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PART I
Attachment Theory, Models and Measures
Evolutionary beginnings

About 150,000 years ago on the plains of north-east Africa in what we now call Ethiopia, small groups of primates, walking upright, might have been seen wandering the savannas. These primates would be immediately recognizable as members of the species *homo sapiens*, biologically no different from you and me; that is, modern men and women. They lived as hunter–gatherers in small co-operative family groups.

Although lacking great size, strength or speed, this new species was in possession of a relatively large and certainly complex brain. In fact, so large was the mature brain that in order to get through the birth canal during labour, a good deal of the brain's growth and development had to take place after the baby was born. This meant that the infant was highly dependent on the succour and protection of its parents and other close kin for many months, indeed, for many years after birth. During this time of vulnerability and dependence, the young of this, our own species, display a range of careseeking behaviours. In response, the adults provide a variety of caregiving behaviours. It is these careseeking and caregiving behaviours that enhance infants' chances of survival.

Ethology is the science of animal behaviour in the wild, in its natural habitat. Human behaviour can also be looked at in everyday settings, especially when it involves biologically basic activities such as caring for young children. From an ethological perspective, behaviour of any kind, including careseeking and caregiving, cannot be fully understood ‘without some knowledge of the environment to which the species has become adapted through evolution’ (Hinde 2005: 1).

In addition, evolutionary biology teaches us that the goal of all life is the replication of genes in future generations (Belsky 2005: 91). One
of the major insights of the evolutionary sciences is the recognition that any attribute or behaviour that increases the chances of an organism’s survival, however marginal, is likely to be selected, and therefore passed on to future generations. These attributes and behaviours represent genetic adaptations to the environment. They become part of that species’ character and make-up. Inasmuch as a characteristic increases the odds of the individual surviving into adulthood and reproductive fitness, then that characteristic will be inherited by any offspring of that sexually mature individual. This, by definition, will include most of what makes up the animal, physiologically, behaviourally, and psychologically.

John Bowlby (1997: 47) termed the environment to which a species adapts (that is, its ecological niche), and in which it is currently surviving, the environment of evolutionary adaptedness. So, for example, the group living, social and co-operative behaviours shown by our species certainly allowed us to take advantage of the environment in ways that were not only adaptive but also flexible. The creative potential of these social behaviours witnessed increasing divisions of labour and individual specialization. Thus, although any one individual would only have a limited number of talents, large groups of individuals collectively would enjoy a great range and variety of skills and attributes. Some would be superb hunters, some good at leading the group and making decisions, while others would know where the ripest fruit might be found or how best to resolve disputes and conflict. The ability to communicate and co-operate therefore helped maximize the benefits of individuals and their talents, thus giving our species a tremendous advantage. In Darwinian terms, we might therefore conclude that the highly emotional and social nature of our species is the product of natural selection pressures.

Stepping back, for any species, genetic traits include all characteristics that are obviously adaptive and aid survival: the colour of an animal’s fur, the possession of keen hearing, the ability to digest tough grasses, the presence of strong leg muscles for speedy running, or the attribute of being nervy and wary by nature. For each species, the list, of course, is potentially enormous as the evolutionist’s compass ranges from what is going on within each cell to the function of major organs, from the shape of the animal’s body to the specifics of mating behaviour. Thinking along these lines encouraged Bowlby to consider which behaviours and characteristics might
enhance the survival of small, vulnerable and very dependent human infants. His enquiries eventually led to the identification and description of a number of innate behaviours that were present at birth and remained active throughout the early and later years of life. These are the careseeking behaviours of which we have spoken and which are displayed by all young children of our species.

Danger and staying safe

Returning to our origins 150,000 or so years ago, north-east Africa was a place of open woods and grassland. Jackals, wolves, and big cats, especially leopards, probably represented the biggest danger, particularly for babies and small children. Our social, co-operative, group-living nature certainly afforded some protection from predators. Many group-living species find safety in numbers. This being the case, to be outside the group, apart and alone, was a particularly dangerous, stressful place to be. Indeed, observed Bowlby (1997: 173), for weaker members of all ground-living primates, ‘especially females and young, the old and sick, isolation often spells speedy death’. For infants, then, safety lies in staying close to the group in general, and principal caregivers in particular. In most cases, as we shall see, an infant’s principal caregiver is destined to become his or her ‘attachment figure’. This is how Main et al. summarize Bowlby’s thinking on these matters:

Bowlby further proposed that the infant primate’s focus upon the attachment figure … has been rendered all the more emotional and insistent because – due to the fact that many primates are seminomadic – it is inevitably closely intertwined with fear. The substantial distances travelled by most primates means that they cannot establish a fixed location for protection of the young, such as a burrow or den. In contrast to those mammals for whom a special place provides the infant’s haven of safety, then, for the primate infant the attachment figure is the single location that must be sought under conditions of alarm.

(2005: 253, emphasis original)

Deep echoes of these ancient dangers are still very active in our physiological and psychological make-up, even today. When threatened
or under stress, we often seek social support. We gravitate to those who seem to be sharing our plight, or turn to those to whom we feel most close. We are particularly sensitive to social rejection and abandonment. Anything that casts us outside the family, group, community, or tribe is likely to cause great anxiety. It unsettles us, even frightens us. And for babies and young children, feelings of fear are at their greatest when they suffer the loss of their primary sources of protection – their parents and other close kin. To emphasize this point, Bowlby (1998a: 52), quotes the great American psychologist William James who said that ‘the great source of terror in infancy is solitude’. It is for this reason that we should never underestimate the long-term effects of neglect, abandonment, and prolonged separation.

The real dangers posed by the loss of a primary caregiver in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness suggested to Bowlby that vulnerable infants probably came equipped with a number of in-built behaviours that functioned to keep the baby safe and out of harm’s way. At times of felt danger, these care and protection-oriented behaviours, which Bowlby termed attachment behaviours, propel young children towards places of safety. Such places include mothers as primary caregivers, but also fathers and other family group members.

Caregivers protect their offspring in two basic ways (Goldberg 2000: 135). They can respond proactively by removing hazards and anticipating danger. This means that infants don’t encounter the risk and so their attachment behaviours don’t get activated. Or, should infants feel in danger, caregivers can react to the signals of distress emitted by the infant. Here, it is important for the caregiver to see things from the child’s point of view. The mother might know that there is no real danger but she can also appreciate that for a small child, the perception might be different. A mother will know that a friendly dog running enthusiastically towards you might well be frightening if you are small and have limited experience of dogs.

Similar dangers and the maternal responses they provoke can be observed in the behaviour of many species of young primates. Here is an example that Bowlby gives of a mother monkey’s response to separation:

Like all other primate infants, the baby chimpanzee spends the whole of its infancy in close proximity to its mother. During its
first four months it clings to her in the ventral position and only very occasionally is seen apart from her, and usually then is sitting beside her. Should it venture more than a couple of feet from her, she pulls it back; and should she observe a predator approach she hugs it more closely.

(Bowlby 1997: 190)

The origins of attachment theory

John Bowlby was medically and psychoanalytically trained. As a child psychiatrist, he retained a life-long commitment to object relations theory which describes how the self and mind develop as children relate to others, particularly the interactions they have with their primary caregivers (Bretherton 1998). After returning from the army medical service in 1945, he joined the Tavistock Clinic in London as Head of the Children’s Department, promptly renaming it the Department for Children and Parents, reflecting his growing conviction that the quality of the parent–child relationship was profoundly important for development and mental health.

It was while thinking about the behavioural distress shown by children separated from their parents, particularly when separation also involved finding yourself in unfamiliar surroundings or in the presence of strangers, that Bowlby began to piece together his ideas about what we now refer to as attachment (Bowlby 1958). To make sense of the distress, upset and behaviours shown by young children at times of alarm, loss and separation, Bowlby wove together an extraordinary range of ideas drawn from many different sciences. As well as his clinical work, the animal behavioural, ethological and evolutionary sciences, along with developmental psychology, control and systems theory, and the cognitive sciences also provided him with many of his key concepts as he attempted to make sense of children’s behaviour and development in the early years.

With a mind that was highly original, Bowlby fashioned his ideas in a series of groundbreaking books that made up his famous trilogy: 
*Attachment and Loss* (1969, 1973, 1980). But if Bowlby was the integrating force behind the theory of attachment, it was Mary Ainsworth who brought research rigour and her own conceptual wisdom to the enterprise. With a grounding in developmental psychology, she worked with Bowlby for a couple of years in the early 1950s before
eventually, by way of Uganda, returning to the United States. Over several decades of innovative research, methodological advances and creative theorizing, Ainsworth helped develop and extend Bowlby’s ideas (for example, see Ainsworth et al. 1978). As the founders of attachment theory, Bowlby and Ainsworth maintained a highly active and productive relationship until John Bowlby’s death in 1990. Mary Ainsworth herself died a few years later in 1999.

The attachment system and attachment behaviour

Ethologists use the concept of behavioural systems to describe the various neural programmes, that is the in-built behavioural repertoires with which animals are biologically equipped to help them survive, negotiate, manage, and reproduce in their physical and social environment. Each behavioural system is automatically activated whenever the senses are stimulated by specific environmental cues – signs of danger, food, a potential mate. When the activated behavioural system has achieved its ‘set goal’ – a place of safety is found, a meal is eaten, a sexual partner met – the system terminates. In effect, then, the daily activities of any animal are being constantly guided by whole suites of behavioural systems being turned on and then being switched off. The bottom line of each behavioural system’s presence and purpose is to maintain optimal functioning, that is, to ensure survival, continuity and reproduction.

Although each behavioural system in itself is relatively mechanical, organisms can and do learn from experience. Learning from experience allows the animal to develop a range of strategies that help it adapt to the particular characteristics of its environment. Each adaptive behavioural strategy represents a learned attempt by the organism to optimize its survival and reproductive potential. Using straightforward learning theory principles, behaviours that achieve their goal are likely to be experienced as pleasurable. These behaviours are therefore reinforced and will be repeated under similar environmental conditions. Behaviours that fail to achieve their goal are less likely to be repeated. For example, we shall see that children’s attachment behaviours are shaped by, and adapt to the characteristics of the caregiving environment in which they happen to find themselves.

One of the most important and fundamental behavioural systems
Attachment Behaviour

is the fear system. It helps to keep us alive. It is the fear system that alerts us to the presence of danger, or the possibility of danger. And as fear also activates the attachment system, fear and attachment work in synchrony (Kobak et al. 2005: 74). So, remembering the world and the very real dangers that it presented to our earliest infant ancestors, the attachment system is that behavioural system which gets activated whenever the individual feels threatened, alarmed, in danger, in distress, or in need. When activated, the attachment system sets in motion attachment behaviours whose set goal is to recover physical or psychological proximity to one or other of the child's caregivers where safety and protection lie. In the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, babies ‘who are biologically predisposed to stay close to their mothers were less likely to be killed by predators, and it was for this reason that Bowlby referred to protection from predators as the “biological function” of attachment behavior’ (Cassidy 2008: 5).

Once a child’s attachment behaviours have achieved their set goal of recovering proximity to the caregiver, the child once again feels safe and the attachment system ‘switches off’ along with any displays of attachment behaviour. ‘By utilizing the concept of feedback,’ explains Bowlby (1997: 20), attachment theory ‘gives as much attention to the conditions that terminate an act as to those that initiate one.’ In other words, attachment theorists are as much interested in how parents help (or in some cases, fail to help) children feel safe and regulate their arousal as they are in the things that trigger attachment behaviours in the first place.

Attachment behaviour, being about seeking protection from danger, means that young children routinely monitor their environment for two classes of experience:

Is danger or stress present? This can be experienced as either external dangers (the presence of a stranger, a loud noise, the rapid approach of a large animal, darkness), or internal discomfort (feeling hungry, tired, or ill).

Where, and how accessible is my attachment figure? Children, even when happily playing, repeatedly make eye contact with their attachment figure, point to something new or unknown whilst looking at the parent, or toddle back to show mum a toy. Uncertainties about the whereabouts and availability of the caregiver activate the attachment system. Separation, abandonment, being alone for
too long, rejection, neglect and abuse can all lead to acute, and in many cases, chronic activation of the attachment system.

Many animals, and certainly most mammals show attachment behaviour. Take the example of a young lamb, busy eating grass, who wanders further and further away from its mother, the source of safety. For lambs, increasing distance from mother represents potential danger. Lambs separated from their mothers and the flock are easily picked off by wolves, big cats, and large eagles. The lamb’s sudden sense that mother is too far away for safety activates its attachment system, triggering attachment behaviour, the set goal of which is to recover proximity with mother where safety and protection lie. While the attachment system is activated, the lamb is in an aroused, dysregulated, and temporarily stressed state. During this distressed state, the lamb is likely to alert its mother by bleating. Once visual contact is achieved, it will run quickly back to its mother. On its return the lamb might suckle, typically with some urgency. However, when the lamb’s attachment behaviour achieves its goal of getting back to the protection of the ewe, its attachment system terminates. The lamb will then go back to what lambs do: eat grass.

It’s the same for human babies, although there are differences. Infants need to experience their parent as both available and sensitively responsive to their needs, signals and communications. If you are unable to crawl or walk back to your mother, then the only alternative is to get your mother to come to you. Protest, crying, clinging, grasping, and other displays of need and distress are very effective attachment behaviours. These fight responses to the frustration of having your needs ignored or unmet draw you to your caregiver’s attention. They are signalling behaviours. Most reasonably sensitive parents will attend quickly to their child when she protests or cries, particularly crying that indicates pain or severe distress (van IJzendoorn and Hubbard 2000: 388). This does not mean that parents fail to respond to other distress signals such as a hunger cry, but in these cases, the caregiving response is less urgent and more self-conscious. It reflects the understanding that a pain might require immediate action – it could, after all, be life-threatening. In contrast, a slight delay in feeding a hungry baby is unlikely to cause much harm and at worse will leave the baby feeling a bit more cross than either mother or child ideally would wish.
Vocalizing, cooing, burbling, sucking, smiling, visual tracking, eye contact, following, and raised arms (signalling ‘I want to be picked up’) can also act as attachment behaviours. They are good at keeping any besotted parent engaged; we’re all suckers for a smiling, babbling baby. Mothers naturally seek eye contact with their babies and when it is achieved, parents become livelier, smile and vocalize more, and exaggerate their facial and vocal expressions. Babies are naturally ‘tuned-in’ to human faces as well as voices that are higher pitched, slowed down, musical and sing-songy.

As babies get older, they begin to smile more at the people they know best. They can play quite happily at a distance, but are likely to glance frequently in the direction of the caregiver and make eye contact. And once toddlers have learned to walk, then of course they can also run back to mum or dad at times of need. These are approach behaviours:

In man’s environment of evolutionary adaptedness it is clearly vital that the mother of a child under three or four years should know exactly where he is and what he is doing, and be ready to intervene should danger threaten; for him to keep advertizing his whereabouts and activities to her and continue doing so until she signals ‘message received’ is therefore adaptive.

(Bowlby 1997: 247)

With maturation and improving ability to make sense of relationships and social situations (social cognition), the appraisal of caregiver availability becomes more sophisticated. The various cognitive-behavioural mechanisms allow more refined and nuanced monitoring and evaluation of the caregiving environment. This sees children using more complex, flexible and revisable (goal-corrected) behaviours and strategies in order to achieve their goals. Given that caregiving environments vary from warm, responsive and available to cool, insensitive and unpredictable, this helps explain why children in different parent–child relationships might well be using different attachment behavioural strategies. Each of the major attachment patterns describes the type of attachment strategy and cognitive appraisals being used by children under specific caregiving regimes (see Chapters 6, 8, 10 and 12).
Attachments and affectional bonds

Forming attachments is what young children do in the presence of familiar adults, even if those adults are harsh and abusive (see Chapter 12). Infants instinctively attach to their carers (Prior and Glaser 2006: 15). Only in extreme cases of severe institutional deprivation or environments in which carers are utterly indifferent and forever changing will children fail to form attachments. But for most children, during the course of healthy development, attachment leads gradually to the formation of affectional bonds with key adults, particularly primary caregivers. Thus, we might observe that ‘whereas an attachment bond endures, the various forms of attachment behaviour that contribute to it are active only when required’ (Bowlby 1998b: 40).

From birth, babies become more and more able to differentiate among the various people who populate their lives. They quickly begin to distinguish who is who in their environment showing clear preferences for their primary caregivers. Between six and nine months of age, most children develop clear-cut attachments with those adults with whom socially they most frequently interact, and who are most likely to soothe, comfort and protect them. These people are therefore referred to as the child’s attachment figures. And with the formation of clear-cut attachments, young children become increasingly wary of unfamiliar adults and strangers.

By 12 months of age, attachment figures have become the centre of children’s lives. Children can have more than one attachment figure. The possibility of multiple attachments echoes our hunter–gatherer, small group origins in which children would be looked after not just by their parents, but by the whole extended family. Hrdy (2005) calls this ‘cooperative breeding’. Even in modern settings, those who regularly help protect and regulate children are destined to become attachment figures. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, and perhaps key day carers are most likely to earn this status. And although at times of need children can use their attachment figures quite flexibly, there tends to be an overall hierarchy, with mothers in most cases likely to be the principal, primary or selective attachment figure. So, for example, while a toddler might show little distress when his grandmother leaves, this would not be the case if he were to suffer a major separation from his mother in her role as principal attachment figure. This
Attachment Behaviour

point is powerfully made by Bowlby when he considers the case of 4-year-old Wendy who is mourning the loss of her mother:

[A]bout four weeks after mother had died, Wendy complained that no one loved her. In an attempt to reassure her, father names a long list of people who did (naming those who cared for her). On this Wendy commented aptly, ‘But when my mommy wasn’t dead I didn’t need so many people – I needed only one.’

(Bowlby 1998b: 280)

A number of other points need to be clarified. The strength of a child’s attachment behaviour in a given circumstance does not indicate the ‘strength’ of the attachment bond. Some insecure children will routinely display very pronounced attachment behaviours, while many secure children find that there is no great need to engage in either intense or frequent shows of attachment behaviour. Children can also show attachment behaviour in the absence of their attachment figure. For example, a toddler frightened by a large animal is likely to run to and cling (attachment behaviours) to the nearest adult, whether or not he has an attachment bond with that person. Summarizing matters, Bowlby writes:

To say of a child that he is attached to, or has an attachment to, someone means that he is strongly disposed to seek proximity to and contact with a specific figure and to do so in certain situations, notably when he is frightened, tired or ill. The disposition to behave in this way is an attribute of the child … Attachment behaviour, by contrast, refers to any of the various forms of behaviour that a child commonly engages in to attain and/or maintain a desired proximity.

(Bowlby 1997: 371)

The parent as attachment figure develops affectional ties with the child in what we have learned to call a caregiving bond. It is worth reminding ourselves that as well as attachment and caregiving bonds, there are a variety of other affectional bonds that we can have with others – sibling bonds, friendship bonds, sexual pair bonds. Technically speaking, therefore, the term attachment is restricted to behaviour shown by the vulnerable towards the strong and protective, whether in
childhood or adulthood. So, for example, parents, in this technical sense, are not attached to their children; rather they have a caregiving bond with their infants.

Adopting this convention both parties can be said to be bonded. Attachment is then limited to behaviour normally directed towards someone conceived as better able to cope with the current situation; whilst caregiving specifies the complementary behaviour directed towards someone conceived as less able to do so.

(Ibid.: 377)

In the case of young children, they will be attached to, and show attachment behaviour towards their parent as caregiver. In the case of adult couples, each partner can display attachment behaviours and offer caregiving responses depending who, in any particular circumstance, needs the other’s care and protection, support and understanding.

Protest, despair and detachment

If attachment behaviours fail to achieve their set goal, the attachment system, along with the arousal and distress that go with it, remains activated. For example, a mother or father might be temporarily unavailable – she’s in the bathroom, he’s changing new baby brother’s nappy, she’s feeling ill.

More seriously, the loss and separation of an attachment figure can sometimes be prolonged or even permanent. Parents go into hospital, divorce, get depressed, or die. From the child’s point of view, each of these major separations and losses is experienced as the breaking of an affectional bond. In these situations, there is significant protest and distress shown during the initial phase of the separation or loss, followed by intense clinging in those cases in which the attachment figure returns (Robertson 1953).

Bowlby (1997) observed that after seven months or more, babies begin to show a distinct sequence of behaviours whenever they experience prolonged separation or loss of a primary attachment figure. Bowlby felt that ‘loss of maternal care at this highly dependent, highly vulnerable stage of development’ was extremely significant (ibid.: xiii). Of course, the presence of other familiar people and objects can
mitigate the intensity of the separation distress. But in the absence of such comforts, the baby’s initial reaction when he or she finds himself or herself in a strange place without the support of familiar people or unable to recover proximity with the primary caregiver, is one of protest – loud crying, anger and attempts to follow or find the attachment figure. Angry crying and active searching for the caregiver make sense as the child attempts to recover the lost parent. Anger of course, can assist in overcoming obstacles that might get in the way of recovering proximity with the caregiver, and it can also discourage the ‘loved person from going away again’ (Bowlby 1998a: 286). ‘So long as anger continues, it seems, loss is not being accepted as permanent and hope is still lingering on’ (Bowlby 1998b: 91).

If the loss or separation is prolonged, babies enter a phase of despair. Their preoccupation with the attachment figure continues and they are vigilant for her return, but they begin to lose faith (Robertson 1953). This is a time of grief and mourning, characteristic of major loss at any stage during the lifecourse. There is increasing apathy and withdrawal. There is a loss of appetite. Sleep patterns are disturbed. In evolutionary terms, this second stage is also adaptive. If there is no attachment figure, and if predators are not to be attracted and energy is to be saved, then being quiet and inactive is the best thing to do.

However, continuation of the loss eventually leads to a defensive stage of apparent detachment. If the period of separation is not too long, upon return of the mother, children begin to recover their attachment. Nevertheless, observes Bowlby (1998a: 47), ‘thenceforward, for days or weeks, and sometimes much longer’ children will insist on staying close to their mother, showing acute anxiety if there is any suspicion that she may disappear again. He reports the response of a miner’s wife when she was asked if her daughter ever wanted a cuddle:

Ever since I left her that time I had to go into hospital (two periods, 17 days each, child aged 2 years), she doesn’t trust me any more. I can’t go anywhere – over to the neighbours or in the shops – I’ve always got to take her. She wouldn’t leave me. She went down to the school gates at dinner time today. She ran like mad home. She said, ‘Oh, Mum, I thought you was gone!’ She can’t forget it. She’s still around me all the time.

(Ibid.: 248)
We shall be looking at some of the effects of lost, broken and disturbed affectional bonds in later chapters. We might also note that as anger with the attachment figure is one of the stronger feelings expressed whenever issues of separation, loss, rejection or abandonment are present, it is worth emphasizing that in cases where such experiences are all too frequent, feelings of anger, aggression and anxiety are likely to continue troubling relationships throughout childhood and into adulthood. For example, some of the most aggressive and angry behaviours, particularly towards parents, can be shown by adolescents who have suffered abandonment and the repeated threat of abandonment by caregivers who might talk of walking out on the family, sending the child away, or committing suicide (ibid.: 289).

**Caregiving**

Attachment behaviours are telling the parent that something does not feel quite right for the baby or toddler. Attachment behaviours, certainly before children acquire language and can discuss their concerns, are a form of communication. Babies cry for a reason, not just for the sake of it. They certainly don’t cry deliberately to annoy parents, as stressed and abusive mothers or fathers sometimes claim.

Faced with a distressed or crying baby, a sensitive, protective parent will try to work out what is the matter. This, of course, is often easier said than done. It’s not always obvious, particularly with very young babies, what is wrong. Is it hunger (but I’ve only just fed you)? Does your nappy need changing, again? Are you too hot? Are you feeling unwell? The parent might also feel tired and sleep-deprived after weeks of waking up several times each night to feed the newborn. Nevertheless, although not always at their best or most responsive, in principle, the majority of mothers and fathers are committed to their child’s health and well-being. At some level, babies sense this love, warmth and interest, and their parents’ protective instincts.

George (1996) calls this reciprocal response of mothers and fathers to the infant’s attachment system the *caregiving system*, a biological urge to care for, comfort, and keep safe one’s young. Protecting children and ensuring their survival increases the
parent’s reproductive fitness, that is, makes it more likely your genes will continue into the next generation. Mirroring and complementing the child’s attachment system, the caregiving system is organized around the goal of protecting, regulating and responding to the child, just as the child’s attachment system is organized around being protected, regulated and responded to. It is the regular and repeated responses of a reasonably sensitive, consistent and available caregiver that reinforce infant attachment behaviours as the kinds of behaviour to display when you feel in danger and seek safety, comfort and emotional regulation.

Being fundamentally to do with children’s safety and protection, Cassidy (2008: 10), following Bowlby, argues that the chief behaviours of the caregiving system are therefore retrieval, reaching, calling, grasping, restraining, following, smiling, soothing, and rocking. The sensitive parent anticipates and so prevents their child getting into danger, thereby forestalling activation of the child’s attachment system. She also rescues and protects the child when he or she has got into danger. When the child is safe, the parent’s caregiving system terminates, and other parental behavioural systems – such as play, tuition, work, socializing with other adults – can resume.

**Play and exploration**

It is equally important to remind ourselves that when children’s attachment systems are ticking quietly away on ‘background mode’ simply monitoring the environment for danger and threat, their energies and behaviours can be freed up to pursue the full range of developmental opportunities that they are programmed to follow. When children feel relaxed and secure, they can enjoy the pleasures and benefits of play, social interaction, discovering new things, learning, being busy and creative, and simply following their curiosity. They explore their environment. However, whenever danger threatens, uncertainty arises, anxiety is felt, or distress is experienced, the attachment system kicks back in. Play and exploration immediately stop. In fact, because fear and survival are so basic, activation of the attachment system generally means that other important behavioural systems – exploratory, affiliative, sociable, and in the case of adults, sexual – are deactivated. When in a state of anxiety or fear, we are unlikely to feel playful, chatty, or sexy.
The attachment system and exploratory system might therefore be seen as complementary, though mutually inhibiting. For most children, the attachment system is acutely activated many times a day, but with sensitive and responsive parenting, these episodes last for relatively brief periods. This leaves the majority of time for play and social interaction. So although attachment keeps you safe and ensures survival, in its own way, so does exploration. Play and exploration help children learn about and adapt to their physical and psychosocial environment. They promote social skills, self-reliance, and general competence. In these ways, children acquire the skills and knowledge that will help them survive at a practical level. As children mature, they spend more and more time in play with a corresponding reduction in the frequency of displays of attachment behaviour (Bowlby 1997: 197). We might note, however, that for children who suffer chronic activations of their attachment system – children who are neglected or abused or rejected – activation of their exploratory system is inevitably compromised. Their energy and attention are spent on survival, and there is less time for play, fun and relationships. Repeated suppression of exploratory and social behaviours is therefore bad for children’s emotional, social and cognitive development.

A similar complementary relationship exists between the attachment figure’s caregiving system and the child’s attachment system. From the child’s point of view, when his parent’s caregiving system is activated, his attachment system can be deactivated. Responsibility for providing proximity, protection and the monitoring of danger is being provided by the caregiver. This allows children to explore without worry. This is why, in the presence of their caregivers, children are at their most relaxed and playful.

When early childhood is reviewed overall, we see that attachment behaviour is most readily activated between the ages of six months and five years. This makes sense as this is the time of greatest vulnerability and highest dependence.

Safe havens and secure bases

Pulling these various threads together, Bowlby and Ainsworth saw the attachment figure as both a safe haven and a secure base. Whenever children run into difficulty, they know that there is a safe haven to
which to return for comfort and protection. And knowing that if things do go wrong there is that safe haven, children can also use the attachment figure as a secure base from which to explore (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Ainsworth and Wittig 1969; Belsky and Cassidy 1994: 375). The more confident and secure children feel in the availability of a responsive attachment figure to be there at times of need, the more independent and playful they can be. Caregivers who provide a secure base allow their children to be autonomous, curious and experimental. Secure children cope well with being alone. They are keen to try out new skills without always feeling the need to ask for help. However, if they do get into difficulty, they are happy to seek advice and support.

Children and adults who lack a secure base feel much more anxious about engaging with the world on their own. Uncertainty about whether or not your attachment figure will be available and responsive at times of need leads to feelings of insecurity. Individuals who don’t feel they have a secure relationship base lack confidence. This has profound developmental consequences. Children and adults who lack a secure base find that their attachment needs keep over-riding their attempts to be independent, playful, and work-minded. Their social interactions are more fussy and agitated. Confidence is easily sapped and attempts to go it alone are quickly undermined.

**Conclusion**

Whenever young human infants feel anxious, in danger or need, their attachment systems are activated. This triggers attachment behaviour, the goal of which is to recover proximity to the caregiver where safety and comfort lie. This basic definition of attachment behaviour is wonderfully simple. It is in its implications and elaboration that the full richness of the concept unfolds. So far in this introduction to attachment and its functions, we have simply emphasized the instinctual, programmed nature of the behaviour and the bonds children have with their primary caregivers. In evolutionary terms, this makes sense. To leave the development of an attachment relationship and its protective functions to the caprices of individual learning, said Bowlby (1988: 5), ‘would be the height of biological folly’. There simply is not enough time for human infants
to learn these complex survival behaviours. They need them to be up and running from birth. But attachment behaviours are also accompanied by strong feelings. We now need to look at how caregivers respond to, and deal with the emotions that get aroused whenever attachment systems are activated.
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