2ND EDITION

EARLY CHILDHOOD THEORIES *Today*

AARON BRADBURY
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DEDICATION

For my lovely dad, **David Edward Bradbury**

We may have lost you but never forgotten. In the quiet moments, reflection has begun to settle in. My mind drifts back to childhood, mud pies, imaginary worlds, laughter in the allotment. It was in those simple, playful moments that you gave me the greatest gifts: space to explore, the freedom to grow, and the unspoken language of love.

Play was how we connected. It was how you taught me joy, resilience, and the beauty of being fully present. Now, as I walk through grief, it's those joyful memories that hold me up.

This book is for you, Dad, because you showed me that play is more than fun. It's connection. It's healing. It's a foundation that carries us, even when we don't realise it.

We need more play in this world, not just for children, but for the adults they'll become.

Thank you for showing me the way.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Dr Aaron Bradbury is an academic and researcher for Early Years and Childhood and Early Childhood Studies. Aaron is a member of the Coalition for the Early Years on the Birth to Five Matters Non-Statutory Guidance for the EYFS and chaired and written the Equalities and Inclusion section with colleagues in the sector. Aaron is a published author on early childhood theories and child development. He sits on many national and early childhood groups and is also a consultant on many aspects of early years and child development. Aaron has spoken as a keynote speaker both nationally and internationally on contemporary issues within the early childhood sector. Aaron has a passion for making the voice of the child, nurturing through a diverse lens and pioneers of early childhood the foreground of practice.

Ruth Swailes has over 30 years' experience in education and has taught every year group from Nursery to year 6. She has held a range of senior leadership roles including primary headship. Ruth has worked as a School Improvement Advisor, Inspector, Early Years Advisor, strategic lead and consultant in several Local Authorities and has a proven track record of supporting schools to improve outcomes for children. Ruth's particular passion is working with children in the 0–7 range and she currently works with settings, providers, MATs, LAs, Hubs and schools nationally and internationally providing training and support. Ruth Is the lead developer, author and trainer for the Oxford University Press International Early Years Curriculum for children aged 2–6. She was named Nursery World Trainer of the Year in 2021 and recognised by ISC research as a leading influencer in International Education in 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kate Irvine is a Foundation Years Consultant for a local authority and a governor of a maintained nursery school with over 20 years of experience in the Birth to Five sector, nurseries, children's centres and primary education. She is a qualified teacher and has a master's in educational practice with specialist knowledge in the early years. Kate is particularly interested in assessment and transition, literacy and the reception year of the EYFS, and is currently developing an academic research project into supporting transitions into year one.

Meredith Hare is a Senior Lecturer and Course Leader (Early Years) at Nottingham Trent University. Meredith has an industry background in the Early Years in both the private and maintained sector and managed a day nursery. Meredith progressed into training and onto teaching in Further Education for over 10 years. In 2018, Meredith began at Nottingham Trent University and is now a lead for a Special Interest group (SIG) in Early Childhood which focuses upon current agendas and debates within the sector. Her research interests include leadership, the value and recognition of play within our society and the curricula for Early Childhood Degrees.

Pam Jarvis is a chartered psychologist, historian, researcher and grandparent. She received her PhD from Leeds Beckett University in 2005 for her thesis on the narratives children create in spontaneous rough and tumble play. She retired from lecturing in 2019 and is now a journalist and author. She writes articles, books and chapters relating to theory and practice in education and early years, including the best sellers 'Perspectives on Play' and 'Early Years Pioneers', and contributes to staff training initiatives. She has recently published her first novel.

Philippa Thompson is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Nottingham Trent University. Philippa is Vice Chair of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network and Chair of the QAA ECS Subject Benchmark Statement review. Among her 14 years of practice experience, Philippa worked in many early year's roles including senior leadership, international outdoor education and community partnership within Sure Start. Philippa also has nearly 20 years of Higher Education experience with research interests centred around the hidden voices of parents and families, rights and participation, well-being and food allergies and anaphylaxis.

Tamsin Grimmer is an experienced early years consultant, author and lecturer. She is the Early Years Director of Linden Learning and passionate about how young children learn. She believes that all children deserve practitioners who are inspiring, dynamic, reflective and loving.

Tamsin particularly enjoys delivering training and supporting early childhood educators to improve outcomes for young children.

Valerie Daniel is a qualified Teacher with over 30 years' experience with the last 13 years as a Maintained Nursery School head teacher. Her other roles include being a trustee for the Birmingham Nursery Schools Collaboration Trust (BNSCT) currently the chair of the Trust as well as sitting on a number of Local Authority Strategic groups. Valerie is one of 15 Birmingham Association of Maintained Nursery Schools (BAMNS) head teachers who work within a contractual collaboration. Valerie has a deep interest in the dynamics of the current Early Years Sector and received her Doctorate in Education from the University of Birmingham on her thesis titled 'The Perceptions of a Leadership Crisis in the Early Years Sector (EYS)'. She is also a trained Systems Leader and Leadership Mentor for other head teachers and leaders in the Early Years Sector.

Angelica Celinska is an early childhood advocate, lecturer and founder of The Voice of Early Childhood (TVOEC). Angelica is working on giving the early childhood sector a voice through TVOEC by encouraging shared reflection, dialogue, collaboration and healthy debate. Angelica's areas of expertise are community building, networking, career progression and bridging the gap between academia and practice. She has worked in practice across various settings and in different roles, before moving into content creation aimed at enhancing training and development for both educators and parents across the globe. This has involved working in publishing, training, academia, events and resourcing learning environments.

David Wright is the former owner of Paint Pots Nurseries, an award-winning group of daycare settings based in Southampton, for whom he continues to work as an Early Years Ambassador. Among many roles, David is a board member of and national representative to the World Forum on Early Care and Education and an advisor to the National Association of Headteachers. He is an author, broadcaster, commentator, presenter, consultant, TEDx speaker, trainer and a trustee for several charities. In 2022, he was the recipient of a lifetime achievement award from Nursery World magazine in recognition of services to early years.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood pioneers and theorists are the backbone of our practices in working with children 0–8 years and families. We continually hear about how we need to link theory to practice as it allows us to continue to put the child at the centre of what we do. The Early Childhood Pioneers and theorists are undoubtably influencing our thinking when it comes to child development and our practices.

This book engages the reader, that's you by the way, in what is deemed to be thought-provoking practices when it comes to Early Childhood theories of today. In this second edition, we wanted to highlight some of the chapters from the first book but also bring in some theorists that have influenced Early Childhood thinking today.

AIMS OF THE BOOK

The main aim of this book is to support your journey as an Early Childhood professional, practitioner or student doing training in the field of Early Years, Early Primary Education, Early Childhood and Community Roles. It is a text which will be able to support you to demonstrate how to apply your knowledge and understanding to Early Childhood in a holistic way. The book will also go a long way to supporting you with being able to apply theory to practice. Working across a range of Early Childhood practices, we know how daunting or confusing it can be with the wide range of theorists and pioneers out there and which is the best one for approaching certain aspects of your practice. We think we can safely say that no matter which theorist you use from this text, whether that is a modern day one or one from the past, we have chosen them for their child-centred approach to Early Childhood practices, so meets many aspects of being an Early Childhood professional today and what is needed to be a 21st-century professional.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The book is divided into 10 chapters, with the importance of love, child-centred, pedagogical approaches in children's learning and everyday lives. The book allows you to be able to see those common threads running throughout the text. The book is also unique, as we felt that professionals in Early Childhood needed to be able to see how theories of Early Childhood are helping shape our landscape of practice today.

The book has been written by several expert voices, depicting their ideas of how these theorists and pioneers link to Early Childhood practices. Each chapter gives you a detailed account of who the theorists and pioneers are and supports you with critical thinking, reflection and connection to your everyday Early Childhood practice. We wanted to share the expert

author voices, making sure that the book was a representation of the workforce, and this developed into the second edited book you are now reading. We are very excited about this text, and we hope you enjoy reading it.

So, let's give a snapshot of what is to come in the book by exploring each chapter.

BOOK CHAPTERS IN DETAIL

Chapter one – Abraham Maslow

Chapter one is written by Aaron Bradbury and focuses on the core aspects of Maslow's theory. Exploring how his theory links to Aaron's current work around love and nurture is a key component to this chapter. It links to the core needs of the child and explores a dialogue needed to further enhance his theory in the 21st century.

Chapter two – Urie Bronfenbrenner

Chapter two is written by Tamsin Grimmer and focuses on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner. Exploring the Ecological systems theory is at the heart of this chapter, but it encompasses many modem day explorations to Early childhood practices, including how children do not grow up in isolation, the importance of looking at the context of a child's life and how a loving pedagogy can support a child's ecosystem.

Chapter three – John Bowlby

Chapter three is written by David Wright and looks at the core components of attachment theory of John Bowlby. We would state that this theory is the bedrock of nurturing our youngest children. The chapter looks at how you can use the theory and principles of Bowlby in your daily practices by understanding where children are starting from, how connected we are to our children and how we can build on firm foundations of relationships.

Chapter four – Pierre Bourdieu

Chapter four is written by Kate Irvine and looks at a theorist we don't typically associate with Early childhood, Education and Care, Pierre Bourdieu. A theorist who is looked at during mostly within a post graduate arena has now become mainstream for us all in this chapter. Kate writes about how his theory can support the theory of cultural capital, looking at how this is perceived today, exploring values and practices and how this affects provision for children and families. There are continual links that are made to established Early Years approaches and theories within this chapter.

Chapter five – Friedrich Froebel

Chapter five is written by Meredith Hare and looks at the great work of Friedrich Froebel. The chapter looks at how you can use the theory and principles of Froebel in your practices today. You may get the end of the chapter and realise that there are aspects of these that you can use in your own setting, alongside other established practices that already work for your children. Consider that theories and approaches can be used as a 'pick-n-mix counter', once you have a good understanding of them, as it is commonplace to see practitioners and settings using a blend of approaches as their practice which evolves in this chapter.

Chapter six – Jean Piaget

Chapter six is written by Ruth Swailes and looks at Jean Piaget. Ruth explains that Jean Piaget is a major developmental psychologist of the 20th century and how his work transformed understanding of how children think, learn and grow. Initially trained in the natural sciences. The chapter looks at how professionals in the Early Years can use Piaget theory to influence play pedagogy and opens a dialogue for schemas and how this supports child development.

Chapter seven – Lev Vygotsky

Chapter seven is written by Angelica Celinska. Angelica highlights that Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory emphasises the fundamental role of social interaction and cultural context in children's development, viewing learning as a social process shaped by relationships and shared experiences within specific cultural settings. A key concept in his theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance, highlighting the importance of scaffolding, where support is gradually reduced as the child gains confidence. Language plays a central role, not only as a tool for communication but also for internalising cultural knowledge and developing cognitive functions. Vygotsky also emphasised the significance of play, particularly imaginative and role play, in fostering self-regulation, social skills and abstract thinking. Another core idea is the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), where learning is enhanced through interaction with a more skilled individual, such as an adult or peer, who provides guidance and models behaviours. Additionally, cultural tools like language, symbols and social norms mediate learning and shape cognitive development, allowing children to internalise cultural values and practices. This chapter will explore these concepts further, providing practical applications and reflective prompts to encourage critical engagement with Vygotsky's theory.

Chapter eight – Tina Bruce

Chapter eight is written by Philippa Thompson, looking at a modern-day theorist and pioneer Tina Bruce. This chapter allows you to recognise the links to Early Childhood practice through the theoretical perspectives of Tina Bruce. Playing close attention to the 12 features of play and the complexities of being able to define play. Links to other theories are made within the chapter, exploring the Froebelian Principles, and further links to diversity and individuality and families are also explored. A modern-day pioneer with a contemporary twist to practice within Early Childhood.

Chapter nine – Loris Malaguzzi

Chapter nine is written by Valerie Daniel and explores a contemporary twist of Loris Malaguzzi. This chapter gets you to recognise the links to Early Childhood practice through the theory of Loris Malaguzzi, learning the rights of the child, valuing the environment as a third teacher and links to nurturing children is at the heart of this chapter.

Chapter ten – Rudolf Steiner and Susan Isaacs

This chapter has been written by Pam Jarvis and takes a trip down memory lane. A history chapter exploring the work of Rudolf Steiner and Susan Isaacs. Two well-respected pioneers within the field of Early Childhood. Watch out for the twist in this chapter though, depicting a historical theme where we could learn much of what we see and hear today within practice.

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JOHN BOWLBY (1907–1990)

David Wright

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Identify the key elements of attachment theory and how experiences in early life influence the development of a child's internal working model which the individual will use in building future relationships.
- Identify the classification of attachment types.
- Understand the importance of responsive caregiving.
- Recognise the need for a child to have a safe base from which to explore and engage with their environment.
- Understand the significance of separation anxiety for both child and carer.
- Apply the findings of attachment theory to the practices and routines of early years care and education settings.

KEY DEFINITIONS

- **Affectional bond** a deep and lasting connection between individuals, providing a sense of security, belonging and emotional support.
- **Attachment** the condition in which an individual is linked emotionally with another, preferred person.
- **Attachment behaviour** any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to a preferred individual (attachment figure), also behaviours triggered by separation from an attachment figure.

- **Attachment types** the classification of behaviours observed in the child, on the attachment spectrum.
- **Attachment behavioural system** a reciprocal set of behaviours shown by care-seeker and caregiver in which they are aware of and seek each other out whenever the care-seeker feels in danger due to physical separation, illness or tiredness.
- **Ethology** study of the 'ethos' or holistic behaviour of non-human animals from an evolutionary perspective.
- **Internal working model** a mental model of the world held within the brain comprising an environmental model mapping the world we inhabit and an organisational model informing our view of ourselves in relation to our environment. This working model governs our view of ourselves, other people and how we relate to them.
- **Monotropy** the exclusive attachment of a child to its primary care giver, usually the mother.
- **Ontogeny** all the developmental events that occur during the existence of a living organism.
- **Secure base** the feeling of safety provided by an attachment figure which equips a person to explore and engage with the environment while maintaining proximity to a preferred individual.
- **Sensitive period** the timeframe in which the child is more likely to form discriminated attachment to a caregiver. Bowlby initially suggested this critical phase was up to two and a half years but later extended this to five years of age.
- **Separation anxiety** about losing or becoming separated from someone loved, as a response to perceived danger or risk.
- **The strange situation** an experiment designed by Mary Ainsworth to test how children behave during separation from and reunion with their mother. Results informed the development of the classification of attachment types.

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine a time before attachment theory and yet John Bowlby's seminal work that first postulated this concept was undertaken in living memory. These ideas proved popular with the public as evidenced by book sales figures in the tens of thousands, but at the same time, they were controversial with his fellow professionals.

Reflecting on this resistance to his ideas, in a 1980 interview, Bowlby said, 'Every ordinary mother knew about the effects of these things and was not surprised at my findings but they were findings at variance with the analytic theory of the time and much disputed' (Sinason, 1980). It is a testament to his character that his fortitude and self-assurance provided him with the confidence to stand behind and popularise his theory. Reading his works, it is challenging to absorb the immensity of his intellect and the breadth of his thinking that seeks to secure a robust, multidisciplinary evidence base for each separate element of his arguments. The extent to which his ideas continue to influence thinking, policy and practice across so many fields is remarkable. As an academic theorist, he consistently refers to examples of individual cases of children and adults for whom he has evident compassion for their struggles with the effects of adverse experiences in their earliest years. Perhaps it is this investment in and advocacy for humanity that we can recognise and relate to in our own work as we seek to make a difference in the lives of the current generation of young children.

This chapter considers the historical, cultural and social context in which John Bowlby lived and worked and that shaped his thinking. It lays out and examines the key elements of his theory and how he arrived at it. The implications of attachment theory, its application, continuing development and influence and latest research findings are presented as well as its criticisms. We will consider how early years care and education practices are affected by attachment theory and how individuals can reflect on their own practice to ensure it is attachment led.

BIOGRAPHY

Edward John Mostyn Bowlby was born on 26 February 1907 in London, England, into a relatively wealthy, upper middle-class family. His father, Major-General Sir Anthony Bowlby, was a high-ranking military officer and a medic, appointed as a Royal-Surgeon. John was the fourth of six children, born when his father was aged 52 and his mother 40 years old. Sir Anthony and his wife, May, mainly delegated the upbringing of their children to servants as was the custom for such families at the time, consequently John would see his mother for one hour only each day after teatime and his father, typically only on a Sunday due to work commitments. John and his siblings were raised in the nursery at the top of the house by a nanny and two nursemaids of whom Minnie served as the primary caregiver to the children. Minnie left employment at the household when John was four. He later likened the experience to losing a mother (Bowlby, 1958). Following Minnie's departure, nanny Friend took charge of the children's care with a strict regime.

In 1914 at the outbreak of World War I, John, aged seven and Tony were sent away to boarding school in Lindisfarne, ostensibly to escape the threat of air raids. John described this experience as terrible and traumatic (Practical Psychology, 2023).

After the war, he joined the Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth in 1921 as a naval cadet. It was at Dartmouth that he was first introduced to the works of Freud by his tutor, sparking an initial interest in psychiatry. Having passed out top in his exams but disillusioned with the prospects of a naval career, he enrolled to study medicine at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1925, graduating with a first-class degree in preclinical sciences and psychology. Against convention but keen to expand his understanding of developmental psychology and education, John accepted a voluntary position at Dunhurst, the junior school of Bedales, a role that lasted only six months before he moved on to Priory Gates, another progressive school which accepted 'maladjusted' students. This was his first encounter with children exhibiting disturbing behaviours and whose difficulties appeared to be related to problems in early childhood and which had a profound effect on him. He later reflected 'apart from a medical background and an interest in psychology, my choice of career had been determined by what I had seen and heard during the six months that I had spent in a school for disturbed children' (Bowlby, 1981).

Noticing John's growing interest in the students' behaviours and their causes, a colleague at the school suggested to John that he might train as a psychoanalyst. In 1929 aged 22, John commenced his medical studies at University College Hospital, London. He also enrolled at the Institute for Psychoanalysis. He intended to become a child psychiatrist – a new profession at that time. John qualified with a medical degree in 1933 at the age of 26 and went on to study psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital, qualifying as a psychoanalyst in 1936, aged 30.

John was appointed to the London Child Guidance Clinic where he worked until he became an army psychiatrist in 1940. One of his published works from this time, *Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves*, draws on his examination of individuals attending the clinic, effectively a school for 'maladjusted' children, and who had a history of stealing. In it, he identifies the connection between these 'affectionless psychopaths' and their experiences of prolonged separation from their parents at an early age – 'the lack of good and continuous childhood care'. (Bowlby, 1944)

John married Ursula Longstaff in 1938. They went on to have four children. Interestingly, as a father much like his own finding fatherhood a difficult role, John left the day-to-day care of his children almost exclusively to Ursula.

During World War II, John served as a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps, conducting research into the application of psychology to the recruitment and selection of officers. He also helped evacuee children separated from their families by the war.

After the war, he was appointed deputy director of the Tavistock Clinic where he was tasked with setting up a department for children. He established a clinical service and child psychotherapy training. The rest of his time was allotted to research. Based on his prior experiences and interests, his research focus was the effects of maternal separation on the personality development of young children.

In 1950, John was invited to work with the World Health Organization as a mental health consultant, investigating the mental health of homeless children post war. The resulting report *Maternal Care and Mental Health* emphasised the importance of maternal care in a child's healthy development. This was subsequently published in a popular edition as Child Care and the Growth of Love in 1953, becoming an instant best-seller, translated into 10 languages.

Working at the Tavistock in the 1950s, he recruited others including James Robertson with whom he collaborated on the groundbreaking film, *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital*, which changed hospital visiting regimes for parents. Mary Ainsworth who would later play a key role in helping him develop and test his attachment theory also joined the team as an associate researcher.

During the 1950s, John continued his studies at the Tavistock and remained active in the Psychoanalytical Society. He spent a year as a fellow at the Centre for Behavioural Sciences in Stanford, California during which he reread the works of Freud and began to write the papers that were the precursors to his published works on attachment theory, from the late 1950s onwards.

John became a part-time member of the Medical Research Council in 1963. In the period from 1964 to 1979, this enabled him to devote his efforts to writing his magnum opus: the three volumes of Attachment and Loss – Volume 1: Attachment (1969), Volume 2: Separation, Anxiety and Fear (1973), and Volume 3: Loss, Sadness and Depression (1980), all of which became bestsellers with the first volume selling over one hundred thousand copies.

John retired from his NHS and Medical Research Council work in 1972 but continued to work at the Tavistock Clinic. He continued to remain active during his seventies, writing his final book, *a biography of Darwin* which was published just before his death on 2 September 1990.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Bowlby was convinced of the significance of early childhood relationships to social and personality development. His quest was to understand the reasons for and processes leading to this. In researching this, Bowlby collated, analysed and assessed knowledge bases from

multiple disciplines including ethology, evolutionary biology and developmental psychology, systems and learning theory and psychiatry. His published works chart a progression of thought and learning from and with others and a revision of his findings in the light of new evidence.

Bowlby's choice of career as a psychoanalyst arose from his interactions with children subject to maternal deprivation who subsequently exhibited affectionless and anxious behaviours. The same motivation led him to establish a unit at the Tavistock clinic dedicated to research into the effects of early separation from the mother. His introduction to the work of Konrad Lorenz carried out in the 1930s on the principle of imprinting in geese, suggested to Bowlby that this could underlie the formation of affectional bonds in humans and that it might provide a biological explanation of attachment and the root of problems caused by maternal deprivation.

Bowlby considered evidence and ideas from discussions with a wide network of contacts across different fields of science. He drew all of this together with the key themes from his earlier published papers into the three volumes of Attachment and Loss. In the first volume, Attachment, published in 1969, Bowlby uses the first half of the book to set out his case for the instinctual and associated behaviour systems of biological entities of ranging complexities, from primitive organisms exhibiting fixed actions through to higher order life forms with 'goal corrected' instinctive behaviours characterised by dynamic adjustments in response to feedback sensed from their environment, for example, a bird of prey changing speed and direction relative to the position, movement and pace of its quarry. He next examines the ontogeny and elaboration of behavioural systems and the notion of sensitive periods of development.

Bowlby underpins each statement of this ethologically based theory with available research evidence. This forms his case for repudiating Freud's psychic energy model. He considers how complex homeostatic behaviour systems have evolved to adapt to changes in the environment to ensure the continued existence and survival of species.

The remainder of the first volume applies this model to attachment behaviours in nature and then to the domain of the reciprocal human infant-mother attachment dyadic. With respect to humans and in particular the relationships formed from birth onwards with a preferred carer (mother), Bowlby employs the term attachment to refer to the 'state and quality of an individual's attachments' (Holmes, 1993). He defines attachment behaviour as actions driven by evolutionary developed motivation to protect the infant from perceived danger by maintaining proximity to an attachment figure, in other words, the baby instinctively seeking safety by monitoring the whereabouts and attempting to maintain the closeness of the mother through behaviours including movement/orientation, smiling and crying.

In terms of the ontogeny of human attachment, Bowlby defines four overlapping stages/phases of development (Bowlby, 1969, pp. 266–267):

Phase	Typical age range	Behaviours in the child
1	Birth–six weeks	Orientation and signals with limited discrimination of attachment figure
2	Six weeks–six months	Orientation and signals towards a preferred attachment figure
3	Six/seven months–two years	Maintenance of proximity to an attachment figure including through physical movement
4	Two years plus	Formation of reciprocal 'partnership' between child and attachment figure. 'A child is acquiring insight into his mother's feelings and motives.'

Bowlby discusses the issue of sensitive periods for attachment as follows:

> during the second quarter of the first year of life infants are sensitive and ready to make a discriminated attachment. After six months of age they can still do so; but as the months pass difficulties increase. By the second year, it seems clear, these difficulties are already great; and they do not diminish.
>
> (Bowlby, 1997, p. 327)

These statements show Bowlby's concern for the necessary support to enable all children to be able to form attachment to their mother within this sensitive period, that children should not be separated from their mothers for any protracted time during the first year of life, for example. Based on his prior research, he believed that failure to do so is permanently damaging to the child.

INTERNAL WORKING MODEL

The notion of an internal working model of the environment and an organism's interactions with it provides for a mechanism to 'transmit, store, and manipulate information that helps in making predictions' (Bowlby, 1969, p. 80) regarding the achievement of goals. Bowlby refers to two working models, an environmental model and an organismic one relating to an individual's 'behavioural skills and potentialities' (Bowlby, 1969, p. 82). The formation of the child's internal working model is critically dependent on responses from the primary caregiver, determining the child's expectation of the availability and responsiveness of the caregiver and whether the child feels themselves to be worthy of love and attention. A securely attached child will develop a working model of 'a responsive, loving, reliable caregiver' (Holmes, 1993). An insecurely attached child failing to receive consistent attention and affirming responsiveness from their caregiver may create an internal model of their world as potentially dangerous and one in which relationships with others are to be engaged in with caution. It is asserted that this blueprint established in the early years is immutable, becoming a fixed template for modelling the formation of future relationships on into adolescence and adulthood.

ATTACHMENT STYLES

Mary Ainsworth was both a colleague/collaborator with Bowlby at the Tavistock clinic and a researcher in her own right. Their collegiality and cross-pollination of ideas contributed to the ongoing development of attachment theory. As part of her own research building on Bowlby's work, Ainsworth developed the Strange Situation Procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978) the outcomes of which have identified four different attachment styles:

- **Secure**

  Children classified as having secure attachment may show signs of distress on separation from the caregiver but are quickly soothed. They are confident to explore their environment, monitoring the proximity of their caregiver, representing a secure base to which they can return for comfort.

- **Ambivalent-Anxious**
  Individuals in this category display anxiety and dependent behaviour when the caregiver is present. They become very distressed at separation and experience difficulty calming down on reunion. They may be resistant to comfort.
- **Avoidant**
  The child shows little emotion regardless of the caregiver's presence or absence, expressing little to no preference for the caregiver over a stranger.
- **Disorganised**
  This fourth category of attachment was developed later to cover behaviours observed as resulting from the breakdown under stress, of the three adaptive strategies above, in response to frightening or frightened caregiver behaviours experienced by the child. This produces conflicting emotions and can result in the child not knowing whether to approach or flee from the caregiver (Main and Hesse, 1990).

SECURE BASE

Mary Ainsworth is attributed with the first use of the term 'secure base' (Ainsworth, 1967). Bowlby comments on the role served by caregivers as the secure base for the child thus:

> All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures.
>
> (Bowlby, 1988, p. 62)

Provided the caregiver is available and responsive, the child feels secure enough to explore the environment. In these excursions from the caregiver, attachment acts as a sort of gravitational pull within the child such that the further he explores away from the caregiver, the more a sense of insecurity operates, pulling him back to the secure base, 'to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened' (Bowlby, 1988, p. 11).

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Bowlby defines separation anxiety as 'anxiety about losing, or becoming separated from, someone loved' (Bowlby, 1988, p. 29). In ethological terms, he asserts that a response of fear to separation from a caregiver signals perception of an increase in the risk of danger threatening the child's survival. Maintaining proximity to the caregiver provides for safety and a sense of security. Behaviours indicative of separation anxiety are thus expected, natural, survival strategies. Typically, caregivers' own separation anxiety arises instinctively in response to the child's behaviours, cuddling a baby in response to her cries, for example, as a reciprocal pattern of interaction.

Contingent on the provision of reassurance in the form of an available and responsive attachment figure representing a stable secure base, the child is able to develop progressive confidence in separation from the caregiver both in terms of time and distance. Bowlby asserts that this process continues on into adolescence (Bowlby, 1988).

CRITICISMS OF BOWLBY AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

Bowlby's contemporaries were dismissive of his notion of maternal deprivation as the cause of mental illness, as it challenged established psychoanalytic orthodoxy focused on the inner world of the mind. He was accused of 'contaminating psychoanalysis with behaviourism' (Holmes 1993).

Criticism for Bowlby's focus on monotropy, his belief in 'the very great influence that a child's mother has on his development' (Bowlby, 1988) has arisen from various different fields of study. Critics have challenged the claims of Bowlby's maternal deprivation hypothesis that in the absence of an affectionate and responsive mother, the child will fail to develop any attachment, resulting in 'grave and far-reaching effects on his character and so on the whole of his future life' (Bowlby, 1952(a)).

Schaffer and Emerson (1964) posited attachment to a discriminated figure at around eight months, with attachment to others developing shortly afterwards so that by 18 months it is unusual to observe attachment to a single primary figure.

In Maternal Deprivation Re-assessed, Michael Rutter (1972) challenges Bowlby's definition of maternal deprivation, distinguishing disruption of attachment as distinct from physical separation from the mother.

Predating the publication of Attachment, but following Bowlby's earlier papers on maternal deprivation, a World Health Organization report from 1962 criticised Bowlby's 'extrapolations from studies about maternal deprivation in extreme circumstances to the everyday relations between mothers and children in regular households', (Vicedo, 2017) along with other critiques of his methodologies. The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, contributed to this report, offering counter arguments to some of Bowlby's claims.

Critics have suggested that Bowlby was influenced by his personal experiences of maternal deprivation growing up and his encounters with particular individuals. These formed his ideas about the effects of maternal deprivation. Bowlby is accused of cherry-picking evidence to support his views and that in presenting attachment theory as universally applicable, he ignores different cultural and social contexts. Levine (2014) states, 'As a scientist, he (Bowlby) assumed a posture of empirical enquiry without recognising the ways in which his ideological advocacy influenced its assumptions.'

The question remains whether these criticisms are correct and whether they invalidate any or all of the claims made for attachment theory. The fact that its principles continue to influence many areas of modern life, including early years practice, suggests that belief in their validity continues, albeit research critiques, refines and builds on the foundations laid by Bowlby.

ATTACHMENT THEORY TODAY

Researchers have continued to advance Bowlby's original ideas. Alan Sroufe and Byron Egeland's Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation, beginning in the early 1970s, has shown the developmental implications of early caregiving and attachment. It has provided the first longitudinal evidence of the implications of attachment relationships.

Attachment theory continues to evolve in response to changes in society, family structures, practices and relationships, the expansion of childcare and research in diverse fields including neuroscience, genetics and epigenetics and physiology. Examples include:

- Dr Pascal Vrticka leads the Social Neuroscience of Human Attachment Lab, investigating areas including bio-behavioural synchrony in families and neural synchrony in mother–child interactions. https://pvrticka.com/

- Ehrlich and Cassidy (2021) have researched how secure and insecure attachments predict vulnerability to physical and mental health conditions associated with stress and inflammation.

EARLY YEARS FRAMEWORK

The Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework in England (Department for Education, 2024) embodies key attachment themes in its four principles:

Principle	Attachment themes
The Unique Child	Provision of emotionally safe and nurturing caregiving adapted to the needs of each individual.
	Recognition of parents/caregivers as the child's primary attachment figures and building partnerships with them.
Positive Relationships 'Strong, warm and supportive relationships with adults enable children to learn how to understand their own feelings and those of others'.	A key person model ensures all children are allocated a consistent and familiar adult who is available and responsive to them as an attachment figure in the early years setting.
	Warm and loving relationships act as a secure base supporting children's independence building.
Enabling Environments 'Children should be supported to manage emotions, develop a positive sense of self'.	Recognition of the potential emotional impact of transitions on the child including separation anxiety.
	Emotional literacy – helping children to understand and express their emotions, to develop self-regulation and to build relationships with others.
Learning and Development	Through 'playing and exploring' and 'active learning', children are afforded opportunities to explore from a secure base with proximity to and support from trusted attachment figures.

Attachment theory continues to inform early years policy and practice, which acknowledge the need for child development and learning to be underpinned by secure attachments grounded in warm, positive relationships with consistent adults.

WHAT DOES ATTACHMENT-LED PRACTICE LOOK LIKE IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS?

Attachment led practice:

- Recognises the fundamental biological need within every child to feel safe and secure, especially in an unfamiliar environment with strangers.

- Is mindful of the influence adults have in building each young child's internal working model of the world, ensuring comfort is always provided in times of distress.
- Is respectful of and acknowledges each family's culture, values and practices and the influence these have on their child.
- Works with parents/carers to build a trusted partnership.
- Acknowledges separation anxiety for both children and carers and works with families to mitigate this.
- Understands the importance of positive relationships and the need for every child to establish a secure base through attachment to a preferred adult – key person, from which to explore having confidence in available support.
- Recognises and is sensitive to children's attachment styles and the needs and capabilities of a securely attached child versus one who is insecurely attached.
- Empowers adults to be available and responsive to individual children during the day and to provide love and nurture including cuddles, as appropriate.
- Prioritises relationships over routines and the child's agenda over that of the adults.
- Has an explicit policy and focus on the potential for transitions to impact on children's well-being, with appropriate strategies in place to support children with these as necessary.
- Seeks to understand and support children's behaviour.
- Validates, acknowledges and helps children to manage their feelings through co-regulation and teaching them about emotional literacy.
- Celebrates and encourages children's achievements and shares their joy.
- Identifies children who may have experienced early trauma and seeks extra support as needed.

REFLECTION 3.1

How far are transitions attachment led in my setting:

- Introductions, home visits, settling sessions, first day, room movements?
- Arrivals, departures, mealtimes, sleep times, toileting?
- Moving on to school or another setting?

How does practice in my setting recognise and acknowledge the primacy of the relationship between every child and their key attachment figures – caregivers/parents?

How is partnership built and maintained between setting and home for the benefit of the child, taking into account the child's attachment style, emotional needs, family and cultural context?

How is a secure base established for every child in my setting?

Are there opportunities for me able to be available and responsive to every child I care for each day?

Does our behaviour policy guide us to understand and support children's behaviour?

CONCLUSION

Our early years practice is heavily influenced by attachment theory. While arguably there may have been biases in Bowlby's research from his personal experiences and strong beliefs, for me these do not invalidate the underlying principles which continue to guide our work more than 50 years after his theory was first published.

KEY QUESTIONS

In what ways can we use Bowlby attachment theory to enhance our work with children?
How can our settings become part of the solution for our children and families to support the development of strong attachments?
How can we practically demonstrate our support for children's emotional and social development when thinking about Bowlby theory?

SOME SUGGESTED RESOURCES/FURTHER READING

The Attachment Research Community https://the-arc.org.uk/
Birth to 5 Matters 'Attachment and the role of the key person'
https://birthto5matters.org.uk/attachment-and-the-role-of-the-key-person/
The Centre for Early Childhood 'Attachment and social and emotional development'
https://centreforearlychildhood.org/latest-learnings/essays/attachment-social-emotional-development/
Connected Baby https://connectedbaby.net
Dan Siegel 'The Power of Showing Up'
https://drdansiegel.com/the-power-of-showing-up-handouts/
Education Scotland 'Attachment Theory and Practice'
https://education.gov.scot/resources/attachment-theory-and-practice/
IRISS Attachment Theory in Practice
https://content.iriss.org.uk/attachment-theory-in-practice/