



Introducing parents to attachment theory

Comforting a crying baby or giving in to demand? Some parents may be confused about Attachment Theory-based ideas, but attending to babies' emotions can help them to feel safe and secure, and will help establish the foundations on which babies will thrive.

By Helen Hans, NCT Antenatal teacher

It's hard to remember exactly how it feels when you have a baby and the day-to-day challenges of being a new parent. It's even harder to put these feelings into words. What if your baby cries a lot? How does that make you feel? Does it knock your self-confidence? If it's hard to explain how we as adults feel, how much harder is it to explain how a baby feels, or how he begins to understand his place in the world and relationships with other people?

I began my NCT career as an antenatal teacher, driven by a passion for birth, which came from my own positive first birth experience. I put this down in no small part to the education I received from my NCT teacher, Sue Dunkley. A few years later, it seemed to me that there were lots of opportunities for

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exploring and preparing for birth, but far fewer for considering parenthood and its impact. I wanted to offer support to parents in the early postnatal period, as they struggled with assuming a new identity, relinquishing some of what they had and were before, and working out how to raise their family. My subsequent training as a postnatal leader led to me to a radical re-think of my antenatal sessions, in particular how I supported expectant parents to think about the impending psychological changes for them and their developing baby.

The cross party manifesto, *1001 critical days*,¹ recognises that what happens from conception till the age of two has a lifelong effect on health, life chances and mental wellbeing. And reports such as those by Field and Allen,^{2,3} as well as my own reading, increased the urgency I felt about informing parents about the significance of the first three years of life through Attachment Theory, Theory of Mind and baby brain development. But as an NCT practitioner, how could I pass on this information without making parents simply feel terrible or making myself sound evangelical? The concepts are complicated and difficult to convey without making people feel criticised or more anxious – the last things new parents need!

What follows is my approach to teaching parents about Attachment Theory – and some of the difficulties I have experienced along the way.

What is Attachment Theory?

Attachment Theory was first proposed by John Bowlby, whose work demonstrated the importance of children's earliest relationships.⁴ He saw children's first experiences of relationships as setting an internal working model – a blueprint – for how relationships work and what to expect from them. As infants live these early experiences, they register a sense of how they are perceived in that particular relationship and begin to behave accordingly. Bowlby saw this partly as a survival strategy, a way of ensuring proximity with caregivers, and also was aware of its long-term impact on a person's behaviour. He strongly believed that a disruption in the relationship between a child and his mother could lead to emotional difficulties and antisocial behaviour. If an infant feels unloved by his primary caregiver, he may come to feel unlovable and behave with others in a way that anticipates the same response from them.

As with any theory, ideas about Attachment Theory have grown and developed. In the '60s and '70s, Mary Ainsworth expanded upon Bowlby's initial concepts, and formulated three categories of attachment;⁵ Mary Main later added a fourth.⁶ Of these four, only one is designated 'secure.' (It is worth remembering that being insecurely attached does not necessarily mean that a person is unable to function in society, although it may mean that their relationships are less rewarding). Since Bowlby, it has been shown that a child can develop more than one attachment style, for example, one with his mother and different ones with his father and/or other care givers.⁷ I am sure that the idea of behaving differently with different people is familiar to most of us.

Consequences of insecure attachment

As mentioned above, being insecurely attached does not mean being unable to function in society or lead a normal and fulfilling life. However, it may present other challenges, such as experiencing more anxiety and finding everyday situations more difficult. Those who are insecurely attached may

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be more vulnerable to peer pressure, self-doubt and depression.⁸ In romantic relationships, an insecurely attached person may be more clingy or need more reassurance than a securely attached person. Some psychotherapists argue that insecurely attached children will externalise their anxiety and display difficult behaviours, subsequently labelled as ADD or ADHD.⁹ Those whose parents' behaviour was the most erratic and unreliable are likely to be the most severely affected.

Benefits of secure attachment

A child who has a secure attachment (or multiple secure attachments), has a secure base from which to learn. A secure attachment bond ensures that a child will feel secure, understood, and be calm enough to experience optimal development of his or her nervous system. Secure attachment provides a child with the best foundation for life: a feeling of safety that results in eagerness to learn, healthy self-awareness, trust, and empathy.

With regard to brain development, more research is needed to understand exactly how early experiences affect this. But there is a lot of support for the idea that positive interactions with caregivers will promote healthy emotional and cognitive development, with lasting effects on a child's sense of security and confidence.

Meeting resistance from new parents

I have felt compelled to share this knowledge with the couples in my NCT groups, given its enormous implications for their child's emotional wellbeing. It feels hard at times to remain non-judgemental and neutral as I would like parents to embrace it wholeheartedly. Unfortunately, much of what the theory suggests feels counter-intuitive, especially to someone who hasn't yet had a baby or experienced the emotions of being a parent. And so I have often encountered resistance to these ideas.

Many commonly held ideas about babies, reinforced by populist literature and television programmes, contradict Attachment Theory. For example, 'he'll learn that, if he wants something, all he has to do is cry and you'll come running'. As a practitioner, I have heard such truisms hundreds of times. It may be unsettling for clients to hear that responding consistently to a very young baby – picking him up when he cries – will probably result in a more independent, adventurous and self-reliant child. How can we, as NCT facilitators, encourage our clients to explore such ideas and begin to integrate them into their way of thinking without burdening them with more guilt? Becoming a parent for the first time is wonderful and terrifying, probably in equal measures. We must guard against adding to these fears.

Challenging parents to think about parenting

For many years, I have introduced a range of ideas about parenting to my antenatal groups, asking them to consider the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches for parents and baby. We discuss their response to the ideas, mostly arriving at the conclusion that there is no magical solution which works for all parents. Recently, one father grumbled that he had been certain how he would approach parenting prior to the session and now he was confused. He thought he had made up his mind and now I had put the cat among the pigeons. I felt quietly pleased to have challenged his thinking,

broadening his horizons. This father is not alone in his feelings of confusion following this particular session, and that is the challenge facing practitioners: to increase our clients' understanding of babies' development without fuelling anxiety.

The baby's point of view

I believe it is important to emphasise that parents do not have to be perfect. Indeed, some would argue that being perfect is detrimental to the developing infant's mental and emotional health:¹⁰ the baby needs to struggle a little, but with the support of his parents. I suggest to clients that perhaps the greatest responsibility they have is to help their baby regulate his/her emotions. One example might be a door slamming. As adults, we have learnt that a door might bang shut for many reasons and so we can use logic to calm ourselves after hearing an unexpected loud noise. The baby, on the other hand, has not learnt this yet, but will, with repeated reassurances that he '...needn't worry about that noise – that was just the wind blowing the door shut. Everything's alright.' These simple steps can help an infant develop the sense of his parent/s as the secure base and safe haven that Bowlby described, from which he can explore but also return to when he needs comforting.

I try to present the world from the baby's point of view where possible, to speak on his behalf; for example, by asking the group whether there is anything in the baby's experience that remains unchanged at birth. Clients quickly conclude that nothing remains the same except their presence. This allows me to reframe the first few months of the baby's life as a time when he 'unlearns' what he has known and begins to learn how the world works now. I hope that my demonstrating the stark contrast between the only sleeping position the baby has known before birth and the one we expect him to assume immediately after birth will stick with them. I daresay they retain an odd image of me adopting the two positions myself! However, I hope that it serves to moderate their expectations of their newborn and helps them to understand why their newborn prefers their chest to the Moses basket.

Discussion about sleep during Early Days sessions is an opportunity for promoting Attachment Theory, albeit subtly. Parents often forget – or find it hard to imagine – that babies need to be calm in order to fall asleep. What if a baby is anxious? By linking to their adult experiences, new parents can begin to relate to their baby's feelings. If they were worried about something, their sleep may be disturbed and it can be the same for babies. Repeated, soothing experiences before bedtime help the baby recognise what is coming next and consequently feel more relaxed.

Parents want what's best for their baby

My training and work as a Parent-Infant Psychotherapist have deepened my understanding of Attachment Theory and all its complexity, as well as the impact of insecure attachments on infants. I see the effects of this on a daily basis. However, it is important to remember two things: i) the vast majority of parents want to do the very best for their children, which is a positive starting point; ii) early intervention can help change the situation for the child. Even in later life, attachment status can be altered with the support of a caring individual who demonstrates that relationships can be a source of pleasure and comfort.

The cross-party manifesto, The 1001 Critical Days¹ to which the NCT has pledged its support, stresses the importance of practitioners who work with parents having a good understanding of infant mental health and attachment. The NCT is fantastically well placed to introduce parents to Attachment Theory, but there is so much room for misunderstanding! Rather than try to teach it as a discrete subject, we can model the approach instead. Babies do experience emotions and these need to be attended to as much as their physical needs; something which is often unclear to new parents. But we don't need to be perfect every time!¹¹ Simply introducing these ideas and threading them through all our work – both antenatally and postnatally – helps to sow and nurture the seeds of understanding in parents' minds.

Practice points:

- Attachment Theory is complex, so messages need to be clear and concise.
- Parents don't need to be perfect! We all make mistakes, but being willing to stay with the infant's emotion and help him/her with it is what counts. Knowing that other people care about your feelings but don't necessarily share them is a very important life lesson!
- Arguably the central message from Attachment Theory is that helping their child to regulate his emotions is the most valuable thing parents can do for him. This is not always easy, but it is a vital part of healthy infant development.

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