Attachments are the emotional bonds that infants develop with their parents and other key caregivers. These relationships are crucial for children’s well-being and for their emotional and social development.

In recent years, extensive research based on attachment theory has established a strong evidence base with relevance for early childhood policies.
Attachment security

According to attachment theory, infants who have formed a positive attachment to one or both parents should be able to use them as secure bases from which to explore the environment. Stress, caused by events such as encounters with strangers or entering unfamiliar settings, should lead such infants to stop exploring and draw closer to their parents, at least temporarily. If contact with the parent is disrupted, for example if the parent and infant are briefly separated, this should lead infants to attempt to bring them back by crying or searching, and to less exploration of the environment. Following the parent’s return, secure infants should seek to re-engage in interaction and, if distressed, perhaps ask to be cuddled and comforted. In fact, this is how about 65 per cent of infants, studied in a number of different countries, behave in the ‘Strange Situation’, a standardised research measure of attachment security, although there is substantial variation in this figure both within and between countries (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988).

By contrast, some infants seem unable or unwilling to use their parents as secure bases from which to explore, and they are called insecure. Insecure infants usually become distressed if they are separated from their parents, they behave ambivalently on reunion, so seeking contact and interaction, but angrily rejecting it when it is offered. Infants showing this pattern in the Strange Situation assessment are conventionally labelled insecure–resistant or ambivalent. They typically account for approximately 15 per cent of infants (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988).

Other insecure infants seem little concerned by their parents’ absence. Instead of greeting their parents on reunion, they actively avoid interaction and ignore their parents’ bids. These infants are said to show insecure–avoidant attachments and they typically constitute about 20 per cent of infants (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988).

Main and Solomon (1990) have described a fourth group of infants whose behaviour is ‘disoriented’ and/or ‘disorganised’. These infants simultaneously show contradictory behaviour patterns, and incomplete or undirected movements, and they seem to be confused or apprehensive about approaching their parents.

(adapted from Oates et al., 2005, p. 28)

- Children’s attachment relationships are described by attachment researchers as being ‘secure’, ‘insecure’ or ‘disorganised’.
- A child with secure attachment is confident in the attachment figure’s availability as a source of comfort and reassurance at times of stress.
- Children with insecure or disorganised attachment do not have consistent expectations that their attachment figures will be able to help them to deal with emotional distress.
Attachment and cultural context

Behaviour genetics has shown that differences in attachment relationships are mainly caused by nurture instead of nature. Although the bias to become attached is inborn, the way in which this inborn tendency takes shape in the first few years of life is determined by the specific socio-cultural context. In fact, attachment behaviour patterns appear to be rather context dependent and to express flexible adaptations to specific niches in which the child is born and has to survive.

... The attachment relationship emerges from myriads of social interactions during the first few years of life, usually with the biological mother or with alternative caregivers who are genetically related to the child and interact with him on a regular basis. As the evolutionary perspective of attachment theory would predict, fathers, older siblings or grandparents fulfill important roles as attachment figures in a variety of cultures (Lamb, 1997; van IJzendoorn and Sagi, 1999; Hrdy, 1999).

... Human infants are evolutionarily built to become part of a network of attachment relationships in which they derive protection and security. Human mothers are evolutionarily selected to share the burdens of raising their children with biologically related alternative caregivers such as the father, older siblings or grandparents.

... The innate bias to become attached is universal. The environmental input is culturally specific, determining individual and group differences in becoming attached in a certain way, even to the extent that under unusual life events (e.g. low-quality daycare, infants sleeping away from parents at night) normative transmission patterns in parent–child relationships might be interrupted.

... The environment is important because it provides parents with a culturally specific history of attachment experiences and with culturally based child-rearing attitudes, behaviours and norms that influence the parental style of responding to the child's attachment needs, preparing these children for adaptation to the specific niche in which they were born.

(van IJzendoorn et al., 2007)

- Although attachment relationships are universal, they are patterned by the culture in which they are formed.
- The specific forms of attachment that develop in particular cultural niches show that attachment has a biological basis and has evolved as a flexible, adaptive process.
Care within the family is important for children's development, but so too is care that is provided by others.

Many children, often from very early in life, are cared for by persons other than their parents for many hours a week and for many months and years before they begin school. Extensive research reveals two fundamental facts about how such rearing affects children’s development: when the quality of such non-parental care is high, children flourish, especially cognitively; when it is poor, the opposite is true. High-quality care is care that is attentive, responsive, stimulating and affectionate.

It is difficult for untrained caregivers who are poorly paid and motivated and have too many children to care for to provide growth-promoting care.

Amount of care, especially in groups, also matters. Children who spend a lot of time in group-based care before they start school are more likely to become aggressive and disobedient.

Thus, long hours and many years growing up in group settings that are of limited quality pose clear developmental risks for children's well-being.

Jay Belsky, Director, Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

- In many cultural settings, informal or more institutionalised types of non-parental care are commonplace, often occupying large proportions of young children’s waking hours.
- The quality of care in non-parental settings is important for a child’s subsequent development.
- Ample resources and training are needed to ensure that non-parental care is of adequate quality.
- If a large proportion of a young child’s life is spent in care settings outside of the family, the risk of later behavioural problems is likely to be greater.
References