



# What can we learn from attachment research?

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### ***What can we learn from attachment research?***

In research involving slightly older children, Calkins et al (1998) found that two year olds were highly influenced by their mothers' strategies for behaviour management in the areas of emotions, behaviour, and physiological regulation. This research team suggests that it is important to identify the origins of particular maternal strategies. Further, since a quarter of the participants in the studies by the Fonagy and Steele teams (see earlier section on special children and attachments) did not follow the suggested intergenerational pattern, it is important to recognise that while intergenerational attachment problems may have been in the majority among their participants, other variables must have intervened for 25 per cent of those involved who overcame this problem. Even Bowlby (1988) himself agreed that attachment research had shown up flaws in his theory. He suggested that a 'theory of developmental pathways should replace theories that involve specific phases of development' Bowlby (1988: 2). Further, Belsky et al (1996) argue that data from different attachment studies show that the ratings of attachment are not stable, they change over time and are context dependent, and that the small sample sizes used in some of the attachment research studies are cause for caution.

Attachments may also be influenced by a family's situation at a particular time. Dunn (1993) would say that we should not be surprised by this. She noted that in her research even mothers changed towards their children at different ages, observing that some seemed to be particularly 'turned on' by their children as 1-year-olds but were less affectionate, compared with other mothers, when their children became more assertive two- or three-year-olds. Meanwhile, Dunn reported, there were other mothers who were especially delighted with their newly talkative and engaging two year-olds.

However, despite the existence of critical challenges to some of the attachment research, the main messages we can take from this work are summed up in the developmental guidelines provided in the Framework *Birth to Three Matters*, which state:-

- Young babies become aware of themselves as separate from others, learning also that they have influence *upon* and are influenced *by* others.
- Babies develop an understanding and awareness of themselves, which is influenced by their family, other people and the environment.
- Young children learn they have similarities and differences that connect them to - but distinguish them from - others.
- Children show their particular characteristics, preferences and interests and demonstrate these in all they do.
- Young babies seek to be looked at, approved of and find comfort in the human face.
- Babies gain attention: positively *or* negatively.
- Young children strive for responses from others, which confirm, contribute to, or challenge their understanding of themselves.
- Children need to feel others are positive towards them, and to experience realistic expectations in order to become competent, assertive and self-assured.

*(Birth to Three Matters – Development Matters: Me, Myself and I and Being Acknowledged & Affirmed)*

Further messages from the research include the following.

- It is preferable to have stability in relationships with children and practitioners.
- A key worker system, with a small number of individually designated practitioners relating to particular children, as advised by Elfer et al (2002) enables responsiveness and sensitivity to individual children.

As Selleck and Griffin (1996: 156) point out on the basis of reviewing children's upbringing in other cultures,

'In Italy, key relationships with a significant adult are not seen as necessary to children's successful development in group day care. Group settings may be seen as attempts to counterbalance the clinging, suffocating closeness of mother and child. ... Children are encouraged to respond to the environment and to small groups of adults and children rather than a key adult.'

So although the above description of the Italian model appears to imply the lack of a key worker system, it still reinforces the idea of a small, significant number of both adults and children being together so that meaningful relationships can be formed. What is warned against is the overly narrow and limiting relationship that can occur if a child is not given opportunities to be with more than one person, whether that is a parent or a practitioner. Selleck and Griffin (1996: 156) add that

'a day educator must also develop a strong and complementary attachment to the infants and toddlers in her care. She will not be a substitute for mothers or fathers or grannies, but she must be able to form a special relationship which can nourish and protect, and is available on a regular and predictable basis during the day.'

So, in addition to advocating complementary attachments with practitioners, which ensure responsive and loving attention (Goldschmeid and Jackson 1994), Selleck and Griffin (1996) agree with Roberts (2002) that effective practice between birth and three will provide individual children with opportunities to develop a positive self-concept, interdependent relationships and a personal identity. In order to do this it is suggested that:-

'the sort of acceptance that babies and young children need from parents and other important people is not acceptance that is dependent on their behaviour; it is acceptance without reservations and without judgements. It can be described as 'unconditional positive regard'...Babies learn that they are acceptable by experiencing, day by day, the results of that acceptance...when an 'important person' smiles at the baby, and when that person comes at the baby's call, the sense that he or she is acceptable is confirmed. This is not simply a passive process; all the time the baby is learning by experience how to win the smiles, how to bring the person. Every experience is a learning experience.' (Roberts 2002: 5-6).