Chapter 2

Viewing Parent-Child Interactions Through the Lens of Attachment Theory

> *"The child who is attached to his mother, if he is secure in this attachment, does not need to maintain constant proximity or contact with her. He is content to move away, as long as he knows that she is there. He can even leave the room on his own initiative, and his aplomb in so doing is sometimes in sharp contrast to his consternation when his secure base gets up and moves off." (Ainsworth 1967)*

Three-year-olds Amy, Betty, and Cathy[1] *arrive at the park with their mothers. Amy and Betty run to the swings while their mothers settle onto nearby park benches. Cathy tugs at her mother's sleeve and whines to go to the slide. Her mother sits down on a bench, pulls out her cell phone, and says "You go play." Cathy continues to tug and whine saying "Come with me." Her mother sighs, puts her cell phone in her purse, and follows Cathy to the slide. Once at the slide, Cathy says "It's too high. I'm scared. I want to swing." Amy and Betty jump out of the swings simultaneously, landing hard, falling forward, and bumping heads. Amy gets up, brushes herself off, and walks to the slide. Betty starts to cry and walks towards her mother. Her mother opens her arms with a sympathetic expression asking "Did you get the wind knocked out of you?". Betty nods her head mutely and leans in to give her mother a hug. After they hug, Betty says "I want to go on the slide." Betty's mother says "okay" and Betty runs to the slide.*

Attachment Theory

In their quest to develop a science of relationships, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth developed ways of talking about attachment that differ from the informal use of these terms (Ainsworth 1967; Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1969).

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[1] This is a fictional account written to illustrate an attachment view of parent-child interactions.

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For example, while a casual observer of the hypothetical playground scene might describe Cathy as "too attached" or Amy as "not attached", attachment theorists would focus on their ***patterns*** *of attachment. When viewed through the lens of attachment theory, Betty exhibits a balance between exploration and attachment described as consistent with secure attachment. Although Cathy exhibits more proximity-seeking and contact-maintaining behaviors than Betty and Amy, she would not be described as "more attached". Similarly, Amy would not be described as "unattached" because she fails to seek comfort when hurt. Instead, their patterns of interacting with their mothers would be viewed as patterns of attachment that maximize their chances of maintaining proximity to their mothers.*

Development of Attachment Theory

In order to view child-parent relationships through the lens of attachment theory, it helps to understand how attachment theory developed and how concepts central to attachment theory and research are operationalized. Attachment theory began as the study of the impact of separation and loss. John Bowlby, a child psychiatrist who studied with child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, began developing his ideas about attachment theory and documenting the impact of separation from caregivers on children in England during the 1940s—a time of significant loss and disruption in attachment relationships due to World War II.

Bowlby's colleague, James Robertson, who was trained as a social worker and psychoanalyst, described three phases young children went through when separated from their caregivers—protest, despair, and detachment (Robertson 1953b). Robertson's films of young children's responses to separation from their primary caregiver are compelling and undeniable (e.g. (Robertson 1953a, 1971)). James Robertson and his wife, Joyce Robertson, who was also trained as a social worker and psychoanalyst, had the important insight that the reactions of children following separation from caregivers was impacted by the quality of the attachment relationship prior to the separation as well as the quality of substitute caregiving (Robertson and Robertson 1989). Consistent with their training as social workers, the Robertsons campaigned tirelessly to ameliorate the impact of separation from primary caregivers. For example, they provided foster care for children in their home and vividly describe the children's reaction to separation as well as how they supported them during the separation. James Robertson also worked with hospitals to raise awareness about the impact of separating young children from their caregivers and change policies that limited parents' visits when their children were hospitalized.

Mary Ainsworth, a colleague of Bowlby and Robertson who was trained as a psychologist, was also interested in documenting how the quality of the attachment relationship prior to separation impacted the reaction to separation. She also recognized the need to determine whether a child was attached to a caregiver in order to evaluate the impact of separation. With this goal in mind, she began a naturalistic, observational study of 26 mothers and infants in Uganda where, she had been told, infants were briefly separated from their mothers at the time of weaning (Ainsworth 1967). Although the majority of infants were not separated for weaning, Ainsworth's observations and extensive field notes provided important insights about the development of attachment. She identified several different infant behaviors (listed in Table 2.1) indicating an infant had become attached to a specific caregiver. Ainsworth noted that in addition to being indicators of attachment, these behaviors also facilitated the further development of the attachment relationship. For example, expressing delight and greeting her mother when she walks in the room is an indication an infant is attached to her mother but it also contributes to a positive attachment relationship by increasing the mother's positive feelings towards the

Table 2.1 Behaviors indicating baby is attached to specific caregiver. (Source: (Ainsworth 1967)

Behavior	Example
Differential crying	Baby cries when held by stranger. Caregiver takes baby from stranger and baby stops crying
Differential smiling	Baby smiles frequently and readily at caregiver. Stranger smiles at baby. Baby smiles warily at stranger and turns away
Differential vocalization	Baby vocalizes more frequently and more readily during interactions with caregiver
Cries when caregiver leaves	Baby is playing contentedly on floor and seems oblivious to caregiver's presence. Caregiver leaves the room and baby begins to cry
Follows caregivers	Caregiver leaves the room and baby crawls after caregiver
Visual-motor orientation to caregivers	Baby is playing on floor. Caregiver walks across the room and baby watches her, turning to watch where caregiver is walking
Greeting responses	Caregiver comes into room and baby smiles, vocalizes, and reaches for caregiver
Scrambling	Climbing on mother. Playing with mother's hair or clothes
Burying face in caregiver's lap	Baby is standing by mother and stranger holds out toy for baby. Baby takes toy, turns, buries face in caregiver's lap
Approach through locomotion	Baby crawls towards caregiver
Kissing and hugging	Baby initiates hugs and kisses with caregiver. Baby molds to caregiver when caregiver hugs her
Use of the caregiver as a secure base for exploration	Dog enters room wagging its tail. Baby looks at parent and begins to crawl towards dog
Flight to caregiver as a haven of safety	Baby crawls near dog. Baby begins to cry, turns around, and crawls to caregiver
Clinging	Caregiver comforts frightened baby. Caregiver tries to put baby down on floor but baby continues to cling to caregiver

child. From the perspective of attachment theory, *not* becoming attached to one's primary caregivers or having only a "weak" attachment are highly unlikely. Failure to develop specific attachments to primary caregivers would be highly disadvantageous. Patterns of attachment are viewed as adaptive strategies that allow a child to maintain an attachment with less than optimal caregivers, albeit with some negative developmental consequences if the pattern is insecure.

Phases of Attachment Development

Ainsworth (1967; Ainsworth et al. 1978) and Bowlby (1969) identified four phases in the development of child-parent attachment. Over the first few months of development, children become increasingly active in maintaining the attachment relationship. By the time they have developed a clear-cut attachment towards the end of the first year, the infant has developed a pattern of relating to his primary caregivers based on his experiences with them. When they reach the fourth phase, around age 3 ½ or 4, the child-parent relationship has become a "goal-directed partnership" where true conflict and cooperation is possible. Descriptions of the phases of attachment development are summarized in Table 2.2.

Evaluating Quality of Attachment

In addition to looking for indicators of when a child became attached to a caregiver, Ainsworth used observations from her field studies to describe the quality of the attachment relationship. Ainsworth (1967) initially referred to this as the strength or security of the attachment relationship but in later writings exclusively used the term *security* (Ainsworth et al. 1978); "The obvious first impulse was to try to assess strength of attachment, but this ran up against a brick wall when one realized that this could not be achieved by the mere assessment of the strength or intensity of attachment behavior, for this is situational, and furthermore it is those who are anxiously attached who tend to have the strongest attachment behavior in the natural environment" (Ainsworth 1988).

Based on her extensive naturalistic observations of infant-mother interactions, Ainsworth et al. (1978) developed a standardized observational assessment known as the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) to examine individual differences in the quality of infant-mother attachment. This procedure involves a series of situations designed to assess the balance between exploring the environment and seeking proximity to the attachment figure. The parent and child enter a novel playroom with attractive toys (designed to activate exploratory behavior). The baby is then confronted with a series of increasingly stressful situations designed to activate attachment behavior: the entrance of a stranger who first talks to the mother and then initiates interaction with the baby, an initial brief separation where the mother

Table 2.2 Phases of child-parent attachment. (Sources: (Ainsworth 1967; Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1969))

Phase	Ainsworth label	Bowlby label	Approximate age	Description
1	Initial preattachment phase	Orientation and signals without discrimination of figure	Birth to 8–12 weeks	Uses signaling behaviors such as crying, smiling, and vocalizing to persuade people to approach. Uses rooting, sucking, and grasping to seek and maintain contact
2	Attachment-in-the-making	Orientation and signals directed towards one (or more) discriminated figures	12 weeks to about 6 months	Directs attachment behaviors (behaviors that promote proximity) towards specific individuals (primary caregivers). Attachment behaviors such as crying are more likely to be terminated by these attachment figures than other people. If preference for one or two preferred people over others is the criterion for attachment, the baby could be considered attached at this phase
3	Clear-cut attachment	Maintenance of proximity to a discriminated figure by means of locomotion as well as signals	Approximately 6 months to age 3 ½ or 4 (Onset delayed in infants who do not have limited number of primary caregivers)	Baby clearly discriminates between primary caregivers and other people. Baby actively seeks proximity with attachment figures through crawling and maintains contact through embracing and clinging. Greets primary caregivers when they return. Baby is active in exploring environment. Uses primary caregivers as secure base for exploration and safe haven when frightened. Baby learns to organize attachment behavior with reference to response of attachment figures (beginning of working model of attachment). Ainsworth views this onset of goal-corrected attachment behavior as the onset of attachment
4	Goal-corrected partnership	Goal-corrected partnership	Age 3 ½ or 4 through adulthood	Child is less egocentric and better able to see situations from caregiver's point of view. Language development facilitates development of more complex partnership. There is more recognition of conflicting agendas and child is better able to negotiate with parent and arrive at mutually acceptable compromises

leaves the child with the stranger, and a second brief separation where the child is left alone in the room. Each situation lasts 3 min. However, separations from the caregiver are curtailed early if the infant becomes distressed.

Based on observations of different aspects of the infant's or child's behavior in the SSP (e.g. proximity-seeking, contact-maintaining, avoidance, and resistance), the dyad is given a classification that summarizes the quality or pattern of attachment. In evaluating the security of the attachment relationship, the child's response to reunions with the mother following separations is especially important. Despite the complexity of the coding system, interrater reliability is good when the SSP is coded by well-trained observers (e.g. 80–90 % agreement; kappa = 0.69 to 0.72) (Cassidy et al. 2011; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 1997). Information about training in coding the SSP is available at the Attachment Training web site: http://attachment-training.com/at/. The SSP is considered the "gold standard" for assessing the quality of infant-parent attachment due to the extensive research supporting its relationship to in-home observations and longitudinal outcomes (Zeanah et al. 2011).

The three patterns of attachment originally identified by Ainsworth et al. (1978) are now referred to as organized patterns of attachment. When Ainsworth first described these different patterns of attachment, she assigned a letter to each type, a shorthand that has stuck over the years. Securely attached infants and young children (B) exhibit a balance between proximity-seeking and exploration. They directly communicate distress in situations that provoke uncertainty or fear, seek proximity to their mother when distressed, are soothed by their mother, and return to exploration. In the other two organized patterns of attachment, the baby or young child is primarily focused on seeking and maintaining proximity to the primary caregiver (insecure-ambivalent/resistant) (C) or is primarily focused on exploring the environment (insecure-avoidant) (A) rather than exhibiting a balance between proximity-seeking and exploration. In the first four samples where Ainsworth used this classification system ($N = 106$), 66 % of dyads exhibited a secure attachment (B), 22 % exhibited an avoidant attachment (A), and 12 % exhibited an ambivalent/resistant attachment (C) (Ainsworth et al. 1978).

The classification of disorganized attachment (D) was developed by Main and Solomon (1990) after reviewing videotapes of dyads that were difficult to "fit" into Ainsworth's organized attachment classifications. The infants in these dyads exhibit a variety of conflict behaviors in stressful situations when they are in the presence of their caregiver. These conflict behaviors are not consistent with the organized patterns identified by Ainsworth and came to be understood as a breakdown in the infant's ability to effectively use the mother for emotional regulation under stressful circumstances (Main and Solomon 1990; van Ijzendoorn et al. 1999). Breakdowns sufficient to classify a dyad as disorganized can range from brief interruptions in an otherwise organized pattern of attachment to global disorganization.

The majority of infant-mother dyads classified as disorganized are given a secondary, best-fitting Ainsworth et al. (1978) classification. For example, an infant classified as disorganized/secure[2] (D/B) might exhibit an overall pattern of going to their parent for comfort when distressed but exhibit conflict behaviors in the context of comfort-seeking (e.g. briefly freezing or engaging in stereotypies such as hair twisting or rocking on the approach to the parent or turning around and backing toward the parent for comfort). In the relatively rare circumstance where the dyad exhibits global disorganization and a secondary classification cannot be determined, the dyad is classified as disorganized/cannot classify.

The SSP and coding system has been modified for use with young children (ages 2 through 6) (Cassidy et al. 1992) and 6-year-olds (Main and Cassidy 1985). There is a growing body of literature on the modified SSP for preschool-aged children, making it the best-validated assessment of attachment security for young children (Greenberg et al. 1991; Moss et al. 2004; Speltz et al. 1990, 1995, 1999). Like the infant SSP, the preschool adaptation uses brief separations from the caregiver. In early studies, the infant procedure was followed but separations were lengthened. In later studies, there continue to be longer separations than used for infants (5 min vs. 3 min) but a stranger is not used. The modified SSP for pre-schoolers used in current studies is as follows: The parent and child enter a playroom for 5 min. The parent then leaves for 5 min, returns for 5 min, leaves a second time for 5 min, and returns a second time for 5 min (Moss et al. 2004, 2011). The procedure for 6-year-olds uses a 1 h separation where the child is with a stranger and only one reunion (Main and Cassidy 1985).

When evaluating quality of attachment in infants and young children, it is important to recognize the major developmental shifts that occur between infancy and early childhood. For example, while securely attached infants often cry during the 3 min SSP separations, securely attached pre-schoolers rarely cry during 5 min separations.

Striking developmental shifts from infancy to school-age are seen in longitudinal studies of infants with a disorganized attachment relationship (Hesse and Main 2000). Many of the school-aged children who display the conflict behaviors and anxiety indicative of disorganized attachment as infants display a controlling pattern of interacting with their parent as 6-year-olds. It is as though they have resolved their conflict and anxiety by taking charge of the relationship. Details of the patterns of attachment in infants and pre-schoolers are presented in Table 2.3.

Positive Parenting Behaviors—Attachment Perspective

The parenting behavior identified in Ainsworth's research as central to the development of secure attachment is sensitive responsiveness, i.e. the parent's prompt, consistent, and appropriate response to the baby's attachment signals (Ainsworth

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[2] Dyads with a disorganized/secure attachment classification are considered insecurely attached, a confusing aspect of attachment nomenclature that has led Lyons-Ruth and Spielman (2004) to refer to this group as disorganized-approach.

Table 2.3 Characteristics of attachment patterns in infant and preschool child-caregiver dyads. (Sources: (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Cassidy and Marvin 1992; Main and Solomon 1990))

Pattern	Infant-parent	Preschooler-parent
Secure (B)	The baby may be distressed during separations from caregiver. If she is distressed, she seeks contact with the parent during the reunions and is easily soothed by the parent. The baby actively seeks interaction with parent after separation with little resistance or avoidance. The baby clearly acknowledges parent's return following separations with smile, cry, or approach	Child is interested in interacting with the parent. Child rarely shows extensive crying during separation but may exhibit muted exploration or search for parent. Child may exhibit no distress during separation—continuing to play until parent returns. Child displays relaxed pleasure at parent's return and interaction picks up where it left off prior to separation
Ambivalent/ Resistant (C)	The baby is distressed during separations. During the reunions, the baby both resists and seeks contact with the caregiver	Child is very focused on interacting with the parent and displays little exploratory behavior. May be highly distressed during separation. During the reunions, both seeks and resists contact. May tantrum, whine, or hit the parent
Avoidant (A)	The baby is not distressed during separation when the stranger is present. Ignores parent's return, often by feigning interest in toys. Avoids proximity to mother during reunion	Child is focused on exploration and displays little interest in interactions which indicate a special relationship with parent. During the reunions, child may avoid parent or may engage in interactions that appear civil but formal
[a]Disorganized/Controlling (D)	When caregiver is present, child displays (1) sequential display of contradictory behavior patterns, (2) simultaneous display of contradictory behavior patterns, (3) undirected, misdirected, incomplete, and interrupted movements and expressions, (4) stereotypies, asymmetrical movements, mistimed movements, and anomalous postures, (5) freezing, stilling, and slowed movements and expressions, (6) direct indices of apprehension regarding the parent, or (7) direct indices of disorganization or disorientation	Disorganized: When caregiver is present, child displays (1) disordering of expected sequence of behavior, (2) incomplete or undirected movements, (3) confusion or apprehension, dazed or disoriented expression, or depressed affect. Disorganized/Controlling: During reunion, child takes control of the interaction

[a] A best-fitting secondary pattern is also assigned—e.g. D/A

et al. 1978). As shown in Table 2.1, attachment signals include both affectively positive signals (e.g. smiling, reaching, following) and affectively negative signals (e.g. crying). Subsequent research suggests sensitive responsiveness to infant distress is especially important in the development of a secure infant-parent attachment (Del Carmen et al. 1993; van den Boom 1988, 1989, 1994). However, it is important to note the distinction between sensitive responsiveness and responsiveness. Sensitive responsiveness involves both knowing when to respond to a baby and when to let the baby utilize their emerging capacities for self-regulation (Beebe et al. 2010; van IJzendoorn and Hubbard 2000). Research indicates a curvilinear relationship between responsiveness and secure attachment suggesting sensitive responsiveness involves the "just right" amount of responsiveness - neither too much nor too little (Beebe et al. 2010).

The parenting behavior with the strongest empirical support for its association with attachment is sensitive responsiveness. However, this parenting behavior explains only a portion of the variance in security of attachment. Table 2.4 summarizes some of the other parenting behaviors associated with the development of secure attachment.

Insecure attachment is clearly a risk factor for disruptive behavior; a meta-analysis of 69 studies examining the association of attachment and externalizing behavior problems found a statistically significant association ($d=0.31$) (Fearon et al. 2010). Disorganized attachment had a stronger association with externalizing behavior problems ($d=0.34$) than avoidance ($d=0.12$) or resistance ($d=0.11$).

Research on Attachment Theory-Based Interventions

Numerous interventions targeting infants/young children and their parents cite attachment theory as a theoretical foundation and indicate their intervention improves attachment (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. 2003, 2005; Bernard et al. 2012; Cassidy et al. 2011; Chaffin et al. 2011; Cohen et al. 1999; Dozier et al. 2002, 2007; Eyberg 2005; Hoffman et al. 2006; Ijzendoorn 1995; Moss et al. 2011; Sanders 2010; van den Boom 1988, 1989, 1994). This review focuses on interventions with outcome studies utilizing research-based observational assessments of attachment security (SSP or Modified SSP for Preschoolers).

Watch, Wait, and Wonder (WWW), Infant-Parent/Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP), and Circle of Security (COS) are described below and outcome studies of these interventions are summarized in Table 2.5. Watch, Wait, and Wonder (WWW) is the only attachment-based intervention demonstrated to ameliorate insecure attachment among infants and toddlers referred for mental health concerns (Cohen et al. 1999). WWW is a dyadic, child-led approach based on attachment theory and object relations theory (specifically, Winnicott and Bion's concepts of the holding environment and projective identification). During the first half of the session (20–30 min), the mother is encouraged to get down on the floor with her infant or child and follow his lead. The mother is told if her child initiates an interaction with her

Table 2.4 Parenting behaviors associated with secure attachment. (Sources: (Ainsworth 1967; Ainsworth et al. 1978; Beebe et al. 2010; Bernier et al. 2014; Britner et al. 2005; De Wolff and Van Ijzendoorn 1997))

Behavior	Definition	Examples
Sensitive responsiveness	Parent exhibits prompt, consistent, and appropriate responses to infant's attachment signals	Parent picks up fussing child and pats her back. Parent picks up child who is smiling and reaching for her
Support for exploration	Parent provides a secure base for exploration of the environment by attending to child's exploration and scaffolding problem-solving on difficult tasks	Child crawls away from parent to investigate toys, picks up block, turns, and shows it to parent. Parent smiles encouragingly and says "Did you find a block?" Child is walking around room by holding on to furniture and gets to a gap. Parent holds out fingers to support child until he reaches the next piece of furniture
Synchronous interaction	Parent-child interactions appear reciprocal and mutually rewarding. Parent is neither intrusive nor unresponsive. Interactions are characterized by turn-taking. This has been described as "serve and return"	Baby smiles at mother, babbles, and quiets. Parent says "Are you telling me about your day?" Baby babbles again
Attunement	Parent facial expressions and behaviors indicating parent is in tune with child's inner state	Baby fusses. Parent exhibits sympathetic facial expression as he picks up baby. Baby crawls quickly towards toys. Parent exhibits excited facial expression as she says animatedly "You are excited to play, aren't you?"
Delight in child	Positive affect towards child or child's activities	Child is sitting on floor examining his hands. Parent looks at child and beams
Positive physical contact	Positive physical contact between parent and child initiated by either parent or child. Positive physical contact when the child is distressed is especially important to the development of a secure attachment	Child fusses and parent picks him up and rubs his back. Child leans against parent's knee and parent leans down and hugs child

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