

# Theories of Attachment: The Evidence



***This activity will help you to:***

*Review some important evidence regarding why attachments form*

*Draw conclusions from psychological evidence*

*Evaluate theories of attachment*

*Decide between psychological theories on the basis of the evidence*

## Theories of Attachment

Dollard & Miller's **learning theory** of attachment suggest that attachment is a set of learned behaviours. The basis for the learning of attachments is the provision of food. An infant will initially form an attachment to whoever feeds it. They learn to associate the feeder (usually the mother) with the comfort of being fed and through the process of classical conditioning, come to find contact with the mother comforting. They also find that certain behaviours (e.g. crying, smiling) bring desirable responses from others, and through the process of classical conditioning learn to repeat these in order to get the things they want.

Bowlby's **evolutionary theory** of attachment suggests that children come into the world biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others, because this will help them to survive. The infant produces innate 'social releaser' behaviours such as crying and smiling that stimulate caregiving from adults. The determinant of attachment is not food but care and responsiveness. Bowlby suggested that a child would initially form only one attachment and that the attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationships so disrupting it can have severe consequences.

**Which of these two theories do you find most convincing? Why?**

On the other side of this sheet are some summaries of important research findings into attachment. This evidence can be used to evaluate these two competing theories of attachment and to help us decide which of the two is closest to the truth. Read each research finding and then make notes in answer to the following questions:

- Which of the two theories does it support? Why?
- Are there any problems with the research that limit its usefulness?

When you have looked at each research finding, look at the evidence as a whole. Does it favour one theory more than the other? What does it suggest about the underlying nature of attachments?

## Research Studies of Attachment

### Research Findings

In the 50s and 60s, Harlow conducted a number of studies in which infant rhesus monkeys were separated from their mothers and placed in isolation. In their cages were two artificial 'mothers', a wire one that dispensed milk and a soft cloth one that did not. The monkeys spent much of their time clinging to the 'cloth mother' and would run to it if startled.

Shaffer and Emerson (1964) conducted a large scale observational study of attachment in human infants. They found that infants formed attachments with the adults who were most responsive to them and who provided the most stimulation. In many cases this was not the person who fed and cleaned or spent most time with the child. In many cases, the children formed multiple attachments to the people around them.

Fox (1977) studied children being raised in an Israeli Kibbutz, where children are reared communally. From an early age, children lived in a children's house where they were cared for by a nurse who took care of their daily needs, fed them and so on. They spent only an hour or so each evening with their parents. The children were strongly attached to their parents and showed only relatively weak attachments to the nurses.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) surveyed a large number of respondents to a newspaper advert about their romantic relationships and their childhood memories. They found that their romantic relationships tended to echo their memories of their early relationships with their parents. When they remembered their mothers being sensitive and responsive they tended to report secure and happy romantic relationships. Those who had more negative memories of early attachment were more likely to report either being clingy or being distant.

### Your Comments