

# a special *bond* a special *time* the *first three years*



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**These pages are designed to explain clearly and simply for everyone what the research of child development experts means to anyone concerned about the needs of the under threes.**

Supporters of WATCH? believe that children's emotional needs should be put first in the decisions we make at home and in society. We can only make the right decisions for our children if we are fully informed. We can then look at changing our lifestyles for the children's sake, changing people's ideas, changing government policy.

This set of pages looks specifically at:

- What 'secure attachment' is all about and why it is so important
- How 'separation anxiety' is a risk for many babies
- Why 'separation anxiety' and 'attachment disorder' should concern us all - parents, healthcare professionals and society as a whole

## NOTE

In our information sheets we refer to the baby as a boy. That is to avoid confusion when we talk about 'she' or 'her', as you might think we are referring to the mother and not her baby!

## What is 'Attachment'?

Attachment is a term used in child development to describe what happens emotionally first between a mother and her baby, and later between the baby and other adults. Attachment is all about building a foundation of security and confidence for the baby, in himself, with others, and the wider world.

Think of it as the relationship which starts when a baby expresses a need by crying and the mother responds. If it all starts happily, and the vital first relationship between mother and baby is a comfortable, contented and happy one, then the baby experiences the world as a safe place. He understands that he can trust other people. If mum can respond with affection and growing confidence, he feels valued, treasured, worthwhile.

It is the start of being able to reach out successfully to others, first to people around him at home, maybe his father, brothers and sisters, extended family, family friends. Later he will feel confident to reach out to children of his own age, and all sorts of people in the outside world.

The care a young child receives in his first three years needs to be of the highest quality. It has critical implications for his later development.<sup>1\*</sup> The baby's early relationship with care-givers has a lifelong impact and his future relationships are built on this early model. His adult personality will develop directly from these early years and will depend on the child's level of self-esteem and basic trust in others - two factors which are determined by the response he gets from his primary carer or carers in the crucial first three years of his life.<sup>2\*</sup>

\* for references see back page

## THE PHASES OF ATTACHMENT<sup>10</sup>

There are several phases in attachment. First is an indiscriminating phase, in which the newborn baby has almost no social responses and then later responds readily to almost anyone.

The next phase is one where the baby shows different responses to different people at close range. Here a baby shows signs of knowing and preferring his mother to anyone else. Most of us can observe this reaction in a very young baby: just watch how his face changes when he looks at mum!

In a third phase, the baby is able to make different responses to people at a distance, active responses that he expects others to react to. Typically, he will cry when he sees mum leave the room. He will gurgle and wiggle his arms and legs when he sees her return, and will expect to be greeted warmly by mum in return, the 'natural' reaction of all mothers who are attuned to their babies.

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During this period you can see that the baby is really carefully working out the difference between strangers and various familiar faces. He will tend to stare longer at less familiar faces, and will be more interested to see how they react to him.

The next phase is one where the baby starts taking the physical initiative by following mum around, approaching her, burying his face in her lap, scrambling over her.

**The way a child is cared for in the first three years will colour the way he sees and lives the rest of his whole life**

At this stage, it is normal for a baby not only to protest when mum leaves the room but also typically to crawl after her. Normally he will greet her actively when she returns, with noises, smiles, and gestures of delight whether she has been away for hours or minutes!

Also at this stage, baby begins to take a few careful steps in independence cautiously leaving mum, to explore the world around him. Even going out of her sight, but usually double-checking she is still there within a minute or two. This is the stage so many mothers know, where they have to chase their baby and stop him from going too far. It is a great game and an important stage in emotional and physical development.

Towards the end of this stage (the baby is normally around 6 to 8 months old), he will become increasingly uneasy with strangers, and will make that evident.

He will move into a phase of open anxiety with strangers. He will not come near them even if asked to do so; he will become tense when held by people he does not know well.

At this stage, if you put him into the hands of another adult whom he does not know, he should become very anxious. This is a perfectly healthy reaction in children, and is likely to continue beyond eighteen months. After that, the child's increasing independence and understanding - and ability to make himself understood - makes him much happier in responding to less familiar faces, and, by the time he is three, he will be able to cope with strangers much better.

Adults often tell a baby 'not to be so silly' when he shows fear of someone he sees as a stranger. Of course, it can be embarrassing for mum if he cannot remember someone who is a close friend or relative. But he needs time, and the reassurance and continuing presence of someone he knows and loves before he can overcome his fear of a new (or forgotten) face.

## What is 'secure attachment'?

A constant and continuous relationship - 'a secure attachment' means that the baby understands deep down that there is someone he can trust and completely rely on. Someone who can interpret the world to him. Someone who can explain his needs to the world. Someone who will stay with him when he sees strangers or when he is in a strange place.

It means that the baby feels secure and confident. He is confident that if anything goes wrong, if anything upsets him, someone is there who knows how to sort things out - and make him feel better again - not just comfortable but happy and contented deep down inside.

To be able to do this needs real understanding of a deep affection of a quality that is rarely developed in anyone except parents or family members.

Normally, the job of caring for baby best fits a parent. Only in cases where the mother has psychological problems, for example as a result of depression, or drug dependency, may a substitute 'mother' be a better alternative.

## Why is secure attachment so important?

### Greater self-esteem and basic trust

A secure attachment is a vital foundation for the child and adult. It will determine how well a child can value himself and establish a trusting relationship with anyone else.

### Better social skills and speech

A child with a secure attachment is generally more competent, more sociable, more self-confident, and inquisitive. He will be more tolerant of having his own demands sometimes frustrated.<sup>4</sup> Children who have not been able to establish a secure attachment find life more

**Secure attachments provide a rich emotional inheritance for our children. Anything which is allowed to impact against secure attachments risks impoverishing our children emotionally.**

difficult, and as you will read in a later section, some may encounter and, sadly, create many problems for themselves and society.

Language which is so important in later life at school and with friends - develops much better in securely attached children: there is a high level of verbal interaction and one-to-one conversations, and baby's tentative early attempts at communication are much more sensitively decoded by a familiar carer.

## A SPECIAL BOND - not for outsiders

Secure attachment needs:

- consistency of care
- individual attention and prompt response to distress
- genuine interest and affection
- deep familiarity between child and carer

## The deep need for family

The unique biological tie between parent and child means that both can share a unique sense of long-term commitment. It is not enough to be interested in children in general, you have to be interested in this particular child and really love and want to nurture him, as a unique individual in your life.

It is quite incorrect, and insulting to every parent, to suggest that the special bond existing between parent and child can be easily replicated by an outsider. Such incorrect assumptions are not only misleading, but also serve to undermine new mums' and dads' confidence in their parenting skills.

## Bonded from birth

Normally, within hours after birth, a very special bond develops between a mother and her baby. The bonding process which has started in the womb will continue to develop for months and years, if allowed to, so that the mother becomes totally focused on the baby, finely tuned to what he wants and needs. It is nature's way of giving baby the best start in life.

Baby needs the opportunity to form secure attachments with his carer. He needs a special person to attach himself to, and he will put out signals to ensure she attaches to him. This is usually the mother as it is during the first six months that a baby learns to differentiate the look, smell and sound of his 'special minder'.<sup>3</sup>

If all is well, the baby forms a unique attachment to the mother. This will provide a secure foundation not only in his first months and early years, but also for his lifetime.

## More vulnerable from 6 months

This attachment depends on continuity and consistency. Once a child has formed an attachment, he becomes vulnerable to changes in his special carer, especially up to the age of about three, and particularly between the ages of 6-18 months.<sup>3</sup>

He needs reassurance that his special carer, usually mum, is not going to disappear. If he does not get that reassurance, he will get a painful sense of rejection.

He will gain mature independence gradually. It is not a race, and the process should not be rushed. Separating a child from his parents before he is ready makes it more difficult for him to develop and maintain stable relationships.<sup>4</sup>

## Problems with child care outside the family

No matter how dedicated and trained any childcare worker may be, there is a further, more dangerous problem. The child's carer may leave. So someone who has become central to his life may simply disappear out of it. The bottom is knocked out of a child's world.

What does that say to the child? Even for a three-year-old, who can understand something about it, this can be very painful. To him, it proves that he was not so important to his carer after all. It shows he is not valued. To a child under three, unable to understand things so well, unable to question so well, it is even more bewildering and upsetting.

## The deep need for individual attention

Very young children need individual attention and love. They learn good social skills from imitating responsible adults. It is a myth to claim that being in social groups with other very young children somehow benefits babies.

**Placing a baby in a day nursery with multiple carers, or leaving him at home with a succession of nannies or childminders, does not provide the right environment for secure attachment.**

## The deep need for consistency

Consistency is immensely important for a child. Normally, there is no greater consistency of care than that offered by the mother. Research points to the fact that an infant's emotional needs are best met by having one key figure: a consistent, loving, unshakable rock on which to build his early life.

Most parents find that there are difficulties between the different ways mum and dad may handle their children. Inconsistencies in handling, in values and discipline, are hard enough between parents. Add an outside paid carer, and it is more likely that this will confuse the child and do nothing to instil a good pattern of behaviour.

Leave him with a stranger, or another not-so-familiar adult who responds differently from his mum or dad, and it does not take long before the child is liable to feel confused, angry and hurt.

## Quality caring means emotional investment

It is not enough simply to ensure that a child is fed, changed and kept safe from danger. Mother and child need to develop familiarity. This cannot be given by an outsider, because the emotional investment is too shallow. Normally the natural pre-occupation of a mother with her child makes a hugely more significant contribution to his natural development than any input a child-minder or trained carer (however dedicated and skilled they may be) can achieve.

Mothers and relatives show significantly more affection and responsiveness towards their children, and communicate much more, and much better with them than nursery workers or childminders.<sup>6</sup>

## What about independence?

It is good to encourage independence, providing that it is allowed to develop at a child's pace! Children are more likely to feel rejected than secure and confident if independence is forced on them prematurely.

When a baby can establish basic trust from his early dependence, he can make the healthy progression to independence at his own pace. He may interpret any attempt to hurry up the process as an act of rejection. This can be traumatic.

By around six months he has learnt that he exists separately from his mother and he realizes that he can lose her. He needs reassurance that mum is NOT going to disappear.

His greatest need for reassurance comes between 6 to 18 months. From 18 months to 3 years, as his understanding of language and the world about him grows, he will be more confident and need slightly less reassurance. After he turned 3, he will still want reassurance, but if he has developed a secure attachment, he will not normally be anxious about being parted from his mother.

## Pre-school

It is only when he is about 3 years old that a child will really benefit from pre-school activities without mum being there too. This is when he can gain from the additional companionship and special stimulation that children of his own age can provide in a group.

Pre-schools or nurseries for the under threes where parents leave their children for long periods are of little or no benefit to children's emotional development, and can be very negative experiences.

Parent and toddler groups for the under threes can be good, especially for parents as an important opportunity to meet other adults and share experiences. For the toddlers they can provide a stimulating environment with the reassurance of a parent's presence. But it is too early to think about 'independence' or genuine 'social interaction' between toddlers. Ask any mum. There is really very little interaction between two-year-olds, and most of that ends in tears!

## Nurseries and pre-schools are valuable for the over threes

High quality nursery schools, where children spend short periods of time, perhaps two or three hours a day, have lasting benefits for children 3-5 years of age. But the amount of time the child spends there should depend on his individual readiness. It should suit his needs, not simply the needs of adults.

At the right time, nurseries and pre-school groups can be brilliant, but if very young children are sent to them too early, it can knock their confidence and cause damage. It is only around the age of 3 that children can truly benefit, educationally and socially, from being with their peer group in a pre-school setting.<sup>5</sup>

Research clearly shows lasting benefits of nursery education (that is, play and activities, not formal 'schoolwork') for 3 to 5 year-olds. It works well for short periods of time, and needs to be flexible, appropriate to each child's readiness. For example, one child aged only just three may be perfectly happy in a playgroup for a whole day. Another child aged four may be anxious if separated from mum for more than a morning session. We also need flexibility in caring well for each child. For example, one day he may cope well with being away from mum for a whole day, and at other times he may be very unhappy at being left even only for a couple of hours. The way he reacts will depend on the care he has received before this age.

Forcing a very young child into a timetable to suit adults, which often means long hours in a day-nursery, is a world away from a morning or afternoon or a short day in nursery school which most children thrive on!

Since the 1950s the overwhelming weight of psychological theory and research has suggested that the origins of good mental health lie within the mother/child relationship.

Studies have shown that:

Mothers and relatives show significantly more affection and responsiveness towards their children, and communicate much more, and much better with them than nursery workers or childminders.<sup>6</sup>

Mothers who employ childcare for their young children are less likely to be sensitive to the subtle signals their children give.<sup>7</sup>

Childcare advocates tend to publicise findings from highly unrepresentative 'showpiece programmes' and are not typical of childcare available in the UK.<sup>4</sup>

The more childcare a child has received away from home, regardless of when it occurred, the more likely he is to display problematic levels of aggression at age 5.<sup>11</sup>

Extended daycare has been linked to negative and aggressive behaviour and decreased co-operation with both peers and adults.<sup>8</sup>

Primary school children who had extensive (30+ hours) day care in infancy may find it harder to work at school and follow the rules, and find making friends harder.<sup>9</sup>

## 'ANXIOUS ATTACHMENT' or 'SEPARATION ANXIETY'

'Anxious attachment' or 'Separation anxiety' are technical terms both used in child development, for when things go wrong. When a child has been unable to develop a secure attachment, he shows various symptoms.

Today, while attachment disorder is formally diagnosed only rarely, the behaviours and attitudes which are symptoms of attachment disorder are definitely appearing more frequently in schools and in young people.

### What should we watch out for?

#### Cause.

If the bonding process is disrupted, the attachments a baby forms may be less secure or effective for various reasons.

For example:

- if the child has prolonged daily separations from his parents
- if parents are unresponsive
- if the care he receives is unstable  
or
- if his time is divided among many different adults

**Being looked after by someone who is indifferent or not tuned into baby's wavelength is damaging to a child.** If a mother is depressed, for example, she may not react much to her baby. This confuses and upsets him.

**If a mother leaves him with a neighbour to 'mind' him, and he is ignored, he feels abandoned and upset.**

**If a mother leaves him with a stranger who responds to him in ways he is not used to, he will feel confused and insecure.**

**If any of these scenarios happen repeatedly, a baby will be building up an accumulation of hurt, fear and anger.**

#### Effect

When the child's first social love, for his mother, is frustrated, this turns to anxiety. It then turns to guilt because he feels he ought not to have asked for what the mother has refused or offered what she rejected. If he is very badly frustrated, the feeling of guilt can turn to hatred, usually against himself. He becomes convinced that if his mother does not love him he must be bad.

If a baby's needs are ignored, dealt with reluctantly, inconsistently or even abusively, this is an environment which builds anxiety and mistrust. The baby feels a

sense of rage, which can build up and shows itself in various ways. He becomes convinced that he must focus on his own needs - no-one else is doing so. He therefore continues to do so to the exclusion of those of others.

### Three stages of damage

When a very young child is separated from his mother, it is possible to identify three stages of 'damage'.

The first is when baby protests, crying loudly when he sees his mother leave or has found that she has disappeared somewhere. If a baby's cries are ignored for more than a few minutes, it signals to him that his mother does not care for him. If this happens repeatedly, it can be damaging.

The second stage of damage is apathy. It is not a good sign if a baby or infant does not seem bothered that mum is going away. Sometimes people will mistake this for the reaction of a 'good' adaptive child.

The third stage is the serious one of denial, when the child has reached the conclusion, unconsciously in his own mind, that loving someone only leads to being let down by them and being abandoned, that it is so painful that it is better not to make close relationships.

Decades of research confirm that young children do best when raised within the home by informed, confident and happy mothers, who are fully aware of a child's emotional needs.

Direct full-time parental care, that is given positively and willingly, is better in the early years of child-rearing than other forms of childcare provision.

If society positively encourages alternatives, without supporting full-time parents as well, it is tipping the balance in favour of a poor substitute which can damage children, and in the long term causes considerable human cost to families and financial costs to society.

### What is the effect of insecure attachments?

Damaging the parent-child bond has various results. In some children separation anxiety can lead to an initial phase of excessively clinging, dependent behaviour (note however that in small doses, clinginess is common with all children from time to time, especially when they feel unwell) followed by attention-seeking. It can also make children uninhibited, indiscriminately friendly towards family and strangers alike, seeking affection from anywhere. In some cases, separation anxiety can eventually lead to mental health problems. For example, the growing child may have no sense of guilt or he may be very mixed up about right and wrong, unable to keep rules or maintain lasting friendships. Separation anxiety can sometimes contribute to adolescent and adult depression.

## Attachment disorder - an impact on lives and society

Attachment Disorder is a mental illness which can be evident in children whose early attachment relationships were abnormal. It may develop from separation anxiety. Fortunately it is much rarer than separation anxiety, but appears to be on the increase.

As they grow older, children who suffer from attachment disorder can cause major problems within their own families and in the larger community.

The symptoms include pathological lying, truancy, and anti-social behaviour.

### NOTE

As with the baby, we are calling this person 'him', but the information applies to girls and boys.

Someone who is suffering from attachment disorder is filled with frustration and suppressed emotions, and feels a growing inner rage which is liable to lead to violence against people or property. He may have been forced to conform to behaviours that hurt him. As he becomes older, he may begin to refuse to conform. He may play truant, be disruptive at school, and under-achieve.

He may be nursing great hurts deep down, consciously or unconsciously, and may seek consolation from his misery in drugs, violence and sexual promiscuity.

He may trick people and manipulate them. He may become a pathological liar.

Attachment disorder can cause family break-ups. Parents are understandably upset, puzzled and outraged, unaware that they may have inadvertently caused their child's behaviour, having failed to meet his emotional needs in the critical first three years of psychological dependence.

Children who have attachment disorder show an overwhelming need to put themselves in control of things, events and people, because this relieves their sense of insecurity. They have become conditioned to the idea that the world is an unsafe place. Deep down they feel that only by being in full control can they prevent something bad from happening to them.

This need to be in control accounts for their constant lying. They feel that if they are the only ones who know the truth, then they have the power. This is why they often fail to make eye contact except when they are lying. They fear that eye contact would help adults to break down their defences and gain control.

Good relationships are virtually impossible for them as these depend on mutual affection and trust.

If you have Attachment Disorder you cannot empathise with others. You live in a very different world from

***We shall not achieve any significant change in society until we focus not only on what it means to be a parent but also on what it means to be a child'***

**Doreen Goodman,  
Founder of What About The Children?**

people with secure attachments. You cannot respond to reason. You cannot comply with other people's requests or instructions as that means you are handing over control, and if you do that you feel your very survival is threatened. It suits you to contrive to make adults lose their tempers. That puts you in control. Punishment has little effect on you because it cannot make you feel worse about yourself than you do already. Some punishment may hurt physically, but it is nothing compared with the deep wounds within you.

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## Further reading

Please contact What About The Children? for a booklist and information about other research.

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