

Secure Attachment & The Key Person In Daycare.
A Basic Guide To Attachment Theory (video 2 of 4)
By Richard Bowlby

By about six months most babies' attachment to their primary attachment figure is obvious, but we need to look at which experiences most influence a baby's choice of who that special person will be. Although there are many contributing factors, two types of experience most often matter. First, who's most patient and responds when the baby cries. Alan Sroufe has made a lifetime study of how parents respond to their babies—

“All infants need is for care to be mostly responsive and mostly reliable. They need you to be mostly understanding of them and mostly patient. They don't need you to be always patient, always understanding, always reliable.”

Second, who most often comes to play with the baby and enjoys their company? Allan Schore spent 30 years studying the neuroscience of attachment ethics—

“Most of the studies that have come out of animals have focused on anxiety as being the key affect. The problem is that with human beings in the first year of life, joy is much more the key to the attachment. So essentially what the attachment relationship is, an interactive mechanism for generating very high levels of positive affect, and the positive affect, squares the work of Tompkins, etc., is enjoyment, joy, and interest excitement.”

During the early months most babies learn to distinguish between the people they meet and increasingly show different reactions to specific people, and by six to nine months they can get very upset if a stranger tries to pick them up. This is stranger anxiety, and although most adults have lost their fear of strangers, babies and toddlers have not. Another situation that increases babies' anxiety is being in an unfamiliar place. Babies and toddlers can feel safe in this situation when they're with their primary attachment figure and, to a lesser extent, with a secondary attachment figure. But they'll usually feel afraid if they can't find any attachment figure. Typically they feel lost when they're alone, and the distress gets worse every minute they're separated. This is separation anxiety, and it's very frightening. I could remember getting lost when I was young. I was in a large store and I couldn't find my mother.

Not everyone has these memories, but many can remember how terrifying this feels, and when my children were young, I can remember a visit to the zoo and the sudden shock of realizing that one of our children was missing. Whether it's the terrified child searching for the parents or the shocked parent searching for the child, the only way to stop the desperate feelings of separation is for the parents and child to be reunited. Attachment bonds have powerful responses that drive parents and children back together again, and they've been helping humans to survive through millions of years of evolution.

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, in the statutory guidance to which providers must have regard “the key person should help the baby or child to become familiar with the provision and to feel confident and safe within it, developing a genuine bond with the child and the child's parents and offering a settled close relationship.” From between 12 and 20 months researchers use the “strange situation procedure” to observe a genuine bond and a settled close relationship, which is secure attachment, by taking a systematic look at a situation that might occur for any toddler. The toddler's left with a friendly stranger, without an attachment figure, for just a minute or so in an unfamiliar room with lots of toys. This situation is designed to trigger all three anxieties, separation, strangers, and unfamiliar places, and it briefly stresses the toddler. When the toddler's reunited with the attachment figure and the stranger leaves the room, the researchers record how quickly the toddler is calmed by the attachment figure and how rapidly the toddler starts to explore the toys.

Researchers usually find that on average 55 to 60% of toddlers in the UK are securely attached and 40 to 45% are to some degree insecurely attached. The quality of a toddler's attachment will depend on whether or not their attachment figure can form a secure relationship with the toddler; therefore, a toddler may form a secure attachment to one of their attachment figures, but an insecure attachment to another. In day care, the security of a toddler's attachment will depend on their key person's ability to tune into the toddler's emotional needs and form a genuine bond and a settled close relationship.

Securely attached toddlers tend to have a basic trust that their attachment figure will be physically and emotionally available when they're distressed. They feel free to express the full range of their feelings to the attachment figure, including anger, and when they're left in the strange situation most will start to cry and search for their attachment figure, and when they're reunited the toddler quickly stops crying and starts to explore the toys. Insecurely attached toddlers don't have the same trust, and they develop strategies to manage some of their painful feelings.

There are three main types of strategies that insecurely attached toddlers use and these are demonstrated by their behavior in the strange situation when they're reunited with their attachment figure. One insecure group is “avoidantly” attached, usually about 20 to 25% of toddlers in the UK. They're eager to explore the toys and don't show much separation anxiety when they're left with a stranger, but when their attachment figure returns they tend to stay focused on the toys and avoid being comforted. Another insecure group is “ambivalently” attached. Usually about 10% of toddlers. They're often distressed when they enter the room and don't play with the toys. They show a lot of separation anxiety when they're left with a stranger and can't stop crying even when their attachment figure returns. Sometimes they have a tantrum or they seek comfort and then reject it. The third insecure group are disorganized in their attachment; usually about 10 to 15% of toddlers. They show a mixture of avoidant, ambivalent, and secure behaviors, with no coherent pattern. They may seem dazed, confused, or frightened, and show incomplete or contradictory behaviors, and sometimes they are motionless and freeze.

The quality of the attachment of the primary attachment figure is likely to have the greatest influence on a toddler's well-being and if the relationship continues the way it started, the attachment classification tends to remain the same; but if the relationship changes, then the classification can change as well.

I've only given the briefest outline of this subject and the researchers are very carefully trained to assess the classifications correctly and reliably.