

# What Is 'Attachment'?

You probably have a fair idea what 'attachment' means in the everyday sense of the word – but it also has a more psychological definition.

The psychoanalyst John Bowlby developed 'attachment theory' in 1958, based on his work in the 1930s in a Child Guidance Clinic in London, treating emotionally disturbed children. Bowlby argued that much of our behaviour and emotional patterns can be explained by our early life experiences.



Attachment can be understood as an 'emotional bond' and 'lasting psychological connection between people'.

Bowlby suggested that our first attachment relationships act as a 'blueprint' for our experiences of all other relationships as we grow up.

According to attachment theory, human beings are biologically 'pre-programmed' to establish attachments with other people, as social connections have helped humans to survive from the stone age to the present.



Human babies are born with an innate need to attach to one main caregiver in their very early years, as a primary close attachment means survival is more likely than multiple attachments as a baby. Babies naturally seek closeness to their caregivers and feel more relaxed in the presence of adults who care and love them. Human infants have evolved to exhibit behaviours which will encourage caregiving from people around them, which includes crying, smiling, crawling, and even having a cute appearance!

The first five years of a baby's life are a critical period for forming a primary attachment as a baby.

A bond between a baby and parent may not form because the adult cannot give the baby enough emotional responsiveness, because they are physically absent, or because they are unkind to the baby.

If an attachment is not formed during the first five years, then the baby may grow into a child and adult who struggles to form meaningful relationships with other people.

We will explore why this happens in more detail.

**Why Is Attachment So Important?**

A positive relationship between a baby and a caregiver stimulates growth in the developing brain and enables the growing child to learn about themselves, other people, and the world around them in a supportive and loving way.

If a baby doesn't have a primary attachment figure, the child often grows into a young person who has difficulties with their social, emotional, and brain development.

A baby who experiences a positive attachment with their mother will grow into a child who trusts that other people will be able to meet their emotional and physical needs, such as comforting them with a hug when they are sad. This is because they know, through the power of a loving relationship, that they are valuable and worthy of care and affection. They will feel calm and confident that even if they are left alone for a short time people who care for them will return. They will be curious about the world around them, and will feel self-assured in exploring their environment, without feeling anxious that people will leave them when they're not looking.

