

# Bowlby Attachment Theory

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## Bowlby Child Development



John Bowlby was a psychoanalyst (like [Freud](#)) and believed that mental health and behavioural problems could be attributed to early childhood. **Bowlby's evolutionary**

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**theory of attachment** suggests that children come into the world biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others, because this will help them to survive.

Bowlby was very much **influenced by ethological theory** in general, but especially by [Lorenz's \(1935\) study of imprinting](#). Lorenz showed that attachment was innate (in young ducklings) and therefore has a survival value.

Bowlby believed that **attachment behaviours are instinctive** and will be activated by any conditions that seem to threaten the achievement of proximity, such as separation, insecurity and fear.

Bowlby (1969, 1988) also postulated that the fear of strangers represents an important survival mechanism, built in by nature. Babies are born with the tendency to display certain innate behaviours (called social releasers) which help ensure proximity and contact with the mother or mother figure (e.g. crying, smiling, crawling, etc.) – these are species-specific behaviours.

During the evolution of the human species, it would have been the babies who stayed close to their mothers who would have survived to have children of their own and **Bowlby hypothesised that both infants and mothers have evolved a biological need to stay in contact with each other**. These attachment behaviours initially function like

fixed action patterns and all share the same function. The infant produces innate ‘social releaser’ behaviours such as crying and smiling that stimulate caregiving from adults. The determinant of attachment is not food but care and responsiveness. Bowlby suggested that a child would initially form only one attachment and that the attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationships so disrupting it can have severe consequences.

## **The Main Points of Bowlby’s Attachment Theory:**

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### **1. A child has an innate (i.e. inborn) need to attach to one main attachment figure (i.e. monotropy).**

Although Bowlby did not rule out the possibility of other attachment figures for a child, he did believe that there should be a primary bond which was much more important than any other (usually the mother).

Bowlby believes that this attachment is different in kind (qualitatively different) from any subsequent attachments. Bowlby argues that the relationship with the mother is somehow different altogether from other relationships.

Essentially, Bowlby suggested that the nature of **monotropy** (attachment conceptualised as being a vital and close bond with just one attachment figure) meant that a failure to initiate, or a breakdown of, the maternal attachment would lead to serious negative consequences, possibly including affectionless psychopathy. Bowlby’s theory of monotropy led to the formulation of his **maternal deprivation hypothesis**.

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### **2. A child should receive the continuous care of this single most important attachment figure for approximately the first two years of life.**

Bowlby (1951) claimed that mothering is almost useless if delayed until after two and a half to three years and, for most children, if delayed till after 12 months, i.e. there is a critical period.

**If the attachment figure is broken or disrupted during the critical two year period the child will suffer irreversible long-term consequences of this maternal deprivation.**

Bowlby used the term maternal deprivation to refer to the separation or loss of the mother as well as failure to develop an attachment.

The underlying assumption of **Bowlby’s Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis** is that continual disruption of the attachment between infant and primary caregiver (i.e. mother) could result in long term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties for that infant. The implications of this are vast – if this is true, should the primary caregiver leave their child in day care, whilst they continue to work?

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3. The **long term consequences of maternal deprivation** might include the following:

- delinquency,
- reduced intelligence,
- increased aggression,
- depression,
- affectionless psychopathy

**Affectionless psychopathy** is an inability show affection or concern for others. Such of individuals act on impulse with little regard for the consequences of their actions. For example, showing no guilt for antisocial behaviour.

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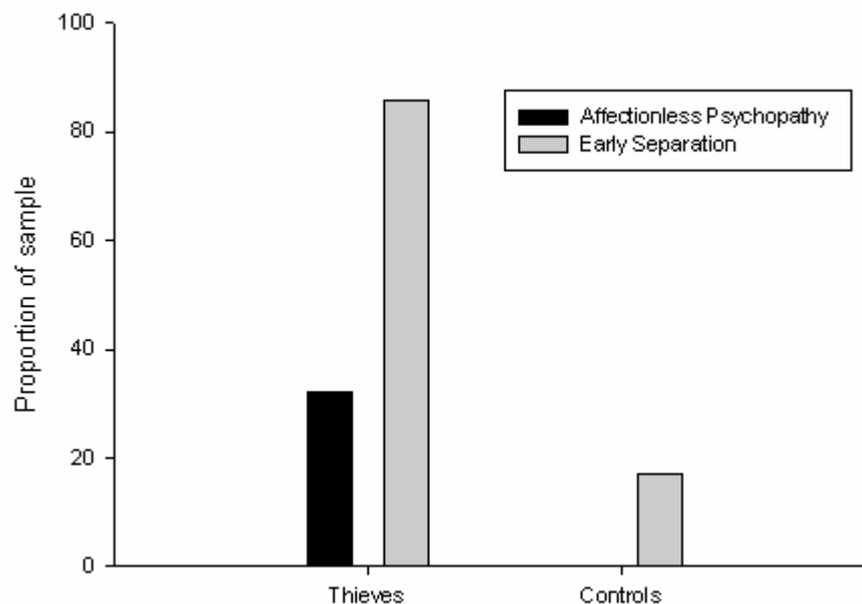
## 44 Thieves Study (Bowlby, 1944)

**John Bowlby** believed that the relationship between the infant and its mother during the first five years of life was most crucial to socialisation. He believed that disruption of this primary relationship could lead to a higher incidence of juvenile delinquency, emotional difficulties and antisocial behaviour. To support his hypothesis, he studied 44 adolescent juvenile delinquents in a child guidance clinic.

**Aim:** To investigate the effects of maternal deprivation on people in order to see whether delinquents have suffered deprivation. According to the Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis, breaking the maternal bond with the child during the early stages of its life is likely to have serious effects on its intellectual, social and emotional development.

**Procedure:** Bowlby interviewed 44 adolescents who were referred to a child protection program in London because of stealing- i.e. they were thieves. Bowlby selected another group of 44 children to act as 'controls'. N.b. controls: individuals referred to clinic because of emotional problems, but not yet committed any crimes. He interviewed the parents from both groups to state whether their children had experienced separation during the critical period and for how long.

**Findings:** More than half of the juvenile thieves had been separated from their mothers for longer than six months during their first five years. In the control group only two had had such a separation. He also found several of the young thieves (32%) showed 'affectionless



psychopathy' (they were not able to care about or feel affection for others). None of the control group were affectionless psychopaths.

In a later paper, he reported that 60 children who had spent time apart from their mothers in a tuberculosis sanatorium before the age of 4 showed lower achievement in school.

**Conclusion:** Affectionless psychopaths show little concern for others and are unable to form relationships. Bowlby concluded that the reason for the anti-social behaviour and emotional problems in the first group was due to **maternal deprivation**.

**Evaluation:** The supporting evidence that Bowlby (1944) provided was in the form of clinical interviews of, and **retrospective data** on, those who had and had not been separated from their primary caregiver.

This meant that Bowlby was asking the participants to look back and recall separations. These memories may not be accurate. Bowlby designed and conducted the experiment himself. This may have led to **experimenter bias**. Particularly as he was responsible for making the diagnosis of affectionless psychopathy.

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## Evaluation of Bowlby's (1946, 1956) Attachment Theory

Bowlby's ideas had a great influence on the way researchers thought about attachment and much of the discussion of his theory has focused on his belief in **monotropy**.

Although Bowlby may not dispute that young children form multiple attachments, he still contends that the attachment to the mother is unique in that it is the first to appear and remains the strongest of all. However, on both of these counts, the evidence seems to suggest otherwise.

- **Schaffer & Emerson (1964)** noted that specific attachments started at about 8 months and, very shortly thereafter, the infants became attached to other people. By 18 months very few (13%) were attached to only one person; some had five or more attachments.
- **Rutter (1981)** points out that several indicators of attachment (such as protest or distress when attached person leaves) has been shown for a variety of attachment figures – fathers, siblings, peers and even inanimate objects.

Critics such as **Rutter** have also accused Bowlby of not distinguishing between deprivation and privation – the complete lack of an attachment bond, rather than its loss. Rutter stresses that the quality of the attachment bond is the most important factor, rather than just deprivation in the critical period.

Another criticism of the 44 Thieves Study is that it concluded that affectionless psychopathy was caused by maternal deprivation. This is correlational data and as such only shows a relationship between these two variables. Indeed, other **external variables**, such as diet, parental income, education etc. may have affected the behaviour of the 44 thieves, and not, as concluded, the disruption of the attachment bond.

Bowlby's Maternal Deprivation is however, **supported Harlow's research with monkeys**. He showed that monkeys reared in isolation from their mother suffered emotional and social problems in older age. The monkey's never formed an attachment (privation) and as such grew up to be aggressive and had problems interacting with other monkeys.

**Konrad Lorenz (1935)** supports Bowlby's maternal deprivation hypothesis as the attachment process of **imprinting** is an innate process.

There are **implications arising from Bowlby's work**. As he believed the mother to be the most central care giver and that this care should be given on a continuous basis an obvious implication is that mothers should not go out to work. There have been many attacks on this claim:

- Mothers are the exclusive carers in only a very small percentage of human societies; often there are a number of people involved in the care of children, such as relations and friends (**Weisner & Gallimore, 1977**).
  - **Ijzendoorn & Tavecchio (1987)** argue that a stable network of adults can provide adequate care and that this care may even have advantages over a system where a mother has to meet all a child's needs.
  - There is evidence that children develop better with a mother who is happy in her work, than a mother who is frustrated by staying at home (**Schaffer, 1990**).
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[The Effects of Childcare on Social Development](#)

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