

## PARENTING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON A CHILD'S LIFE

By: Suzana Sjenicic

Parenting is a key component involved not only in shaping one's personality and behavior but also in forming a relationship with caregivers - particularly mothers. Different styles of parenting create relationships that are remembered throughout life and can both positively and negatively affect a child's social interactions. People are not usually consciously aware of the impact that their upbringing has on them. They often talk about their difficult or happy childhoods, but rarely take a moment to understand where certain behaviors or feelings stem from. If we, as counselors, take the time to explore the lasting impact of child-caretaker relationships, we can learn much about individuals and begin to better understand their choices and behaviors.

Over many years, various theorists dedicated their lives to exploring the attachment of a child to their caregiver, with a particular focus on the mother. Famous psychologists such as Sigmund and Anna Freud, John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and Melanie Klein, contributed their own perspectives in order to complete the picture of the importance of attachment. Although they all approached the topic from psychodynamic backgrounds, attributing both a mother's and her child's behaviors to different causal factors, some of their theories differ significantly from each other based on the way they view the mother-child relationship.

John Bowlby was one of the theorists who placed added emphasis on the role of care and safety in a mother-child relationship. He claimed that a child's primary need is to feel the closeness and warmth of a mother, and to feel safe and comfortable around her. In that way, the two form a secure bond, and a desired relationship is created. He based his theory on three psychoanalytically-derived assumptions: (1) that a parent's behavior has a powerful influence on their child's personality and social development, (2) that cross-generational influences has an impact on the parent-child relationship, and that it continues to govern a child's expectations from social partners, as well as determine appropriate behaviors in social situation; and finally, (3) that internal working models are shaped and activated by the anxiety-

provoking situations caused by the experience or fear of losing the loved one or their love (Steele & Steele, 1998).



John Bowlby and Anna Freud believed that early parent-child interactions influence - and can even fully determine - a child's future social interactions. They were of the opinion that children with proper attachment are continuously provided with positive experiences, feel safe, and use caregivers - particularly the mother - as a secure base for such safety. Mary Ainsworth supports her colleagues in this by noting that children are normally allowed to freely explore the world while knowing that they could always come back to the parent for protection, which is important because, "... infants and young children need to develop a secure dependence on parents before launching out into unfamiliar situations" (Steele & Steele, 1998).

According to John Bowlby, the mother serves as a child's ego and superego until they acquire the ability to perform tasks independently. More specifically, she does not allow for her child to get hurt, teaches them right from wrong, and performs tasks for them with instructions on how to perform those tasks on their own. A mother provides comfort and encourages a child to explore on their own, while monitoring

them (Steele & Steele, 1998). Such a mother creates a secure bond with her child and creates trust, resulting in the child's growth into an individual who feels valued and reliable.

If a child develops secure attachment to their mother by being raised in a warm, caring, and supportive environment, that child will most likely grow up to be a warm, caring and supportive individual. Usually, these children are taught right from wrong from an early age, and thereby develop a relationship with their parents such that they feel free to be honest. They know that they will be understood and supported, even in negative situations. These children tend to mature into good decision makers, and are more likely to avoid risky behaviors. Raised in a secure and supportive environment with the confidence to explore the world on their own, such children will not feel the need to experiment with dangerous activities.

Following Bowlby's second point, parents of a securely attached child were most likely securely attached children with similar past experiences. Bowlby's claim that there is a cross-generational influence within the role of attachment makes sense, considering that good parenting creates confident, reliable, and positive children who can then transfer that warmth and care to their own children. Of course, the inverse could happen as well: those children who are insecurely attached – who have had parents who did not provide them with security, encouragement, and loving understanding – will behave in the same manner when

interacting with their own children and other people (Steele & Steele, 1998). They are likely become hostile adults who are be unable to behave appropriately in social situations and have difficulty making sound decisions.

The scientific literature supports the belief that the authoritative parenting style is preferred. This style is embodied by the maintenance of a loving, supportive, and caring relationship between a parent and child in which the child is treated as a valued and respected individual – which closely mirrors the definition of secure attachment that psychoanalytical theo-

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rists such as Bowlby posed. It is worthy to note, however, that Bowlby stresses the point that conflict is unavoidable even in the most secure, authoritative relationship. The difference, then, between a securely attached parent-child relationship and one that is insecurely attached, is that conflicts are handled with care. With such an approach, the difference between right and wrong is explained to the child, responsibility is taken by the mother, and the relationship isn't weakened by severe punishments and hostile behaviors. This way of dealing with conflict results in a healthier attachment than one in which parents resolve conflicts with hostility in the form of yelling, arguing and punishing harshly. Promoting fear of a parental figure – who is supposed to represent the secure base to a child – results in an unhealthy attachment and a disturbed bond between the child and parent. Such damage can also be transferred to the child's later relationships, which become based on the unhealthy feelings of need towards others (that were unfulfilled by caregivers), coupled with an ingrained fearfulness of them.

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tact to the child. Bowlby stresses their importance, and – unlike Melanie Klein – believes that they are the most valuable factors that a child looks for in a relationship with a parent (Steele & Steele, 1998). Contrarily, Klein believed that children base their interactions with a caretaker on basic survival needs such as feeding and washing. Harlow's experiment with rhesus monkeys appears to prove Bowlby's point. In the experiment, two 'mothers' were available in cages: one made out of wire with an attached bottle, and the other made of comfortable cloth with no bottle. When able to, baby monkeys chose to stay close to the mother made of cloth. This challenges Klein's belief that a child's primary concern is being fed and cleaned, while supporting Bowlby's point that children seek comfort.

According to research conducted by Nathanson, et al. (2014), parenting behaviors can have an effect on child's executive functioning as well. It is believed that positive parenting can foster the development of executive functioning in children, while harsh parenting can inhibit it. Parents who dedicate more time to their children and watch age-appropriate programs on television together with them, are fostering child's healthy growth and brain development. At the same time, they are creating a bond with their children, especially if they use those educational programs or non-violent cartoons as topics of discussions and teaching.

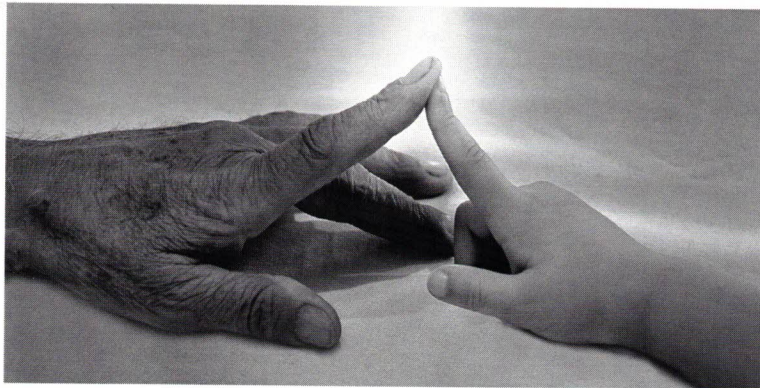


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Many contemporary parents, however, do not have the time to dedicate to their children, and let their children watch television instead of spending time with them. The biggest issues with this strategy is that children end up spending too much time watching television and are also left unmonitored relative to what they are watching, which can have a negative influence on their development. For instance, one study showed that watching too much of adult-oriented television weakened children's executive functioning three years later. Another negative impact of television watching on children is thought to be the impediment of children's attention by background television noise (Nathanson et al., 2014). In contemporary society, technological devices play a big role: televisions are rarely shut down, smart phones rarely put away, and computers are available to everyone – including children. As parents, people must begin to think about the long term effects that these devices could have on their children, and start paying closer attention to what their children are exposed to through those devices.

Additionally, parents should examine the meaningfulness of the attention they give to their children and the quality of the bond they are creating together. This is because the bonds children create with parents – along with the ease with which children can talk to them honestly and openly – have a significant influence on their relationships with peers. Teenagers and adolescents who have open and trusting relationships with their parents are more likely to avoid risky situations, and know better to distinguish right from wrong. Even if they make a mistake and do something their parents would not approve of, they are more likely to admit to a mistake and talk to them. Securely attached children like these are able to communicate with their parents in a healthy way without fear of harsh punishment, and work hard to repair their relationship if parents are upset with them. As Bowlby asserted, a child's greatest fear is the loss of a loved one or their love (Steele & Steele, 1998).

An article written by Smith et al. (2014) discusses the research results stating that adolescents who were told they were being observed by a peer were more likely to partake in risky behaviors. This underscores the power that peer relationships have over teenagers and adolescents. However, if adolescents have good relationships with their parents, the fear of disappointing their parents and losing their love is more likely to prevail when making decisions. Those adolescents will not be rebellious or attempt risky behaviors to anger their parents by a show of defiance. This is not since they expect a harsh punishment, but rather because they fear ruining the bond with their parents more than any punishment they may experience.

As supported by the aforementioned research



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articles, parent-child relationships are very powerful and have an enormous impact on a child's life.

They often predetermine who children will become and what their relationships will be like. Many problems that children experience later on in life stem from their disrupted relationships with parents, which may come in the form of weak bonds or insecure attachment. Children who are missing care and dedication from their parents will often grow up feeling empty and hostile, and will be unable to keep relationships. On the other hand, children who have created secure

bonds to their parents, developed trust in them, and spent enough time nurturing their attachment, will grow up to become adults who are confident, secure, and able to create and maintain healthy relationships. When working with clients, it is crucial for counselors to pay special attention to these factors. It is important to get to the root of the person and their relationships, which is often located in childhood, before proceeding with treatment.

Counselors applying psychodynamic approaches to therapy need to be mindful of the surfacing of transference. Many clients who have had troubled relationships with their caretakers can transfer their feelings from those figures onto their counselor. This happens more often than not, and it is crucial that it is addressed in therapy sessions and used towards healing and resolving existent issues. It is important to

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consider transference, as it could happen with both adults and children, and can provide meaningful information about our clients.

When working with younger children, various techniques could be used to understand their relationship with their caregivers. Their feelings could be explored using drawing, play therapy, or by discussion of their favorite television show. Through such conversations, children are encouraged to speak about things that they do and do not like, while the counselor is able to learn more about parenting that his child client is exposed to and what his routines are. Play therapy is helpful since children can use it to show how family members relate to each other. Toys could also be used to reenact what a child saw on television which allows counselors to further explore child's feelings about watching different kinds of programs. A well-known psychologist, Violet Oaklander, has been using this approach for many decades now, and

it has been proven to be very successful in therapy with children.

It is important that television watching is addressed in therapy sessions with teenagers and adolescents, and that the counselor learns more about the impact that watched programs have on their lives. Many times teenagers are seen as trying to imitate reality show stars, and their relationships with peers are greatly influenced by those shows. Through exploration of this phenomenon, relationships with peers could be better understood. One can evaluate whether the adolescent feels the need to fit in or fears what would happen if they don't, and if relationships are supportive or pressured. There are also times when having parents join

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the therapy sessions could be beneficial for both their relationship with the child, and their child’s wellbeing. If a child can learn that it is safe to speak to parents honestly in a safe setting such as therapy, then their relationships with caretakers will be greatly improved. Lastly, peer relationships – as well as parents’ attitudes towards them – are important to address in work with children and adolescents. Do parents encourage children’s socialization with their peers or do they prevent it? Do they like their child’s friends? Do parents trust their children enough to let them out with friends or act in a more controlling matter? All of those questions should be raised and explored in order to understand dynamics within the circles of family and peers.

The first client I have ever worked with, whom I still see, is a great example for the application of the psychodynamic therapeutic approach. He is a man in his late thirties whose childhood bonds with his care-

takers have been disrupted by physical and verbal abuse, neglect, and rejection. He grew up to become a severely anxious man who has difficulty trusting others and socializing in general. It is hard for him to begin a friendship, relate to others, or even begin a simple conversation with his classmates – especially if they are female. About 3 months into our therapy, he came to realize that his current psychological state might be related to his childhood relationship with his mother, more so than others. I was intrigued to hear him suggest that on his own, because that supported my hypothesis about his issues. We spoke about his relationship with his mother other family members in greater depth, and decided to dedicate some more time in our future sessions to exploring the connection between his current life and his difficult past.

Parenting is powerful concept that holds great importance in one’s life, as it can play a role in determining one’s character and the quality of relationships with others. We, as counselors, should therefore always be mindful of understanding people from that perspective and exploring their relationships with immediate family in order to understand them for who they are today. At the same time, parents should provide caring and comfortable environments for their children, along with abundant love and understanding. Parents should also be conscientious in working through conflicts in a healthy way, in spite of any possible childhood experiences. A loving relationship with the child is healing for the child, but also for the parents who may not have experienced it themselves.

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