Fact sheet 1.10 Critics of Bowlby

Learning aim E2.1.1: Bowlby

Critiques of Bowlby's attachment theory

There are many criticisms of Bowlby's work and it has been superseded by other pieces of research. When looking at the criticisms of his work it is important to remember the political, economic and social climate of the time.

The role of the mother was overemphasised

This has been a major criticism of Bowlby's early work. At the time of writing, women were the traditional caregivers. For economic reasons, after the Second World War, the government was keen for women to return to their traditional roles within the home. Bowlby's later work did emphasise that babies could form an attachment with someone other than the mother.

Attachments to more than one person were not explored

Bowlby placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of one single attachment. Subsequent research has shown that, as children get older, they can develop equally strong attachments to other figures such as their fathers and siblings. These are known as multiple attachments.

The quality of the substitute care was not taken into consideration

Bowlby did not take into consideration the effect of being in poor-quality care. This means that it is hard to be absolutely sure that the psychological damage done to the children was the result of only maternal deprivation. However, later studies have suggested that children's development may not be affected if there is a substitute person acting as an attachment figure. This is the concept behind the key person system that is used in early years settings today.

Attachment behaviour

It is important for adults working with children to be able to identify when babies and children have made attachments. This can generally be observed through looking at their behaviour. There are four broad indicators that babies and children might show. Babies and young children show clear responses to a person they have made an attachment to, as follows:

1. They actively seek to be near the other person.
2. They cry or show visible distress when that person leaves or, for babies, is no longer visible.
3. They show joy or relief when that person appears.
4. They show an acute awareness of that person's presence, such as looking up at them from time to time, responding to their voice or following their movements.

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