

# Implications of attachment theory for adolescent development



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Attachment is one of the most intriguing and researched psychological theories in the modern era. Exhaustive research has spanned 50 years and continues.

The overview of attachment theory is that it provides an explanation of behaviour exhibited by an infant in relation to their attachment figure (caregiver). This relationship is emotionalised the greatest during the incidences of separation and reunion. The theory relates behaviours of attachment from the “ attacher” to the “ attachee” that occur during infancy. These attachments in childhood mould our relationships in adolescents and adulthood and have implications for one’s holistic development.

Over time, many differing opinions have arisen regarding Attachment theory. Bowlby and Ainsworth’s theory relating to attachment formed in infancy shapes the attachment achieved in adulthood has received criticism from other psychological pioneers.

Harris and Kagan present a different view to that of Bowlby. Harris believes too much emphasis is placed on how a child is raised. The pressure is applied to parents, it is unfair and unwarranted. Harris believes that peers in conjunction with the environment mould a child’s personality, not simply early attachment. Kagan theorises that biological factors play the biggest role in development especially regarding the child. This theory was borne out of his previous idea that personality traits are inherent into the infant, not merely the creation of one’s environment.

Due to the background required the adequately explain attachment theory, I have opted to present the opinions expressed regarding attachment and <https://assignbuster.com/implications-of-attachment-theory-for-adolescent-development/>

adolescent development of Bowlby and Ainsworth first, utilising Harlow's monkey as a study example. Discussion regarding the point of view will follow. This section will be balanced with the rebuttal of attachment theory using Rutter's Romanian orphan study and further discussion incorporating research conducted by Kagan and Harris. Both points of view will be related back to the essay topic to regarding attachment theory processing any implications for adolescent development and developmental psychopathology.

It is believed by some that attachment occurs from birth and remains constant throughout the individual's lifetime. A vulnerable newborn requires immediate care and protection, the provider of this care becomes the figure of attachment. Bowlby believed that the bond formed between the child and caregiver will shape the infants personality, therefore also the adolescent and adult. Traditionally this bond occurs between mother and child within minutes of birth. I intend to explore the idea that if an infant experiences an unsecure attachment with their caregiver this will have implications for their adolescent development and psychopathology.

## **Harlows Monkeys**

Harlow was famous, or some may say infamous regarding his study involving attachment and his subjects Rhesus monkeys. The study involved the baby Rhesus monkeys being removed from their mothers. They were then divided into two distinct groups. The first group had a surrogate mother made of soft terrycloth. This terrycloth mother however did not provide any food.

Additionally in the cage as well was another surrogate constructed from hard wire, it provided food in the form of an attached bottle which contained milk.  
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The second group was reversed they had a “ wire” mother who did not provide food and a terrycloth mother with a bottle attached. Results concluded that the baby monkeys in group one spent up to 17 hours attached to the terrycloth mother compared to less than 1 hour with the wire mother. It was summarised by Harlow that this is purely due to necessity to feed to live. In the second group however they spend 100 per cent of the time with the cloth mother (Bpolnariev, 2007).

Irrespective of the stimulus used to frighten the monkeys, the response was to consistently flee to the comfort and security of the cloth mother. Although over time it was noted that as the monkeys matured this response decreased questionably marking the onset of adolescents. (Bpolnariev, 2007).

Motivation sought from Harlow’s initial monkey studies aided in gaining momentum. Commencing from early 1960, Harlow engaged his students in a follow on study to observe and report the monkeys reactions in response to partial and total social isolation. In the first group of Partial isolation, monkeys were raised in bare wire cages. This enabled them to engage all senses, but they were unable to gain any physical contact. The second group of total isolation monkeys were raised in isolation cages that provided sensory deprivation and contact with other monkeys was forbidden (Harlow, Dodsworth & Harlow, 1965).

Harlow reported that the monkeys who were subjected to partial isolation, exhibited abnormal such as self-mutilation, blank staring and compulsive circling of their cages. Some of the monkeys continued to be held in total

isolation for up to 15 years (Reinhardt, Liss & Stevens, 1995). Unfortunately the total isolation subjects did not fair as well as the partial subjects. It was discovered that these baby subjects had been left isolated from between 3 months to 2 years. This provided a “ total social deprivation” This experiment resulted in monkeys who displayed an extreme level of psychological disturbance which continued into their monkey adolescence and adult years (Harlow, 1964).

Bowlby (1988) believed that from birth the child starts forming an internal pattern relating to people, often starting with the infant’s parents. This experience pattern lays the foundations to how that individual will relate to others. This early interaction provided by caregivers aids children to organise their experience and relate it to their relationships (Laursen & Collins, 2004).

It has been noted that Allen and Land (1999) theorise that family goals require regular re-negotiation in order for the family unit to be successful. This is certainly the case when related to the family unit of an adolescent. Eventhough the adolescent may be securely attached to the family, it is important that goals are in sync with all the family members concerned.

As the child develops and is exposed to more individuals than their parents, children will create emotional bonds with others close to them. The early relationships between a parent and child do impact social development as they will determine peer relationships as well. However, the newly created peer relationships differ from the relationships they experienced with their parents and family unit (Freeman & Brown, 2001; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

As the formation of peer relationships occur outside the family, this is

important as it allows for the adolescent to improve their social development guided by their friends (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990).

Waters, Wippman & Sroufe (1979) reported their conclusion, that the level of attachment of children to their parents had direct implications for the individual's peer social functioning in adolescents and adulthood. Nickerson and Nagle (2005) communicated that there are two very distinct views regarding an individual's attachment to parents and peers. Firstly if the child is in a parent-child relationship with tenuous attachment they may seek out more secure relationships to fill this desire. Secondly if the child is involved in a secure parent/child attachment, this may provide the security required for the child to seek out different relationships.

The long-term effects of the failure of childhood attachment have been described as severed and numerous. Bowlby attests that it is critical for parents to achieve and nurture a strong loving bond with their infants. If this bond isn't formed then these children will be subjected to a variety of emotional, social and developmental difficulties as they progress into adolescence. Consequences may include developmental delay relating to difficulties with auditory processing, verbal communication impairment and gross motor deficits. Conscience impairment may manifest with emotional numbing eg. Adolescent displays no signs of anxiety after witnessing an act of aggression or cruel behaviour. Adolescents may not display signs of guilt but often will project blame onto others. Other deficits nominated include, damaged self esteem, poor impulse control, impaired interpersonal interactions and non reversible cognitive issues (Fahlbert & Arbor, 1979).

Attachment theory embodies the seriousness that early life emotional bonding places in relation to all future relationships. Obviously for most infants, parents have the highest level of responsibility as the figure of one's attachment. Of the research presented it has highlighted the need for the adolescent to have been exposed to a secure parent/child relationship. If this has taken place then it is expected that their movement through maturity should be smooth. Noting the opposite to be true if deficits of attachment occurred in infancy, therefore placing serious implications for the adolescents development and psychopathology as Harlow's adolescent monkeys highlighted.

Contrary to the previous point of review regarding attachment having an implication for adolescent development and developmental psychopathology, other notable psychological researchers have theorised that secure attachment in infancy does not shape adolescent development and psychopathology.

### **Romanian orphan study**

Romanian orphans were the focus of study when the countries dictator, Nicolae Ceaucescu was overthrown from power at the end of 1989. President Ceaucescu had developed and enforced the requirement that all women in Romania were to have 5 children, abortion and contraception were banned. Due to economic burden 5 dependant children already placed on an already " poor" family, an explosion of up to 40, 000 children were surrendered by their families and placed in state run orphanages. Appalling conditions of these orphanages were beamed worldwide by the media. Millions of viewers from all over the world were left in a state of shock. Many children were <https://assignbuster.com/implications-of-attachment-theory-for-adolescent-development/>

found tied together in cots, malnourished and soiled. Often the orphans had never been held or touched in their short lives (Rutter, 1996).

Rutter and his team of researchers followed the ongoing pathological and psychological development of 111 orphans who had been adopted into British families. Results indicated that at the age of 4 years the group of adopted children displayed no significant ongoing developmental or intellectual impairment. IQ levels of the orphans had risen from 63 to 107. Even children adopted after 6 months had a doubling of their IQ scores (Rutter, 1996). Many of the adoptees remain to subject of ongoing study, more recently the impact that severe early deprivation has on the adolescent. “ Although higher rates of atypical insecure attachment patterns were found compared to native born or early adopted samples, 70% of later adopted children did not exhibit marked or severe attachment disorder behaviours”.

Rutter (1996) quoted that “ Many have argued that early experiences have lifelong effects on a child’s development, and are difficult to alter. Our study of Romanian orphans adopted by families in the United Kingdom does not support that. On the other hand, neither does the research support those who argue that contemporary experiences are all that matter”.

To continue this theory, researchers and critics of Bowlby’s attachment theory, Jerome Kagan and J. R Harris raised their concerns in the 1990’s of the simplicity of Bowlby’s concept. Kagan was famous for opposing almost every theoretical component that made up Bowlby’s attachment theory.

Kagan’s biggest argument was that one’s heredity was of more importance



than ones early environment. Simply this translates to Nature versus nurture theory which continues to be a topic of great debate. It focuses on the importance of an individual's innate qualities versus personal experiences (Kagan, 2004). The example provided by Kagan was, that if a child processed a particularly difficult temperament, it would be unlikely that the parent would offer a sensitive response to the bad behaviour. By temperament, Kagan believed that this is an individual's personality eg. Extrovert or introvert, these traits cannot be learned; they are innate (Kagan, 2004). The opinions held by Kagan resulted in exhaustive research and debate. Further research did conclude that a child's attachment style was dependant on the caregiver's behaviour, taking into account of individual's temperament (Kagan, 2004).

Harris like Kagan believes that a child's personality or character is not moulded by their parents, rather it is genetics. The common belief held in psychology is that " nature gives parents a baby: the end result depends on how they nurture it. Good nurturing can make up for many of nature's mistakes: lack of nurturing can trash nature's best effort" (Harris, 1998). Harris emphatically disagrees with this concept, as the term " nurture" shouldn't only describe the environment. In response Harris coined the term nurture assumption to combine all influences placed on a child's development eg. Genetics & parental care. The example being, identical twins separated at birth and raised in different homes by different parents. Studies have shown that in a majority of cases both twins share the same hobbies and habits. This illustrates the importance of nature, but not nurture (Harris, 1998).

Influence from the peer group is far greater than the child's parents. An example being the children of recent immigrants, Children grasp and learn their new language easily, but at home continue to speak in their parents native tongue. The peer group will provide guidance regarding accent and grammatics and the child will adjust accordingly in order to assimilate with the group. The parents on the other hand aren't exposed to this group formation therefore will continue to have an accent (Harris, 1998). Peer groups can provide both positive and negative influences on the child. In the case of child who is raised in an area prolific with crime and gang association, peer pressure may steer that young person into a life of crime. This bears no relation to the quality of the parenting they received. But if that same individual is relocated to an area of little crime and no negative peer influence then the outcome is very different (Harris, 1998). Harris theory concludes with the concern that there has been an over-exaggeration placed on the influence of parents, as peer groups are responsible for the child's socialisation not their parents (Harris, 1998).

When the above discussion is applied to Rutter's studies, it is understandable that many agree with his findings regarding that the infant's separation from familiar people is only one of many factors that help to determine the quality of development. Rutter's work has aided in reassuring the population that no matter how dire or unsecured the attachment of an infant is, the infant has the potential to return to a normal level of functioning as long as they become attached. Harris and Kagan agree that personality traits come from their genes and are not dependant of the level of nurturing they received from their parents.

The above has provided understanding regarding attachment not being fixed, thus presenting a point of view where attachment theory may not possess any implications for both adolescent development and developmental psychopathology.

After researching and reviewing the concept of attachment theory and marrying it with its critics. I have discovered that there are two defined boundaries both which provide insight into infant/child/adolescent development. I feel that my opinion rests with the theories held by both Harris and Kagan. I agree that the exaggeration of the effect parents have on their children has been over emphasised for too many years. Parents do not hold the key responsibility when applied to the way their child develops. I agree that the parents are responsible from their child's genetic makeup and overall development influence. The concept of peer group influencing the child's personality provided insight as the peer group enforces what is deemed acceptable.

Attachment theory does contain limitations that require further exploration. It is assumed that the mother is the child's figure of primary attachment, this assumption can be false. Bowlby's theories can lack substance and have been criticised for being too simplistic. As the example below illustrates;

“ Observation of how a very young child behaves towards his mother, both in her presence and especially in her absence, can contribute greatly to our understanding of personality development. When removed from the mother by strangers, young children respond usually with great intensity; and after reunion with her, anxiety or else unusual detachment” (Bowlby, 1969).

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In this modern age with blended families, parents employed fulltime, children enrolled into childcare, it is not as simplistic as being exposed to “mother”. The opportunities for mother to be emotionally available for their infant is not as readily accessible as yesteryear. Pressures on time and lifestyle can leave little opportunity for mother to spend the imperative time required to assure a secure attachment is obtained.

After reviewing all the research, they all support one common belief, that being in order for an adolescent to have an uneventful and fruitful adolescence, all will benefit from being nurtured as individuals and caregivers need to adjust to the nuances of their children.