

The Importance of Secondary Attachment Figures in Childcare

Until recently mothers have been helped to care for their young by members of the extended family. In society today the biggest question for some new parents is who will look after the baby when the mother goes back to work. It's a hard decision for many parents. For some, a relative steps in and offers assistance and these people become secondary attachment figures, and their motivation to provide care would have come from shared attachment bonds.

For others the search for childcare commences with childminders and crèches being the foremost options for most parents. The focus of this talk is about the importance of childminders as carers for our children when we are at work and why, due to social development and attachment theory, this is an important factor for the emotional and social development of our children.

Researchers have gained a profound understanding of the social and emotional needs of children and the importance of forming stable and loving family bonds, and during the past 20 years there's been a vast array of new technology that's given neuroscientists the ability to discover how these emotional experiences affect the infant's developing brain.

The first thing we need to understand is Attachment Theory which was formulated by the late Dr John Bowlby in the 1940s in England.

In attachment theory, the term *primary* attachment figure refers to the person with whom a child develops their main lifelong emotional bond which is usually their parents.

The term *secondary* attachment figure refers to the few special people in a child's life with whom they have developed a close attachment bond, such as siblings, grandparents.

Having three or more such people will usually increase children's resilience and act as a protective factor throughout childhood. These are the people who can provide babies and toddlers with comfort and security in the absence of a primary attachment figure, and act as a secure and safe haven.

Secure attachment means having a predictable, safe and affectionate bond with an attachment figure (either the primary or a secondary). Securely attached babies and toddlers are not usually affected by a few hours of separation from their primary attachment figure if they're being looked after by a person with whom they have developed a secure *secondary* attachment bond. When these carers are consistent, sensitive and responsive they can benefit toddlers' social and cognitive development and provide support to families.

Insecure attachment means having a less predictable bond with an attachment figure (either primary or secondary). By itself insecure attachment is very difficult to identify unless the Strange Situation Procedure is employed. Insecure attachment is found in approximately 40% of toddlers in the UK and USA, and is acknowledged as a risk factor that often contributes to the mental health problems of children and adults.

Insecure attachment can be classified as either avoidant, ambivalent or disorganised, and such babies and toddlers are less emotionally strong and are usually more vulnerable to separation distress than securely attached toddlers.

By 6-9 months a baby's attachment to their parents is well established, added to the realisation of 'object permanence' which is a brain developmental stage which is the realisation that object or people out of sight do not mean that they are gone forever.

Another point is that because attachment seeking is a child's *natural* response to separation, that the separation is therefore not traumatic - its *natural!*

Some parents have the mistaken belief that their 6 month old baby has become overdependent on them, and that this can be 'corrected' by leaving the baby in a supervised group without having one of their attachment figures present.

Neuroscientists have observed that important structures in babies' brains are shaped by their emotional experiences, and that the most positive and the most negative impacts on the brain are the result of social and emotional relationships (enduring or fragmented), especially with their primary attachment figure (usually their mother). The physical structure of babies' brains is affected by the hormones that are generated within attachment relationships during the first two years whilst their brains are doubling in size. In babies and toddlers younger than about 30 months, the right hemisphere of the brain develops more rapidly and exerts more control over them than does the left side of their brain. The right side develops

the intuitive and emotional skills which are needed for relationships, and for the empathic understanding of another person's feelings. Babies learn these unconscious skills by experiencing sensitive and responsive care over and over again, and the quality of *relationships* and the feelings they generate day after day can have a significant influence on the structure of the developing brain. These early experiences cannot be consciously recalled later on because they occur during the pre-verbal phase of brain development, but the enduring feelings and expectations will play an important part in forming their personality throughout childhood.

By about 33 months, toddlers' brains begin to undergo a very significant change. The growth spurt of the right side of the brain has slowed down and the sensitive period for developing social and emotional intelligence makes way for a growth spurt on the left side instead. By about 36 months the left side of the brain becomes dominant, and this promotes the development of complex speech and the ability to remember past events and anticipate future ones. For these reasons toddlers aged between 24 and 36 months need very careful assessment of their individual capacity to cope with the stress of separation, and the average age of 30 months must be used as a guide only.

As humans, each of us is the sum of our experiences and our genetic inheritance. Our capacity to make intimate attachment bonds and our ability to form social relationships is rooted in the gene/environment interactions of our early childhood experiences. To develop into young adults who are emotionally robust and socially competent, babies and toddlers need time and sensitive attention from trusted attachment figures. But parents nowadays have to make the choice between giving their babies and toddlers these experiences on the one hand, and on the other hand giving enough time & attention to paid work for adequate family income.

Now researchers are worried that less traumatic and much less easily detected developmental problems may be experienced by some babies and toddlers who spend long periods in non-parental daycare each weekday. These problems seem to be more common for babies and toddlers aged between 6 months and 30 months, and when a baby is cared for by unfamiliar people, instead of by one who is well known and trusted.

There has been a longstanding debate about whether these experiences have any effect on babies and toddlers, and if they do, whether the effects will last or disappear, or whether they'll reappear later as a 'sleeper effect'. But there is now evidence showing a small increase in negative behaviour that endures into later childhood that's linked to children who were in centre based day-nurseries when they were babies and toddlers.

Poverty is a well known risk-factor which tends to make the impact of all other risk factors even greater. Serious risk factors also include family breakdown, having a parent who was raised in care, having parents who are chronically neglectful, have a drug or alcohol problem, are abusive, violent or criminal. Other childhood risk-factors that are not as serious include parental depression, young unsupported parenthood, and lack of parenting skills. The effect on the child will be linked with their genetic predisposition to different experiences, and by the particular combination of experiences.

Toddlers who are *insecurely* attached to their primary attachment figure have a risk factor. Toddlers who are *securely* attached may have a risk-factor if they are in non-parental daycare without an attachment figure. These two risk factors are difficult to detect *individually*, but if toddlers are both insecurely attached *and* have no access to an attachment figure during daycare, they experience two risk factors which acting together are likely to be more easily noticed.

As adults we tend to focus on the most recent or obvious risk-factor in a child's history and attribute a disproportionate significance to it. Children's capacity to tolerate one or two modest risk factors will often mean the risks go undetected, and the most recent experience is then singled out as the sole cause.

In the normal course of everyday life, babies, toddlers, children and adults all thrive on moderate and predictable amounts of controllable stress that's appropriate for their age and development. These experiences produce normal levels of cortisol which is needed by the body for healthy functioning, and levels of cortisol will rise and fall throughout the day depending on many different physiological and psychological factors. However, babies and toddlers have extremely fragile brains that are developing very rapidly, and some researchers are growing very concerned about babies and toddlers whose levels

of cortisol are elevated all day. They worry that because babies' brains develop in response to the neurochemicals in their body, their brains may become adapted to chronically high levels of cortisol, and this may be affecting their ability to control their emotions and behaviour as they grow up.

Attachment theory predicts that babies and toddlers will sense an increased level of danger when they are unable to access their primary or a well known secondary attachment figure. This triggers an alarm reaction that activates their attachment seeking response which is heightened if they are in unfamiliar surroundings. The theory also predicts that at this young age the attachment seeking responses will not be adequately satisfied by a relatively unknown person.

Babies and toddlers between the age of 6 and 30 months tend to live in the present, and if they do not have a sense of familiar attachment figure they have an instinctive sense of danger which increases by the minute. This sense of danger raises their levels of cortisol (the fight, flight or freeze hormone) and induces a degree of distress - but what are the defences that babies and toddlers have available to cope with this form of distress?

Some can react in a trauma based way - some may cry for a short while or long while. Some become visibly distressed and scream long and loud. Although the best known response to fear is the aggressive fight or active flight behaviour, these responses are impractical for babies and toddlers and they tend to use dissociation as 'psychological flight'. Dissociative behaviours that babies and toddlers adopt when they are unable to reach an attachment figure:

Some appear unaffected by the experience of separation, and others may be over boisterous or aggressive,

some continue to be active but are rather subdued or withdrawn, and some quietly occupy themselves alone and appear to be undemanding and 'easy children', whilst others may be overly compliant or obedient and unusually co-operative.

At the extreme end of the dissociative spectrum is the 'freeze and surrender' response of blanking or stilling. Babies' instinct to de-activate their attachment seeking response under stress in the absence of an attachment figure probably originated as an emergency measure to reduce the risk of being detected in the natural environment of evolution.

In order to develop and maintain a secondary attachment bond between a baby and a carer, it's necessary that the carer provides continuity of personalised care for several years. But even then there is no certainty that a bond will develop. For a bond to develop between them, the carer must be willing to make an emotional commitment to the baby. Even the most sensitive daycare with a secondary attachment figure is likely to be more stressful than care from the primary attachment figure, but it does not seem to constitute a significant long-term risk factor for either secure or insecure children.

A model for attachment-based daycare is a family-type grouping which allows a carer to provide age appropriate care for each child.

It is important then

1. that carers actively encourage babies and toddlers to form secondary attachment bonds to them, and this is sanctioned by the parents
2. that babies and toddlers are accompanied by their primary attachment figure for the first few weeks of daycare whilst the baby makes friends with their new carer - the first stage of developing a secondary attachment bond
3. that by introducing a few minutes of separation and gradually increasing the time, the baby realises that they can take comfort from their carer and feel secure, keeping cortisol levels as low as possible
4. that the duration of care each day is kept short for babies whilst their secondary attachment bond is developing
5. that carers have sufficient energy, and are trained and supported to meet the physical, cognitive and emotional demands of the babies, toddlers and young children in their care

Long periods without access to any attachment figure is probably a developmental risk factor that goes undetected at the time, but which leaves babies and toddlers more vulnerable to developing social and emotional problems in the future. The role of child minders in Ireland today is vitally important as children need to make close attachment relationships with their caregivers and can do this in a loving environment.