

## INTERVIEW

### Fathers' role as attachment figures: an interview with Sir Richard Bowlby

Lisa A. Newland<sup>a\*</sup> and Diana D. Coyl<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Division of Counseling and Psychology in Education, The University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota, USA;* <sup>b</sup>*Child Development Program, California State University, Chico, California, USA*

(Received 23 June 2009; final version received 8 July 2009)

Sir Richard Bowlby, son of John Bowlby, has carried on his father's work by lecturing and writing on the topic of attachment theory. He has initiated and maintained international connections with researchers, practitioners and agencies in the field of child development, and has produced training videos to more widely disseminate information about attachment theory to professionals working with children and families. In this interview, conducted in London in February of 2009, Richard responded to questions regarding the father's role as an attachment figure, highlighting new theoretical directions and current research. He also addressed cultural influences on fathering and attachment, and offered suggestions for researchers and practitioners.

**Keywords:** child attachment security; fathering; context; culture; childcare

#### Sir Richard, when did you become interested in attachment theory?

I was not chatting with my father about attachment theory when my babies were tiny. I only had discussions with him much later. And he didn't offer any insight either. He only made one comment to my wife, which was that "you're doing fine" (see Bowlby, 2004, p. 21). It wasn't until my children were eight or nine years old that I decided I had better read some of my father's work. I better read these three thick volumes. My father said: "Well don't start on Volume 1, you'll find it very boring; start on Volume 2, it's a lot more interesting". He was right, but he made a mistake. I should have started on Chapter 11 of Volume 1, because that is all about how we develop these primary attachment bonds. After my father died, I thought I had better learn a bit more about it. Xenia (my wife) and I went to a series of one-hour evening lectures on attachment theory, and we got to know the people quite well. Mario Marrone, who was organising the lectures, and who co-founded the *Attachment & Human Development Journal*, said that he was going to repeat the series of lectures. He asked whether I would do an introductory talk about my father. I said no – I had never spoken in public, but Mario said that he had already advertised that I was going to speak. So I made a video and showed it at the next series of lectures. At the end, I asked if there were any questions. Mario had said: "I think you'll find that you know more than you realise", and he was right, because of course they were asking me questions about my

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: [lisa.newland@usd.edu](mailto:lisa.newland@usd.edu)

dad, nobody else's dad. Slowly this (interest in attachment) started perking up. That was in the mid-1990s. But what really made the difference was the birth of my first grandchild, because suddenly I saw all of this happening before my eyes. I had some knowledge by that point. And then I made the real shift to include fathers. You know, I made the video tape and distributed that, and people started to invite me to lecture, and things slowly built up. But then Sophie and Matthew came to live with us for a few years (daughter and son-in-law) after Nathan was born, and Matt said: "There's something wrong with attachment theory – it doesn't account for fathers!"

**You've lectured extensively on fathering and attachment, and in your lecture notes you describe current research, which suggests that fathers may play a different role than mothers in the socialisation of children. Can you explain?**

Researchers have found that children who excel in social situations as young adults, had mothers who provided an enduring secure base and a positive model for intimate relationships within the family, and fathers who had provided exciting play and interactive challenges. There seem to be two separate attachment roles for two separate but equally significant functions – one attachment role is to provide love and security, and the other attachment role is to engage in exciting and challenging experiences (see, e.g. Grossmann et al., 2002; NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 2004).

When I watched Matt with his son, I could see that there was something different going on here. I knew that he was doing something different, that he had an insight, a connection with the child, which was more involved. (My grandson was about 18 months old at the time.) It was the play that made a difference. It was always interactive. It might be early morning, watching a bit of TV with the toddler on his knee, watching children's programmes together (never alone). They would talk about what they were watching, rewind and see their favourite part again. He also read to him. The effect of having a parent read to a child is very advantageous. It is an unequivocal illustration of time and attention being paid only to the child. And the child has this sense of "I've gotcha!" or "You're mine, and this time is special". The child is in control for a bit. That time and attention is very important.

So my son-in-law was playful and engaging with my grandson. As Matt and I got to thinking about this, we worked it out in about 10 minutes on the back of an envelope. I drew up a diagram of our conversation and I said: "Do you think it looks like that?", and he said: "Yes, something like that". I sent it to Howard Steele, and he sent me the Grossmann paper. I read the abstract, and was so taken, that I emailed Karin Grossmann and sent her the drawing. Based on her empirical findings with fathers (Grossmann et al., 2002), she gave me some feedback and I made some changes. Eventually I ended up with the diagram that I use in lectures showing dual primary attachments to mothers and fathers (see Figure 1).

Whilst attachment theory acknowledges children's desire for play and exploration, there isn't much emphasis put on it. Attachment theory has focused on the quality of the relationship necessary for a child to achieve a sense of safety under threatening conditions. But is the attachment bond no more than evolution's way of keeping children safe from danger? Or is the bond evolution's way of promoting exploration, giving us the confidence to venture beyond known territories – the secure base being more like a launch-pad for these activities? I believe that we also need to examine the instinctive human need for discovery, enjoyment and sense of achievement and to

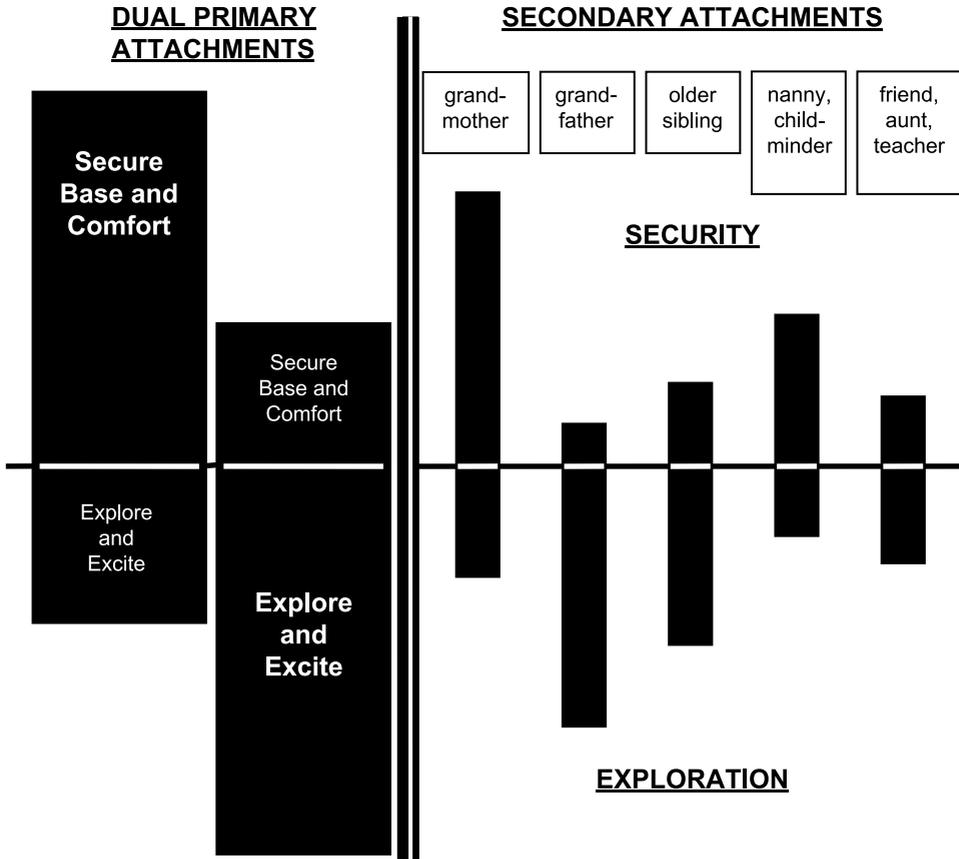


Figure 1. Dual primary attachment figures proposed by Richard Bowlby. Source: Richard Bowlby’s personal lecture notes, 2006.

look at the emotional and social implications for children’s development when these needs are not met.

I remember asking my father about the role of fathers in attachment theory, but he didn’t have a well thought out opinion and finished the conversation by saying: “Well, a child doesn’t need two mothers!” By the 1980s my father valued the role of fathers much more, and he talked about the effect on boys of losing their fathers. His recognition of fathers came late in his career, and I suspect his intense focus on mothers has biased researchers and distorted cultural values.

Now supposing the significance of the relationship between children and fathers is very much greater than that of just a secondary attachment figure. Supposing a father was another primary attachment figure. In families where there are two people raising children, one parent is the highest ranking attachment figure for providing an enduring secure base and haven of safety in times of distress, and the other parent is the highest ranking attachment figure for providing exploration and excitement when times are favourable – different roles but equally significant. There will be varying degrees of overlap between these two attachment roles, but each parent will usually provide mostly one or the other type of attachment relationship. The roles may be influenced by gender, but are not likely to be gender specific.

If this was the case then it would explain why fathers' sensitive and appropriate involvement with children would have as great a degree of positive impact in their adult life as that of mothers. Conversely one could see why fathers' emotional unavailability, separation or loss could have a similar degree of negative impact as would the emotional unavailability, separation or loss of mothers, but in different ways and for different reasons.

Whether young or old we seem driven to explore and to seek new experiences and there is a potent neurochemical reward when we do, but we need to feel sufficiently safe doing so, or we're too frightened to continue. To optimise our chances of being successful we need two distinct systems in place: the first is to know there is a secure base to return to when the activity ends or goes wrong, and the other is having a trusted companion to show the way.

Being seen as a "primary" attachment figure would change the importance we place on fathers. It would allow us to re-evaluate the importance of a father's role and to recognise that his significance in his child's history is equal to that of a mother's. Fathers would see themselves as having a crucial influence on their children's long-term social development, and their position as trusted play companions would, instead of so often being ridiculed as juvenile and time wasting, be highly valued. So what does all this mean? It doesn't change what fathers have always been to children – good, bad or indifferent, just like mothers; what it changes is the place of fathers within attachment theory.

This is a bit controversial to say that children may have two primary attachment figures, but if dads matter, then they matter. And what is the mechanism by which they matter? I don't have any empirical evidence myself, but I do have some comments from my father, on video, about the role of fathers, later in his career. My father says:

When we feel an increase in the risk of danger, we are going to need to respond to that. We will try to reduce the risk of danger, by our behaviour. We may be in a very risky situation, and if the risk gets any greater, that will threaten us and trigger the attachment-seeking response which can only be terminated by proximity to an attachment figure either father as a protector or mother as a secure base.

**What role do you see parental relationships (the relationship between mothers and fathers) playing in children's attachment formation? For example, how do co-parenting and parental conflict play out in children's attachment security?**

In all of the data that I have come across, including the (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) NICHD data on parents' report of marital harmony, parental harmony seems to be a significant predictor of the outcomes of the child. There is a very good report in Britain called "Breakdown Britain" which addresses this issue. In that report, it's noted that family conflict is related to a wide range of negative outcomes for children, and parents in conflict-ridden relationships are less able to co-parent well. In addition, if a child is exposed to parental disharmony, which results in parental separation, the child's emotional outcome is reduced (although they fare better than if parents stay in a high-conflict marriage; Amato, 2006). If there is no marital disharmony, and the relationship suddenly breaks up, apparently for no reason, their outcomes are worse (Centre for Social Justice: Family Breakdown Working Group, 2006, p. 79). We see long-term effects on those children's later marital relationships, because you can't predict (a breakup) and you can't prepare for it. That report is based in part on Booth and Amato's work (e.g. Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995).

### **What are your thoughts about the influence of culture on fathering and attachment?**

Well, certainly culture plays an important role. I believe that the dual attachment model mainly applies in Western culture. I don't think that it applies as often in Middle Eastern and Far Eastern cultures. For instance I am told that children's rough and tumble play with fathers is a Western activity and I think this may prepare children in some way for the culture of Western work practices which rely on individual achievement and learning to trust a boss or colleague.

In Eastern cultures the focus is more on *collectivism* rather than *individualism*. Different cultural values will play out in different socialisation practices. One example of cultural influences on parenting and child outcomes is the Hikikomori phenomenon in Japan. These are young men (and women) who are completely socially isolated young adults still living in their parents' homes. In that case, children have been raised in a culture where they expect things to be done within a group dynamic, but due to the rapid westernisation of society they are suddenly expected to go out on their own as an adult. Many cannot cope. We may be seeing more of this kind of antisocial phenomena in other cultures, if we don't address this issue of attachment, and the balance between security and risk taking (exploration). We want them to be able to function when they do leave home, in their work place, in their college, in their social settings, in their peer groups and with their romantic partners. Inability to do this is a huge disadvantage outside the home. It takes both a sense of security and willingness to explore.

### **What do you think are the next steps to be taken in advancing attachment theory?**

I believe that attachment theory will be advanced in at least four important ways: greater dissemination of attachment information to parents and child-minders, the inclusion of multiple risk factors when examining child emotional outcomes, more through examination of the effects of non-parental care, and increased use of measures which capture the complexity of father-child interactions.

#### ***Dissemination of attachment information***

We must consider alternative ways of disseminating information regarding the importance of early attachments. The internet is one potential medium, also popular media, parent education groups and public forums. The information has to get to parents and child-minders (i.e. childcare providers), for example, through health care professionals. I've begun making a general interest DVD about secure attachment and the "key person" in day care that I hope to put on the internet for free download worldwide.

#### ***Examination of multiple risk factors***

We must start examining multiple risk factors for children. Insecure attachment is a fairly wide-spread risk factor, 40–45% of children are classified as insecurely attached in Great Britain, also in America. And then if you add impersonal childcare for eight hours per day, five days per week, with care given by multiple staff members when none of them have become attachment figures, then that's a second risk factor. Then if parental separation occurs, let's say father has just left home, that's a third risk

factor. These are all common and socially acceptable experiences, but now we have three risk factors, all on the same emotional system, that is, the (child's) attachment system. Quite often, what people tend to blame is the most recent event, the bit that you can see, that was the "last straw". In this case, everybody blames the dad leaving, when in actuality, it was the combination of factors, the effects of multiple (risk) factors, but it was the last one that was the most obvious.

### *The effects of non-parental care*

We have to seriously examine the effects of non-parental care from an attachment perspective. In the UK we have these driving license points, and if you get more than 12 points you lose your license. Usually a significant speeding ticket is four points. Now if you take four points off your license because you've gotten a speeding ticket, you've got eight points left. You're still driving, but you're in the danger zone. We may be putting children who are receiving *impersonal day care* into that position where they've gotten four points off their license already. They are still "driving", still functioning, but they are in the danger zone. If they have a rotation of different staff coming in and out throughout their day, they are essentially in a strange situation for eight hours per day, without access to an attachment figure, and they start disengaging. They may come from well-functioning middle-class families, but they now have a risk factor.

There is another model of childcare that is based on attachment theory. An example would be the Soho Family Centre in London (see Bowlby, 2007). At the Centre, child-minders (care providers) expect to develop a secure, secondary attachment bond with each of the three small children they look after. Great care is taken to maintain the children's primary attachment bond to their primary attachment figure whilst a secondary attachment relationship with the child-minder is actively nurtured. First, the coordinator assesses the attachment dynamics of each family before a (child's) place at the Centre is agreed, and she will work out the individual childcare plan that she considers to be in the best interests of the child, rather than of the parent. The children are each looked after by only one child-minder throughout the entire period that they attend the Centre (usually three or four years). The Centre only permits a child-minder to care for one baby younger than 18 months, one toddler 18 months to three years and one child over three years old. In addition the child-minders are allowed to take on one child over the age of five after school – often a child they had cared for as a toddler. The youngest age that infants are accepted by the child-minders is six months old but the Centre prefers nine months or older, so that infants may develop their primary attachment bond with their parents.

When infants are first introduced to a child-minder, their primary attachment figures are required to stay with them at the Centre for as long as it takes the infants to get to know their particular child-minders. It usually takes several weeks for the relationship to develop and for their surroundings to become sufficiently familiar that the babies are not distressed when left. The baby gradually realises that they can take comfort from their (new) carer and feel secure. The initial separations are for only a few minutes and then are slowly increased, and even then the babies and toddlers are in day care only part time if they are younger than 18 months old.

There are seven tables in the main room at which each child-minder and her three children will sit together for lunch, as well as using it as a base throughout the day for

play. The child-minders can often be seen carrying the youngest whilst the toddler under three plays nearby, and the older child is engaged in more adventurous activities. One practical arrangement to note is that two child-minders are paired with one another, and the children of each one get to know the other child-minder quite well. If a child has to have its nappy (diaper) changed in another room, the two remaining children have a responsible person to go to, with whom they have a confident and familiar relationship.

The child-minders and the coordinator are extremely careful to avoid letting the relationship between the infant and the child-minders develop from a secondary attachment to a primary attachment. It's a balance. If it is observed that the baby routinely does not want to separate from the child-minders at the end of the day, the day care is temporarily discontinued so the baby can spend more time with mother and re-establish the primary attachment. From what I've observed and what I've been told, the system of childcare provided by the Soho Family Centre is unique in the UK. The Centre is an example of the intelligent application of attachment theory to the practical and long-term provision of non-parental, out-of-home, centre-based, childcare – but it's not an easy or a cheap system to maintain! I am proud to be a patron of the Soho Family Centre. There are other good options for families, such as family-childcare, neighbour-care and other arrangements where the babies know and love the people caring for them.

### ***The father's attachment role***

We must push to really understand the father's role in children's emotional lives. We can start by accurately measuring what it is that fathers do that makes the difference. An excellent example is the Grossmann's SCIP measure of sensitivity during exciting and challenging father-child play (see Grossmann et al., 2002). We need to pursue measures which capture the complexity of father-child interactions and fathers' attachment role.

### **Notes on contributors**

Lisa A. Newland is an associate professor of educational psychology in the Division of Counseling and Psychology in Education at the University of South Dakota. She teaches courses in child development, statistics, research methods, and child assessment. Her research interests include parent-child relationships and developmental outcomes from infancy to adolescence, fathering and co-parenting, and interactions between home and school settings.

Diana D. Coyl is an associate professor of child development in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences at California State University at Chico. She teaches courses in school-age and adolescent development, family relations, research methods and statistics. Her research interests include attachment relationships across the lifespan, adolescent identity development, couple relations and parent-child relationships.

### **References**

- Amato, P. (2006). Marital discord, divorce, and children's well-being: Results from a 20-year longitudinal study of two generations. In A. Clarke-Stewart & J.F. Dunn (Eds.), *Families count: Effects on child and adolescent development* (pp. 179–202). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Amato, P., Loomis, L., & Booth, A. (1995, March). Parental divorce, marital conflict, and offspring well-being during early adulthood. *Social Forces*, 73(3), 895–915.

- Bowlby, R. (2004). Fifty years of attachment theory. In R. Bowlby (Ed.), *Fifty years of attachment theory: The Donald Winnicott memorial lecture* (pp. 11–26). London: Karnac Books.
- Bowlby, R. (2007). Babies and toddlers in non-parental day care can avoid stress and anxiety if they develop a lasting secondary attachment bond with one carer who is consistently accessible to them. *Attachment & Human Development*, 9(4), 307–319.
- Centre for Social Justice: Family Breakdown Working Group. (2006, December). *The state of the nation report: Fractured families*. Retrieved June 15, from [http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/BB\\_family\\_breakdown.pdf](http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/BB_family_breakdown.pdf)
- Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K.E., Fremmer-Bombik, E., Kindler, H., Scheurerer-Englisch, H., & Zimmermann, P. (2002). The uniqueness of the child–father attachment relationship: Father’s sensitive and challenging play as a pivotal variable in a 16-year longitudinal study. *Social Development*, 11, 307–331.
- NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) Early Childcare Research Network. (2004). Father’s and mother’s parenting behavior and beliefs as predictors of child social adjustment in the transition to school. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18(4), 628–638.