in conditions such as Oppositional-Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder have been shown to be significantly enhanced in cases where low levels of attachment have occurred (Dukes & Smith, 2009). Moreover, research has also indicated that children adopted above the age of six months have a much higher probability of developing attachment difficulties and the behavioural and emotional difficulties which result (Dukes & Smith, 2009). Furthermore, ineffective attachment in childhood not only affects the emotional state of the child, it also continues to impact in later life. It is important to note that attachment among adults differs in many respects from that which occurs in children (Berk, 2008). However, Mercer (2006) suggests that adults who experienced poor attachment in their formative years are more likely to have difficulty forging effective romantic relationships. In addition, it has also been suggested that low self-esteem in adulthood can be correlated to some extent with poor childhood attachment (Mercer, 2006). Naturally, a variety of issues serve to affect development in later life, however, the above discussions clearly highlight the degree attachment can play a significant role. Thus, the attachment thesis can be validated and supported.

The various discussions and assessments undertaken during the course of this work have aimed to exemplify the extent to which attachment directly impacts upon emotional well-being among children. The correlation between psychoanalytical assessment and social environment as pioneered by Bowlby clearly indicates a strong link between emotional difficulties in childhood and the lack of an effective attachment with a caregiver. Indeed, the combination of sociological environments in conjunction with psychological development is perhaps one of the strongest benefits of attachment theory. Whereas these two phenomena were once viewed as being distinct from one another, attachment theory allows for an effective collaboration between socio-environmental factors and psychological processes. The evidence supporting the suggestion that poor attachment serves to create emotional and psychological problems among children is compelling. Moreover, the further development of Bowlby's theory by later thinkers, in particular Ainsworth, clearly indicates the extent to which the capacity for children to establish positive feelings about themselves and those around them is closely linked to their attachment in early life. Given this, the only logical conclusion one can draw is that attachment in the formative years of childhood has a considerable impact upon later development, both in adolescence and adulthood. Indeed, examples of both good and bad attachment in childhood serve to support this assumption.