

*reviewed by Kristina Lerman
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Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love
by Robert Karen, PhD

Attachment is a concept familiar to most parents. The idea of attachment parenting has been popularized in recent years by Dr. William Sears, whose recipe for raising attached, and presumably successful, children include breastfeeding, using the baby sling, bed sharing and other B's. Even those who view attachment parenting with disdain agree that showering the baby with less than one's total love and devotion, especially in the first years of life, will lead to deep-seated developmental problems. It is striking how radical this idea appeared 50 years ago, and how much work it took to convince both the scientific community and the society at large of its truth. "Becoming Attached" traces the intellectual history of this idea.

First hints of the importance of the early bonds babies form with their caretakers, primarily their mothers, came out of the studies of the effects of maternal separation on hospitalized children. Until the middle of last century, hospital policy for admitted children and babies was to allow no parental contact whatsoever. Indeed, for fear of spreading germs, even nurses were forbidden to touch or hold the babies. Psychologists documented the mental and physical deterioration of hospitalized children in a series of films. These films shook the medical community and led hospital wards to open up to parental visits and eventually stays. As a result, the children thrived. The rate of infection went down, and hospital stays shortened. The children cried less and did not reject their mothers upon returning home. The bond with the mother (or another primary caretaker) has come to be known as attachment. The germ of the idea had been planted, but it would take several decades of research before it would find its way to popular culture and acceptability. Many issues remain hotly debated to this day, but much progress has been made in defining attachment, measuring it, explicating its origins, and understanding its deficits in the lives of children.

First Evidence

In the mid-50's, an American/Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth found herself in Uganda, setting up a study on maternal separation. In the Ugandan society, children are taken in by their grandmothers during weaning to "forget the breast." Ainsworth enrolled two dozen expecting mothers in her study, hoping to follow the infants' development and effect separation had on them. Things did not go according to plan – the separation from the mother during weaning was not complete, hence the type of effect Ainsworth hoped to study was not there. However, she had a treasure trove of data – hours of careful observations of babies' behavior, mother-child interactions, and parenting styles. She realized that what she observed was the formation of attachment. Ainsworth defined broad categories of attachment: secure and insecure, with the latter category further divided into avoidant and anxious attachment. Further, Ainsworth was able to identify parenting styles that led to each type of attachment. Ainsworth's categories of attachment, though with different distributions, and findings on parenting styles were later confirmed with American, German, Japanese, and other children. Her observations now form the cornerstone of attachment thinking.

Ainsworth found that securely attached infants were those that were able to “use the mother as a secure base from which to explore the world.” They were confident, they explored, periodically returning to mother for reassurance. If the mother went out of sight, they were upset, and they openly showed their joy upon her return. The mothers had a sensitive parenting style, feeding them on demand, carrying them, responding immediately to their cries. Some insecurely attached infants never showed their distress at the mother leaving or their joy on her return – indeed, they seemed precociously independent. Other insecurely attached infants were excessively clingy and fussy, unable to tolerate any separation from the mother and unable to be comforted even when their mother was holding them. The causes of insecure attachment were easy to identify: the infants were left by themselves large part of the day, were not responded to when they cried, their mothers were preoccupied and anxious. However, although the amount of care mothers gave to their children was largely predictive of their attachment status, the quality of care was equally important.

When Ainsworth returned to the US, she continued to make dramatic impact on the field. Her most significant contribution in this period was the quantitative tools to assess the quality of the relationship between the mother and the child, ie, the quality of attachment. This tool, known as the Strange Situation, has been used extensively in psychology since. In Strange Situation, a mother-child pair (child under 2 years of age) comes into the lab. The mother tries to involve the child in play with toys. A friendly stranger may come in and start interacting with a child. After a few minutes, mother leaves, and the child’s response is carefully documented by a trained observer. A few minutes later, she returns, and the child’s response is again observed. The child’s behavior correlated with his attachment. Securely attached children became distressed during separation, but eagerly greeted their mother upon return, seeking and enjoying physical contact with her. Anxiously attached children were extremely distressed during separation, but showed both anger and clinginess when mother returned. They seemed unable to be comforted or enjoy physical contact. Avoidant children seemed blasé about the entire separation experience. The striking thing about the Strange Situation was how different the children appeared at home. The secure children cried little, and weathered small separations from the mother, while the avoidant children cried a great deal and were very clingy.

The Big Deal

The Strange Situation finally gave psychologists the tool they needed to start asking and answering important questions: Does the quality of attachment at 12 months predict the quality of attachment at a later age? Does it predict the child’s behavior later in life? How well the child gets along with peers? How well he does at school? What kind of parent she will be? Whether he will be able to form meaningful, lasting relationships? Whether he will be in trouble with the law? The babies who took part in the first large studies are young adults now, and the questions are gradually getting answered. No clear long term consequences of attachments are listed in the book. If anything, attachment is a fluid concept that changes in life with the changing circumstances. The infant’s quality of attachment seems to have no predictive value beyond preschool.

In preschool, securely and anxiously attached or avoidant children had characteristically different behaviors. Avoidant children had the most problems interacting with peers and caregivers. They were often bullies with little empathy for the pain of others. They retreated into a corner when hurt. They were difficult and this was reflected in the negative characterizations the teachers gave them. (E.g., Teachers got used to not being obeyed and repeated commands without giving the child a chance to respond.) Anxiously attached children, on the other hand, were easily frazzled, often becoming targets of bullies. They desired to be comforted by teachers, but were inept at seeking out the comfort. One child in the study, for example, would awkwardly back himself into the teachers lap. The teachers were much more forgiving of such children than of avoidant ones, often babying and indulging them. Securely attached children were the easiest for the teachers and peers to get along with.

How Attachment is Created

Every new finding and methodology in attachment research was greeted with skepticism and even hostility. Although over the years most of the attachment ideas have survived, the controversy lives on. Does the culture matter? Would a culture that values independence produce children who would be judged avoidant? Does the child's inborn temperament matter? Does the Strange Situation measure the parent-child bond or just the child's temperament? True, even attachment theorists admitted there must be an interaction between temperament and parenting style: an easy baby who seldom cries may invite more positive interactions with the parent than a fussy, colicky infant, leading the former to be classified as securely attached and the later as insecurely. A well-designed Dutch study showed that it was really the parenting style that mattered. The study followed over 100 infants born to poor single mothers. All infants were classified as highly irritable at birth – what we would call colicky babies. Half of the mothers were given instructions on how to take cues from and interact sensitively with their babies. For example, a counselor worked with them to help find the soothing techniques that work best for their babies. Significantly many more of the children of mothers in the intervention group were later classified as securely attached than from the other group. The sensitive parenting style, defined as *consistent and positive* response, was likely to lead to securely attached children.

Many more interesting insights into the development of attachment and parenting styles emerged. Mothers of avoidant children were more likely to respond to them when the children were displaying positive behaviors – playing, for example – and withdraw when the child showed negative emotions, such as crying or having a tantrum. Often such mothers wanted to teach their children independence and control of emotions, but what they succeeded in teaching them was to expect rejection. Mothers of the anxiously attached children, on the other hand, were most responsive to their fears. They were inconsistent in their parenting style. When the child was upset, he was scared to approach the mother, not knowing whether she will comfort him or reject him. Mothers of securely attached children were most responsive during the negative displays, when the child was upset, leaving the child alone for the most part while he was playing contentedly. Such children developed the empathetic style that made them popular with their peers and teachers.

Daycare

One of the most burning questions to us, of course, is how does fulltime daycare affect the quality of attachment? The evidence is contradictory and opinions controversial. This is a politically explosive topic, tearing mothers between what's best for them and what's best for their children. Although initial reviews of evidence (in 1970s) found no harm in daycare, the most recent position of experts is that fulltime daycare (more than 20 hours per week) before the age of 1 does put the child at the increased risk of insecure attachment. The risk, however, is small – 8-12% higher. Given that daycare is a fact of life, I, for one, would like to see psychologists, society, daycare, and government focus on how to reduce or mitigate that risk. Some ways to reduce it are well known: more generous parental leave policy, smaller infant to teacher ratio, a single dependable caregiver for the child, better paid, more satisfied childcare professionals. Our government is still refusing to follow the rest of the industrialized world in improving the quality of care for young children.

Conclusion

The book is well researched and extremely well written. Dr. Karen deftly mixes personal observations of the protagonists with their research findings, creating a seamless narrative. Although the book is lengthy, I wish he had included more topics. For example, what are the pathologies associated with attachment disorders? I would have liked to learn more about the reactive attachment disorder (RAD) supposedly observed in neglected or orphanage-reared children, or the controversial treatment for this condition. I would have liked to see a discussion of Dr Sears and the attachment parenting style. Surprisingly, Sears is not mentioned in the book even once. It is clear to me that techniques advocated by Sears to increase physical contact with the infant do promote secure attachment, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient. What matters is a consistent, sensitive and responsive parenting style. (Of course, this could all be bunk. I am currently reading a book that claims that parents have no measurable effect on the personality of their children. Stay tuned...)