Breastfeeding: A Psychological Perspective

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Contents

- Attachment Theory
- Neurobiology
- Breastfeeding for secure attachment and normal brain development
Children have a biological *need* to be close to their caregiver/s.

Breastfeeding is a primary way of meeting that need.
It’s not just about the milk...
Attachment Theory

- ‘Attachment’ has to do with the relationship between one person and another.
- Developed by John Bowlby (British Psychiatrist) in 1950s.
Types of attachment

- **Secure** - trust their caregiver. Feel safe and loved.

- **Insecure** - cannot trust their caregiver. Mixture of feelings.
Secure children:

- Cry less than insecure kids
- Can express their needs
- Increasingly independent
- Psychologically healthy
- Positive relationships
Measuring Attachment: The Strange Situation
Secure attachment

- Results from frequent and sustained physical contact with a primary caregiver,
- Sensitivity of that caregiver to the infant’s signals, and
- Reliable responsiveness
Insecure attachment

Three categories:

- **Ambivalent** - unpredictable parenting
- **Avoidant** - rejecting parenting
- **Disorganized** - frightening parenting
Attachment classification tends to remain stable into adulthood.

Securely attached kids do better throughout life.
### Secure Attachment

**PARENTING:** Warm, sensitive, consistent caregiver who responds quickly to baby’s cries.

**BEHAVIOUR:** Baby uses mother as ‘secure base’ from which to explore. Cries least. Most compliant, and most easily put down after being held.

**STRANGE SITUATION:** Actively seeks caregiver when distressed. Readily comforted.

### Ambivalent Attachment

**PARENTING:** Unpredictable or chaotic caregiver. Often attentive but out of synch with baby. Most tuned in to baby’s fear.

**BEHAVIOUR:** Limited exploration. Baby cries a lot, is clingy and demanding. Often angry, upset by small separations, chronically anxious.

**STRANGE SITUATION:** Difficult to soothe after separation. Angry and seeking comfort simultaneously.

### Avoidant Attachment

**PARENTING:** Emotionally unavailable or rejecting caregiver who dislikes “neediness”. May push child to be ‘independent’

**BEHAVIOUR:** Seeks little physical contact with caregiver (by 1 yr old), randomly angry. Unresponsive when held but upset when put down.

**STRANGE SITUATION:** Avoids caregiver when distressed. Seems unmoved by separations.

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*Summary of Attachment Patterns taken from Karen, 1998, pp. 443-445*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secure Attachment</th>
<th>Ambivalent Attachment</th>
<th>Avoidant Attachment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRESCHOOL TEACHERS:</strong> Treat child in warm, matter-of-fact, age-appropriate ways.</td>
<td><strong>PRESCHOOL TEACHERS:</strong> Indulge, excuse, and treat child as less capable than others their age.</td>
<td><strong>PRESCHOOL TEACHERS:</strong> Become angry and controlling.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>AT AGE SIX:</strong> Warm and enthusiastic with parents. Open and meaningful exchanges. Comfortable with physical contact.</td>
<td><strong>AT AGE SIX:</strong> Mixes intimacy seeking with hostility towards parents. May be affectedly cute, ingratiating or worried when mother is absent.</td>
<td><strong>AT AGE SIX:</strong> Abrupt, neutral, unenthusiastic exchanges with parents. Absence of warm physical contact.</td>
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<td><strong>MIDDLE CHILDHOOD:</strong> Forms close friendships and is able to sustain them in larger peer groups.</td>
<td><strong>MIDDLE CHILDHOOD:</strong> Trouble functioning in peer groups. Difficulty sustaining friendships when in larger group.</td>
<td><strong>MIDDLE CHILDHOOD:</strong> No close friends or friendships marked by exclusivity, jealousy. Often isolated from the group.</td>
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<td><strong>SECURE ADULT:</strong> Easy access to wide range of feelings and memories (pos &amp; neg). Balanced view of parents. If insecure in childhood has worked through hurt and anger.</td>
<td><strong>PREOCCUPIED ADULT:</strong> Still embroiled with anger and hurt at parents. Unable to see own responsibility in relationships. Dreads abandonment.</td>
<td><strong>DISMISSIVE ADULT:</strong> Dismisses importance of love and connection. Often idealizes parents but actual memories don’t corroborate. Shallow self-reflection (if any).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Usually has securely attached child.</td>
<td>Usually has ambivalently attached child.</td>
<td>Usually has avoidantly attached child.</td>
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Breastfeeding & Attachment

- Correlation between B/F & attachment.
- All breastfeeding is not equal from a psychological perspective.
Breastfeeding & Attachment

Babies who are breastfed on demand are more likely to develop secure attachment.
Internalising Attachment

- Attachment relationship is internalised.
- Becomes a ‘working model’ of the world.
- Parenting style leads to physical changes in the brain.
The Human Brain
The Human Brain

- 100 billion neurons
- 60 trillion connections
- Begins developing in early pregnancy
- Takes around 20 years to reach its adult form
Brain Development

- Normal brain development involves cycles of overproduction and loss.
- Adult brain has fewer neurons and connections than a young brain.
Neural Networks

A neural network with close-up of a synapse
“Nature and nurture work together to shape our brains”

(Cozolino, 2006, p. 81).
“The brain is a social organ that is built through experience”

(Cozolino, 2006, p. 7)
Allan Schore & others: The Neurobiology of Attachment
Early relationships affect the development of our brains and our capacity for psychological wellbeing
Breast really is best!

... but it also matters *how* we breastfeed ...

because the milk isn’t the most important part
Recommended Reading


- Robert Karen (1994). *Becoming attached: First relationships and how they shape our capacity to love.*