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Article *in* Journal of Divorce & Remarriage · April 2010

DOI: 10.1080/10502551003597808

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## Attachment Theory and Parental Alienation

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*Following an acrimonious divorce or separation, arguments are frequently presented as to why a child should not be with a non-resident parent. The custodial parent, whether a father or a mother, uses the concept of a child being attached to himself or herself and therefore this should prevent the child from having actual or reasonable contact with the absent parent. This view is based on antagonism between the former partners rather than the importance of the attachment theory being relevant. The attachment theory is also used to discredit the intentions of the noncustodial parent. This is especially the case for the younger child. With older children this is not likely to be as relevant. The history of the development of the attachment theory commencing with Bowlby and Ainsworth is presented, and the counterarguments are also presented. Attachment to the mother is obviously important initially but attachment to the father is equally important to the child and such bonding is likely to lead to positive emotional and behavioral development. It is therefore argued that both fathers and mothers have an important role to play and are, or should be, responsible for the rearing of children. The acrimony between the couple should not be considered as relevant as it is, in fact, the real reason why attachment theory is used against a nonresident parent.*

**KEYWORDS** attachment theory, parental alienation

Following an acrimonious divorce and a considerable degree of antagonism between the former partners, use is frequently made by the custodial parent of the importance of the attachment theory. It is used for the purpose of discrediting the intentions of the noncustodial parent in seeking contact with a child.

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It is the intention of this article to describe this particular theory and its founder, John Bowlby, in regard to infants and young children and their need to be closely attached to one figure, usually the female, in a relationship. As an expert witness to the courts, particularly in family problems, where there is a dispute as to whether the absent parent, be it father or mother, should have contact with his or her children, I am constantly being requested to comment on the value of considering the attachment theory as a reason for not allowing contact between an absent parent (usually the father) and his children. When this occurs my response tends to be based on the research that has been conducted over a period of many years as to whether an attachment to one parent should mean the lack of attachment or association with the other parent.

It must first of all be stated that research into this area has been considerable, commencing in the 1940s and continuing today. I illustrate this technique through an example of a particular court appearance wherein I played the role of the independent expert witness.

#### EXAMPLE OF USE OF ATTACHMENT THEORY TO PREVENT CONTACT

Mrs. X and Mr. Y were involved in a constant dispute over many years dealing with a number of children. Mr. Y had requested regular contact with all his children but each time Mrs. X, with the support of certain specialist pediatricians and psychiatrists, had refused such contact. She claimed Mr. Y would disrupt her child's capacity for being close to herself and this feeling she had was more important than the children having contact with their father. It was a typical example of 19 cases I have encountered where this ploy of using the attachment theory had been used, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully.

#### COMMENTS ON THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED INTO ATTACHMENT THEORY

According to Bowlby, the infant is primarily seeking proximity with an identified attachment figure and will experience considerable distress and alarm if this is not provided (Bowlby, 1951, 1999). Reference has even been made that failure to provide such attachment is likely to result in a dismal future for such young people, including their turning to juvenile delinquency (Bowlby, 1944). Attachment theory has been found to be dominant in the understanding of early social development in children (Schaffer, 2007). There has also been criticism of attachment theory, most especially the theory of maternal deprivation published in 1951 (Bowlby, 1951). Bowlby

stressed, however, that this closeness of attachment need not be to one person alone; for the child to have a secure relationship with a number of caregivers was necessary to improve normal social and emotional development. Hence the role of fathers and siblings has not been found to be ignored because here, too, attachments are made that provide for further security for the infant and young child.

Mercer, Misbach, Pennington, and Rosa (2006) emphasized the importance of human attachment behavior and emotions as being based on evolution and involving a selection for social behavior that makes individuals or groups more likely to survive. It is encouraged that toddlers and very young children benefit from being with familiar people from the point of view of safety and learning early to adapt to others. It must also be said that toddlers in their first months have no preference for their biological parents over strangers and are equally friendly to anyone who treats them kindly. Preference for particular people, and behavior that solicits their attention and care, develop over a period of time (Bowlby, 1958). On the whole, infants become attached to adults who are sensitive and responsive in social interactions with the infant and who remain consistent caregivers for some time; this could include fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969).

There are critical periods. Certain changes in attachment, such as the infant's coming to prefer a familiar caregiver and avoid strangers, are most likely to occur within a fairly narrow age range. The period between 6 months and 2 to 3 years is likely to be the time that a specific caregiver might be preferred. Attitudes toward caregivers, whether father or mother, does change with both real and vicarious experiences (Bowlby, 1973; Mercer et al., 2006; Mercer, Sarner, & Rosa, 2003). The attachment attitude involves the seeking of proximity to other persons and might include a variety of other attachment behaviors for the protection of unfamiliar persons (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton 1974).

Attachment theory accepts the customary primacy of the mother as the main caregiver, but there is nothing in the theory to suggest that fathers are not equally likely to become principal attachment figures if they happen to provide most of the child care (Holmes, 1993). Hence the infant and young child will form attachment to any consistent caregivers who are sensitive and responsive to social interaction with the child.

Rutter (1995) considered four main changes to have taken place over the years to 1995. He found that it has become apparent that there are more differences than similarities with imprinting. It appears to be of value to children to be involved with a small number of people but the involvement should be close and as early as possible (Bowlby, 1988).

According to Levy (1937) in a very early study of adopted children, early emotional deprivation of meaningful adults could have a disastrous effect in the long term on such children. It is also for this reason that some children reared in an institution and receiving care there are likely to be

limited in their emotional development compared with children raised by two parents (Bowlby, 1988).

Bowlby took considerable interest in the work of ethologists such as Lorenz (1937) and the work of Tinbergen (1951). This research showed how attachment works in the animal world. Bowlby collaborated with Robert Hind (Van der Horst, Van der Veer, & van IJzendoorn, 2007) on the subject of attachment and human development. A study by Rutter (2002) showed that there is a considerable amount of optimism in the manner in which children who have been rejected in early life in Romania and who were adopted by British citizens make considerable progress with their new families. It must be remembered that they were separated from familiar people in Romania.

Sroufe and Waters (1977) consider there are different ways by which children achieve security at different ages and in different environments. Hence there are different attachment styles.

### MEASUREMENT OF ATTACHMENT STYLES

Ainsworth and others sought to construct a way of determining the type of attachment a child might have toward his or her mother:

1. *Secure attachment*: The child protests the mother's departure and quiets promptly on the mother's return, accepting comfort from her and returning to exploration.
2. *Avoidant attachment*: The child shows little or no signs of distress at the mother's departure, a willingness to explore the choice, and little response to the mother's return.
3. *Ambivalent attachment*: The child shows sadness on the mother's departure, and the ability to be picked up by a stranger. The child even warms to the stranger and on the mother's return shows some signs of ambivalence, signs of anger, and reluctance to warm to her and return to play.
4. *Disorganized attachment*: A child presents stereotypes on the mother's return after separations, such as freezing for several seconds or rocking. This appears to indicate the child's lack of coherent coping strategy. Children who are disorganized are also given a classification of secure, ambivalent, or avoidant, based on their overall reunion behavior.

The following are the attachment styles as displayed by the caregiver:

1. *Secure attachment*: The attachment figure responds appropriately, promptly and consistently to the emotional as well as the physical needs of the child. She helps her child transition and regulates stress, and as a result, the child uses her as a secure base in the home environment.

2. *Avoidant attachment*: Here the attachment figure shows little response to the child when distressed. She discourages her child from crying and encourages independence and exploration. The avoidantly attached child might have lower quality play than the securely attached child.
3. *Ambivalent attachment*: The attachment figure is inconsistent with her child; she might at some time be appropriate and at other times neglectful to the child. The child raised in an ambivalent relationship becomes preoccupied with the mother's availability and cannot explore his environment freely or use his mother as a secure base. The ambivalently attached child is vulnerable to difficulty coping with life stresses and might display role reversal with the mother.
4. *Disorganized attachment*: This can be associated with frightened or disorientated behavior, intrusiveness or negativity and withdrawal, role and boundary confusion, affective communication, errors, and child maltreatment.

It must be said that this assessment procedure can equally be with fathers as with mothers, and the result is likely to be an effective way of assessing the attachment between the child and that parent.

Using attachment theory is one of the more insidious, wrong, unfair, and unjust arguments offered by parents who do not wish their former partner to have any or limited contact with their children. This view is then supported by a number of psychologists, psychiatrists, and pediatricians who, instead of being independent in their views, have sided with the custodial parent, usually the mother.

There is, of course, evidence that under normal conditions, a baby or very young infant gains in security by being closely attached to the primary caregivers. This is usually the mother, but the father's influence can and should soon follow. The father, when given custody, will often also prevent the children from being in contact with the mother, providing similar reasons to those previously mentioned.

Whoever has custody, the argument for parenting or limited contact between the nonresident parent and children is unsound, and not in the best interests of the children. Neither Bowlby (1969) nor Ainsworth (1969) ever considered that their research and theory should be used to lead to the nullification of either a father's or mother's contact with their mutual children (Garber, 2007). Bowlby (1969), in his conducted research, often speaks of the undeniable bond between infants and their primary caregivers (Eagan, 2008).

More currently, research indicates that although mothers may be the primary caregiver for a short time, fathers and other family members, including grandmothers and grandfathers, can and often do play an important role in promoting attachment to a number of people. Attachment can be defined as the strong bond that develops first between the parents and

the child and later between other individuals on both sides of the family. Divorce between parents can, but need not necessarily lead to detached attachment bonds and the possibility of the process of alienation.

Many parents who truly care for their children consider what is in the children's best interest. Such parents, whether fathers or mothers, do as much as possible to praise the absent parent, rather than deprecating the absent parent. In this way children will continue to feel a close attachment toward the absent parent despite the separation of the parents themselves. This will be of real value to the children in the short and long term and also to their separated or divorced parents. This will allow children to feel they are loved and cared for by both parents equally.

It is the implacable hostility between the parents that destroys the capacity of the custodial parent to encourage good contact between the child and the now absent parent. The child needs to feel a positive and valuable attachment to both parents to do as well as possible in his or her development. Parents who put the welfare of their children first do not practice alienating the children against the other parent, because of an acrimonious relationship and separation. They put their love and knowledge of what is in the best interest of the children first, and their acrimony toward the other parent second, whatever the reason for the relationship ending.

Such parents realize the importance of encouraging the attachment, not merely toward themselves, but toward the now absent parent. They do not use attachment theory for the purpose of obliterating the contact between the children and the nonresident parent. It is unfortunate that the judiciary fail to note this fact.

Hence, the family courts often listen to and adhere to the advice provided by inexperienced and unprincipled experts who are not truly independent, but favor one of the parents who has custody and who benefits, at least in the short term, by obliterating the guidance and love that could be provided by the absent parent. That absent parent being deprived of contact resolves despite the fact there was in the past very often a positive relationship between the child and that now absent parent. Hence attachment theory used and hence misused and abused in the manner described helps the custodial parent unfairly and unjustifiably to retain total control of children, leading to what is not in the best interest of these children.

It must be reiterated that no expert would or should allow or encourage contact between children and sexually or physically abusive adults, once this has been proven as fact. Unfortunately, it is not always proven by factual evidence when the custodial parent alleges that physical or sexual abuse by the now absent parent has occurred. This is also used as a weapon for curtailing or totally eliminating contact between children and the absent parent (usually the father).

This again is evidence of how attachment theory has been misused as an argument, albeit a false one based on keeping a parent at bay. Even a

study of adopted children shows that positively formed attachment heightens the chance for a well-adjusted life, regardless of the biological or nonbiological relationship of the attachment figure (Juffer, Stams & van IJzendoorn, 2002). Also Harlow (1958) found that infant monkeys became attached to surrogate mothers in the form of heated, cloth-covered objects when they had no contact with their real mother.

### THE EFFECT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

There is a large list of studies considering the effect of divorce on children and the resulting loss of one parent. Booth, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, Owen, and Vandell (2000) and Lowenstein (2007) referred to various national studies when stating that poor school performance, low self-esteem, behavior problems, distress, and maladjustment are often associated with divorce.

In adolescents from divorced families, it has been noted that there are more instances of delinquent behavior, early sexual activity, and continued academic issues and problems. Blakeslee and Wallerstein (1989) added that small children might suffer from sleep problems. Boys especially suffer from lack of contact with a major attachment figure, causing them to have trouble in school (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). Parents who remain together in severe conflict are also not immune to causing problems in children (Blakeslee & Wallerstein, 1989).

It is unfortunate that as a result of divorce, one of the parents loses his or her position in the family and hence there is the threat that the attachment to the absent parent by the child could be damaged or destroyed (Cordero, 2008). The child is at the same time powerless to influence the situation, especially when the custodial parent, who is all powerful, discredits the absent one. The child might also have formed a negative impression of the absent parent during the trouble between the parents. This can be independent of, or combined with, the alienation process conducted by the custodial parent (Garber, 2004) against the noncustodial and now absent parent.

When, however, as Garber (2004) stated, the main or custodial parent encourages by word and action good contact with the noncustodial parent, this will increase the child's security and attachment to the nonresident parent. It also leads to a positive relationship between the noncustodial parent and the custodial parent. This can often be achieved with the help of a therapist (Freeman, Abel, Cowper-Smith, & Stein, 2004). It is, however, difficult to achieve when there is ongoing alienation being practiced by the custodial parent (Lowenstein, 2007) while the therapy is taking place. The process of alienation or brainwashing against the absent parent, as already mentioned, causes much to harm the child in the short and the long term.

The child has already witnessed much unpleasant acrimony between the two most important supports in his or her life. When this is followed by separation of the parents and one or both parents are determined to turn the child against the other parent, this ongoing vilification destroys the child's security. The child's mind is being manipulated mostly by the more powerful custodial parent (Kopetski, 1998).

Attachment theory, unfortunately, used as an argument is especially powerful with the younger child with the unjustified claim being made that visits to the alienated parent cause the child distress. This distress, it is claimed, occurs for two main reasons:

1. The child has been separated from the parent with whom he or she has had a strong "attachment" in the past.
2. The child is unhappy being with the alienated and now vilified parent because he or she has not "formed an attachment" to that parent and therefore does not want to be with that parent due to the influences received, mainly by the custodial parent.

The child will eventually identify totally with the view of the custodial parent because there is no counterpresence or influence from the absent parent. The influence of the absent parent and the potential for attachment to the child weakens when there is decreasing or no contact. Eventually, the child wishes no further contact at all, or very limited contact with the absent parent, because the attachment has to some degree been severed or broken. The impact of maligning the absent parent as evil, immoral, untrustworthy, irresponsible, and feckless, turns the child away from a formerly loved parent.

The court, noting the situation of the child's lack of desire for contact with the now absent parent, accepts this unquestioningly. The view expressed by the court is that the child's rights must be protected. The child's need for two parents rather than only one is not accepted. Instead the child's right to make his or her own alleged choice is paramount. The courts fail due to the element of subterfuge, which has led to the child making the decision he or she makes. The concept of attachment theory cleverly lends itself well to this scenario of deception.

## WHAT SHOULD THE JUDICIARY DO?

The judiciary should be aware of how a parent might use various ploys for preventing contact between the child and an absent parent, including the use of attachment theory. This theory can be and is frequently misused by claiming that a child is harmed by being absent from contact with the custodial parent. It is claimed that the child regresses as a result of this absence

from the primary parent, usually the mother, including suffering from disturbed sleep, enuresis, and a number of other negative symptoms.

This reaction is mainly due to the fact that the custodial parent rarely if ever praises the absent parent as worthy due to the separation of the parents. If the case is reversed and the custodial parent speaks highly or well of the absent parent, the child is likely to wish to be with both parents as it was in the past when the parents lived together and perhaps even loved one another. When the child claims that he or she does not want to be with a parent and indicates that he or she has no reason for not wanting to but that he or she does not wish to leave the custodial parent, the court should investigate further. The reasons should be investigated in depth. If the reasons given are found to be unreasonable or illogical, the process of alienation could well have taken place. This results in a child not wanting contact because he or she is so "attached" to the custodial parent.

Such parents often make statements like these: "I have encouraged him or her to be with her father or mother but he or she doesn't want to. Do you expect me to force my child against his or her will? Hasn't the child the right to decide? I will not force my child."

In the case of certain sexual or physical abuse, the judiciary can demand no contact between the child and the abuser. When this is not the case, the judiciary can order that contact occurs even when the child claims not to wish this. How can an attachment occur with an absent parent when a child does not see that parent?

It is unfortunate that at present some psychological experts are being manipulated by acrimonious, vindictive custodial parents to do what is not in the best interest of the child both in the short and long term. At the same time, such experts encourage an even stronger attachment between the custodial parent and the child at the cost of the absent parent by sacrificing the nonresident parent, who is increasingly and often totally barred from being involved and hence attached to the child.

As an expert in and outside the courts, I am often demonized for my believing that both parents should play a responsible role in the life of a child. This is in the best interest of the child, all things being equal, and if neither parent is harmful to or abuses the child. This is a view with which many eminent bodies agree, including the United Nations, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association.

Any parent who fails to respond to this need for contact with both parents requires treatment, as does the child who has been thus alienated. Failure of the custodial parent to accept this necessitates the removal of the child from the control of such a parent and placing the child with the parent who will instil in him or her love and respect for the other parent. Hence the court must act decisively imbued with the knowledge that such action is necessary and truly in the best interests of the child.

## CONCLUSIONS

The following points should be emphasized:

1. From the assessment of the research into attachment disorder it becomes clear that on the whole mothers have the greater initial influence on their children due to their likelihood of being involved from the very beginning, first in carrying the child, and second giving birth to the child and having early contact.
2. Fathers are equally, frequently, and increasingly involved in bonding with their children and therefore they are care providers, too, despite other areas, such as work, taking priority in many cases.
3. Attachment to the child therefore, all things being equal, is close in both parents provided there are no pathological situations arising such as separation or divorce, which frequently lead to implacable hostility between the two partners and affect the childrearing process. It is here that attachment to the nonresident parent is threatened when there is no, or little, contact with the child.
4. Children are close initially to both parents, and this might well be altered due to acrimony between the couple, but attachment remains the same if one considers in depth what children have experienced and feel, despite the possible alienation that children have received from the custodial parent against the absent and noncustodial parent.
5. Psychologists and the judicial system must be aware of the fact that both parties in the parenting relationship have an equally important role to play.
6. Children's futures are best served by harmony between the parents, especially in relation to childrearing. It is vital for the court, when making decisions on contact, to be aware of the possible alienation or brainwashing by the custodial parent against the absent parent, before making decisions that are vital to the welfare of the children's futures.

The concept of attachment as a theory is a two-edged sword. It has been used as a weapon to prevent contact with children by custodial parents of either gender. The argument goes something like this: The custodial parent, especially (although not exclusively) of a younger child, claims that the child has a strong attachment to the custodial parent and for this reason should not be or cannot be forced into having a close relationship with the absent parent (usually the father).

Frequently there has also been a process of alienation practiced against the absent parent. This has led to the child identifying totally with the custodial parent and therefore having little or no contact with the absent parent.

The concept of attachment, however, also emphasizes the importance of a child being attached to both parents and not merely to one who has or

seeks total control over that child (usually the mother). This leads to a battle of wills between the parents, with the power almost totally in the hands of the custodial parent.

The question that is not always asked is this: What is in the best interest of the child? There is considerable research that demonstrates that children will do best if they have a relationship with both parents rather than just one parent, providing neither is abusing of the child. Acrimony between the parents could be a sign that some form of alienation is likely to be occurring.

The only way attachment to the absent parent can continue and develop, or redevelop, is for there to be regular and prolonged good contact with the nonresident parent. This is an important fact frequently forgotten or ignored in the effort to exclude the nonresident parent. This is not done because it is in the best interest of the child, but because it is the best interest of the often controlling and vindictive custodial parent.

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