

***Attachment in Child Welfare Decisions***  
**IDEA Project 2018**  
**Hungary, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Ireland**

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**new developments in attachment  
theory**



## MISCONCEPTIONS: HOW WE SOMETIMES MISINTERPRET ATTACHMENT CONCEPTS

(from Main, Hesse and Hesse, 2011, Attachment Theory and Research: Overview with suggested applications to child custody, *Family Court Review*, 49,3.)

### Misconceptions: how we sometimes misinterpret attachment concepts (Main et al, 2011)

- *An adult needs to have been present from the infant's birth in order for the infant to form a secure attachment to that adult.*
- *The "window of opportunity" for the formation of a secure attachment, endures only throughout the first three years of life.*
- *The amount of time spent with a child is the most important element in forming an enduring attachment relationship.*
- *A young child needs more than one attachment figure readily available.*
- *The great majority of parents, as well as infants, are secure.*

Misconceptions: how we sometimes misinterpret attachment concepts (Main et al, 2011)

- *An infant who is insecure with a particular parent is not attached to them*
- *Infants cannot be attached to maltreating individuals.*
- *A child who avoids the parent on reunion, or is “distant” following a major separation, has lost interest in the parent.*
- *Where parent and child have been separated for a long time, only the child will become “detached”.*
- *Taking a child out for a meal or to see a film is typically all that is needed during “visits”.*

Misconceptions: how we sometimes misinterpret attachment concepts (Main et al, 2011)

- *Children can be “overly” or “too strongly” attached to a particular parent.*
- *An insecure parent—i.e., one whose background presently limits or distorts their expressions of affectionate responsiveness—can do little to promote their child’s well-being.*
- *Only infants and children can be described as “attached”.*

## Problems with attachment checklists

- Children who have attachment difficulties can express this in a wide range of behaviours and it can sometimes be difficult to recognise that the issue is linked to attachment. These behaviours can be broadly categorised as follows:
  - Aggression, oppositional or defiant behaviours (e.g. extreme tantrums, open aggression and defiance, or gratuitous violence)
  - Hyperactivity, poor concentration and risk taking
  - Lying, stealing and manipulative behaviours
  - Compulsive caregiving, compliance and self-reliance (the child looks after him or herself as well as their carer)
  - Indiscriminate approaches to adults and children (the child may treat their carer the same as stranger adults, or may appear to show more interest in or affection for unfamiliar adults than their familiar carer)

## Problems with attachment checklists

- Social withdrawal (e.g. rejecting behaviour towards the main carers)
- Sexualised behaviour
- Sleeping problems
- Eating problems
- Wetting and soiling
- Self-harm

## Deepening and Strengthening our Understanding of Attachment

- The key principles of the 'Strange Situation' Procedure
- Secure
- Insecure
  - *Anxious-Avoidant*
  - *Anxious-Resistant/Ambivalent*



## Towards a contemporary application of attachment theory – 'understanding mechanisms'

- Because it is difficult 'assess attachment' instead we should look at what are the most influential factors that affect attachment relationships e.g.
  - *Unresolved Loss and Trauma*
  - *Low Mentalising Capacity*
- We can also understand parenting through an attachment lens by doing Guided Parenting Tasks and we can learn carefully to spot when there might be a severe breakdown in the attachment relationship

Zooming Out and Zooming In  
- great phrase by Liz  
Bosanquet

## DISORGANISED ATTACHMENT BEHAVIOUR:

THE NEED FOR SOME CAUTION

Prof David Shemmings OBE PhD

## Contemporary research on DAB

- While DAB is strongly correlated with maltreatment - around 48-80% of maltreated children show DAB - this does not mean that every child who shows DAB is being maltreated. (This is exactly the same point that we made about the 'risk factors' e.g. mental ill-health). About 15% of so called 'low-risk' samples also show DAB but this is thought likely to be the result of frightening parental behaviours (which may be unconsciously displayed, for example, as the result of post-natal depression, which can be quite high in the general population of mothers).
- One study (Cyr et al, 2011) showed that a **combination** of five socio-economic status (SES) factors had the same effect as maltreatment (but presumably the effect of that combination is likely to be mediated through the caregiving relationship).
- There is a problem in some studies in that 'maltreatment' is assumed to be physical and/or sexual abuse but doesn't always include *emotional* neglect and/or abuse.

## Contemporary research on DAB

- Because 'maltreatment' doesn't necessarily mean 'abuse' – it can be unintended, for example - perhaps DAB more accurately indicates 'experiencing high levels of distress from which there is no immediate prospect of comfort or respite'. This is magnified if the source of the distress is another human being, especially if they are the person who is meant to be caring for the child.
- The use of 'maltreatment' was chosen deliberately instead of 'abuse', to include unintended- or 'not directly' (Main, Hesse and Hesse 2011) - forms of emotional distress which a child might experience. This could include frightening behaviour, 'neurological disturbance, extensive non-parental care, frequent overnight stays' etc.
- Finally, it important not to repeat the Strange Situation Procedure, or create too much distress within it, as this can elevate disorganised attachment behaviours, but not as a result of maltreatment (see Granqvist et al, 2016)

## Contemporary research on DAB

- There are a number of studies which indicate, so far, that neither temperament nor genetics on their own - but there may be gene-environment interaction - play a major part in the development of DAB (but we should keep an open mind about this).
- One other connection is that *some autistic children can sometimes display DABs* (but it appears that they were compared with non-autistic children, hence, the possibility exists that the autistic children displaying DAB may also have experienced maltreatment).
- Consequently ... DAB/FwS must not be viewed as 'magic bullets': they are best seen as 'amber lights' which then need to be considered alongside other interactional mechanisms, and then with other more familiar risk factors such as substance abuse, domestic abuse etc.
- What appears fairly incontrovertible is that prolonged and frequent exposure to such highly stressful experiences often lead to poor outcomes later for the child.
- The aim of the project has been to increase awareness of these behaviours and then help and support the parent to be able to reduce them. It's only rarely that a child has to be removed to do this



## Recent developments around D behaviours – my own ‘take’

- There appear to be three different 'pathways' to disorganised attachment behaviour:
  - *Abusive Parental Behaviour* experiences, such as physical or sexual abuse and some extreme forms of intentional emotional abuse or neglect.
  - *Unintentional Parental Maltreatment*, comprising caregiving which is inadvertently frightening to the child, extensive unplanned care (see Main et al, 2011), frequent over-night separations (see Main et al, 2011), the combined effect of socio-economic risk factors (Cyr et al, 2010; Gedaly & Leerkes, 2016) as well as gene-environment interaction (but more research is needed here).

## Recent developments around D behaviours – my own ‘take’

- *Pathways Involving No Maltreatment*, such as some children with autism (but as yet it isn't clear precisely what the mechanism might be that produces D behaviours) and the possibility of a more direct genetic influence (again, more research is needed). And ... having been subject to the SSP too often (or very recently)

## Recent developments around D behaviours – my own ‘take’

- Furthermore Robbie Duschinsky points out in his comprehensive review of the history of the development of the D category that some of the more 'extreme' forms of insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent attachment patterns can resemble D behaviour (Duschinsky, 2015).
- At the root of D behaviour appears to be that the child cannot gain any comfort when experiencing high levels of fear or stress.
- What the family will often need is help to understand and then stabilise (i.e. 'un-disorganise') the child's attachment system. Ignoring D behaviours is likely to lead to developmental problems later on.

## Writing about Attachment

- Additionally, nursery staff told me that Y will run straight into nursery when he is dropped off and, often when he is collected by her, he will begin to cry or run away from her.
- To form a judgment on the basis of this alone would be unfair. However, during the course of my involvement I have witnessed other worrying behaviors from Y.
- When I visited on ... I took Y to nursery while she was interviewed by Dr N. I told him that I was taking him to nursery and he took my hand and led me towards the front door. She shouted from the living room 'Bye then'.

## Writing about Attachment

- I asked Y to say goodbye to Mummy and he continued to hold my hand and wait for me to open the door. I walked him back to the living room and he waved goodbye in her direction but did not approach her.
- On ... when we went to the post office, she went in a different direction to us to get her bus. Y did not respond to this or say goodbye. When I left him with her, after he had been in my care, he started to cry, and was not comforted by the fact that his mother was there.
- When I met her at the hospital for Y's second Child Protection medical he started to cry when she was walking towards us.

## Writing about Attachment

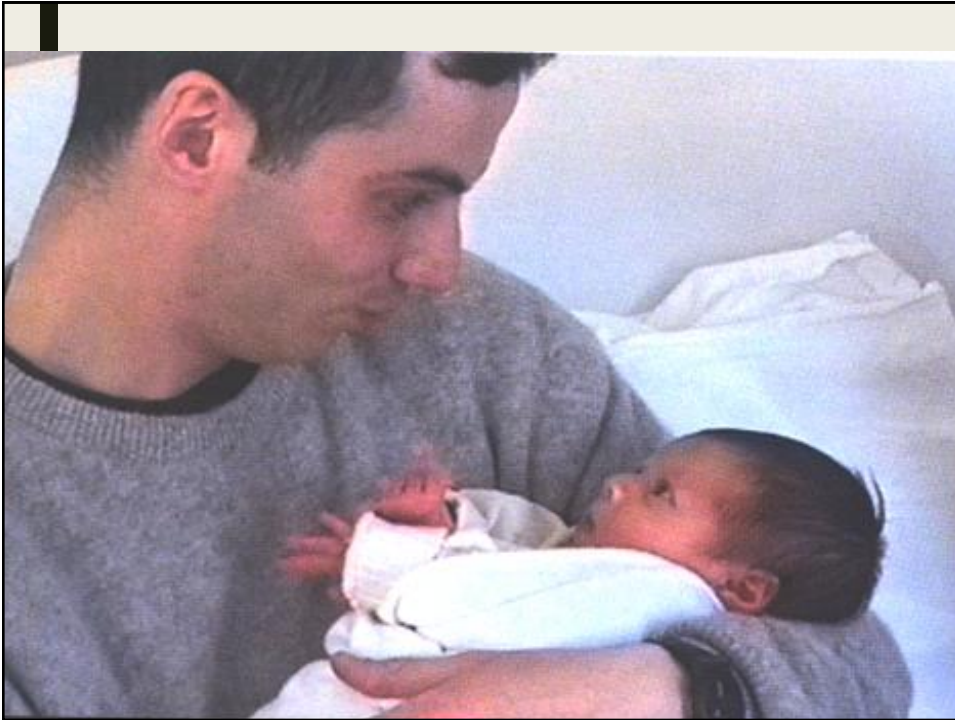
- In contrast, when I dropped Y at nursery I said goodbye to him and he came back to me, took my hand and started to lead me back through the door while he waved and said goodbye to the nursery staff.
- When I collected him, he came running straight towards me and he was smiling. He took my hand once again and was keen for me to open the door. The two nursery staff present commented on how they had never seen this response from him when he is collected by Ms X.

## Writing about Attachment

- I think it is important to note the behaviors that Y has displayed towards me. He has shown affection by taking my hand; he has wrapped his arms around my legs and hugged me and tried to kiss me; he has stroked my arms and my hair; he has given me full eye contact and even removed my glasses (and then remained looking at me).
- I have not observed such behaviors from him towards her. On a few occasions, I have observed Y approach her and want to be picked up; however he continues to give her no eye contact and soon wants to move away.

## Writing about Attachment

- This is the nature of a deeply insecure attachment: he will still approach her as she is the one who he spends the majority of his time with. However, it is evident from his behavior that he does not gain any meaningful comfort from this.
- There is now a wealth of research about the likely effect that Y's current experiences, in terms of his attachment relationship and environment, will be likely to have on his current and future development.



### Contemporary, evidence-based principles of offering parenting help and support

- Explaining the principles of attachment, sensitive and emotionally available parenting
- Seeing someone doing sensitive and emotionally available parenting i.e. modelling
- Seeing yourself doing it
- Mentalising the child - 'speaking for the child'
- How did I get here?
- Keeping calm by learning to regulate emotions
  
- And ... the central importance of 'relationships science'
  - Empathy and 'epistemic trust'

## Staying connected

Hedi Argent (ed)

2002

- Many families have always looked after their own and everyone seems to agree that children should stay within their families or origin wherever possible.

## Staying connected

Hedi Argent (ed)

2002

- We now know that this business is never finished and that we must make arrangements accordingly.
- It is no longer a question of whether children should remain connected to their origins but rather how connections can best be preserved and how children can be protected in often problematic circumstances”.

## Contact arrangements - Qs

- Frequency and form of contact arrangements?
- Changes in arrangements over time?
- The nature of the transition from previous foster carer/s and any ongoing contact arrangements with them?

## Contact arrangements

- One of the important issues to address in an assessment is whether there is too little or too much contact and its meaning for the child.
- We have to consider whether contact arrangements are enhancing or inhibiting the child's current, significant attachment relationships

## Contact arrangements

- Contact arrangements alone cannot resolve the child's unrequited longing, her unresolved ambivalence or his denial and idealisation

## Face-to-face contact for young adopted children

- Face-to-face contact is often not planned for young adopted children.
- The following is taken from a study by Elsbeth Neil (UEA) 2000a, 2000b, 2002
- See also <https://www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption>
- She found that.....



## Face-to-face contact for young adopted children

- What contact means to the child is not always clear
- Additional psychological tasks for adopted children involve the negotiation of issues of attachment, loss, and identity, so it is useful to think about post-adoption contact alongside consideration of how children manage this.

## Face-to-face contact for young adopted children

- For pre-school adopted children the sense of loss precipitated by separation may not be so overt, but may emerge over time.
- In most cases in this study the average age at which the child left home was nine months, and then they spent at least a year in foster care before being adopted. Therefore in most cases, the foster carer was the primary attachment figure.

## Face-to-face contact for young adopted children

- This research suggests that social workers tend to think of face-to-face contact as being imperative only when children have established attachments to birth relatives.
- She proposes an alternative view that the very lack of attachment between the child and birth relatives is likely to be less problematic for the child, as opposed to a situation where the child has an intense but insecure relationship with birth relatives

## Face-to-face contact for young adopted children

- Neil's study also found that children who were anxious about contact meetings were those who were older at placement (most were over 3 years old), who had experienced more adversities before being placed and who had more emotional and behavioural problems.

## Face-to-face contact for young adopted children

- She suggests that we need to ask if it is productive to invite a troubled child into a further troubling situation and case-by-case assessment is probably the best, if not the only, feasible strategy.
- However, in this study, she found that many adoptive parents felt that even where contact might make children worried, it was still, on balance, beneficial.

An unhelpful question ...?

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Do you believe that  
siblings should stay  
together?

## Headline practice messages

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Assessing sibling placements is a complex task

Simple, checklist-based approaches can only ever be partially useful

We cannot simply ask family members a series of questions

We need to get 'inside' and 'beneath' relationships – from 'surface' to 'depth'

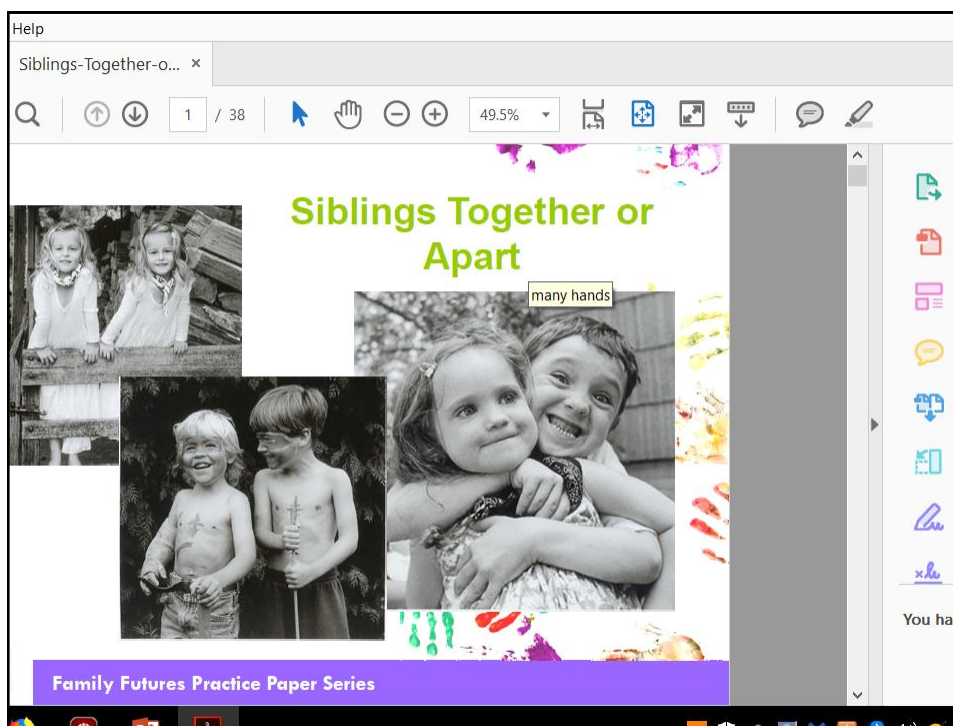
## Headline practice messages

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To do this, we need to understand the nature of 'childhood trauma'

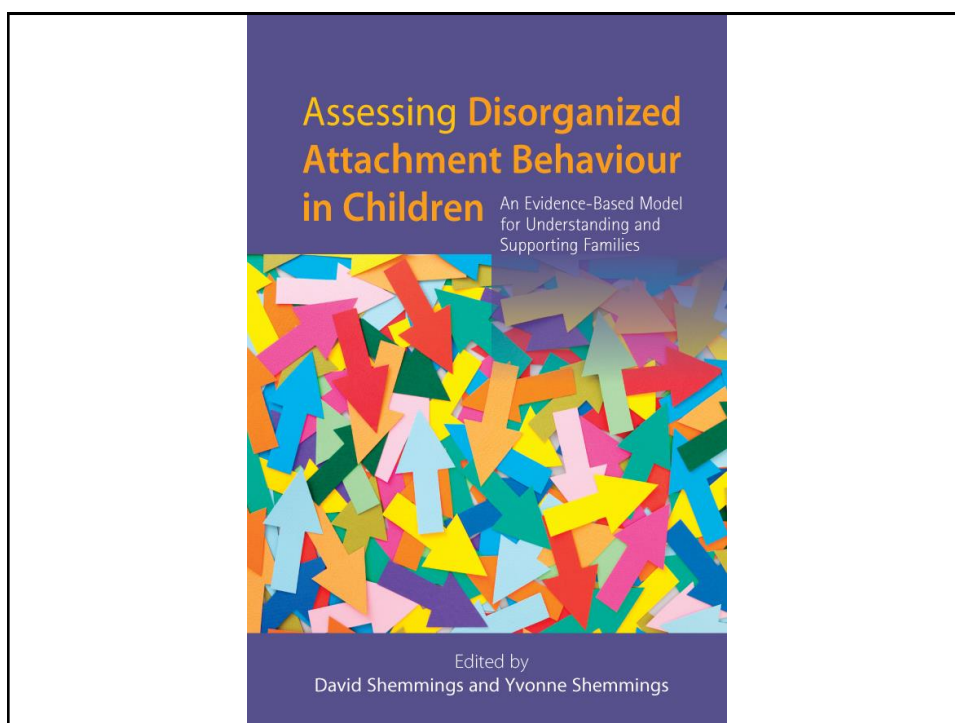
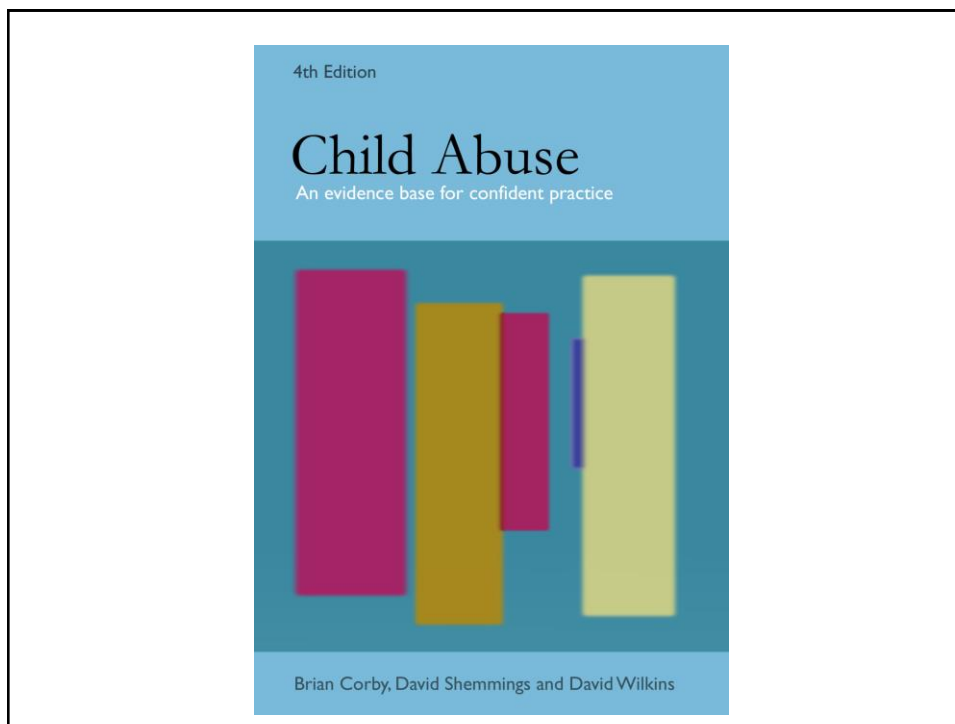
We need to determine the extent to which it is the sibling relationship that is problematic

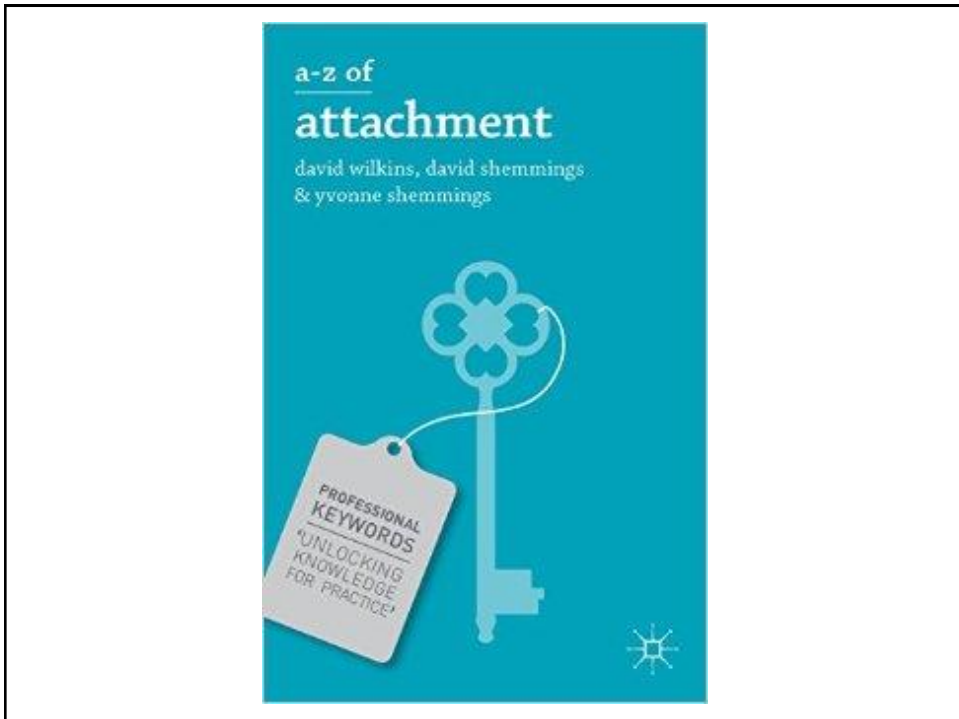
Finally, we need to do a lot of work to help carers support relationships between siblings (where there are problems)



## Further Reading (on attachment)

- ... also try *Community Care Inform* ...
- ... and *Research in Practice*
- ... and google *NICE Guidelines on Children's Attachment*
- + *articles in communitycare.co.uk*
- Recent (15/02/16) article in the *Guardian newspaper* (now in 'Most Viewed' section)





**Shemmings, D. (2016)** 'Disorganised Attachment in Pre-school Children', Special Edition of the *International Journal of Birth and Parent Nursing*, 4(1), pp. 21-26

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SOCIAL WORLD AROUND THE BABY

## Making sense of disorganised attachment behaviour in pre-school children

David Shemmings  
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The concept of 'disorganised attachment' arose from the 'Strange Situation Procedure' designed by John Bowlby's colleague, Mary Ainsworth, which led to the discovery of three distinctive patterns of attachment termed 'secure', 'insecure: anxious-avoidant' and 'insecure: anxious-ambivalent'. Some children do not fit any of these categories. This article explores possible mechanisms for their 'disorganised' attachment, concluding that if a child cannot find comfort, reassurance or protection from a caring adult when severely stressed, then this can lead to developmental problems later on, but if the 'caring adult' is the cause of the fear then this can be even more damaging.

*Keywords: disorganised attachment behaviour, family support, carer and inner worlds*

**T**he concept of 'disorganised attachment' arose from the famous experiment in social psychology designed by John Bowlby's colleague, Mary Ainsworth, called the 'Strange Situation Procedure' (SSP; Ainsworth & Wrigg, 1969; see Duschinsky, 2015, for a detailed review of the history and development of the 'disorganised/disoriented attachment classification'). The SSP requires children to visit a strange room with a

In large representative samples, the ratio between secure and insecure organised attachment is around 65:35 respectively

10:57  
21/03/2018

## Forthcoming publications

- **Shemmings, D. & Shemmings, Y (late 2018)** 'Contemporary attachment theory: how can it inform social workers?' in the Routledge Handbook of Social Work, eds. Payne and Hall
- **Shemmings, D. & Shemmings, Y (late 2018)** Emotional and Behavioural Development: The Importance of Attachment in The Child's World, (eds. Howarth, J. & Platt, D.) London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.