



THE LOVING TIES THAT BOND

By Susan H. Greenberg/Newsweek

When Goslings hatch, they will immediately become attached to the first moving object they see, whether it's their mother or the Energizer bunny. Human babies are smarter. Even in utero, they begin to recognize the muffled voices of those who will care for them. By 10 days of age, they can distinguish the smell of their mother's breast milk from that of another woman. Around 5 weeks, babies demonstrate a preference for their primary caretakers by smiling or vocalizing. They follow them intently, first with their eyes, then later on hands and knees. By 9 months, many infants scream when their parents try to leave, as if to say, "I can't bear being without you!"

And so it is that babies fall in love with their parents. Psychologists, of course, have a less romantic name for it: attachment. First postulated by British psychiatrist John Bowlby in the 1950s, attachment remains one of this century's more enduring theories of human development. It has far outlived the particular—and unfounded—notion of bonding popularized in the 1970s that mothers and babies need prolonged skin-to-skin contact immediately after delivery to form a proper love connection. Attachment holds that infants and their parents are biologically wired to forge a close emotional tie, which develops slowly over the baby's first year of life through an ongoing dialogue of coos, gazes and smiles. How it unfolds may influence everything from how we perform in school to what kind of partners and parents we become. Says Alicia Lieberman, a psychology professor at the University of California, San Francisco: "The foundation for how a child feels about himself and the world is how he feels in his relationship with the primary caregiver."

For most infants that is their mother, simply because she's usually around them the most. But young babies will become attached to anyone who is consistently available and responsive to them. "If you handed a newborn to a male cousin and he acted like the typical mother, it wouldn't matter to the baby," says Jay Beisky, professor of human development at Penn State. In fact, most babies form multiple attachments. It's nature's way of protecting them against the loss of their primary caretaker.

Yet not all attachments are good attachments. Parents who respond sensitively to their child's needs—to eat, to play, to feel safe, to be left alone—will likely build strong, nurturing relationships, which some psychologists call "secure." Parents who don't are more likely to establish "insecure" or "anxious" attachments. "Children are prewired to fall madly in love with their caregivers," says clinical psychologist Robert Karen, author of "Becoming Attached." "The sense that that love is returned, that they're valued and that they can count on their mother and father, is secure attachment." Karen estimates that two thirds of 1-year-olds in middle-class American homes are securely attached; the percentage is lower in households that face hardships such as poverty.

This notion of secure versus insecure attachment is probably the most controversial aspect of attachment theory. Bowlby's colleague Mary Ainsworth first made the distinction in the 1960s, when she devised an experiment called the "strange situation." Over several months she studied mothers and infants in their homes. When the babies turned 1, she invited each pair



into the lab and placed them with a stranger in a toy filled room. Then she observed how the baby responded when his mother left the room and when she returned. As Ainsworth expected, the mother's departure distressed some babies and not others. But what defined their quality of attachment was how they greeted her return. The babies whose mothers were considered responsive all rushed to them—whether for comfort or to play—as if to say, “I know you’re there for me!” Ainsworth labeled those children “securely attached.” The infants of those deemed less responsive in the home study either ignored or rebuffed their mothers when they returned. Ainsworth concluded that these “anxiously attached” babies had no confidence that their mothers would give them what they wanted.

Such labels make many people uncomfortable. “The ‘attachment people’ decided incorrectly that the most important aspect of that relationship is security/insecurity,” says Harvard psychologist Jerome Kagan. “The ‘strange situation’ is not an accurate measure, because the child’s behavior in that situation is a function of its temperament and how it’s been treated.” Even proponents of attachment theory acknowledge its limitations. “Attachment hasn’t left enough room for what any mother of two has noticed: that children are different,” says psychologist Arietta Slade of the City University of New York.

To be sure, some children find it harder to form attachments than others. Children who suffer from autism and other developmental disorders, abused children, even colicky babies, all present special challenges. But most psychologists believe that with enough sensitivity and perseverance, every caretaker can form a secure attachment with almost any child. “There is such a thing as a poor fit,” says Robert Karen. “But you hope parents will find a way to connect.”

They needn’t do it alone. Counselors can help parents overcome their own obstacles to bonding, such as depression or substance abuse. One of the most common sources of insecure attachment is what child psychiatrist Selma Fraiberg called “the ghost in the nursery,” a parent’s unresolved mourning for a loved one. Psychotherapy can be extremely effective in helping mothers learn how to be more sensitive to their babies. In 1985 Alicia Lieberman proved that with a group of mothers from Latin America, many of whom had recently immigrated to the United States. She performed “strange situation” assessments on their children. Of those deemed anxiously attached—about 65 percent—she offered psychotherapy to half “After a year, these mothers were significantly more empathic, responsive and interactive” than the control group, Lieberman says.

And what if, despite everyone’s best efforts, an infant fails to form a close bond with “a caring adult? “Kids who were secure as infants or toddlers in general function better in ways we value in this culture,” says Belsky. “But it would be a mistake to draw the conclusion that how you end up after the first year of life determines how you’ll be in later life.” Indeed, few people could look at a room full of teenagers and guess accurately who was securely attached at age 1. And adults who failed to bond with their own parents are not destined to revisit that fate upon their children; plenty of them transcend their early experience—whether through attachment to another caring adult, a fulfilling marriage or psychotherapy—and raise perfectly secure kids. By the same token, a secure attachment is only a beginning. “Being secure is an asset, not a guarantee,” says Belsky. In this life, that’s about as good as it gets.