



## Attachment Theory



Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1980, 1982) (AT) can be used to explain the relationship of teachers as expert adults who support learners' growth in early childhood to young adulthood from school to university education. This theory is one of the most popular psychological theories in the 20th century. The AT postulates that there is an attachment behavioral system govern human interaction, children are born with the tendency to engage in a set of attachment behaviors that evolution designs to ensure that a young child is proximate to figures who could give protection to the child (attachment figures, usually but not necessarily, the parents). These attachment figures can defend the vulnerable child from threats, hence the system enhances the child's chance of survival. This theory is especially pronounced in more advanced animals such as humans, whose young are generally born immature and lacking the abilities of self-defense.



The AT is best illustrated in the Strange Situation. In this experiment, a young child (usually an infant) first stays in a laboratory room in the presence of his/her caretaker (generally the mother) and a stranger (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978). After some time, the mother departed from the laboratory, leaving the child alone with the stranger. In this circumstance, the child would start to show certain behaviors when as he/she notices that his/her mother is missing. He/she would begin to cry or otherwise engage in behaviors that may draw the attention of his/her mother or other adults (i.e., engage in attachment behaviors), until his/her mother appears in the laboratory room again. This demonstrates that attachment behaviors primarily function to ensure the child's proximity to their attachment figures.





During infancy, primary caretakers such as parents, grandparents, neighbors, older siblings and daycare workers tend to assume the role of attachment figures. When infants are tired, ill or otherwise discomforted, they tend to seek proximity to their attachment figures, as the caretakers are physically present, they tend to be calmer (Heinicke & Westheimer, 1966). This is especially true for secure attachment – that shows that caretakers are available and providing consistent support. Caretakers who are unresponsive to the child’s needs tend to produce avoidant children, who are similarly unresponsive to their caretakers, while caretakers who are inconsistent (sometimes acting affectionately while sometimes acting cold) tend to produce anxious children, who tend to demonstrate hyperactive attachment behaviors. Children with secure attachment, in contrast, are known to be emotionally responsive without being anxious. It is thought that secure attachment fosters positive socio-emotional outcomes and corresponds to positive social support.

Individuals experience attachment in infancy would develop an internal working model of what relationships are like. Secure children tend to expect friends, teachers and for adults, spouses around them to be emotionally available for support, acting as a significant other to the growing children, adolescents and adults. This largely unconscious process can extend its influence well into adulthood that benefits one’s growth positively (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). For instance, it is known that infants whose caretakers have been unresponsive tend to favor ‘deactivating’ their Attachment Behavioral System – they prefer to avoid forming intimate and interdependent relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001).

AT has been revised according to advances in research in the field of psychology (Mercer, 2011). For instance, researchers discovered that later social interactions could have greater impact on later social behavior than early experiences (Kagan, 1998). The experimental setting of AT is controlled in a stressful situation, namely, the Strange Situation, it is more appropriate that the study of AT should be based on a non-stressful situation, as interaction in normal daily situations can show better how the attachment model works saliently. Besides, AT may extend beyond the current explanation which lay the focus on only the primary figure (i.e. mother), to include playmate peers (Lee, 2003). Recent development of cognitive neuroscience shows the power of the neurobiology of attachment in which early encounters of social relationships in infancy may create schemas that affect a person’s relations with others. It is assumed that as children grow, the internal working model is open to amendment in later life (Baldwin, 1992; Shaver et al., 1996).

Humans are constantly perceiving and evaluating the availability and emotional closeness of the people around them. Even if an infant fails to form secure attachments in early life, he/she could still change in later life – provided that there are significant others who are emotionally available in the said later life. Thus, while teachers cannot alter their students’ early life, this ‘later life’ is where teachers can intervene. Thus, AT underscores the importance of positive affect that is created by the close bonds between teachers and learners of any age. AT can therefore support the cultivation of relatedness and a supportive environment in the classroom for learners.



## References

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