Origins of attachment parenting

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Prescriptions on how to raise children have a long history; from the Pentateuch and Plato, through Locke and Rousseau, to the 20th century. The most recent popular movement is Attachment Parenting. Examples of this are known as positive, non-aversive, ethical, nurture or 'helicopter' parenting, as well as concerted cultivation, emotional coaching, and the circle of security.

Some background

Attachment Theory, upon which Attachment Parenting is based, was first proposed by British psychiatrist John Bowlby post WWII. Like Erikson's theory, it proposes that psychosocial development in humans occurs in stages. Bowlby sought to explain the origins of significant mental and behavioural problems in adolescence and adulthood, as the result of a disordered early childhood infant-mother relationship.

He proposed that the child's first stage is to bond to the caregiver, usually mother, not merely with affection, but attachment. The caregiver, in being reliable and responsive to needs, instils a sense of safety and security, an expectation of always being readily accessible, and confidence in secure attachment. Otherwise, healthy psychosocial development is at risk.

American psychologist Mary Ainsworth extended Bowlby's concepts, devising a method of categorising security of attachment in infants, 'The Strange Situation'. Its validity and reliability is not universally accepted. Using The Strange Situation, she and others found disordered attachment not only in mothers and babies presenting clinically with problems, but also in mother-infant 'dyads' randomly drawn from the population, and with unexpected frequency. Bowlby's idea that attachment disorders were a cause of mental ill health was then generalised; attachment disorders were seen as the major cause.

Not so simple

The many studies supporting this view have been criticised. This is for methodological flaws related to poor study design and flaws inherent in the paradigm of psychology research, which examines psychological constructs rather than observable reality (behaviourism excepted). Attachment theorists counter that their critics have the good fortune to work in more objective fields.

The evidence gap between Attachment Theory and clinical practice (i.e. Attachment Parenting) is also wide. For psychologists, the theory suggests most causes of child behavioural problems are attachment related. Therefore parents should work with therapists to restructure their parenting style and practice, their internal working models of parenting. This is a variation of cognitive behavioural therapy. Parents are instructed to be 'supportive', and risk harming their child if they say, "No". Parents are often upset, but comply.

A second consequence is drawn from the modern fashion of advocacy. Attachment Theory supports preventative mental health programs on the care of children such as The Circle of Security and the Positive Parenting Programme. Locally, the Disability Services Commission's Code for the Elimination of Restrictive Practices is another example. Unfortunately, like breast-feeding advocates, zealotry is the rule rather than the exception.

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