

Attachment Theory and Offending Behaviour

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In work with children, young people and their families, attachment theory has become a major cornerstone of training and development for practitioners. However, as Aldgate notes "Attachment theory has been much used and abused in child care policy and practice" (2007: 57). This factsheet reviews the core elements of attachment theory and reflects on some of the emerging debates around brain development and offending behaviour by young people.

Key messages

- John Bowlby is generally credited for introducing the basic principles of attachment theory with his student Mary Ainsworth, recognised for developing a methodology which allowed for the empirical testing of his ideas, through The Strange Situation experiment.
- Bowlby believed attachment behaviour to be a specific biological response which arises from the desire of an individual, to seek security and protection from harm through proximity to an attachment figure who is seen as stronger and wiser with the ultimate aim of survival from predators and, thereby, preservation of the species (Bowlby, 1958 cited in Aldgate, 2007: 58).
- Dr Suzanne Zeedyk has conceptualised the need for "proximity-seeking" behaviour in children in evolutionary terms as their response to an imaginary "sabre tooth tiger". Thus, attachment is concerned with the behaviour and emotions "that occur in particular situations where a child is stressed or fearful of a perceived danger" (Aldgate, 2007: 59).
- Howe (2001) has identified four distinct and widely recognised attachment patterns: **Secure**; **Ambivalent**; **Avoidant**; and **Disorganised**. Attachment patterns can generally be observed from when an infant reaches six months of age.
- Solomon and George (1999) outline three groups of caregivers: those who provide a secure base; those who reject and deactivate the infants' attachment behaviours; and, uncertain and helpless parents who provide disorganised caregiving (cited in Aldgate, 2007: 61).
- Critiques of attachment theory have noted that there are inconsistencies in its empirical evidence base (Bolen, 2000) and that it does not integrate structural issues sufficiently. Burman (1994) argues this leads to unfair blaming of mothers for their children's subsequent behaviour. It is increasingly accepted that "children who experience multiple carers from early on will give equal weight to each experience" and that "two secure attachments...will be more powerful than one that is insecure" (Aldgate, 2007: 64). Attachment theory in the 21st century must take into account the wide array of care-giving arrangements now in existence.
- A key question for those working with young people who have experienced multiple early years trauma (often leading or contributing to disorganised attachment patterns) is: Can negative early experiences and related behavioural patterns be improved or changed to reshape a child's or young person's 'internal working model'? Rutter and O'Connor (1999) suggest that it is helpful to think of such experiences not as deterministic but as probabilistic:

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Thus, there is potential for change albeit "those who have had repeated experience of feeling emotionally unsafe will find it hard to show trust in new relationships with adults" (Aldgate, 2007: 66). The challenge remains for practitioners to decide what constitutes care giver support that is "good enough" (Winnicott, 1965).

- Increasingly early years' experience, attachment theory and brain development have become interwoven, not least in the justice context. In the U.S. Courts, defence claims in cases of violent behaviour that the accused could not control himself or was biologically predisposed to aggression and impulsivity are supported by neuroimaging. Shaw (2014) emphasises that it is "important that neuroscience is not given undue weight" and from a Scottish perspective "only reliable, probative" evidence should be admitted in the justice arena. Williams (2014) echoes this noting that "Attachment is fascinating as an idea; when it hardens into science, which is inchoate but treated as fact, its consequences can be devastating".

References

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