

# What About The Children?

Patrons: Sir Michael Morpurgo, Rebecca Abrams, Sir John Timpson



*'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of children in our ever-changing society'*

## **Pam Jarvis: Attachment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Pam Jarvis, a chartered psychologist, a reader in childhood, youth and education at Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, UK and – interestingly - also a historian, closed the formal part of the 2019 conference with a fascinating lecture summarising the history of attachment theory from the 1950s to the present day. She started where all discussions of this theory must start, with the work of John Bowlby. His psychoanalytical studies of evacuees in the period immediately after the war led him to propose that mothers and babies had evolved a natural, intimate bond that would, if broken (or if not formed at all) lead to deeply troubled children.

The way that mothers – or other 'primary carers' – treat babies leads them to form 'working models' of themselves. Babies who feel that they can rely on a constant, loving relationship with their caregiver become securely attached. Others fall into two types of insecure attachment: babies who feel unloved and rejected tend to become avoidant, while those who experience inconsistent reactions from their care-givers become angry and confused. This second type of insecure attachment is known as 'resistant'. In a slightly frivolous aside, she illustrated this point using four characters from the Peanuts cartoons; out of these, only Peppermint Patty could be said to be securely attached. She was characterised as seeking the company of others but not becoming over-anxious when left alone. Bowlby had suggested that babies bond principally with one person, most often – but not always – their biological mother. Later studies have shed some doubt on this, and work in the 1960s suggested that babies develop one primary bond and several secondary ones, generally with other members of the family. The primary bond was made with the family member who responded to the baby most sensitively, but sometimes this was a father, grandmother, aunt or much-older sister rather than the mother. It is, however, clear that to become securely attached, an infant must be cared for consistently and sensitively by the same few people.

Practically, no parent or carer, however sensitive and loving, can be around for a baby for every hour of every day. A securely attached baby will often form a bond with a 'transitional object' – a teddy or other toy, or a blanket – that can in some sense 'stand in' for an attachment figure when he or she is absent. This can be particularly important when that well-functioning family is hit by a major, but temporary trauma such as illness, relationship break-up or job loss.

Bowlby's attachment theory, as it has been developed over the decades, implies that all children under three (and preferably under five) need regular, individual care from adults who respond to them sensitively and who they can rely on. It is not enough for the adults to 'be there', they must be sensitive and responsive. Toys should be appropriate to a child's developmental stage and should not be used as baby-sitters. This, Jarvis stressed, has important implications for non-family day care; nurseries should do all they can to avoid high staff turnover, and where possible each child should have one principal carer throughout their time there. Any adult with responsibility for young children, whether parent or professional, needs to learn about children's development and the importance of play.

Jarvis then described the 'circle of security' in which a well-loved child learns to interact with the world. The attachment figures form both a secure base from which children can begin to explore their surroundings, and a safe haven to which they can return when things go wrong. All children, growing up, pass through four stages, from 'attachment' in babyhood to 'altruism' in adulthood, but these words are only generally appropriate for a securely attached child. A resistant infant will tend to crave attention and to cling, and will, if not helped, tend to grow into a selfish and over-indulgent adult. Conversely, an avoidant infant will tend to be lonely and withdrawn and risks growing into an adult with narcissistic and anti-social tendencies. Or, to put it another way, you need a secure base for little adventures when you are two if you are to thrive in grown-up adventures – jobs, secure relationships and nurturing the next generation – when you are 32.

Moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jarvis explained that basic attachment theory is now supported by findings from neurophysiology. Much of this work involves measurements of the stress hormone cortisol, which is known to be raised or dysregulated in stressful situations. Studies have consistently shown that young children in daycare have higher cortisol levels and more physiological signs of stress. It is simplistic to argue that all homes are better than all daycare settings, but the average home is certainly less stressful for an infant than the average nursery. Whereas the interaction between an infant and a loving adult carer has been compared to a jazz duet with each responding to the other's rhythms, this 'dance' is rarely observed in most nurseries. We have created a world in which more value is given to the production of material goods than to the production of happy, healthy and self-reliant children.

The stress hormone cortisol has an important biological function in mobilising what is known as the 'fight or flight' response. In modern life, however, stress provides few opportunities for either of these reactions: we will not do our cause any good by fighting or running away from the boss, for example. In this type of situation cortisol will tend to build up and, eventually, to affect many systems of the body, increasing the risk of illness. Cortisol levels in adults show a regular daily pattern, rising in the early morning and falling slowly during the day. Even young children rapidly fall into the same pattern, but it is easily disrupted by stress; cortisol in securely attached children rises to a lower peak during stress and returns more rapidly to baseline than it does in those with insecure attachments.

Some children, however, are unfortunate enough to live under constant, 'toxic' stress, for example with a parent who is chronically anxious, depressed or abusive or a family in severe poverty. Jarvis eloquently described this situation as akin to 'arriving home every night to find a bear in the living room'. This level of 'toxic' stress, and even fear, puts these children's fight or flight response on standby all the time. They are prone to severe anger or sadness, and can have short attention spans and problems concentrating, mistrust other children and adults, and lack confidence and self-belief. Children who start life securely attached are better able to cope with even this level of stress; it is a combination of poor attachment and these 'adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)' that causes the most severe problems. About two-thirds of the UK population will have suffered at least one ACE – a difficult household situation, abuse or neglect, or severe illness – by the age of 20. The most severely affected children, those with four or more ACEs, attempt suicide 14 times as often and become intravenous drug abusers 11 times as often as those with none.

In many cases, adverse childhood experiences grow from another ACE – adverse community environments. These include poverty, discrimination, poor housing and violence. Jarvis said there is an English proverb that 'when poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window'; poverty, and the stress it brings, will impact negatively on all aspects of a child's development. However, securely attached children, with a background of stable, caring and supportive relationships, are protected to some extent from these experiences by their own resilience. This resilience can be strengthened at any point in childhood by secure and supportive relationships with other adults. Jarvis illustrated this with a case history of a student of hers in the 1990s who had been both a 'full-blown punk' and the mother of a young daughter. This student was brought up by a violent, alcoholic mother until the age of 11 when she was adopted by her grandmother. She gave that grandmother 'hell' for many years, but the grandmother never stopped loving her, and when she, in turn, became a mother she was motivated to turn her life around. Without her grandmother's support she might well have found that change impossible to make.

Jarvis ended by summing up 'what we know and what we don't know' about attachment. It started with Bowlby's Freudian analysis and has more recently been linked to the neurobiology of stress, through the concept of adverse childhood experiences. We are beginning to see how a complex bio-psycho-social human being develops and understand the role of positive and negative emotional experiences. But we need to assess our society from this viewpoint: how functional is it, and how likely is it to produce emotionally secure children? I suspect that the UK in 2019 is unlikely to come out of such an assessment well.

*Summary written by Dr Clare Sansom*

