

# **EARLY YEARS CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES, A BASE FOR ADULT ATTACHMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper aims for a comprehensive exploration of the attachment theory, and focuses on the importance of early years experiences in shaping children's attachment. Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) states that a secure attachment, developed through appropriate and consistent sensitivity from primary caregivers, impacts children's beliefs about the availability and support from significant individuals. The article addresses the connection between maternal sensitivity and the infant's attachment security, and highlights the importance of this bond for the child's psychological development. Furthermore, it delves into how individual social skills and the quality of peer relationships impact adaptive functioning in adults. The interactions among these factors have implications for mental health and interpersonal relationships in adulthood. "La Maison Verte" study case serves as a transformative space where the practices and principles employed nurture not only the children's development but also foster the foundation for secure attachments between parents and children. A profound understanding of attachment dynamics provides essential foundations for effective interventions and the promotion of well-being throughout life.*

**Keywords:** *attachment theory, secure/ insecure attachment, early years experiences, maternal sensitivity, social play, La Maison Verte*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This article explains the nature of the relationship between early years experiences and adult attachment, and how parents can be provided with tools to build a secure attachment relationship with their children. The connection between early years experiences and adult attachment can be considered fundamental in shaping the emotional and relational development of an individual. Early experiences, especially those in the first months and years of life, play an essential role in shaping attachment patterns (Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Fraley et al., 2013).

Parents need to promote a safe and stimulating environment where the child can develop self-trust and trust in others and the sense that the world is a good place, to build a secure attachment with their child. “La Maison Verte” is modeling a secure environment for children, parents and all those in need of help from the entire community. This involves responding promptly and appropriately to the child's emotional needs, establishing strong emotional bonds, and fostering open and non-judgemental communication.

While it is acknowledged that attachment patterns influence children's development and can have long-term consequences in adult life, including interpersonal relationships and mental health (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Fraley et al., 2013), this paper aims to highlight that parents can be empowered with hands-on information and practice to master important abilities according to their family needs, in order to build a secure attachment relationship with their children, despite their own insecure attachment. “La Maison Verte” study case is a clear example of that.

Interventions aimed at improving attachment in children with insecure patterns represent a developing research area with significant implications for well-being. Further research on relationships is necessary to identify the most appropriate strategies for different types of insecure attachment patterns and customize options based on the individual's context in dedicated centers, as presented in the case study below (Widom et al., 2018; Stams et al., 2002).

## **PARENTS - CHILDREN DYNAMICS**

### **Attachment Theory**

Bowlby (1969) states that attachment is a deep and reciprocal emotional bond between two individuals, especially between a child and its primary caregiver. This concept describes the affective relationship that develops over time, based on constant interactions and the fundamental needs of the individual for security, comfort, and emotional support. Attachment is essential for healthy emotional and social development, influencing how individuals will experience and manage interpersonal relationships throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1969).

Attachment theory was initially developed by John Bowlby (1969) and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth and other researchers (1978). It underscores the importance of early years experiences in shaping children's beliefs about the responsiveness and trustworthiness of significant individuals (Ainsworth et al., 1978). A child who receives care responsively and consistently develops the expectation that others will be available and supportive when needed (Ainsworth et al., 1978) because the caregiver exhibits predictable behavior and she or he is always there (Donovan et al., 2007).

Main (1985) developed classifications of attachment types, including ambivalent and disorganized styles, adding them to the initial model of secure, avoidant, and anxious styles developed by Ainsworth. These classifications reflect how children perceive the availability and support from attachment figures and influence how they build relationships throughout their lives. Internal working models developed in childhood concerning attachment figures continue to influence how adults perceive and behave in their subsequent relationships. This research highlights that these models are not rigid and can undergo changes based on later experiences and the process of reflecting on the past, but can also experience significant shifts in how they perceive and experience their relationships throughout their lives (Main, 1985).

The attachment theory developed by Levine and Heller (2020) suggests that our happiness is closely tied to the happiness of others, and this connection is reciprocal. The two cannot be separated. Understanding the biological mechanisms behind attachment can lead to effective communication and better balance regulation in a relationship. Oxytocin, a crucial hormone in attachment regulation that enhances trust and willingness to cooperate, can be released when we embrace each other (Levine & Heller, 2020).

### **Antecedents of Adult Attachment**

The parental antecedents of attachment security have been examined in a meta-analysis by De Wolff and van Ijzendoorn (1997), focusing on the association between maternal sensitivity and infant attachment security. The central question is whether there is significant correlation between these aspects. It was assumed that studies

like Ainsworth's pioneering research in Baltimore (1978) would demonstrate more consistent associations than those deviating from this initial model.

Social psychologists Feeney and Thrush (2010) identified three categories of parental antecedents of observed adult attachment: (a) maternal sensitivity and factors influencing the quality of the caregiving environment during childhood (such as maternal depression, or absence of the father), (b) the individual's development of social competencies, and (c) the quality of the individual's peer relationships. The three characteristics of a secure base (availability, non-interference, and encouragement) strongly predict exploratory behavior, and the provision and receipt of these behaviors can be predicted by individual differences in attachment. Maternal sensitivity refers to the extent to which the primary caregiver is available and responds appropriately to the child's needs, the first characteristic of a secure base. Through repeated interactions with a sensitive caregiver, the child learns that others will be available when needed, providing him with a psychological resource for exploration, autonomy, and subjective well-being without being overly supervised or controlled, highlighting the second characteristic. Encouragement is the third characteristic of a secure base, involving the facilitation of positive interactions and the development of social skills such as empathy and collaboration. The implications of these findings and the contributions made to existing scientific literature by this study add understanding and perspective to how specific parenting factors can influence attachment quality and children's social relationships (Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

### **The caregiving environment during childhood**

The above-mentioned research (Ainsworth et al., 1978; De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997; Donovan et al., 2007; Feeney & Thrush, 2010) highlights that, in normal environments, maternal sensitivity is important but not exclusive in determining attachment security. Several dimensions of parenting have been identified as equally significant: consistency in caregiving, emotional availability, responsiveness to the child's specific (emotional, physical, and social) needs, and communication style. The researchers (Ainsworth et al., 1978; De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997; Donovan et al., 2007; Feeney & Thrush, 2010) emphasize the need for a contextual approach for a better interpretation on the complexity of interactions between context and sensitivity, especially in more unstable and stressful environments, and to pay increased attention to nonspecific shared environmental influences (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997; Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

Fraley and contributors (2013) test the hypothesis that individual differences in adult attachment styles originate from their developmental histories. In a longitudinal study following a cohort of children and parents from birth to the age of 15, individual differences in adult attachment correlate with variations in the quality of caregiving environments, the development of social competence, and the quality of the best friendships. Temperament evaluations and most genetic polymorphisms do not significantly correlate with adult attachment, except for a polymorphism in the serotonin receptor gene, which predicted higher attachment-related anxiety, indicating that changes in maternal sensitivity influence avoidant attachment. The implications of these findings are discussed in the context of adult attachment theory (Fraley et al., 2013).

Childhood physical abuse and neglect have an impact on adult attachment styles (Widom et al., 2018). Individuals with histories of neglect and physical abuse exhibit higher levels of attachment anxiety in adulthood, while neglect predicts an avoidant attachment style. Adult anxious and avoidant attachment styles are associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Analyses show that adult anxious attachment partially explains the relationship between childhood neglect and physical abuse and certain enduring aspects of mental health, but not the relationship with allostatic load (Widom et al., 2018).

Individuals with insecure attachment in childhood go through puberty earlier compared to those with secure attachment, according to research by Belsky and contributors (2010). These findings support a conditional - adaptive perspective on individual differences in attachment security and raise questions about the biological mechanisms responsible for attachment effects (Belsky et al., 2010).

One year old children with secure attachment are more likely to develop positive relationships with peers in early childhood (Kerns, 1994; Parke & Ladd, 1992). These children are considered resilient by their teachers (Arend et al., 1979). In a longitudinal study (Englund, 2011), composite scores of resilience and self-control indicated that children previously classified as having secure attachment were significantly more resilient than others, as expected. They were also more curious than those with anxious attachments. The data in the study provided correlations between the quality of attachment in childhood, child effectiveness in problem-solving, and competence in preschool years.

Traditionally, social capital has been defined as a quantity of resources obtained through a variety of interpersonal relationships (Cohen & Wills, 1985). However, the quality of these relationships throughout development has not been examined as a contribution to social capital. Few studies have analyzed the importance of different age-specific relationships in predicting adaptive functioning, especially testing cumulative effects over time. The quality of age-specific relationships in different developmental periods predicts the quality of later relationships and showed links to adaptive functioning as adults. Research also highlights that infant attachment relationships have direct effects on global functioning, suggesting the potential

significance of early years relationship quality in adaptation and subjective well-being, in adult life (Englund, 2011; Furman et al., 2002).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) investigated the link between early sensitivity and adult attachment styles, using retrospective reports. These studies indicate that adults who remember affectionate and loving relationships with their early attachment figures tend to consider themselves secure in attachment. In contrast, individuals with insecure attachment more often reported parents perceived as cold or rejecting (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In another study, Mickleson and contributors (1998) found that respondents who indicated that their parents experienced depressive episodes when they were young more often presented an insecure attachment orientation. Davila and contributors (1997) discovered that young adults with secure attachment were less likely than others to report histories of family psychiatry, including depression.

Attachment research in adults (Davila et al., 1997) evolved on the assumption that attachment style is relatively stable and affects future functioning. However, researchers became interested in attachment instability and predictors of changes in attachment style. The results mainly supported the conceptualization of changes in attachment style as an individual difference (Davila et al., 1997).

Selcuk and contributors (2010) examined the quality of parental relationships. Parental divorce, father absence, or intense parental conflict can convey to the child the idea that other people may not be available or trustworthy. These concepts are especially highlighted by attachment theorists. A parent who has not resolved their own traumas (Watts et al., 2021) introduces a disorienting discourse regarding the child's representation of the family history, disrupting ideas about safety and protection that the child holds. The researchers' hypothesis in the study conducted by Watts and contributors (2021) is that such impasses in the shared narrative of family adversities perpetuate the implicit idea that the family is vulnerable as a secure base or that challenges can be catastrophic or difficult to understand.

Early years experiences and the development of attachment in participants with mood disorders were also analyzed by Craba and contributors (2023). The study supports the conclusions of previous research, highlighting a significant and positive association between attachment quality and the development of resilience, reinforcing the hypothesis that attachment represents an essential aspect of resilience capacity (Craba et al. 2023; Schetsche & Mustaca, 2021).

### **Social play and the interactions between peers - "La Maison Verte" case study**

Stams and contributors (2002), frequently mention early years social play as a relational context of particular importance, providing affective exchanges in the form of face-to-face play and attachment behaviors. The gradual introduction into the social sphere is crucial. These interactions influence the child's development in terms of self and others, offering the opportunity to experience role distinctions so that gradually the child learns not to seek the mother where she should not be (daycare, kindergarten, etc.). As the infant becomes more mobile, these interactions evolve to include exploring the environment and manipulating objects. Exploring toys in the presence of the mother is a significant element in the child's ongoing development (Stams et al., 2002).

During interaction (Stams et al., 2002), both the infant and the mother send signals to attract each other's attention, providing opportunities for joining or maintaining the interactive process. For the infant, affective signals are the main means by which they engage with the mother, expanding their response repertoire as they age. Mothers' varying sensitivity to infants' signals during play influences children's development, and responsive parents have children with more mature play behavior and increased ability to explore objects (Stams et al., 2002).

Alongside an adaptable parenting style, secure attachment is associated with the development of consciousness in children. Stams and contributors (2002) investigated the relative contribution of infant attachment at 12 months of age in predicting the behavior and effect of the young child, as well as dyadic interaction during play at 24 months of age, compared to interaction measures at 9 months of age. Given the importance of early childhood for various developmental stages, including social interaction skills, this study extends the data connecting infant attachment with the later development of young children, highlighted by positive behavior and affect during play (Stams et al., 2002).

In the 1970s, Dolto (1994) hosted a radio program on France Inter Radio, where she put forth the notion that, despite parents' love for their children, there is often a lack of profound understanding. Dolto passionately contended that, right from birth, children require more than mere material care – they crave security, love, happiness, and verbal communication. Through her show, she successfully constructed a crucial link between parents and children, offering support and guidance to help parents engage in authentic and open communication with their little ones. Dolto stated the significance of fostering transparent relationships between parents and children while discouraging any attempts at manipulation or control (Dolto, 1994).

In 1979, alongside a meticulously chosen team, Dolto established "La Maison Verte" (French The Green House). Dolto (Accueil | La Maison Verte, n.d.) described "La Maison Verte" as a venue where young children can engage in play and interaction with their parents, fostering the development of an interactive social life for parents navigating challenges in their parent-child relationship. This space serves as a conducive setting for

socializing, catering to children from birth to 3-4 years old and their parents. It functions as a place where a team of three members, including a psychoanalyst, supports parents by emphasizing dialogue, and play-based interaction, distinguishing between the roles of a mother and a psychopedagogue, and constructively managing tensions within the family, establishing a groundwork for healthy boundaries (Dolto, 2005).

Dedicated to language theory, Dolto (2005) contends that mothers' presence in daycares or kindergartens, aiming to facilitate the children adjustment, does not yield substantial benefits. It would merely serve as a starting point for a set of rules dictated by the child's whims or as a reward for episodes of hysteria. Consequently, "La Maison Verte" emerges as a wholesome alternative to a genuine parental challenge, functioning as a transitional space where the child's bond with the parent is fortified, and communication between them is enriched. This setting prepares the child for the symbolic shift from mother to educator, granting them the opportunity to distinguish between the two roles and gradually acquaint themselves, at their own pace, with the educational process they will autonomously undertake in daycare or kindergarten. The educator's role is to actively participate in activities with the child, providing education, rather than assuming a maternal role. The child comprehends this distinction without encountering the anxiety of attempting to identify and replicate maternal and paternal roles in an environment where such roles do not exist (Dolto, 2005).

Numerous similar centers function as independent nonprofit entities, usually financed through public funds.

The success of these centers has been duplicated in various locations globally. Notably, there is no equivalent center in Romania financially supported by public funds. Although there is a number of educational centers adhering to psychopedagogical principles and featuring a psychologist in their team, they rely on private funding.

Effective interventions encompass parenting education initiatives, family counseling, and social support, exemplified by the model of "La Maison Verte" This approach equips parents with valuable knowledge and practical skills to navigate the intricate dynamics of attachment relationships. Fostering awareness regarding the influence of early experiences and cultivating an environment of understanding and acceptance within the family are pivotal elements in fostering secure attachment between parents and children (Accueil | La Maison Verte, n.d.).

Dolto (2005) possesses a profound insight into the bond between child and mother, acknowledging the child's vulnerability when confronted with the unavoidable separation accompanying their growth and the mother's assumption of her societal role. Consequently, the separation from what constitutes the child's safety and identity reference must transpire within a protected environment to mitigate the traumatic impact of the initial social encounter without parents. Through engagement in such an environment, the child comprehends their identity and the reason someone else will care for them at daycare or kindergarten. Gradually integrating into society, the child requires validation from the mother less frequently, gradually becoming attuned to the potential violence of others in any space they inhabit. Hence, "La Maison Verte" serves as an intermediary space between the family and daycare or kindergarten, facilitating the child's socialization in the presence of those who shape their self-awareness (Dolto, 2005).

Psychoanalysts approach their profession uniquely in this setting, serving as psychoanalysts dedicated to community welfare (Dolto, 2005). Rather than dispensing magical advice, they participate in verbal exchanges within their immediate community. Solutions arise through attentive listening, and their role in this context is to stimulate maternal and paternal intuition. Daily, psychoanalysts confront complex family situations with repercussions for young children. Their task is to situate individuals within their own identity, in their distinct space and time, allowing for imaginative mediation through the symbolic representation of human relationships (Bétournée & Boukobza, 1986, nd).

All these achievements are realized using simple language. They alleviate anxiety by employing straightforward yet potent techniques to present the facts as they are, preventing the imagination from concocting scenarios that would only exacerbate the existing situation (Dolto, 2005).

During interactions with a child, essential information is shared, including details about their age, place of birth, and the mother's perspective, along with insights about family members (Dolto, 2005). Remarkable outcomes have been noted: the child listens attentively, remains composed, shows no signs of distress, and exhibits patience during a brief bottle delay. Upon the mother's arrival, the child neither cries nor is perturbed by other cries (Dolto, 2005).

"La Maison Verte" plays a pivotal role in cultivating secure attachments between parents and children through its unique approach and practices (Accueil | La Maison Verte, n.d.). By offering a supportive environment where parents and children interact, play, and communicate under the guidance of a dedicated team, the center creates opportunities for genuine connection. The emphasis on dialogue, interaction through play, and the clear distinction between the roles of the mother and the psychopedagogue contribute to strengthening the parent-child relationship. As children gradually transition from the secure base of their mothers to educators, they are afforded the chance to distinguish between these instances at their own pace. This symbolic transfer, facilitated within the safe confines of "La Maison Verte", not only prepares the child for future educational settings but also fortifies the parent-child bond. The psychoanalysts at the center engage in verbal exchanges that aim to awaken maternal and paternal intuition, providing parents with the tools to

understand and respond to the needs of their children. This comprehensive approach, rooted in the principles of Dolto (2005), not only shapes a child's early experiences but also fosters an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance within the family, ultimately contributing to the development of secure attachments.

Psychoanalyst Eliacheff (2018) draws a parallel between the societal impact of "La Maison Verte" and the establishment of kindergartens in the 1920s, marking it one of Dolto's most significant contributions to society (Eliacheff, 2018). Moreover, according to Benvenuto (2018), "La Maison Verte" represents a symbolic shift for psychoanalysis, as, thanks to Dolto, it has moved from the refined consulting rooms and bourgeois rituals of the 19th century to the streets.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

In an extended context, it is important to analyze in detail how cultural and social factors influence the phenomenology of attachment formation and adaptive adult functioning. Studies exhibit a high degree of heterogeneity in methods and research instruments. It would be interesting to include in future analysis, genetics or neuroscience perspectives, integrated into several longitudinal studies, to more easily track the lifelong evolution of attachment changes. An analysis of the extended role of the early years' social experiences specific interventions for the development of a secure adult attachment is yet an important direction for future field research.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In conclusion, considering extensive research on attachment theory, it becomes evident that early experiences play an essential role in shaping both child attachment and adult attachment. Maternal sensitivity, , is a determining factor in the development of secure attachment, providing children with a secure framework for exploration and autonomy. Recent studies have highlighted the complex connections between maternal sensitivity, individual social competencies, and the quality of peer relationships, emphasizing the reciprocal influences of these aspects on adaptive functioning in adulthood (Craba et al. 2023; Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Fraley et al., 2013; Schetsche & Mustaca, 2021; Stams et al., 2002). Furthermore, research has revealed significant implications for the mental health and interpersonal relationships of adults, reinforcing the importance of early years interventions and support in family environments (Wallin, 2010).

"La Maison Verte" study case equally represents a revolution for parents and family members who rediscover themselves within family and community connections, for those seeking a space for relaxation or socialization, or for those in need of advice, beyond the benefits of the child that are a lifelong process rooted in his early years childhood social experiences (Dolto, 2005).

A deep understanding of attachment dynamics in the context of individual development provides an essential perspective for effective interventions and well-being promotion throughout life.

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