

Attachment Theory: Schaffer and Emerson

Jeffrey H. D. Cornelius-White, PsyD, LPC

Joan E. Test, Ed.D.

Missouri State University

Rudolph Schaffer and Peggy Emerson's work on the development of attachment in childhood is based on the evolutionary perspective of John Bowlby. Schaffer and Emerson (1964) defined attachment as, "The tendency of the young to seek the proximity of other members of the species" (p. 6). In their view, infants and young children seek out and find comfort in being physically close to people with whom they have formed attachments.

Schaffer and Emerson conducted a large longitudinal study to further understand infants' attachments. They wanted to know how and when attachments develop. To do this they explored a number of different aspects of children's attachments, including the ages at which attachments began, the intensity of these attachments, the person to whom the child was attached, as well as the total number of different attachments for an individual child. Schaffer and Emerson studied 60 infants, visiting their homes every 4 weeks for 12 months and then again when the infant was 18 months old. They recorded and then analyzed children's reactions during seven everyday situations where adults would naturally be separated from their infants. These situations included times when an infant was left alone in a room, left in his crib at night, passed by in her chair or crib, or left with other people. Schaffer and Emerson did not observe these episodes themselves, but interviewed parents about each of these seven everyday experiences.

Using parents' answers, Schaffer and Emerson found that half of the infants were primarily attached to their mothers, about half to their fathers, and a few to grandparents or siblings. They also found that infants could have multiple attachments at the same time and that the development of a strong attachment to one person did not mean that infants could not also have attachments to other people. Furthermore, infants tended to become attached to the people in their lives who responded sensitively to them. Schaffer and Emerson called this "sensitive responsiveness," which includes responding accurately to the infant's signals, responding quickly to their cries or demands, and interacting with the infant. Sensitive responsiveness was what allowed an attachment to develop, rather than the amount of time spent with the infant, or the physical care provided.

Based on their interviews, Schaffer and Emerson also outlined four stages in the development of attachment.

The *Asocial* stage (0-6 weeks) is first, in which infants respond to people and things with a positive reaction such as a smile, responding similarly to people and objects.

The *Indiscriminate Attachments* stage (6 weeks to 7 months) occurs as infants enjoy human company over objects, but respond similarly to any caregiver. They get upset when someone stops interacting with them. From about 3 months old, infants smile more at familiar faces and can be easily comforted by a familiar caregiver. No one caregiver is seen as primary, though.

The *Specific Attachments* stage (7 to 9 months) follows. At this age infants show a special preference for particular caregivers and look to them for comfort, security,

protection and reassurance in stressful situations. Infants this age also show *stranger anxiety* and *separation anxiety* that are an indication that they have formed attachments. Stranger anxiety is visible when infants are quiet, hide behind a familiar caregiver, protest, or stare at the person not familiar to them. Separation anxiety is visible when infants show distress in response to separation from a caregiver to whom they are attached.

The *Multiple Attachments* stage (10 to 18 months) is the final stage. At this age, infants become increasingly independent and form attachments with multiple people in their lives who respond sensitively to them, including grandparents, siblings, or neighbors.

Through their groundbreaking research on children's behavior during everyday separations, Schaffer and Emerson revealed how attachment develops and the factors that foster attachments. Their work is now a classic study and has contributed greatly to our understanding of how and why attachments form during early social development.

References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1973). The development of infant-mother attachment. In B. Cardwell & H. Ricciuti (Eds.), *Review of child development research* (Vol. 3, pp. 1-94) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1991). Attachments and other affectional bonds across the life cycle. In C. M. Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, & P. Marris (Eds.), *Attachment across the life cycle* (pp. 33-51). London: Routledge.
- Bowlby J. (1969). *Attachment. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Loss*. New York: Basic Books.

Schaffer, H. R., & Emerson, P. E. (1964). The development of social attachments in infancy. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 1-77.