# Attachment Theory Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

## The Importance of Early Emotional Bonds

Attachment theory is focused on the relationships and bonds between people, particularly long-term relationships including those between a parent and child and between romantic partners.

### What is Attachment?

Attachment is an emotional bond to another person. Psychologist [John Bowlby](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesal/p/john-bowlby.htm) was the first attachment theorist, describing attachment as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings."

Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life. He suggested attachment also serves to keep the infant close to the mother, thus improving the child's chances of survival.

The central theme of attachment theory is that primary caregivers who are available and responsive to an infant's needs allow the child to develop a sense of security. The infant knows that the caregiver is dependable, which creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world.

### Ainsworth's "Strange Situation"

In her 1970's research, psychologist [Mary Ainsworth](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesal/p/ainsworth.htm) expanded greatly upon Bowlby's original work. Her groundbreaking ["Strange Situation"](http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle_2.htm) study revealed the profound effects of attachment on behavior. In the study, researchers observed children between the ages of 12 and 18 months as they responded to a situation in which they were briefly left alone and then reunited with their mothers.

Based upon the responses the researchers observed, Ainsworth described three major styles of attachment: secure attachment, ambivalent-insecure attachment, and avoidant-insecure attachment. Later, researchers Main and Solomon (1986) added a fourth attachment style called disorganized-insecure attachment based upon their own research. A number of studies since that time have supported Ainsworth's [attachment styles](http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle.htm) and have indicated that attachment styles also have an impact on behaviors later in life.

### Why Attachment Matters

Researchers have found that attachment patterns established early in life can lead to a number of outcomes. For example, children who are securely attached as infants tend to develop stronger [self-esteem](http://psychology.about.com/od/sindex/f/what-is-self-esteem.htm) and better self-reliance as they grow older. These children also tend to be more independent, perform better in school, have successful social relationships, and experience less depression and anxiety.

### Patterns of Attachment

### Characteristics of Secure Attachment

[Secure attachment](http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle_4.htm) is marked by distress when separated from caregivers and are joy when the caregiver returns. Remember, these children feel secure and able to depend on their adult caregivers. When the adult leaves, the child may be upset but he or she feels assured that the parent or caregiver will return.

When frightened, securely attached children will seek comfort from caregivers. These children know their parent or caregiver will provide comfort and reassurance, so they are comfortable seeking them out in times of need.

### Characteristics of Ambivalent Attachment

[Ambivalently attached](http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle_5.htm) children usually become very distressed when a parent leaves. This attachment style is considered relatively uncommon, affecting an estimated 7-15% of U.S. children. Research suggests that ambivalent attachment is a result of poor maternal availability. These children cannot depend on their mother (or caregiver) to be there when the child is in need.

### Characteristics of Avoidant Attachment

Children with an [avoidant attachment](http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle_6.htm) tend to avoid parents or caregivers. When offered a choice, these children will show no preference between a caregiver and a complete stranger. Research has suggested that this attachment style might be a result of abusive or neglectful caregivers. Children who are punished for relying on a caregiver will learn to avoid seeking help in the future.

### Characteristics of Disorganized Attachment

Children with a [disorganized attachment](http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle_7.htm) often display a confusing mix of behavior and may seem disoriented, dazed, or confused. Children may both avoid or resist the parent. Some researchers believe that the lack of a clear attachment pattern is likely linked to inconsistent behavior from caregivers. In such cases, parents may serve as both a source of comfort and a source of fear, leading to disorganized behavior.

### The Stages of Attachment

Researchers Rudolph Schaffer and Peggy Emerson analyzed the number of attachment relationships that infants form in a longitudinal study with 60 infants. The infants were observed every four weeks during the first year of life, and then once again at 18 months. Based upon their observations, Schaffer and Emerson outlined four distinct phases of attachment.

1. **Pre-attachment Stage:** From birth to three months, infants do not show any particular attachment to a specific caregiver. The infant's signals such as crying and fussing naturally attract the attention of the caregiver, and the baby's positive responses encourage the caregiver to remain close.
2. **Indiscriminate Attachment:** From around six weeks of age to seven months, infants begin to show preferences for primary and secondary caregivers. During this phase, infants begin to develop a feeling of trust that the caregiver will respond to their needs. While they will still accept care from other people, they become much better at distinguishing between familiar and unfamiliar people as they approach seven months of age. They also respond more positively to the primary caregiver.
3. **Discriminate Attachment:** At this point, from about seven to eleven months of age, infants show a strong attachment and preference for one specific individual. They will protest when separated from the primary attachment figure (separation anxiety), and begin to display anxiety around strangers (stranger anxiety).
4. **Multiple Attachments:** After approximately nine months of age, children begin to form strong emotional bonds with other caregivers beyond the primary attachment figure. This often includes the father, older siblings, and grandparents.

While this process may seem straightforward, there are a number of different factors that can influence how and when attachments develop. First is the opportunity for attachment. Children that do not have a primary care figure, such as those raised in orphanages, may fail to develop the sense of trust needed to form an attachment. Second, the quality of care-giving is a vital factor. When caregivers respond quickly and consistently, children learn that they can depend on the people who are responsible for their care, which is the essential foundation for attachment.

### Problems with Attachment

What happens to children who do not form secure attachments? Research suggests that failure to form secure attachments early in life can have a negative impact on behavior in later childhood and throughout the life. Children diagnosed with oppositional-defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) frequently display attachment problems, possibly due to early abuse, neglect or trauma. Clinicians suggest that children adopted after the age of six months have a higher risk of attachment problems.

While attachment styles displayed in adulthood are not necessarily the same as those seen in infancy, research indicates that early attachments can have a serious impact on later relationships. For example, those who are securely attached in childhood tend to have good self-esteem, strong romantic relationships and the ability to self-disclose to others. As adults, they tend to have healthy, happy and lasting relationships. For more information, see this article on [attachment styles.](http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle.htm)

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After reading this article, write a one –two paragraph summary on attachment theory and its components.