ATTACHMENT THEORY: IMPLICATIONS ON PRACTICE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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About me
Currently in Australia

- Young children in formal care settings at a critical time for attachment development
- Workforce participation of mothers
- Educators as secondary attachment figures (R. Bowlby, 2007)
- Many studies on impact of quality and quantity of care; few on relationship between educators and children
- Study to investigate educator perceptions of attachment and to observe and document their practices that support secure relationships

Children who usually attended child care, by type and age

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014
Why relationships?

- The quality of the relationship between educators and children is considered a predictor of quality in early childhood education and care settings.
- Interactions between babies and educators provide stimuli which can influence how the brain develops and how children respond to new situations and challenges.

The relationships we build and the style of our interactions with young children are critical to their present and future wellbeing, to their learning, their development and their social competence. Children learn about themselves and their worlds through relationships and experiences.

Reflect, Respect, Relate p. 33
Attachment Theory

“The emotional bond between two people in which there is an expectation of care and protection”

(Rolfe, 2004, p. 7)

- Provides a framework for understanding important relationships between humans
- Proposes earliest bonds formed by children with caregivers have a tremendous impact continuing throughout life.
- Central theme is mother figures who are available and responsive to their infant’s needs will establish a sense of security in their children.
- Having the comfort and security of a trusted adult who is fully present, observing and responding to their cues and gestures, enables a child to discover and explore their world on their own terms, knowing that they will be safe and supported.
Harlow’s Monkeys

- Baby monkeys separated from mothers and reared by surrogate alternatives - one wire mesh and the other soft cloth
- Contact is more important than food.
- John Bowlby developed attachment theory in mid-20th century, applying Harlow’s findings to the infant-caregiver bond
The first year of life is a critical period for attachment development.

Infants require a secure base in a LDC setting in addition to at home (Kim, 2016)

Instead of only one primary attachment figure, a child needs access to a consistently available attachment figure which may be a combination of people.

By being part of this attachment network, being separated from a specific attachment figure does not imply that a child is also separated from their secure base.

Research has shown that children with secure attachments:

- Are more independent
- Have lower rates of mental illness
- Are more successful at school
- Have a healthy self-esteem

(Erikson et al. 1985)
## Primary and secondary attachment figures

### Primary attachment figures

- “The person with whom a child maintains their main lifelong bond, and whom they want to be most comforted by when they are frightened or hurt” (Bowlby, R., 2007, p. 309).
- Typically mother or mother-figure
- Once formed, the attachment endures, even when attachment behaviours are not observable

### Secondary attachment figures

- Special people that a child develops a close attachment relationship with.
- Begin to develop with people typically familiar to their primary attachment figure at around 12 months.
- Can vary in both identity and quantity with changes typically reflecting the happenings within the infants’ household at the time.
- Provide children with a secure base for exploration and learning in the absence of the primary attachment figure (DEEWR, 2009)
The four stages of attachment

01 Pre-attachment phase
02 Attachment-in-making phase
03 Clear cut attachment phase
04 Formation of reciprocal relationship
Pre-attachment phase

*Birth to six weeks*

**01**
Babies attract their caregivers with behaviours such as grasping, crying, and eye contact maintenance.

**02**
Through these behaviours, infants maintain proximity to primary caregivers.

**03**
Whilst they recognise their mother-figure, they are not usually yet attached and are happy to be cared for by unfamiliar caregivers.

**04**
No fear of strangers.

Do you think we promote independence as a positive from birth? Why do you think this is the case?
Attachment-in-making phase
Six weeks to 6-8 months

01 Infants begin to understand that their actions can change behaviours of caregivers

02 They differentiate between their primary caregivers and others—responding more to their mother figure

03 They begin to develop an expectation of a response from their caregiver when demonstrating attachment behaviours

04 They generally will not protest in separation
Clear cut attachment phase
6-8 months to 18-24 months

01 Attachment to their primary caregiver is evident

02 Between 12-24 months infants will typically begin to develop secondary attachments

03 Separation anxiety beings to emerge

04 Stranger anxiety begins to emerge
Formation of reciprocal relationships
18 months onwards

01
As language further develops, toddlers are able to understand and predict their primary caregivers departure and return

02
The child will be less dependent on the primary caregiver, safe in the knowledge that they are responsive when needed
Factors affecting attachment

- **Quality of caregiving**
  - Caregivers response - consistency/promptly/sensitivity
- The family context
- Caregivers own attachment experience with their caregivers
- The infant themselves
  - Temperament
  - Illness
  - Additional needs
Features of an attachment based setting (Bowlby, R.)

- Babies 9 months of age and older
- Babies and toddlers actively supported to develop secondary attachments to educators
- Primary caregiver attends alongside child for several weeks until they start to develop a secondary attachment bond
- A few minutes of separation are introduced and gradually increased so that the infant/toddler knows they can receive comfort and safety from the educator in the primary caregiver’s absence to keep cortisol levels as low as possible.
- Shortened days at first whilst the secondary attachment bond develops
- Part time education and care until 18 months
- Educator to child ratio of 1:3
- Educators have enough energy and are supported and trained to meet infants and toddlers’ needs
- Primary caregivers supported to maintain their primary attachment bond with children
Primary caregiving

• Primary caregivers are educators who take primary responsibility for creating a personal relationship with nominated children in a service.
• Allows services to meet each child and family’s individual needs
• Provides a “secure base” in the absence of a child’s primary caregivers
• Allows the child and the primary educator to get to know each other intimately such as the child’s likes, dislikes, strengths, and opportunities for improvement
• Respect for the child as a unique human being, worth of the same respect as an adult is key

Is not
• A way to reduce the amount of documentation
• A procedure- it is a philosophy of working with children

Primary Caregiving

“A staffing arrangement, particularly suitable for infants and toddlers, in which one staff member has primary responsibility for a small group of children. The rationale for primary caregiving is that it facilitates the attachment of very young children to one adult”

Primary caregiving in action - an example

- Educators matched with children based on mutual interest, drop off/collection times of child and number of children the educator already was primary caregiver for
- Secondary caregiver matched with child
- Permanent set shifts
- Primary caregiver responsible for feeding, putting the child to sleep, changing nappies and any other care routines throughout the day
- Primary caregiver responsible for documentation for child
- Primary caregiver main point of communication between family and service
- Home visits and babysitting supported
- Educators supported by educators as children commenced and settled, facilitating the opportunity for one-on-one time
This sounds like a lot of work in addition to what I am already doing!

“Educators who give priority to nurturing relationships and providing children with consistent emotional support can assist children to develop the skills and understanding they need to interact positively with others”

DEEWR, 2009, p. 12

■ The National Quality Standard
  • Standard 5.1 Respectful and equitable relationships are developed and maintained with each child.
  • Standard 5.2 Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults.

■ Early Years Learning Framework
  • Principle 1: Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
  • Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
The research

01 What are early childhood educators’ perceptions of early attachment?

02 What are early childhood educators’ perceptions of how early attachment relationships develop?

03 How do early childhood educators support the development of secure infant/toddler-caregiver relationships?
Methodology

- Interpretive theoretical framework which will focus on understanding attachment theory and practice in a holistic, comprehensive way through the voices of educators.

- Mixed method approach to provide a greater depth of knowledge than a singular method can offer and by combining the two strands provide triangulation of data (Creswell and Clarke, 2011)

- Sequential data collection- quantitative data will inform the collection of qualitative data
Methodology

- **Participants**
  - Working with 0-2 age group
  - Educational Leaders
  - 3 months’ service

- **Service**
  - Catering for 0-2 age group
  - Perth Metro-Based

- **Instruments**
  - Survey
  - Interview
  - Observation tool
  - Reflect, Respect, Relate

**Reflect, Respect, Relate**

An instrument designed to assess the quality of relationships and environments for learning. The resource includes scales which support the critical examination of interactions, educators’ pedagogy, children’s wellbeing and children’s involvement.
What if....?

- If I am the main person who looks after the child then they will become too clingy?
- I go on holidays or leave?
- They develop a stronger attachment with me over their mother?
- Another child would like to join in with my child’s feeding times or sleeping times?
- Not all the team are on board?
Cooper
Through a child’s eyes...

You take care of them and keep them safe, and give them nice food and take care of them for a very long time. And his name is Cooper. Tuck them into bed nicely and give them lots of cuddles and nice drinks and a nice dinner. That’s how you take good care of children

Cooper, 7 years old
Thank You

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References


