

Secure Attachment & The Key Person In Daycare. A Basic Guide To Attachment Theory (video 1 of 4) By Richard Bowlby

Most parents know about government plans to provide high-quality affordable day care, but many parents have heard scare stories that it might harm babies and toddlers. Since I retired from a career in scientific photography I've been trying to understand more about day care by reading research papers and talking to parents and professionals. This isn't my profession, so you'll have to make up your own mind about what I'm saying. My conclusions are that certain kinds of day care experience can benefit babies and toddlers, but that other kinds can harm them. The question is which ones, and why?

I'm going to start by looking at family bonds, then at beneficial experiences, and then at harmful ones. Most parents who have grown up in close-knit families know that when parents are busy, their babies and toddlers are sometimes cared for by family members. This sort of family child care has been going on for thousands of years all over the world, and most children thrive on it. But one aspect that's easily overlooked is that family members know and love the babies and toddlers they care for, and the babies and toddlers know and love the family members who care for them.

But family life in the UK is changing. Over the past 50 years we've needed more and more day care and we've run out of family members to provide it free. Nowadays many parents have to work, and they need to earn more than it costs them in day care expenses. This usually means having babies and toddlers cared for in groups by nursery staff. But it may be difficult for the babies and toddlers to love the staff in the same way that they love a family member. But does this really matter?

The science of family bonds, which researchers call attachment theory, was started in the 1950s by my father, John Bowlby, who died in 1990. He was a child psychiatrist who was also a scientist, and in 1952 he wrote a book called "Child Care and the Growth of Love." But love had too many different meanings for a scientist, and later he called the kind of love that children feel for their parents "attachment": children's attachment to their parents.

After the Second World War he was asked to write a report about the mental health of children growing up in orphanages. The staff were very worried about the children's mental health, but nobody knew what caused their problems. At first my father thought it was the lack of mother love, because the orphans hadn't got their mothers; but then researchers began to see that children who'd become attached to a member of the staff had better mental health than children who hadn't become attached to anyone. The problem wasn't so much the absence of someone who loved the child; it was more the absence of someone whom the child loved. These children hadn't become attached to anyone and this had affected their mental health.

My father then started to refer to children's "attachment figures," because it isn't clear from people's job, nanny, carer, teacher, or even granny or mother, whether or not the child is actually attached to them, and that's what really matters. There's usually something uniquely special about the attachment that a child has to one attachment figure, which is most often the person who's raising them, usually their birth mother. In order to be strictly scientific my father called this person the child's principal or primary attachment figure, because they have the greatest influence on the child's well-being, and the other caring people the child knows and loves he called subsidiary or secondary attachment figures. In the 1960s my father studied all the scientific evidence on family bonds that he could find, and he realized that babies and toddlers get the best start in life if they always have access to an attachment figure, preferably their primary attachment figure, and that their social and emotional resilience is greater when their attachment is secure.

The Early Years Foundation Stage is government legislation that applies to children from birth to 5. In the section on positive relationships it requires that day care providers take a key person approach and that babies and toddlers develop secure attachments. Parents, practitioners, and providers need to understand the key person's role in this and why babies and toddlers in day care need a secure attachment to a key person. Information about the Early Years Foundation Stage is on the Department for Children, Schools, and Families website.

The first 3 years are a time of rapid growth, when experiences of life and love have powerful influences on the rapidly developing brains of babies and toddlers. I'll be looking at the close bonds that parents develop with their babies and the close attachments that babies develop with their parents. If we look back at our own childhood and think of the person who brought us up, that person will usually be our primary attachment figure, the person we most wanted to be with when we were tired or distressed. But babies make attachments to other people besides their primary attachment figure, and for thousands of years loving and committed people have been helping parents to raise their babies. These are secondary attachment figures, and having three or more can benefit babies. Under normal circumstances, babies will gradually become attached to anyone who regularly gives them enough time and attention, and it is best for babies and toddlers in any form of day care to have a secondary attachment to their practitioner, their key person.

The arrangement of the baby's attachment figures looks a bit like a pyramid, with the primary attachment figure at the top—for me was my birth mother—then secondary attachment figures below that, where the key person needs to be, and a third level of familiar people and friends at the base. Everyone else is a stranger. Although most babies and toddlers are happy to be left with a secondary attachment figure such as a grandmother or key person for a few hours, they can benefit from a third-level friend only if an attachment figure is nearby, but babies and toddlers are likely to be frightened of strangers.