

SUMMARY

BECOMING ATTACHED

ROBERT KAREN



Summary of “Becoming Attached” by Robert Karen

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Becoming Attached (1998) explores the importance of children’s first relationships in life by examining their attachment to a primary caregiver.

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Introduction

As long as children have existed, there have been theories on parenting and childhood development, whether they stem from a leading psychologist, your mother-in-law, or your next-door neighbor. Some of these theories are controversial, especially as the scholarship on developmental psychology has grown in recent years, and this can make it hard to know which theories are trustworthy. Robert Karen's research, however, seeks to cut through the noise by providing insights which are both accurate and beneficial. Through the course of this summary, we'll learn about childhood attachment from a psychological point of view and explore research from some of the world's leading psychologists who specialize in attachment theory. These insights can, in turn, help you to provide a healthier environment for your own children or even to arrive at a better understanding of your own childhood experience. You'll also learn:

- About the pros and cons of daycare and why it's controversial
- About different types of parent-child attachment styles and how to classify them, and
- How separation from parents for just a few days can negatively impact childhood development

What is Attachment?

How much do you remember about your early childhood? If you're like me, you might struggle to think back that far and you might mistake pictures you've seen or stories you've been told for genuine, authentic memories. But no matter how much you truly remember about your early life, one thing is for sure: you definitely remember the person who took care of you. For many people, that person was your mother. And the special connection that is formed between a young child and their primary caregiver is called attachment. Beginning in the first year of a child's life, attachment is a complex process that evolved for one simple reason: children can't survive on their own. Attachment develops in a few different phases, however. In the first few weeks of life, babies are too little to have any preference for one caregiver over another. But after a few weeks more, they can distinguish between faces and recognize their mother or another primary caregiver. As they grow older, they soon begin to display signs of distress when that caregiver isn't nearby. This is the beginning of attachment.

To further our understanding of attachment, many researchers have studied monkeys. In one experiment, psychologists separated baby monkeys from their mothers immediately after birth and raised them in a cage that had two fake "mothers" built from wire. The scientists covered one with a soft cloth while the other had a feeding nipple because they wanted to see which "mother" the babies would prefer. As anticipated, they spent most of their time cuddling with the cloth mother, only turning to the other when they absolutely needed food. This proved that their needs for love, warmth, and closeness were more important to them even than their need for food, and this is true of children and animals alike.

Mothers Are a Secure Home Base

Think back on your childhood. Did you go to your mother every time you were scared or worried? Did you grow up with the feeling that no matter what happened, you always felt better if your mom was around? Many people can relate to that experience because their attachment to their mothers helped them feel as though they had a secure home base to retreat to when the world was scary. And that's important because children rely on that base to help them navigate the world. This is demonstrated as early as a baby's crawling stage because even when babies venture to crawl around and explore on their own, they still opt to stay near their mothers as they do so. But if their mother leaves, they usually stop exploring and cry until she comes back because they want to know that they have that secure base to return to.

This was proven in another experiment with baby monkeys when researchers moved one baby into a cage with a soft "mother" made of wire and another to a cage completely on its own. While the monkey who had a "mother" was initially scared, after a while, it felt comfortable enough to leave its mother and explore its surroundings in the cage because it knew it could return to the "mother." By contrast, the baby who was alone simply sat in a corner, crying and immobilized by fear. And if we apply this insight to our observation of human children, it becomes readily apparent that this behavior is also demonstrated by toddlers. But what about when children appear to deviate from this behavior model by running as far away from their parents as possible or intentionally disappearing in a crowded place

We might wonder why a child would choose to wander so far from its base, but the answer is simpler than we might think. Researchers call this behavior "negative attention seeking" and it works because children sometimes want to test boundaries, experimenting to see how far they can wander before their mothers will call them back. It might seem nonsensical or defiant, but in fact, kids are simply trying to figure out how far they can go or how dangerous a situation would have to be in order for their mothers

to protect them. So, when they test the limits of their secure base, they're really just trying to understand how much safety and security they really have.

The Problems of Separation

Let's say that your young child-- who's maybe two or three years old-- is very sick and in the hospital. But you're not allowed to stay with him or even to visit. To the modern reader, that might sound like some kind of dystopian horror story, but in fact, that was the standard of our not-too-distant past. Just a few decades ago, hospitals made this policy because they were worried about infection. But in so doing, they also caused a significant disruption to the development of many young patients. That's because, in the beginning of a child's life, even temporary separations can have a lasting detrimental impact.

James Robertson, a psychiatrist and social worker in the 1950s, knew this and he campaigned aggressively for hospitals to change this policy because he believed he was literally saving patients' lives in so doing. To educate hospitals on his theory, he presented them with live footage of real children who were suffering from separation anxiety after being hospitalized. One film study included footage of a two-year-old girl whose hospital stay lasted only eight days but whose psychological damage was almost permanent. Her parents were only allowed to visit her for 45 minutes every other day and this was all it took to transform a happy, well-adjusted toddler into a resentful and unresponsive child.

For the first few days, she cried continuously and only wanted her parents. But after a while, she started to ignore her parents when they visited and, unfortunately, she continued to suffer from anxiety, irritability, and a strained relationship with her parents even after she went home. That's because very young children aren't able to understand that their separation is only temporary; at the age of two, their brains simply aren't developed enough. So, when a caregiver leaves them even for only a few days, they'll interpret it as a permanent loss and grieve accordingly. Having perceived such a deep abandonment at only two years old, it's unsurprising that her issues would persist long after the initial separation.

And the consequences can be even worse if children are separated from their parents for even longer stretches. Some can stop eating. Some never accept their parents again.

Fortunately, however, Robertson was able to get through to the hospital boards and they took his research on board when formulating their future policies. And it wasn't long before they started allowing parents unlimited visiting time.

The Three Attachment Styles

If you've ever studied developmental psychology even for a brief period of time, you've probably come across the name Mary Ainsworth because her research revolutionized the field of child psychology. Ainsworth developed three categorizations of attachment to explain the types of bonds between parent and child and we still use them today. So, let's take a look at these three categories. The first is secure attachment. This one is the healthiest and most common and it's characterized by an emotionally available mother and a well-adjusted child. Because these mothers are consistently available, meet their child's needs, and provide them with a stable and loving environment, these children are happy and comfortable with their place in the world.

The second type is ambivalent attachment. This occurs when mothers behave in unpredictable ways, like alternating between being available and ignoring the child for long periods of time. As a result, the child is frequently confused and insecure. They may struggle significantly with any separation or be prone to prolonged fits of crying that the mother cannot soothe.

And last but not least, the final style is avoidant attachment. As you've probably guessed from the name, this is a very unhealthy bond and it's characterized by an inconsistent relationship between mother and child. In this case, a mother might encourage too much independence or communicate to the child that she doesn't want them to be needy or clingy. As a result, the child might fluctuate between being unresponsive to her mother or become angry with her for no reason. And sadly, no matter what type of attachment style a child grows up with, its effects tend to last well beyond childhood. So, whatever your attachment style was as a child, there's a strong chance that you unknowingly bring these emotions, tendencies, and preconceptions into your adult relationships as well.

How to Assess an Attachment Style

But now that you've learned about the three attachment styles, how can you determine which one someone has? To answer this question, we'll return to Ainsworth's research, because she developed an experiment called the "Strange Situation" to test this. First, she built a playroom in a laboratory to test how children would respond in an unfamiliar environment. She then had them enter with their mothers (their secure base), which allowed them to feel comfortable enough to start exploring the toys. Once the children were engrossed in play, their mothers would sit in a chair a few feet away and a stranger would enter the room. And after awhile, the mothers would exit the room, leaving the child alone with the stranger, allowing the experiment to take its course.

Usually, the child would become distressed at being left alone with the stranger and would resist the unfamiliar adult's efforts to calm them down. At this time, Ainsworth would then reintroduce the mother and determine the child's attachment style by observing their response when their mother entered the room. She noted that the securely attached children were happy to see their mothers again and calmed down easily in her presence. By contrast, however, the ambivalently attached children seemed more distressed when their mothers returned and actually appeared to be angry. And the avoidantly attached children just completely ignored their mothers when they returned; their presence had no impact on the child's emotional response to the situation.

To this day, the Strange Situation is used as a method of assessing attachment styles. But it's actually not limited to kids! In fact, it's been adapted for adult therapy to help patients understand how they were attached to their parents in childhood. The Berkeley Adult Attachment Interview is one such adaptation and it includes questions about the patient's childhood, family dynamic, and their painful childhood memories. This can be especially helpful for people who are expecting a baby because people often pass their own attachment style on to their children through

their parenting. So, if you fear that your parents' attachment style negatively impacted you, it can be helpful to learn more so you can avoid repeating their mistakes.

How Parent Behavior Impacts Attachment

In the previous chapters, we've explored the ways that a parent's behavior--like showing consistent love and affection or ignoring a child one day and being available the next-- can impact attachment. But now, it's time to take a closer look because, as we mentioned in the last chapter, the type of attachment you had with your parents is a pretty good indicator of the attachment you'll form with your own child in later life. One study, the Adult Attachment Interview set out to examine this in depth by interviewing first-time mothers-to-be. After the questionnaire was completed, researchers used the women's responses to predict what attachment style they would develop with their children and found that their predictions were accurate 75% of the time.

For example, one expectant mother seemed to have a pretty realistic picture of her future as a parent. She expressed excitement and joy tempered with some realistic concerns about being a first-time parent, along with typical levels of fear and worry. This healthy balance of emotions indicated that her awareness of potential problems would make her better equipped to handle them and showed that, overall, she was motivated by love for her child. The researchers therefore predicted that she would form a secure attachment to her child. (And she did!) But because the researchers recognized that there's always room for improvement in parenting, they were also concerned with helping first-time parents who weren't so well-equipped.

For example, one team of researchers worked with a large group of children born into low-income families who identified as having anger-management problems. The researchers therefore decided to provide free counseling sessions for the mothers so they could explain their children's behavior and clear up potential misunderstandings that lead to anger. And the counseling had a tremendous impact! Although only 28% of children in the study's control group were found to be securely attached, after their mothers attended counseling, 68% of children in the focus group could be classified as securely attached. This just goes to show that even if parents

struggle to properly bond with their child, they're not without hope; anyone can improve their attachment with the proper resources and encouragement.

Daycare Isn't Necessarily A Bad Thing

Remember how, earlier, we mentioned that daycare falls under the category of those potentially controversial child-raising theories? Well, that's a bit of an understatement. In fact, for quite awhile, daycare was considered extremely harmful to a child's development in its first year of life. But interestingly enough, the conversation about daycare only began when women's rights caused a shift in the socially acceptable paradigm. Because there wasn't a strong market for daycare in the days when women stayed at home and cared for their children, opposition to daycare only arose when the women's liberation movement provided opportunities for a mother to have a life beyond the confines of domesticity.

This shows us two key things: firstly, that opposition to daycare wasn't based solely on legitimate concerns for a child's welfare, but rather arose as a means of protesting women's rights. But secondly, what about those studies that did generate negative findings about daycare? Are they inherently unfounded? Well, yes and no. For example, some early studies demonstrated that children who were placed in daycare showed signs of anxiety and aggression, and that's true. But each of the daycare centers examined in these studies were both overcrowded and underfunded and their workers lacked sufficient training to adequately care for the children. So, what we can ultimately take away from these studies is the fact that, yes, low-quality daycare centers can have a detrimental impact. But if children are placed in daycares with adequate training, funding, and resources, there is no cause for concern and this is a perfectly viable form of childcare for working parents.

Advocates of daycare have also pointed out that, in many cases, the problems children experience in daycare aren't the result of the daycare center itself but rather, the parents' motivations for putting their child there. For example, many children are in daycare because their parents are extremely busy-- so much so, in fact, that the child might easily feel as though their parents have no time for them. So, if the environment at home

is stressful or the child feels neglected, these feelings will follow them to daycare no matter how positive the center's environment is. However, this effect can be mediated if a child is able to form healthy and nurturing relationships with his caregivers at the daycare center. And if a child feels that he has a reliable and loving environment in this area of his life, there is no reason at all to assume that daycare would have a negative impact on a child.

Final Summary

As we've seen through this summary, a child's first relationship doesn't just impact her childhood-- it also shapes the adult she becomes. For this reason, Robert Karen argues that children must form a secure and healthy attachment to their primary caregiver in order to become happy and well-adjusted adults. Karen's theory is supported by the research of Mary Ainsworth, whose classifications of attachment-- secure, ambivalent, and avoidant-- are still used today and the experiments of early psychologists who tested their theories of attachment with baby monkeys.

Likewise, James Robertson's argument that even brief separations cause lasting damage to childhood development reinforces Karen's beliefs about the importance of secure attachment. We've also learned that the type of attachment we formed to our parents in childhood can impact our own parenting styles for better or for worse. But fortunately, even if we've learned unhealthy patterns, we're not doomed to blindly repeat them; with appropriate counseling and resources, parents can learn how to form secure attachments with their children.



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