



# Attachment Through the Life Course

## Instructor Manual

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This instructor resource module is designed to help implement a lesson on attachment. It covers early childhood attachment as well as attachment relationships later in life (namely, romantic attachments). To this end, we review key concepts and provide a general framework for the lesson as well as more specific recommendations for activities, outside resources, and discussion questions. PowerPoint lecture slides consistent with these recommendations are available on the Noba website.

## Learning Objectives

- **Relevant APA Learning Objectives (Version 2.0)**
  - Describe key concepts, principles, and overarching themes in psychology (1.1)
  - Build and enhance interpersonal relationships (3.2)
- **Content Specific Learning Objectives**
  - Explain the way the attachment system works and its evolutionary significance.
  - Identify three commonly studied attachment patterns and what is known about the development of those patterns.
  - Describe what is known about the consequences of secure versus insecure attachment in adult relationships.

## Abstract

The purpose of this module is to provide a brief review of attachment theory—a theory designed to explain the significance of the close, emotional bonds that children develop with their caregivers and the implications of those bonds for understanding personality development. The module discusses the origins of the theory, research on individual differences in attachment security in infancy and childhood, and the role of attachment in adult relationships.

## Class Design Recommendations

This module can be covered in one long class period (75-90 minutes) or two short class periods (50-60 minutes). If the lesson is taught in two class periods, more time can be dedicated to assessment methods and attachment styles. If the lesson is taught in two class periods, a good place to break is after discussing how parenting impacts children's attachment style.

## Overview for One Class Period

- Introduction
- History of attachment research and core concepts
  - Attachment behavioral system
  - Evolutionary value
  - Harlow's research on contact comfort
- Individual differences in attachment
  - Ainsworth's strange situation task
  - Three types of attachment: secure, anxious-resistant, avoidant
  - The role of parenting in shaping attachment style
- Influence of early attachment on childhood outcomes
- Attachment in romantic relationships
  - Adult attachment styles

- Impact of adult attachment styles on romantic relationships
  - Finding a partner
  - Relationship functioning
- Relation between early attachment bonds and adult attachment
- Attachment and social media

## Module Outline

Introduction: Close relationships are a source of great joy (e.g., the special bond shared between children and their parents) and great suffering (e.g., the loss of a spouse). Attachment theory focuses on understanding the nature of these close relationships.

## History of Attachment Research and Core Concepts

- *Attachment behavioral system*: John Bowlby developed attachment theory in the 1940s to try to explain why infants and young children show great distress when they are separated from their parents and engage in behaviors aimed at being reunited (such as crying for their parents or pounding at the door).
- *Evolutionary value*: The prevailing psychoanalytic view of the day was that these behaviors are a kind of immature defense mechanism. Bowlby proposed that these behaviors have an important adaptive value. Specifically, he argued that the **attachment behavioral system** serves to help young offspring (who need protection and care) maintain proximity with their primary caregivers.
- *Harlow research on contact comfort*: Some time later, Harry Harlow sought to understand what exactly causes infants to become emotionally attached to their mothers. Harlow's research (with monkeys) found that it is mothers' providing of comfort (rather than food) that leads their young to form emotional attachments to them.

Individual Differences in Attachment: There are individual differences in the styles of attachment bonds young children form with their caregivers.

- *Ainsworth's strange situation task*: These differences can be assessed using Mary Ainsworth's **strange situation** task. In this task, children are separated from their parents for a short time and then reunited. Researchers watch how the child responds under these circumstances to assess the child's attachment style.
- *Three types of attachment*: **secure, anxious-resistant, avoidant**
  - *Secure* (most children fall into this category): these children are distressed when their caregiver leaves, but are quickly comforted when she returns.
  - *Anxious-resistant* (about 20% of children fall into this category): these children become very distressed when their caregiver leaves, but are not calmed by her presence when she returns.
  - *Avoidant* (about 20% of children fall into this category): these children do not seem overly distressed upon separation from the caregiver and avoid the caregiver when she returns.
- *The role of parenting in shaping attachment style*: The kind of attachment style that a child exhibits has been linked to parenting behaviors (in both correlational and experimental research). Caregivers who are consistently responsive to their children's needs tend to have children who form secure attachment bonds. Caregivers who are inconsistently responsive tend to have children who form anxious-resistant attachment bonds. Caregivers who consistently fail to respond to their children's needs tend to have children who fall into the avoidant attachment style.

Influence of Early Attachment on Childhood Outcomes: Early childhood attachment styles have been linked to a variety of outcomes in childhood. Children who are classified as secure are more likely to have better relationships with friends, be rated more positively by their teachers, and tend to be more persistent on challenging tasks. Children who are classified as insecure-avoidant are more likely to experience difficulties maintaining peer relationships and are more likely to be identified as bullies.

## Attachment in Romantic Relationships

- *Adult attachment styles*: Hazan and Shaver (1987) extended research on attachment to the realm of adult relationships. These researchers argued that the special close bonding experienced in romantic relationships should be considered an attachment bond.
  - Just as there are three styles of childhood attachment, there are three styles of adult romantic attachment (with the percentages of people falling into each category being similar to those for childhood attachment):

- *Secure*: individuals with this **adult attachment** style find it easy to get close to others and readily become emotionally intimate with romantic partners.
  - *Anxious*: individuals with this adult attachment style seek extremely intimate emotional bonds with romantic partners but tend to worry that their partners will leave them.
  - *Avoidant*: individuals with this attachment style tend to avoid forming close emotional bonds with romantic partners.
- Impact of adult attachment style on romantic relationships
    - *Finding a partner*: Couples tend to share the same attachment style; if one partner is secure, the other partner is more likely to be secure. In part, this may be because people tend to be more attracted to individuals who have a secure attachment style. However, it may also be because individuals' attachment style may influence their partner to become more like them (in terms of romantic attachment).
    - *Relationship functioning*: Individuals who have a secure romantic attachment style tend to have more stable, satisfying, and high-functioning relationships. In part, this may be because individuals who are secure are more likely to provide support to their partners when they are in need.

Relation Between Early Attachment Bonds and Adult Attachment: There is some evidence that early attachment style is probabilistically linked to adult romantic attachment style. However, even those who fail to form secure bonds as children can develop a secure romantic attachment style as adults. This is because attachment style is shaped by the joint influence of all of the close relationships a person experiences in life, including relationships with parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, and any other figures with whom the individual forms a close emotional bond.

Attachment and Social Media: Importantly, the attachment style that one develops likely influences social interactions in a wide variety of settings. For example, recent research has found that attachment styles predict differences in the way people use social media: individuals who are avoidant use Facebook less frequently and are less open; individuals who are anxious are more likely to use Facebook more frequently.

## Difficult Terms

Adult attachment

Anxious-resistant

Attachment behavioral system

Attachment behaviors

Attachment figure

Avoidant

Insecure attachment

Secure attachment style

Strange situation

## Lecture Frameworks

Overview: This lecture is designed for one long-class period (75-90 minutes), but it could be broken up into two shorter class periods (50-60 minutes). After prompting students to think about their own personal relationships, students learn about the history of attachment research and receive direct instruction via lecture and videos on childhood attachment. The latter part of the lecture focuses on adult romantic attachment (including the relation between childhood and adult attachment).

- **Warmup Discussion:** Ask students to think about a very close relationship they have with a friend or a loved one and have them spend a few minutes writing down words that describe that relationship. Next, invite students who wish to do so to share their answers with a classmate; remind students that classroom discussions are confidential and that their classmates' responses should not be shared with others outside of class. Finally, bring the whole class together in a discussion about the importance of close relationships—and how they can give us especially positive experiences as well as especially negative experiences (e.g., when there is conflict or loss). Explain that the first of these close social relationships develops in infancy, when a baby forms an attachment to his or her caregiver.
- **Direct Instruction of History of Attachment Theory:** Refer to the lecture slides to review:
  - Attachment figure
  - Attachment behaviors
  - Adaptive value of attachment behavioral system
- **Video of Harlow's Research:** Show classic video footage of Harlow discussing his research.

Before showing the video, prompt students to pay attention to the answer to Harlow's research question and after the video ask students, What did Harlow find? See Outside Resources section below for description and YouTube link to the video.

- **Direct Instruction of Individual Differences in Attachment:** Refer to lecture slides to explain the "strange situation" task and how it is used to measure attachment.
- **The Strange Situation Video:** Show the video of the "strange situation" task. Tell students to pay special attention to children's behavior at separation and reunion. See Outside Resources section below for description and YouTube link to the video.
- **Direct Instruction of Individual Differences in Attachment:** Refer to lecture slides to:
  - Review the different styles of attachment exhibited by children (secure, anxious-resistant, avoidant)
  - Review the antecedents of the three attachment styles
- **Evaluate Your Own Attachment Style Activity:** This activity gives students a chance to practice evaluating attachment style while connecting the course content to their own personal history (which will improve memory for the content). For a detailed description, please see the Activities/Demonstrations section below.
- **Applied Discussion:** Have students apply what they know about attachment theory to their own experience by having them answer this question: What advice would you give to parents who wish to ensure that their children form a secure attachment?
  - Answers to this question can be used in a discussion about how experiences shape attachment bonds. It also prompts students to think about practical applications for attachment theory.
- **Direct Instruction:** Refer to the slides to review:
  - Outcomes linked to different attachment styles in childhood
  - Adult romantic relationships as attachment relationships
  - Three styles of adult romantic attachment (secure, avoidant, anxious/resistant)

- Attachment and dating trends—similarity of partners in attachment style
- Impact of adult attachment style on romantic partners' relationship functioning
- **Celebrity Attachment Style Activity:** This activity provides a fun way for students to review the different styles of adult romantic attachment and their impact on relationship functioning. See section below on Activities/Demonstrations for complete detail on how to do this activity.
- **Applied Discussion:** Have students apply what they know about attachment theory to their own experience by having them answer these questions: (1) What style of romantic attachment would you classify yourself as fitting into? and (2) What experiences have led you to this attachment style? Students should reflect on these answers individually at first, preferably in writing. Then, if students wish to share, invite them to share their answers with the class (in a general classroom discussion it is not recommended to do this as a Think à Pair à Share, in case students do not wish to discuss sensitive information). These questions prompt learning about the different adult romantic attachment styles by having students connect the course content to themselves. It also serves as a good transition to the next topic.
- **Direct Instruction:** Refer to the slide to review: *What is the relationship between early childhood and adult attachment?*
- **Classroom Assessment Activity (CAT):** Ask students to write down the "muddiest point." With remaining class time, ask students to share their muddiest point and provide additional review on these points.

## Activities & Demonstrations

**Activity—Evaluate Your Own Attachment Style:** This task provides an opportunity for students to practice applying the concept of different attachment styles to a real life example (themselves), thereby enhancing their memory for the material.

- Time: 5 minutes
- Materials: none needed



- Directions:
  1. Ask students to spend a few minutes reflecting on their own early childhood attachment style.
  2. You can use the following questions to prompt their writing:
    - Which attachment style do you think you formed?
    - What kinds of early experiences may have led to this attachment style?
    - Do you think this has impacted your later relationships (with friends or romantic partners)? Why or why not?
  3. After students have finished writing, have a general class discussion, asking for volunteers to share their answers. Note that some students may not wish to share, so it is not recommended to do this activity as a Think à Pair à Share.
  4. Later in the class period (when the topic of adult romantic relationships is being taught), students can perform a similar activity, reflecting upon their adult romantic attachment style.

## Activity—Celebrity Romantic Attachment Styles

- Overview: This is a fun activity that helps students apply the concept of adult romantic attachment styles to pop culture.
- Time: 15-20 minutes
- Materials: laptops, tablets, or smartphones (to access the internet)
- Source: This activity is from: Dewart, C. N. & Myers, D. G. (2013). Why do romantic partners get under our skin? Teaching students about the science of romantic attachment. APS Observer, 26. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publ...>
- Directions:
  1. Have students get into small groups of 3 or 4.
  2. Assign each group an adult romantic attachment style and have them generate a short list of celebrities who exhibit this style, finding news stories, images or other evidence to back up their claims.
  3. Have the groups present their findings to the rest of the class.

## Additional Activities

Sy, S., Brown, E., Amsterlaw, J., & Myers, J. (2005). Attachment parenting: A media activity for developmental psychology research methods. *Psychology Learning and Teaching*, 4, 112-116. doi:10.2304/plat.2004.4.2.112

- This paper describes an activity in which students critically evaluate the claims of attachment parenting (including designing a study to test these claims). This task can help students understand the difference between attachment (as it is studied academically) and popular media's concept of attachment parenting (whose claims are not supported by research).

Dewall, N., & Myers (2013). Why do romantic partners get under our skin? Teaching students about the science of romantic attachment. *APS Observer*, 26. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2013/april-13/teaching-current-directions-in-psychological-science-4.html#one>

- This article offers several suggestions for activities for teaching romantic attachment styles to college students, including the activity described above (Celebrity Romantic Attachment Styles).

## Discussion Points

1. Think about the special kinds of personal relationships you have with people you are very close to. What kinds of words would you use to describe these relationships?
2. Reflect on your own attachment bonds with your early caregivers; how would you classify your attachment?
  - This question prompts learning about the different attachment styles by having students connect the course content to their own personal history.
3. What advice would you give to parents who wish to ensure that their children form a secure attachment?
  - Answers to this question can be used in a discussion about how experiences shape attachment bonds. It also prompts students to think about practical applications for attachment theory.

4. What style of romantic attachment would you classify yourself as fitting into? What experiences have led you this attachment style?
  - This question prompts learning about the different adult romantic attachment styles by having students connect the course content to themselves.
5. Recent research suggests that teachers' attachment style can impact their relationships with students. How might teachers of the three adult attachment styles interact differently with their students?
  - This question prompts students to go beyond the course content to think about how attachment style may impact other kinds of relationships (beyond just parent/child and romantic relationships).
6. Some people argue that the first few minutes of life are critical for bonding. How would Bowlby and Ainsworth respond to this assertion?
  - This question offers a means for reviewing how attachment bonds are formed. It also offers an opportunity to discuss a commonly held misconception.

## Outside Resources

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 511-524. Retrieved from: <http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~schaller/Psyc591Readings/HazanShaver1987.pdf>

Hofer, M. A. (2006). Psychobiological roots of early attachment. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15, 84-88. doi:10.1111/j.0963-7214.2006.00412.x  
<http://cdp.sagepub.com/content/15/2/84.short>

### Strange Situation Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTsewNrHUHU>

**Survey: Learn more about your attachment patterns via this online survey**

<http://www.yourpersonality.net/relstructures/>

**Video on Harry Harlow's Research with Rhesus Monkeys**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrNBEhzjg8I>

**Evidence-Based Teaching**

Bryan, A. J. (1988). Discussion topics for developmental psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 15*, 42-44. doi:10.1207/s15328023top1501\_12

- Vignettes related to developmental psychology are presented, including vignettes that can be used to spark discussions about infant/parent attachment and romantic attachment.

Henson, A. M., & Scharfe, E. (2011). Association between adult attachment representations and undergraduate student course evaluations. *Teaching of Psychology, 38*, 106-109. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0098628311401582>

- This article describes the relation between students' attachment style and course evaluations. Recommendations are made for how professors might adapt their teaching to form better working relationships with students who have an anxious attachment style. Students could read this article and discuss how adult attachment has an impact on relationships in all kinds of settings. Students could also brainstorm ways to apply lessons learned from this article toward interactions with individuals who have an anxious attachment style.

**Links to ToPIX Materials****Activities, Demonstrations, Handouts**

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/27773427/Simulated%20ParentChild%20Interaction>

**Books and Films**

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/19980987/Development%20in%20the%20Classroom>

## Teaching Topics

Teaching The Most Important Course

[https://nobaproject.com/documents/1\\_Teaching\\_The\\_Most\\_Important\\_Course.pdf](https://nobaproject.com/documents/1_Teaching_The_Most_Important_Course.pdf)

Content Coverage

[https://nobaproject.com/documents/2\\_Content\\_Coverage.pdf](https://nobaproject.com/documents/2_Content_Coverage.pdf)

Motivating Students

[https://nobaproject.com/documents/3\\_Motivating\\_Students\\_Tips.pdf](https://nobaproject.com/documents/3_Motivating_Students_Tips.pdf)

Engaging Large Classes

[https://nobaproject.com/documents/4\\_Engaging\\_Large\\_Classes.pdf](https://nobaproject.com/documents/4_Engaging_Large_Classes.pdf)

Assessment Learning

[https://nobaproject.com/documents/5\\_Assessment\\_Learning.pdf](https://nobaproject.com/documents/5_Assessment_Learning.pdf)

Teaching Biological Psychology

[https://nobaproject.com/documents/6\\_Teaching\\_Bio\\_Psych.pdf](https://nobaproject.com/documents/6_Teaching_Bio_Psych.pdf)

## PowerPoint Presentation

This module has an associated PowerPoint presentation. Download it at

[https://nobaproject.com//images/shared/supplement\\_editions/000/000/174/Attachment%20Through%20the%20Life%20Course.ppt?1475878586](https://nobaproject.com//images/shared/supplement_editions/000/000/174/Attachment%20Through%20the%20Life%20Course.ppt?1475878586).

## About Noba

The Diener Education Fund (DEF) is a non-profit organization founded with the mission of re-inventing higher education to serve the changing needs of students and professors. The initial focus of the DEF is on making information, especially of the type found in textbooks, widely available to people of all backgrounds. This mission is embodied in the Noba project.

Noba is an open and free online platform that provides high-quality, flexibly structured textbooks and educational materials. The goals of Noba are three-fold:

- To reduce financial burden on students by providing access to free educational content
- To provide instructors with a platform to customize educational content to better suit their curriculum
- To present material written by a collection of experts and authorities in the field

The Diener Education Fund is co-founded by Drs. Ed and Carol Diener. Ed is the Joseph Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the University of Illinois. Carol Diener is the former director of the Mental Health Worker and the Juvenile Justice Programs at the University of Illinois. Both Ed and Carol are award- winning university teachers.

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