

*Understanding & Supporting
Attachment in the Early Years*

Infant Mental Health Promotion
(IMP) Hospital for Sick Children

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About Infant Mental Health Promotion

- Initiated in 1988 by the Department of Psychiatry, Infant Mental Health Promotion is a coalition of individuals and agency representatives who are dedicated to supporting positive mental health of infants and toddlers.
- Our home is at The Hospital for Sick Children. The Hospital along with other community based agencies across Canada guide our work

What Infants Need

- All infants need to know that they have a “champion” – someone who will:
 - Protect them from harm
 - Respond to their needs – especially when they are distressed

A Working Definition of Attachment

- Attachment is that part of an infant-parent relationship concerned with the infant's sense of safety and protection.
- The attachment relationship reflects the baby's efforts to seek comfort, support, nurturance, and protection from a small number of adult caregivers (Zeanah, 2009)

What “activates” the attachment system?

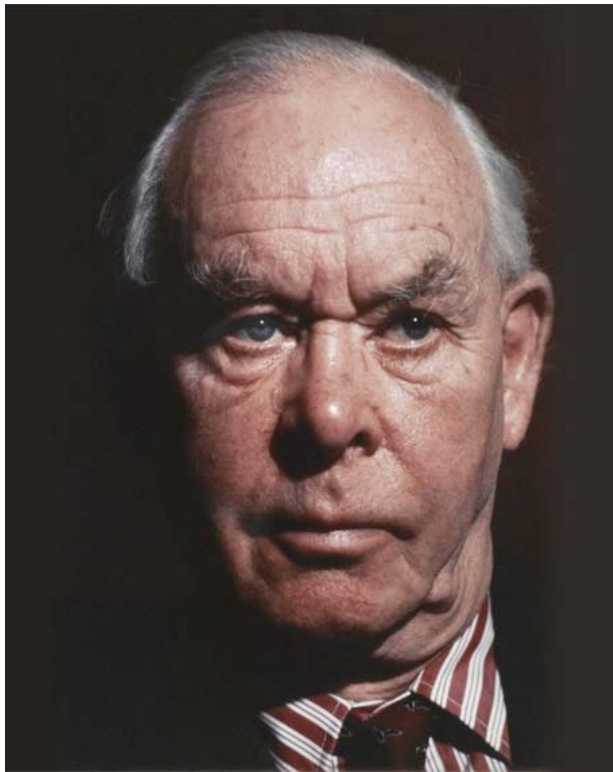
- Whenever safety is threatened, the attachment system is activated
- Activation happens when a baby is:
 - Emotionally upset (e.g., afraid, sad, lonely)
 - Physically hurt
 - III

What happens when it is activated?

- At that time, infants show attachment behaviours such as:
 - Seeking contact with their attachment figure
 - Eliciting caregiving responses by crying or clinging

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- The quality of parents' responses to their infants under these three circumstances determines whether infants learn to:
 - Feel safe with their parents
 - Feel secure with their parents
 - Feel protected
 - Feel confident enough to explore the world around them

The “Attachment Figure”



- John Bowlby, who first drew attention to the importance of attachment, referred to the person who protects and responds as the “attachment figure”

Attachment Has Evolved

- Bowlby concluded that this protective function is common not just to humans but ALL other mammals.
- In the normal course of development, all human babies will form an attachment to at least one significant caregiver in their first year of life.

Mary Ainsworth

- A student of Bowlby's
- Studied with Bowlby and built on his research
- Developed the Strange Situation procedure to assess differences in infants' reactions to a series of separations and reunions with their mothers (Arcus, 1998).

Strange Situation



- Strange Situation
Procedure

What Ainsworth Found

- It was through this research that Ainsworth and her colleagues described three patterns of attachment:
 - Secure
 - Avoidant
 - Resistant

Secure Attachment

- Infants show a balance of attention to the mother and toys
- They explore freely when the mother is present
- When separated, the reactions may vary but upon reunion, their reactions are consistently very positive toward their mother
- These mothers are very quick to respond to their baby when distressed with comfort

Secure Attachment (Kendra Van Wagner)

Characteristics of Secure Attachment

As Children:	As Adults:
1. Able to separate from parent.	1. Have trusting, lasting relationships.
2. Seek comfort from parents when frightened.	2. Tend to have good self-esteem.
3. Return of parents is met with positive emotions.	3. Comfortable sharing feelings with friends and partners.
4. Prefers parents to strangers.	4. Seek out social support.

Avoidant Attachment

With this pattern of attachment babies will:

- Appear to be quite independent and very busy with the toys their mother presents
- They will show little distress at her departure
- They may snub or ignore her upon her return
- Moms are typically unresponsive to distress and seemed uncomfortable with close body contact

Avoidant Attachment (Kendra Van Wagner)

Characteristics of Avoidant Attachment

As Children:	As Adults:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. May avoid parents.2. Does not seek much comfort or contact from parents.3. Shows little or no preference between parent and stranger.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. May have problems with intimacy.2. Invest little emotion in social and romantic relationships.3. Unable or unwilling to share thoughts and feelings with others.

Ambivalent/ Resistant Attachment

- These infant will:
 - appear preoccupied with their mothers
 - They explore very little even when mom is present
 - They become very distressed when mom leaves
 - They will seek comfort when reunited with mom, but will not settle and may even resist mom's comfort
 - These moms are typically inconsistent in their response to their baby's distress

Ambivalent/Resistant Attachment

(Kendra Van Wagner)

Characteristics of Ambivalent Attachment

As Children:

1. May be wary of strangers.
2. Become greatly distressed when the parent leaves.
3. Do not appear to be comforted by the return of the parent.

As Adults:

1. Reluctant to become close to others.
2. Worry that their partner does not love them.
3. Become very distraught when a relationship ends.

Disorganized Attachment

- The fourth classification was later added by Main and colleagues
- Babies have mixed strategies that use any combination of secure, avoidant and resistant attachment behaviors
- This pattern is most predictive of later psychopathology (Zeanah, 2009)

Disorganized Attachment

Kendra Van Wagner)

Characteristics of Disorganized Attachment

At Age 1:

1. Show a mixture of avoidant and resistant behaviors.
2. May seem dazed, confused, or apprehensive.

At Age 6:

1. May take on a parental role.
2. Some children act as a caregiver toward the parent.

-Adapted from Main & Cassidy, 1988

This Relationship is Essential

- This attachment relationship is essential
- Early development is dependent on relationships and the quality of experiences those relationships offer an infant