

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND PRAISE

So today, we're looking at attachment. This is a theory developed originally by John Bowlby in the 1940s and early 50s. I'm going to try and tell you the principles of attachment but I would also like to look at some of the criticisms of John Bowlby's theory, which would have been put forward over the last 50 years or so, because there are some significant criticisms. Despite that, it still remains a very important theory and one used by paediatricians, health visitors, social workers and other experts. So it's still very important. We'll look at criticisms at the end when I've been through the different types of attachment. Now most children in the UK and, in fact, in western countries will have an attachment of sorts, it may be a secure attachment, which I'll describe in a moment; it may be an insecure attachment but most children will have some type of attachment. The situations where you find children who don't have attachments would apply in, say, very large institutional orphanages which you used to get or may still get, in some countries in the world. I think at one stage in Romania, possibly still in some countries like China. In those countries where you have very large institutional organisations looking after hundreds of babies, it is unlikely that those children will form attachments to significant adults because they'll just have lots of people looking after them and that can cause serious developmental delays, which may affect their development for many years or even throughout their lives. Children in the West, as I said, will usually have some form of attachment and most children do develop secure attachments. There are various types of different attachments which I'm going to describe in a little bit more detail in a moment. If you look at my third slide, there, which I'll bring up now, one of the principles of strong attachment is the development of a relationship between a key adult or adults and the child. So that may be the mother or it could be other people who form that strong relationship with the child beginning really at birth. So it's a bond we're talking about here between an adult or several adults. It's a bond of trust, which begins by the adult meeting the child's needs and the child beginning to respond to the security of having their needs met. This little mnemonic here stands for... I'll read them out to you:

So the **'P'** stands for predictability, if you'd like to write that down. So one of the important things in developing strong attachments is that the adult or adults in the child's life are predictable in their behaviour, by which I mean they are not overly emotional and praising one minute and the next minute angry and rejecting, that there is some kind of predictability to the behaviour of the adult. Predictability also applies to routine as babies and children like and need routine; they like to know that certain things happen at certain times of the day. For older children that might be bedtime stories, breakfast, special times with mum and dad. For babies it's a routine of being cuddled and fed and those type of things. So predictability applies to both of those aspects.

The second letter **'R'** stands for reliability. So, similarly to predictability in many ways but it refers to the development in the child of a sense that the parent will respond to them. They may not respond straightaway. So, for example, if your child is crying because they have a wet nappy or they're hungry, it may not be possible to go to them immediately. We can appreciate that, can't we? We're not going to immediately be able to respond to children all the time; there will be other things going on in parents' lives that mean they have to wait a little while but children can get used to that. So they realise, OK, maybe someone isn't coming immediately but they will come, I know they will. For some children, of course, they don't know the parent will come and that's the beginning of attachment problems. So reliability is that you can rely on somebody to respond to your need, maybe not immediately but they will respond to your need.

**'A'** stands for availability which means that somebody is available, not the same person necessarily, but a significant adult is available to respond to needs.

**'I'** stands for interest, showing an interest in the child which may be simply talking or singing or making eye contact, or as children grow older, obviously, taking an interest in their pictures as they bring them back from nursery or their hobbies or taking them out to play, showing an interest.

**'S'** stands for sensitivity; being sensitive to a child's moods, being sensitive to the way in which they express their needs, so all parents

and carers gradually get used to the ways in which children express their needs. In older children, the way in which they express their needs in subtly different ways, their moods, perhaps, or it might be, for younger children, the different ways in which they cry, call or wave their arms around. You need to be sensitive to those and for those of us who have been lucky enough to have secure relationships, our parents or people who were looking after us were sensitive to the way in which we expressed our needs and, hopefully, the other things as well.

Finally, the 'E' just stands for being encouraging. So encouraging or praising we know is very important for children. We know that they build up esteem, self-esteem and confidence through having encouragement. It doesn't have to be completely uncritical encouragement, obviously, as children grow older they can cope with criticism as well as praise, but encouragement is important, particularly for children who do have low self-esteem, who may have suffered a series of rejections. I'm thinking here, perhaps, of children who had to come into care, maybe being looked after by foster parents, who will, inevitably, have experienced loss and maybe even rejection so for those children they may lack confidence in themselves, they may even blame themselves for the fact that they are now in care. I gave you a couple of examples the other week where children may take responsibility themselves for this loss that has occurred to them. So for them, the carer is very much trying to encourage, to find things that they're good at, that they like doing, so that they can praise them and that can be difficult, so for some children they don't really seem to do anything very well or anything much at all. So the carers job is a very skilled one in beginning with little things to praise and then gradually finding things which the child is good at so they can build in more encouragement and praise so that their self-esteem will grow. Now you'll see this, hopefully, in terms of the attachment cycle, so the attachment cycle is a way of representing attachment in a graphic form.

## **2. ATTACHMENT CYCLE AND SECURE ATTACHMENT**

OK so here's my cycle and this is how John Bowlby and other writers have described this cycle of attachment. So it begins here at the top with a child having a need. So for babies it might be they have wet themselves, they've soiled themselves, they're hungry or something like that. For older children it may be something more sophisticated; they need comfort or they need attention or they need somebody to come and rescue them from some sort of situation. The attachment cycle continues throughout our childhood, probably throughout our lives, actually. So according to Bowlby the next stage is that the child feels some kind of discomfort. Obviously, for babies, we can imagine the discomfort they may feel if they're hungry, their nappy is soiled, or they have a tummy ache. For older children it may be a different kind of discomfort, an embarrassment or an anxiety or something of that nature.

Now then, here we have a signal from the child. So the baby with the wet nappy, what would be the signal?

### **“Crying”**

Yes, so the earliest way in which we often communicate, providing we are able to articulate our needs in that way, is crying and this then should stimulate in the parent, according to the cycle, a need. So down here, we have parent needs – we need to respond to that signal. If the attachment cycle is working well then the parent or the carer then feels a need. Now we know that's not always the case. In the story which you may have seen on Monday, in the Bristol Social Services programme on BBC2, some of Toby's needs did seem to be met, particularly his mother seemed to be quite sensitive to his needs. But if you watched the sequence where Toby I think was playing in a room in the Social Services Centre, and his dad was there, his dad wasn't very good at responding to Toby was he? In fact, his dad was playing with the toys and Toby was playing with the toys. So it looked more like two 3-year-olds in a room playing separately rather than a dad and a child playing together. So for some parents they don't feel that need; something is stopping them from feeling that need and they may be the kinds of families perhaps that you will be helping to work with or certainly the types of families who may need their children to be looked after by foster

carers for a short while or longer. Some of the things that can stop a parent experiencing a need are that they are preoccupied perhaps with their own problems and their own troubles. OK it may be that mental illness is preventing the parent from experiencing a need, it may be that issues with substance abuse are stopping them from experiencing that need or it might be something in their own upbringing which means that they haven't learned to respond to needs in that way. But this is a crucial part of the attachment cycle, the parent, I've put 'Parent' there but I could have put 'Carer', they need, they feel a need. And then, over here, they take action: change the nappy, rub the tummy, talk, cwtch, coo, go over and start playing with the 3-year-old. Whatever, they take action, based on the need to respond, they have responded; they've taken action. There's an outcome then, and then again the child signals so the nappy gets changed and the baby goes quiet for a while. It seemed to work, maybe it doesn't work so you get another signal, another cry, and mmm... obviously, it wasn't the nappy so we're off again: rubbing the tummy, seeing if that works, if that doesn't work, maybe something else. So this is a continual process and for babies this will be going on hundreds of times a day probably, but it is a process that goes on throughout our childhood when things are working well. This is called the attachment cycle, developed by John Bowlby but refined by other writers since. It expresses in quite graphic form the relationship between a child expressing their need and a parent or carer responding to that need.

### 3. AMBIVALENT ATTACHMENT

So as I said earlier, most children will be able to develop a secure attachment with their parent and when you're able to develop a secure attachment like that, it not only means that physically you are protected and your physical needs are met but what we know now is that this development of attachment is also very important for children's' sense of self, sense of self-worth, sense of identity, sense of emotional well-being, so it isn't just a physical need. Obviously, babies and children are very vulnerable; they do need to be protected and have their physical needs met but we know that this attachment cycle, if it's successful, also helps us to develop confidence in ourselves. We are people who are worth responding to. However, John Bowlby outlined, I think, two different types of insecure attachment and one other one has been added since his original theory and we're going to look at those now...

The first is called ambivalent attachment; ambivalent just means not one, not the other: a parent may respond either coolly or may respond very effusively, very emotionally. Ambivalent attachment is where children are uncertain about the type of response that they may get. So an example of that might be where sometimes your parent or carer is extremely loving or caring and you get presents and when you go home there's food on the table and everything is great, but the next day everything is wrong and everybody is very angry with you, cross with you and wants to push you away. So you get this kind of seesaw between very positive emotional response and very negative emotional response. So children who are seeking attachment become quite anxious because they never quite know what kind of response they are going to get, whether it's going to be a good day or a bad day and this can produce in children very anxious behaviour, also quite clingy behaviour. So for attention-seeking behaviour it may be that in order to ensure you get that response from your parent you literally want to hold on to them. We mentioned this when we looked at the younger children who physically cling on to them or you act up so that you'd get attention from the parent because you don't have that inner model of consistency; you don't know that you're going to get that attention later. Anyway, so it's characterised by inconsistency and seesawing from one extreme to the other, the children are often anxious, clingy, or attention seeking,

and this may be a feature of neglectful parenting. I think we saw with Toby, if you saw the programme on BBC2, that his behaviour was quite challenging; he was trying to get attention, wasn't he, through his behaviour and yet his parents were complaining about his behaviour. So you can get that type of vicious circle where a parent is getting increasingly stressed by the clinginess and the acting out and yet on the other hand they are not able to provide the consistency and reliability which would mean that the child would not need to do those things in order to gain attention. So one of the things we're trying to do with that family apart from getting the basic conditions in the home sorted out is to get a routine in place: so that Toby has a regular bedtime, a regular mealtime, regular attention time, so he doesn't have to act out. So foster carers who frequently have to look after children who display this kind of behaviour, are trying to develop a child's sense of consistency and reliability through developing a routine. So the child knows that things happen at a certain time of the day, you know, just things like a bedtime story, a hot drink at bedtime, have a play, bath time; all of those things help children to build up an inner model of how their lives work, things are predicable, they don't have to act out, they don't have to cling in order to get attention. The foster carers may need to take many months to establish that because, as you can imagine, a child who comes to you with that kind of behaviour won't change it overnight. So you do need an awful lot of patience, perseverance and care to get that kind of routine established and, in the case of the programme on Monday, I think they said that in about 6 months Toby was beginning to behave in a much more predictable, responsive way and I think, probably, Toby did have this ambivalent attachment pattern.

Do you want to ask me anything about ambivalent attachment?

**“Can some of these traits be carried on when they are in adulthood...?”**

Yes that's right, if you read Bowlby or some of the writers who have picked up on this theory and some of the research that has been done yes, it is claimed that we tend to actually carry on this attachment pattern into our adult life, so if we were very anxious about people when we were children we may grow up into fairly anxious adults who are equally anxious and clingy in our adult life and there is some evidence that we

may tend to develop these patterns of attachment with our own children. Now that doesn't have to be the case, of course, it's quite possible that we might become aware through self-awareness, reading and discussion that we have this ambivalent attitude to significant people in our lives and we can change it, so I don't want you to think there's anything deterministic about this. We don't have to go on and repeat these cycles but there is quite a strong correlation between people's experience of attachment when they were children and their experience of attachment with their own children.

Anything else you want to ask?

**“Could some of those features of insecure ambivalent attachment just be attributed to normal child development or organic practice?”**

Yes, it certainly could be organic reasons, it may be the child has a physiological problem, maybe a hearing impairment, visual impairment, the parent may have a visual impairment or a hearing impairment, and they may have undiagnosed mental illnesses. So there may be other reasons apart from just the relationship between the parent and the child. And obviously, well perhaps not obviously, we need to look at this not as a dogmatic way of identifying problems but considering it in the light of, is it causing a problem for the child? I guess many of us, perhaps, have been brought up in relationships where we do have a fairly ambivalent attachment with our parents but we have still managed to get on OK and it hasn't really created a major problem for us, perhaps it's just the way our parents were. However, for some children it creates a real problem; it may be their language is delayed, or they have problems making friendships in school or they're quite aggressive, or often, in the case of Social Services, the parent is saying to you, “I can't cope with them”, “they're doing my head in”, “they're clingy”, “what can you advise?” That is a good point; we must always bear in mind these are not theories which can be applied in a blanket way to every single child. We need to take into account those other factors.

#### 4. AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

The next sort of attachment that Bowlby described as insecure is called an avoidant attachment. So we've had ambivalent, this is called avoidant attachment. OK, this is sometimes associated with emotional neglect, which is characterised by parents who find it difficult to express emotions, so they find it difficult to express love and care, or even to express anger and other emotions. I suppose, typically, they're people who believe that you don't show emotions, you bottle it all up, stiff upper lip. But those parents may, in certain circumstances, come over as quite cold, hostile even, maybe even rejecting and encourage feelings, or they model a way of behaving in which feelings are suppressed, so you kind of learn that we don't get angry around here, or we don't express emotions in an open way around here, we keep those to ourselves. So I'm sure children don't actively think that way but they are learning that that is the way in which people behave so, again, we mustn't be too orthodox about that because I'm sure that many parents find it difficult to express their emotions openly; other parents may be very emotional, very touchy-feely. There are the opposites, you know there's a wide range of ways in which we can bring up our children but for some children this produces a problem because they themselves then find it very difficult to empathise with other people, to recognise emotions in other people. So they can become quite insensitive themselves, they are very self-sufficient, they may be insensitive to other people's type of emotions. They may express themselves, perhaps, in an angry and aggressive way in the classroom or outside in the community. So foster carers again will look after children with avoidance attachment patterns and there again, they are trying to get that attachment cycle going again, so this is a more long-term process than perhaps dealing with ambivalence but they are trying to build trust in the child. They are trying to model behaviour which says it's OK to show love, it's OK to show care, it's OK to show anger sometimes; we don't have to get out of control because we show these emotions but that may take a long time for children gradually to learn, but if you can learn one way of behaving, you can learn another way of behaving so children can still learn different ways of forming attachments with significant adults. So this is a characteristic of emotional abuse in its extreme form; parents tend to be rather cold and hostile, and don't believe in showing emotions. Again,

there may be problems if children then find it difficult to understand emotions in other people, are not sensitive to emotions in other people or can't respond to emotions in other people. They might find it more difficult to form relationships with other people because they're quite insensitive, so other people may be rather wary of them around their children or animals as they get older.

## 5. DISORGANISED ATTACHMENT

OK, well finally, this is a type of insecure attachment which I don't think Bowlby referred to but which writers, since his original theory was put forward, have identified and characterised as disorganised attachment and this has been associated, particularly, with physical abuse of children where children have been physically harmed, usually over a long period of time. So how does this differ then? Well we've talked about ambivalent attachment – hot and cold, we've talked about avoidant attachment – parent rather cold and not acknowledging emotion. In this type of attachment it may be a parent is loving some of the time, is not rejecting, they may be quite good at showing emotions but actually, from time to time they may be quite frightening indeed. This is a parent who, perhaps, you don't know whether they're going to hit you, harm you or do something nice. This is characterised by parental behaviour which is frightening for children. The child not only doesn't know which way the parent is going to react but is aware that sometimes the parent reacts in a very frightening way, maybe very aggressive shouting or it may be actual hitting. So children here are disorganised because they simply don't know how to respond, they just don't know. The ambivalent child can get clingier and try and get closer to the parent, the avoidant child can become more self-sufficient but this child doesn't know what to do because whatever they do that frightening situation might happen; they may get hit in the most extreme situations. So these children tend to be extremely distressed and anxious, when they come in to care they are very, very difficult to settle, very, very difficult to communicate with, very mistrustful and foster carers will have to work very, very hard to try and build that attachment cycle with this child, to build up that sense of trust because it's going to take a long time for the child to realise actually this is a safe place. So often foster carers are putting a lot of effort into creating a safe environment where the child knows that they can trust the people around them, that they will not get hurt, that there are routines but also their basic safety is taken care of. That's called disorganised attachment and the foster carer will be trying to build that warmth of trust and sense of safety.

Do you want to ask me anything about disorganised attachment?

**“What’s the difference between insecure disorganised and then insecure ambivalent, is it quite similar?”**

Well in an ambivalent attachment you’re not frightened of your parent, you’re not waiting there to see what they’re going to do tonight, you know, the door goes at 11 o’clock, they come in, you’re in your bedroom, they’ve been drinking again, they come upstairs, you know that sometimes they get very, very angry or chuck you out of bed or knock you about. The ambivalent child, usually, isn’t fearful of the parent, just that they don’t know whether the parent is going to be cwtching them and saying, “I love you darling”, you know, “fish and chips here, come and sit down, we’ll have the TV on, you can stay up as long as you like”, or whether they are rejecting you, “get away, you’re getting on my nerves, clear off!” That’s typical of the ambivalent relationship. So I think its fear that’s the extra ‘ingredient’ in the disorganised attachment. But clearly we would be most worried, I suppose, about those children who seem to be extremely anxious, extremely wary, extremely uncertain because those signs are probably going to be combined with physical symptoms as well: fingertip bruising or stick marks or those kind of things because those children are probably being physically abused as well. Now again you’re probably going to say to me, “Well, actually, when I was a kid I was often very frightened of my dad, you know, he would come in and shout”. So I don’t want to lay down orthodox rules about this because I’m sure we all grew up in lots of different types of families, most of us survive, we grow up and we’re OK. But for some children, and these are the children you are going to work with and these are the children foster carers look after, for them it has become a serious problem. It’s not just that their family is a little bit different – this will affect their school, it’ll effect their development, it’ll affect a whole range of things in terms of their development so it is actually a problem; it’s not just a theoretical problem.

## **6. EVALUATION AND CRITIQUES OF THE THEORY**

Now these theories have been criticised and that's what I want to look at quickly now unless you want to ask me anything else about those three different types of attachment.

**“What age does Bowlby sort of cover with the child, is it up to, sort of five...?”**

No, right throughout childhood. So this will apply throughout childhood and some writers would say right through our lives as we take these attachment patterns into adulthood. We then have a tendency to replicate them with our own children. I think Bowlby, in his original work, 'The Growth of Love' was talking about babies and toddlers and that was published in 1950; he published a number of books after that and then other writers have kind of developed his theory. So, originally, he was mainly concerned with babies and toddlers.

**“So does he only identify only one kind of secure attachment then?”**

Yes, basically, the secure attachment, if we could lift that up again, would be where all of that is working pretty well. But again, you know, whether you regard it as working well or not so well, it's not an academic point really, it's to do with, well, 'does the child appear to be developing reasonably well, reasonably happy or are there problems?' It tends to be that we look at attachment issues when somebody is saying "look, there is a problem", you know, "he's wetting all the time" or "she's very unhappy", or, "she just won't leave me alone, she's clingy" or a neighbour is saying, "the child is so frightened, he's actually hiding in the garden when they come home from the pub at night". Those would be the kind of presenting problems, which might make you think there might be an issue with attachment. Yeah, but no, there aren't any different types of secure attachment, according to this theory. So if you read any of those three books I'm passing round you'll see there's a section in there on criticisms of this theory of attachment. There are three or four main criticisms; the earliest were by another developmental psychologist called Michael Rutter, who's written extensively on child development and attachment. His criticism was that Bowlby's theory was far too reliant on the mother. Bowlby in his original works, talks just about the

mother and the importance of the child having a strong attachment to the mother. What Rutter said was, well, look, it's not just the mother; children can be attached to other people: father, grandparents, relatives, foster carers, adoptive parents; it isn't just mother focused. Often mothers are the most important attachment figure, that is true, but he felt it was far too focused just on mothers and the original theory did put an awful lot of emphasis on mothers. Many people believed that his theory became quite popular at that time because Government policy was very much encouraging women to move back out of the workplace and back into the home after the war. During the war, women had come in to the workplace because men were serving in the army and they worked in factories and they drove the trains and the buses etc. But there was a problem after the war with unemployment and one theory suggests that in fact this theory chimed in very well with government policy, which wanted women to move out of the workplace and back into the home. Feminists have argued that women were made to feel very guilty about working because of this theory and that if you weren't at home with your child you were somehow failing your child. So that's an interesting point there about how theories have to be seen in their social context, OK, the context of their time. What else is happening at that time which is influencing the theorists, the academics, because they are not immune to that; they are influenced by that as well. Bowlby is also being criticised for being too euro centric, by being too focused on what happens in middle class European and American families, or what he saw as happening at that time in the 40s and 50s. He was looking at a family being mother, father and children. So from a cultural point of view you could say, well what about other cultures that don't emphasise those kinds of relationships so much, what about cultures where children are brought up by a whole group of people? Are we saying that those children are not going to be able to form secure attachments? Clearly they can, it is just that their relationships are different because their culture is different. Some children may be more used to being passed from one relative to another; they spend some time with their grandmother, some time with their parent, some time with somebody else. There isn't really any intrinsic reason why they shouldn't develop secure attachments; children can have attachments to different people. But Bowlby's theory tended to emphasise the importance of this mother-

child attachment so tended, in a way, to devalue other cultural experiences of parenting and family life, so that's another criticism. OK, so the two main criticisms, really, are the overly focused attention to mothers and lack of cultural sensitivity. Bowlby did in fact modify his theory as he revised it so he took on board those criticisms but those were certainly very strong criticisms of his original work.