

# Research proposal: child attachment with care providers



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## Rationale

The author has chosen to focus on the area of nursery care for children aged six months to five years, chiefly because it is an area of personal and professional interest, and because despite a wealth of research on parenting attachment, child development, behavioural development and the like, the field of study is still lacking in good, applied research which explores how children become acclimatised to a nursery environment, and what factors may affect this process. Because of social and societal changes “ many infants start their out-of-home lives at an early age with non-familial caregivers in childcare settings” (Lee, 2006 p 133). This care setting has potentially long-term implications for the child, the family, and for society as a whole. “ The infant-caregiver relationship is crucial for infants since this first relationship with a caregiver will not only provide a working model for the subsequent relationships with teachers but will also set the stage for adjustment, development, and learning in the current setting and for later school life” (Lee, 2006 p 134). Attachment theories explore how attachment between child and caregiver affect these issues. The focus on attachment theories is also related to the need for nursery workers to engage in partnership working with parents in order to ensure good supportive exchanges of information from both sides, and to promote the best possible experience for the child (and their peers).

The author has observed great differences between different children in the ways that they settle into the nursery environment. Some children adapt quickly to the new situation, the caregivers and the activities, while others take much longer, displaying ongoing signs of separation anxiety and other

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behaviours which indicate they are not fully acclimatised to the nursery environment and carers. While there are arguments here about whether or not childcare workers and parents should expect certain levels of conformity from such young children, and about the individual needs of children being met in a flexible, responsive manner, there is no doubt that children do need to learn to interact in peer groups and to integrate into environments other than the home environment at some point during their developmental processes. The adaptation to the new environment may be related to parenting styles, attachment, or the characteristics of caregivers.

### Literature Review

A range of variables might affect the child's ability to settle into the childcare environment. Some of these are potentially derived from the home setting, from attachment to parents and other caregivers, and from the kinds of parenting styles that the child has already experienced and from the family situation (David et al, 2003). Other variables are related to (potentially) biology and the social behaviours which reinforce gender. Turner (1991) explores the complex relationships between attachment and gender and child integration with peers in preschool environments, and shows that there are gender differences in these phenomena. How much this is due to carer and peer preconceptions of appropriate child behaviour is not clear, but Phillipsen et al (1999) show that social acceptance, and carers' perceptions of behaviour and peer interactions are mediated by preconceptions about expected behaviours. This author is concerned that children's individuality and individual circumstances are perhaps, on the basis of such studies, not being given enough attention, and that this drive for behavioural conformity

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is perhaps serving a different purpose to the expressed, child-focused aims of nursery providers. McKown and Weinstein (2002) also relate teacher expectations to gender and to ethnicity in early years environments, and so the kinds of demographic information that would be needed in an exploratory study of this kind would include gender and ethnicity questions.

Other authors have researched relationships between children and their childcare providers, and shown that the relationship between these may vary according to the perceptions of different childcare workers (Howes et al, 2000), and according to the sensitivity and characteristics of the childcare workers (Gerber et al, 2007). This study would focus on the kinds of perceptions of attachment identified by Howes et al (2000). A more useful study would employ an objective observer to measure and record attachment behaviours (Delamont, 2002), but this is a small scale academic piece, and there are insufficient resources to employ an objective, skilled observer.

Other variables affecting the child's ability to settle must obviously derive from the nursery environment. These may be characteristics of caregivers and caregiver-child relationships, which may be in turn influenced by nursery policies, by organisational culture and norms and managerial practices, and also by the personalities of the caregivers (Cryer et al, 2005). Resources may also affect this environment. Lee (2006) found that " infants and their key caregivers did build firm (close, secure, synchronous) relationships in the relationship-valued and supportive childcare context" (p 140). This suggests that the context may affect this process in significant ways.

However, it is the characteristics of the child his or herself, and their parents or their attachment to their parents which may be the issue here, hence the focus on attachment theory. Rydell et al (2005) suggest that “ a central prediction from attachment theory is that the quality of the child’s attachment to parents will be related to the quality of relationships with other people” (p 188). Therefore, it is important as part of the proposed study to assess the parenting experience and any markers of attachment from the point of view of the parent(s). This may be important in identifying children’s ability to develop secure relationships with other carers (Rydell et al, 2005).

Bowlby (2007) argues that babies and toddlers will have their attachment seeking response activated in the absence of a primary or a secondary attachment figure when they are in the presence of a stranger and in unfamiliar surroundings, which is what may happen in nurseries when children do not ‘ settle’. This attachment seeking response may be terminated if the child is able to develop an attachment to a secondary carer (Bowlby, 2007). Bowlby (2007) suggests a model of childcare that actively promotes and monitors long-term secondary attachment bonds between baby and carer. This kind of model is shown in the theory of having a key person identified for each child within the setting, which has benefits for the baby/child, in terms of affection and attachment, for parents, and for the key person (Elfer, 2002). Understanding this in the context of the child-caregiver relationship is challenging, because this relationship is multidimensional (Lee, 2006).

#### Aims

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The aims of this study are: to answer the following question: *Why do some children settle in nursery in a short space of time and some take longer, using the same settling in method?*; and to model the complex interactions between the factors which may be seen as affecting this process. Theories of attachment will be used as a framework to inform and support the design of the study, but a range of potential variables will be explored in order to fully develop a model of understanding which may answer the key research question. Other aims of this study are that it should improve understanding in order to help childcare workers and parents support children's transition into the childcare environment

## Methodology

While an ethnographical methodology would be a logical choice of research methodology in this case (Massey, 1998), there are some issues around this kind of approach, including the potential bias of the researcher and the issues cited elsewhere about observation and participant observation.

Perspectives other than that of the researcher need to be addressed, and data from parents and from the childcare setting needs to be incorporated. A Grounded Theory approach will be used, chiefly because of the way that this methodology supports the inclusion of a range of qualitative data sources along with quantitative data in the form of descriptive statistics and demographic characteristics (Borgatti, 2005; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Grounded Theory sets out to develop models of knowledge and explication which are 'grounded' in the data under investigation, the nature of which always include 'rich' qualitative data (Charmaz, 1994). The complexity of

Grounded Theory models lies in their derivation from the data themselves, <https://assignbuster.com/research-proposal-child-attachment-with-care-providers/>

and so would serve well this attempt to address a complex phenomenon likely to be affected by a range of variables. Grounded Theory allows the researcher to make full use of the data (Bell and Opie, 2002; D'Onofrio, 2001). Data analysis is via a process of constant comparison of the data with each other, through stages of analysis towards an end model (Charmaz, 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The kinds of complexities, the human nature of the interactions within the childcare environment, and the many variables that would likely affect the child's interactions within that environment, do not lend themselves to a quantitative methodology, particularly one carried out on so small a scale. Nor would it be ethical to carry out quantitative research on vulnerable children when there is no hope of gaining a statistically significant sample size for a good quality quantitative study. Therefore, a qualitative study, which supports and exploratory approach, has been deemed more suitable. Methods which collect talk and conversation would be suitable for this kind of research (Adelman, 1981), but due to the vulnerability of the children involved, the data collection methods must be chosen with care.

Similarly, the data collection methods and sources have been selected to include all relevant information which might indicate factors which impinge upon the infant or child's ability to settle into the nursery environment. Because of the issues of perception discussed above, participant observation was ruled out as a data collection approach (Arnould, 1998). The data collection methods were chosen to minimise the impact on children, parents and childcare workers. These will include exploratory questionnaires given to parents and semi-structured interviews with nursery caregivers,  
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documentary data in the form of the children's nursery records, nursery policies, mission statements and staff training and orientation documents, and interviews with staff. All these kinds of data sources are suitable to a Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It is important to take into account the complexities and details of the context, both physical and behavioural, within which the child behaviours are taking place, because this may indicate factors within the nursery itself which affect the child's orientation into that environment.

The data collection tools, which consist of a parental questionnaire and a pro-forma for the semi-structured interviews with childcare providers, will be informed by the use of established measures, including the Q-Set measure (Moss et al, 2006). Other studies have applied such measures to a similar situation in relation to attachment theory (Moss et al, 2006).

Interviews will be audio-taped, anonymised at point of recording, and then transcribed as text documents. All data, from questionnaires, interviews and documentary sources will be transferred into an electronic qualitative data analysis programme such as NVivo, for ease of management and improved analysis (Drisko, 2004). NVivo allows for the development of models from qualitative data, but also supports the integration of quantitative and demographic data to develop correlations between these data and qualitative concepts and findings (Drisko, 2004). Because Grounded Theory tends to treat the literature review as a concurrent process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and literature sources as a form of data in themselves (D'Onofrio, 2001), the use of NVivo also supports and aids this process in terms of the management of large amounts of textual data (Drisko, 2004).  
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## Ethical Considerations

It is important that the quality of the research is such that it is justifiable to carry it out within this setting (see methodology section above). Ethical considerations include the ethics of carrying out research on small children who are unable to give consent, and the affects the research might have on their caregivers. Research that distracts the childcare workers or affects their ability to take care of children would not be ethical. Participant observation was deemed as unsuitable (Arnould, 1998). Having a 'strange' adult (the researcher) in the environment might also disturb the 'status quo'.

Therefore, an observational method was not chosen, and parents given full information sheets and consent forms for participation in the study. Only those parents who consent will be included, and data will only be gathered pertaining to their children. Ethical approval will be sought from the researcher's place of study (via normal ethics committee approval).

Permission will be gained from the child care organisation's manager, and staff will be recruited via information sheets and consent forms in the same way that parents were. Staff interviews will be carried out at a location convenient to the place of work, and at agreed times which do not interfere with their normal workload. All interviews and demographic data including even the location and name of the childcare setting will be anonymised.

## Timescale

Because of the data collection methods chosen, the timescale is adjusted to take into account the difficulties in gaining good response rates from questionnaires and in fitting in the interviews with the childcare providers in

a way that does not place them under undue stress or affecting their working lives. A three month timescale (from the point of ethical approval) is projected for the data collection phase of this project, which will allow for an initial recruitment of the sample, distribution of questionnaires, a second round of questionnaires to improve response rates, and concurrent interviews with childcare providers and collection of documentary evidence from the childcare setting. The concurrent literature review must also take place within this timescale, and so literature searching, identification and collection will occur during the data collection phase, and critical literature review and analysis will commence during this phase and continue through the data analysis phase of the research. This second phase, data analysis, should take a further three months, from initial analysis to completion of a model. Writing up should take a further two weeks.

## Conclusion

It is anticipated that this study will illuminate the still murky waters of attachment with childcare providers, the potential benefits of the “ key person” in relation to attachment and to promoting the adjustment of the child to the childcare setting. It should also shed light on demographic and other characteristics which may affect this process, thereby, at the very least, identifying key areas for further, more in-depth or targeted research. Because this is an exploratory study, the potential richness of the data should allow for some insight and discovery about issues affecting attachment and adjustment. Attachment theories would need to be explored in much greater detail than this brief proposal allows, and the quality of the existing research on these theories applied to this setting appraised. The <https://assignbuster.com/research-proposal-child-attachment-with-care-providers/>

resultant model should incorporate the evidence from the literature with the evidence from the study data into a model which may inform future approaches to caring for children within this setting.

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