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# Developmental Psychology

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# Developmental Psychology

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- However, relationships may also be important for other areas of development and a good student will remember to consider evidence from topics such as:
  - *language development* (Chapter 5): infants and children learn about communication and social interactions through early relationships with carers
  - *play* (Chapter 6): play behaviour and relationship formation in childhood is often linked in current literature
  - *identity development* (Chapter 9): social relationships at both an individual as well as a group level are thought to play an important role for identity development in a number of ways.
- Finally a word of caution related specifically to the theory of infant attachment. This is a very emotive topic and anecdotal evidence about early infant bonding, parental roles and the impact of care by non-family members is easily come by. However, it is very important to put aside any personal beliefs and focus on academic evidence only; as with all your work in psychology you must ensure that any ideas you put forward, whether in an essay, poster or information sheet, are clearly supported by sound evidence provided by peer-reviewed papers.

## Sample question

Could you answer this question? Below is a typical essay question that could arise on this topic.



### Sample question

### Problem-based learning

Discuss the importance of early relationships for later psychological development.

Guidelines on answering this question are included at the end of this chapter, whilst further guidance on tackling other exam questions can be found on the companion website at: [www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress](http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress)

## Attachment theory

According to Bowlby, the survival value of attachment is not just physical. A psychoanalyst by training, he believed that attachment provided 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' (Bowlby, 1969: 194). He also believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their carers have an impact on relationship formation that continues throughout life.

#### 4 • Attachment and relationship formation

- Attachment is believed to be an evolutionary mechanism designed to ensure the survival of the vulnerable and dependent infant.
- Infants and their primary carers (usually the mother) are therefore biologically predisposed to form attachments.
- Infants are born with the ability to elicit attachment behaviour from the carer through reflex behaviours such as clinging, crying and proximity-seeking behaviours, which keep the carer nearby and attentive to the offspring's needs, thus maximising survival rates.
- Although biologically based, attachments are not automatic and maternal responsiveness and sensitivity to a child's needs is suggested to be the key to the development of secure attachments.
- Infants who are unable to develop a relationship with a mother or permanent mother substitute are said to be suffering from *maternal deprivation*; according to Bowlby this can have a profound negative impact on future psychological well-being.
- Specific attachments develop gradually as carers become more proficient in interpreting and responding to infant signals, and the infant begins to recognise different individuals and their behaviours.
- Once specific attachments have developed at around six months of age, infants begin to demonstrate other attachment behaviours such as fear of strangers and *separation anxiety*.
- Early relationships provide a prototype for later relationships in adolescence and adulthood through the development of an *internal working model* (IWM).
- The IWM can be modified as the infant develops new types of relationship: contact with a greater variety of people with whom infants can form attachments can therefore lead to a more fully developed IWM, better preparing the child for forming relationships with a wider range of people later on in life.
- The IWM is thought to influence the child's responses to others even in adulthood (Bretherton & Mulholland, 2009). Therefore a child whose IWM is based on maladaptive relationships is likely to repeat this pattern of behaviours through life.

Bowlby based his theory on evidence from a number of research studies carried out in the 1940s and 1950s.

- Goldfarb (1947) studied the extreme cognitive, language and social dysfunction commonly seen in children raised in orphanages at the time. Bowlby believed that these problems were a direct result of a lack of a permanent attachment figure.
- Robertson and Robertson (1967–1973) documented the inconsolable despair demonstrated by young children separated from their mothers when placed in hospital for short-term care (Robertson & Robertson, 1989).

- Harlow and Harlow (1958; 1966) found that young rhesus monkeys raised in isolation showed social maladjustment when placed with other monkeys.
- Bowlby (1944) carried out his own research study, often referred to as the 'Forty-four thieves'. In this study he linked adolescent delinquency to some form of maternal separation experience in childhood such as hospitalisation or parental divorce.

## Evaluating attachment theory

While attachment theory remains an important construct within the study of early relationship formation, there have been some criticisms of this approach, especially with regard to the notion that mothers should be a child's primary carer. Feminist psychologists have objected to the idea that female identity is tied to child-rearing and believe there is a high price to pay for maternal sensitivity (for example, Woollett & Phoenix, 1991). However, while Bowlby talks primarily about mother-child relationships, it should be remembered that this theory was developed in the 1950s when social convention dictated that mothers took the main parenting role. It should also be noted that Bowlby does not write exclusively about mothers; he does recognise the notion of a permanent mother substitute.

The evidence surrounding the notion of maternal deprivation has been discussed extensively by a number of authors.

- Rutter (1991) argued that it is the discord surrounding separation that results in behaviour problems, not the separation per se. Subsequent work, which has shown that children from divorced families do not develop behavioural problems when the separation is handled in a sensitive way, supports this view.
- Re-evaluation of the work into the effects of institutional rearing have shown that the orphanages concerned were poorly equipped with a high staff turnover. Children raised in these institutions had very little sensory stimulation and only limited social interaction. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that they showed delayed language, social and cognitive development. Subsequent work has shown that improved institutional care has fewer harmful effects (Hodges & Tizard, 1989; Tizard & Hodges, 1978). Consistency of care seems to be more important than whether or not a child is cared for by their biological parents.

Bowlby's work has been instrumental in changing the way in which parent and child separations are dealt with in today's society including:

- improvements in the standard of institutional care
- phasing out of much institutional care in favour of fostering
- encouraging parents to stay in hospital when a child undergoes medical care.

### Key term

**Internal working model (IWM):** This is a central premise of attachment theory and is essentially an internalised set of expectations about how relationships work based on a mental model of the self, the carer and the relationship between these two (Bowlby, 1969). The IWM is thought to provide a prototype or model for future relationships. Although believed to develop early in infancy, the IWM can change over time as children encounter new experiences and different types of relationship.

### The circle of security

The circle of security intervention protocol is a 20-week, group-based, parent education and psychotherapy intervention based on attachment theory. It is designed to shift patterns of attachment in high-risk carer–child dyads to a more appropriate developmental pathway. Carers are shown videotapes of their interactions with their children and encouraged to increase their sensitivity and appropriate responsiveness to the child's needs. They are also encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of relationships as children and how this may have affected their own caregiving patterns. Preliminary evaluation findings have been positive (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2002). For more information go to the intervention website at: [www.circleofsecurity.org](http://www.circleofsecurity.org)

### CRITICAL FOCUS

#### Factors influencing early attachment

*Key question: How might transactional models of development explain differences in the attachment process?*

Traditional attachment theory suggests that the carer's behaviour, in particular their responsiveness to the child's needs, is an important factor in the development of a good relationship. However, as you probably realise, this is not the only factor involved in relationship development. The sociocultural context of development, including expectations and beliefs about behaviour, is also relevant. In addition, it is important to remember that relationships by definition involve more than one person and it is essential to ask what influence the child brings to the developing relationship. Sameroff (1991) describes a transactional model of development (see Chapter 1) in which the mutual effects that children and adults have on modifying each other's behaviour is emphasised. In this model the dynamic interactions between child and social environment are seen to be at the heart of developmental progression. Furthermore, the response of each individual to the other at a given time point fundamentally changes each individual's future response. In this way patterns of interaction develop. Sameroff (1991:174) provides the following example.

A complicated childbirth may have made an otherwise calm mother somewhat anxious. The mother's anxiety during the first months of the child's life may have caused her to be uncertain and inappropriate in her interactions with the child. In response to such inconsistency, the infant may have developed some irregularities in feeding and sleeping patterns that give the appearance of a difficult temperament. This difficult temperament decreases the pleasure that the mother obtains from the child and so she

tends to spend less time with the child. If there are no adults interacting with the child, and especially speaking to the child, the child may not meet the norms for language development and score poorly on preschool language tests. In this case the outcome was not determined by the complicated birth or by the mother's consequent emotional response. If one needed to pick a cause it would be the mother's avoidance of the child, yet one can see that such a view would be a gross oversimplification of a complex developmental sequence.

Read the following case studies and, drawing on the information presented above, reflect on how the different experiences of the two children's carers may impact on how they respond to their child and how this in turn may have further influenced the child's development and the relationship between parent and child.

**Case study 1:** Anna, aged two years, lives in a three-bedroom semidetached house with her two parents and her older sister Laura, who is four years of age. When Anna was born she suffered from severe anoxia as a result of a difficult birth. However, she seemed to show no lasting physical effects and was discharged home with a clean bill of health. Although initially worried, her parents were reassured by the positive attitude of the midwife and hospital consultant. Anna's mum felt her second-born child initially fussed more than her sister Laura had done, but used the same calm, consistent approach that had worked with Laura and found that she was soon able to settle her. Early developmental checks were normal and the family soon forgot about the more alarming aspects of Anna's birth. At age two she is able to walk alone, kick and throw a ball. She understands spoken language and is a good communicator, able to use sentences of two–three words. At this stage her preferred activities are 'drawing' (undefined scribbles) and 'reading' (turning the pages in her favourite picture book). Her mother, a part-time florist, takes her to a mother-and-toddler group twice a week, where she socialises well with the other children. Attachments appear to be secure. On the days when her mother is working she is cared for either by her maternal grandmother or by her father, who works shifts in a local factory.

**Case study 2:** Maria is also two years of age. An only child, she lives in a two-bedroom terraced house with her mother, a single parent. Maria also suffered from severe anoxia at birth, which seemed to show no lasting physical effects. However, Maria seemed to be a difficult, fretful child who was hard to settle. As a small baby she cried frequently, which her mother found very distressing. Maria's mother works full-time to support herself and her child and feels constantly tired. The emotional and physical stress experienced by Maria's mother makes it harder and harder for her to enjoy interacting with Maria – even caring for her physical needs always seems an uphill struggle. When her mother is at work Maria is cared for by her aunt, a caring but busy mum herself, who has three children of her own aged ten months, three years and five years. Maria therefore experiences very little social interaction with adults, either at home or with her aunt. Early developmental checks suggested some delayed development and this seems to have continued. The health visitor who did Maria's two-year health check noted that Maria has a vocabulary of only about 20 words rather than the 50 words that would be expected by this stage. She also noticed that Maria shows little concern when her mother leaves her with her aunt and shows little interest when her mother returns from work. According to her mother, Maria actively avoids interaction and ignores her bids for interaction when she goes to fetch her: 'She doesn't bother if I am here or not. In fact I think she punishes me for leaving her sometimes – she runs away when I get back and refuses to speak to me. I think she'd rather be here with my sister.'

Test your knowledge

- 4.1 Why is attachment important for human infants?
- 4.2 Describe the processes of attachment that have evolved to ensure species survival.
- 4.3 Which attachment behaviours develop at around six months of age?
- 4.4 What is the importance of the IWM?

Answers to these questions can be found on the companion website at:  
[www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress](http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress)



Sample question

Information provider

Design a poster for social workers, health visitors or other childcare professionals that shows the importance of attachment for emotional development. How can they promote healthy attachment relationships? Remember to write in an appropriate voice for your audience and to provide evidence to support your argument.

Further reading Attachment theory

Topic	Key reading
The role of fathers	Pleck, J. H. (2007). Why could father involvement benefit children? Theoretical perspectives. <i>Applied Developmental Science</i> , 11(4), 196–202.
Maternal/paternal sensitivity	Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J., Diener, M. L., Brown, G. L., Mangelsdorf, S. C., McHale, J. L., & Frosch, C. A. (2006). Attachment and sensitivity in family context: The roles of parent and infant gender. <i>Infant and Child Development</i> , 15(4), 367–385.

Measuring attachment in childhood

Individual variation has been noted in the development of attachments. The standard method for assessing attachment type in infancy is the strange situation procedure (SSP) developed by Ainsworth and Bell (1970).

- This 20-minute procedure has 8 episodes, designed to expose infants to increasing amounts of stress.
- Carers (typically mothers) and their one-year-old infants are observed in a playroom through a two-way mirror and their attachment behaviours when in an unfamiliar environment are recorded.