

Child Abuse and Its Effects on Child Attachment
A Look at Reactive Attachment Disorder

Selena Perez
PSYC 2308.03
Professor Martin
September 25, 2011

Abstract

An infant comes into this world with the need for love and affection from a parent. The parent-infant bond is a critical aspect of a child's life and the relationship established early on, echoes throughout their lifetime. John Bowlby first developed the Attachment Theory and it has become a pivotal part in comprehending the actions and behavior of dysfunctional children and their hostility. This research paper examines how a destructive and scarring, unhealthy relationship between caregiver and child affects the emotional, social, and cognitive development of a child.

Reactive Attachment Disorder

The attachment of a child to their caregiver has a grand effect on how a child develops and functions later in life. If they are surrounded by an unwelcoming, harmful environment and neglected as an infant, they develop detrimental characteristics and become cognitively impaired. I became interested in this topic because having a baby brother made me think of how much differently he would be if he lacked attachment and a bond with my family. It bothers me to know that some children do not receive the necessary love and care to grow up functioning members of society. It was interesting to find out how and why some children and adults act the way they do and their difficulties to create and keep long lasting relationships.

Psychologist John Bowlby first developed the Attachment Theory describing attachment as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Cherry). The bond between child and caregiver promotes brain growth and personality development. Infants who have responsive caregivers and are constantly and positively interacting with someone, have a greater sense of security and the positive influences, molds a child. The main characteristics of attachment according to Bowlby are those of: Safe Haven, Secure Base, Proximity Maintenance, and Separation Distress.¹ All of these characteristics have to do with the safety and security a child feels when they are with their caregiver and feeling upset when separated. Another prominent psychologist who expanded upon the work of Bowlby is Mary Ainsworth. Her study, “Strange Situation”, presented the extensive effect of attachment on behavior. In the study, researchers observed the behavior of children between the ages of 12 and 18 months as they were left

¹ Cherry, K. (n.d.). *Attachment theory: An overview of attachment theory.*

alone with strangers and then reunited with their mothers (Cherry). With this study, Ainsworth was able to develop the three major styles of attachment: secure attachment, ambivalent attachment, and avoidant attachment.²

According to the National Children's Alliance, nearly five children die every day in America from abuse and neglect.³ Child abuse and neglect have a profound impact on the emotional and cognitive development of a child. Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) is the "psychological consequence of child abuse and neglect for very young children" (Hornor). RAD is most common with children who have an inconsistent foster home, physically, emotionally and or sexually abused. Many of the children who suffer from this disorder are untrustworthy and fail to develop a conscience (Thomas). They have learned to not trust the adults in their lives, therefore built up walls against other people and tend to depend solely on themselves. Symptoms of a child with RAD are: control issues, anger problems, difficulty showing genuine care and affection, and an underdeveloped conscience (Smith).

Children who have been sexually abused have a greater risk of developing anxiety disorders, depression, anti social behavior, and drug abuse (Becker-Weidman) Although children who have severe Reactive Attachment Disorder have many obstacles ahead of them on their journey to become a better person, it is possible for them to recuperate from the disorder. A prime example is the story of Beth Thomas who was featured in an HBO special called "The Child of Rage". Suffering from severe RAD, in her infancy she was malnourished, and sexually abused by her biological father. Her tragic childhood led to uncontrollable rage despite the love and affection of her adoptive parents. She took the

² Cherry, K. (n.d.). *Attachment theory: An overview of attachment theory*.

³ National Children's Alliance Statistics - <http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/NCANationalStatistics>

rage out on herself, her younger brother and parents. She was so extensively hurt in her childhood that she would try to hurt the people around her in order to not be around them. Her mistrust led to violent acts and unruly behavior. Her disorder prompted the parents to seek professional help. After the intensive treatment, Beth was able to overcome the disorder.⁴ While not all abused children are as deeply scarred as Beth, they do however carry an emotional hurt with them for the rest of their lives. It is possible for the children to receive extensive care from professionals, which can help ease the pain and hurt that they carry inside. There are various treatments, which include: Family therapy, individual psychological counseling, play therapy, Special Education services, parenting skills classes (Smith).

Extensive research and studies have shown how important and critical it is for an infant to connect and bond with a parent. For this reason it is crucial that all parents know how much of an effect their actions are to the development of their child. Adoptive parents also need to be aware of the symptoms of a child with a Reactive Attachment Disorder and know the necessary actions to take in order to help the child.

⁴ She is now a graduate of the University of Colorado with a degree in Nursing
<http://reactiveattachmentdisorderlife.blogspot.com/2008/03/child-of-rage.html>

References

Becker-Weidman, A. (n.d.). *Child abuse and neglect: Effects on child development, brain development, and interpersonal relationships.*

Cherry, K. (n.d.). *Attachment theory: An overview of attachment theory.*

Honor, G. (n.d.). Reactive attachment disorder. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care.*

Smith, M., Saisan, J., & Segal, J. (n.d.). *Attachment & reactive attachment disorders: Warning signs, symptoms, treatment & hope for children with insecure attachment.*

Thomas, N. (n.d.). *What is attachment disorder / reactive attachment disorder (RAD).*