

This Week's Citation Classic®

Bowlby J. The nature of the child's tie to his mother.

Int. J. Psycho-Anal. 39:350-73, 1958.

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In place of current theories to account for the development of a child's tie to his mother, notably a secondary drive derived from food satisfaction, it is proposed that a baby is equipped with a number of primary instinctual responses that become focussed on his mother and result in proximity-keeping. [The *SCI*® and *SSCI*® indicate that this paper has been cited in over 305 publications.]

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Working as a psychoanalytically qualified child psychiatrist before the war, I was struck by the high incidence of disrupted or otherwise disturbed relationships that children referred to a clinic had with their mothers and decided to focus research in this area. A statistical study showed that children and adolescents given to repeated stealing and who appeared self-centred and affectionless were significantly more likely to have experienced prolonged separations from, or repeated changes of, the mother figure during their first five years than a comparison group.^{1,2}

After war service I resumed this research and also undertook a study of the mental health of homeless children for the World Health Organization. My report, in which I reviewed several studies that showed a link between deprivation of maternal care during early years and subsequent personality disturbance, was published³ and created sharp controversy.

Meanwhile, my research assistant, James Robertson, was making observations of how very young children respond when removed

from their families and placed in a strange place with strange people. This led us to formulate the phases of response as those of protest, despair, and detachment. After returning home the children usually became intensely anxious about a further separation.⁴ The question then arose: If the disruption of the bond between child and mother leads to distress and anxiety and, if prolonged, to personality disorder, how best can we understand the nature of the bond disrupted?

During the 1950s the relationship between child and mother was always referred to as "dependency," was regarded as childish and so should be promptly outgrown, and was assumed to develop only because the mother feeds him. My observations of the way young children relate to parents, and especially the way the relationship develops as children grow older, did not square with these ideas. Hearing of the work of K.Z. Lorenz⁵ on the imprinting of goslings to parents, which occurs without the parents providing food, led me to study the ethological literature on the development of infant-parent relationships in other species, notably in nonhuman primates.

As a result, I advanced the view that the tie between human child and mother develops as a consequence of a child being born equipped with a number of primary instinctual responses that lead to his keeping in close proximity to his familiar mother figure. The responses listed were sucking, clinging, and following, and also crying and smiling, which lead his mother to maintain proximity to him. Proximity-keeping, referred to as attachment behaviour, was recognized as persisting into later years and regarded as a valuable part of human nature.

These ideas met with a cool response from clinicians but, after elaboration,⁶ have led to exciting research by developmental psychologists.^{7,8} Attachment, with its function of protection, has now replaced dependency as the preferred concept.

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2. ———. *Forty-four juvenile thieves: their characters and home-life.* London: Bailliere, Tindall & Cox, 1946. 56 p. (Cited 80 times.)
3. ———. *Maternal care and mental health: a report prepared on behalf of the World Health Organization as a contribution to the United Nations programme for the welfare of homeless children.* Geneva: World Health Organization, 1951. 179 p. (Cited 515 times since 1955.) [See also: Bowlby J. Citation Classic. *Current Contents/Social & Behavioral Sciences* 18(50):18, 15 December 1986.]
4. Robertson J & Bowlby J. A two year old goes to hospital: a scientific film. *Proc. Roy. Soc. Med.* 46:425-7, 1952.
5. Lorenz K Z. The comparative method in studying innate behaviour patterns. (Society for Experimental Biology) *Physiological mechanisms in animal behaviour.* New York: Academic Press, 1950. p. 221-68. (Cited 200 times.)
6. Bowlby J. *Attachment and loss. Volume 1. Attachment.* London: Hogarth Press; New York: Basic Books, 1969. 428 p. (Cited 1,670 times.) [See also: Bowlby J. Citation Classic. (Smelser N J, comp.) *Contemporary classics in the social and behavioral sciences.* Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1987. p. 183.]
7. Ainsworth M D S, Blehar M C, Waters E & Wall S. *Patterns of attachment: a psychological study of the strange situation.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978. 391 p. (Cited 370 times.)
8. Bretherton I & Waters E, eds. Growing points of attachment theory and research. (Whole issue.) *Monogr. Soc. Res. Child Develop.* 50(1-2), 1985. 318 p.