

# Attachment Theory In Action: Emotional Regulation for Youth-At-Risk



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# Introductions

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Previous work on child and adolescent unit at Peninsula Behavioral Health and Helen Ross McNabb

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# Case Study

Johnny is a 16yo male. He regularly smokes marijuana and abuses opiates. His parents are divorced and he lives with his mom and older brother and visits his father every other weekend. He reports having dated a girl for the past year but described their relationship as volatile. He reported that he is certain that his girlfriend is cheating on him with other guys despite not finding evidence in his daily checks of her cell phone and facebook account. He is fairly expressive and speaks at length when answering questions. He describes his family life and personal relationships in great detail. He discusses a number of different details about his childhood. He reports that he abuses drugs because otherwise he would have a panic attack. He came to talk to his history teacher during his open period after getting into a heated argument with his girlfriend during lunch.

# Case Study

Jennifer is a 15yo adolescent female. She was a straight A student in middle school but her grades have steadily declined since entering high school. She has a younger sibling and her parents are married. Jennifer admits to struggling with her school work and admits to smoking marijuana and experimenting with other drugs. She has a blunted affect and minimizes concerns about her drug use. She answers questions briefly and gives few details about her personal life. She describes her family life and personal relationships in fairly shallow terms. When asked, “What was your childhood like?” She answers , “Good, typical, just like other kids I guess.” She describes her life as “fine but dull.” She reports being sexually active with no steady sexual partner. She expresses little motivation to change her life though she recognizes that she is heading towards failing high school. She was forced to visit the school counselor by the assistant principal.

# Outline

- Foundations
- Theorists that contributed
  - Bowlby, Ainsworth, Harlow, and Lorenz
- Styles
- Emotion Regulation
- Significant Research in Neurobiology
- Experiential/Interactive
- Implications



# Foundations

- The roots can be traced back to Bowlby and Ainsworth with their choice to deviate from psychodynamic, drive, and object relations theories
- Attachment theory by its most rudimentary definition is a basic behavioral system used to increase species survival advantage
  - This system is created and modified throughout the lifetime by our experiences, beginning with our primary caregiver
  - Biologically hardwired behaviors in infants and adults that increase the likelihood of survival

# Some of the theorists that contributed...

## Mary Ainsworth

**Field:** Developmental Psychologist

**Population:** Mother-Child

**Major contribution:** Distinct attachment patterns

## John Bowlby

**Field:** Psychology, psychoanalyst

**Population:** Juvenile

Delinquents/Children in hospitals

**Major contribution:** Early childhood disruption in attachment

## Harry Harlow

**Field:** Research psychologist

**Population:** Rhesus monkeys

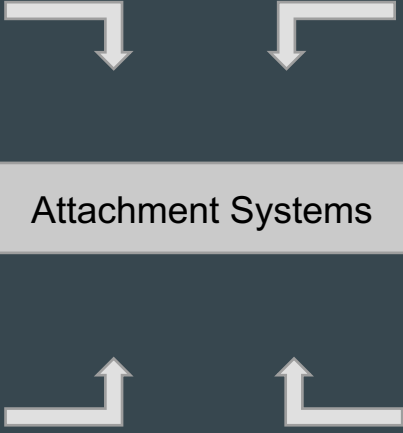
**Major contribution:** Comfort Vs. food

## Konrad Lorenz

**Field:** Ethologist

**Population:** Geese

**Major Contribution:** Imprinting



Attachment Systems



Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby



Harry  
Harlow



Konrad  
Lorenz



# Four Infant and Caregiver Attachment Behaviors

## **Proximity Seeking**

Infants insist on maintain close proximity to their caregivers

## **Safe Haven**

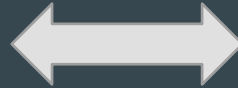
Infants flee to their caregiver as a safe haven when frightened or alarmed

## **Secure Base**

Infants use their caregivers as a secure base for exploration

## **Separation Protest**

Infants protest caregiver leaving (physically or psychologically)



## Sensitivity to signals

Detecting the infant's signal correctly, interpreting the signal, appropriately responding, and timely response

Cooperation Vs interference with on-going behavior

Physical and psychological availability

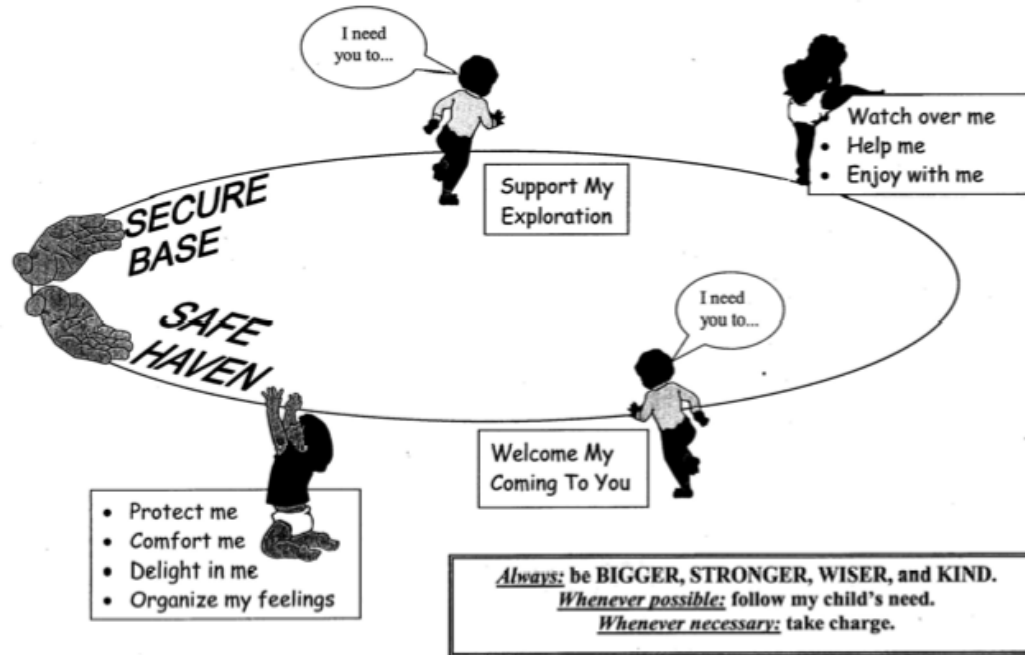
Physical and psychological availability

# Still Face Experiment



# CIRCLE OF SECURITY

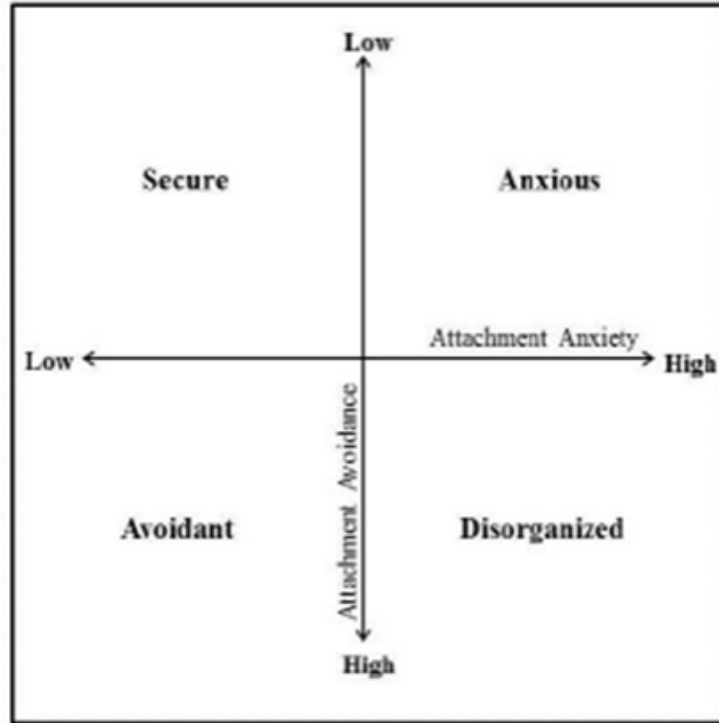
PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS



# Early Childhood Attachment Classifications



# Attachment dimensions & styles





Avoidant



Anxious



Secure

Disney Pixars 2013  
movie Frozen

# Attachment, the brain, and emotional regulation

# Affect Regulation

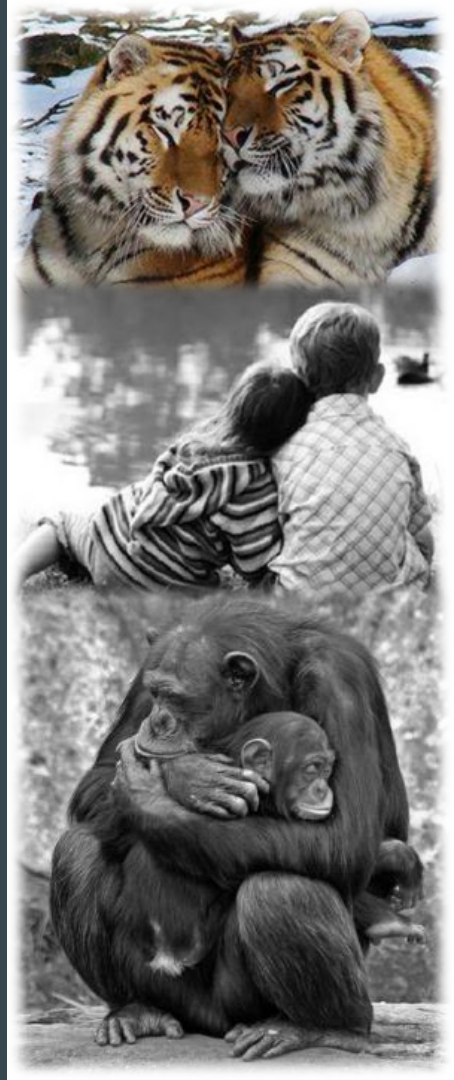
- The relationship between caregiver and child creates a foundation for emotional regulation and attachment capability later in life
  - Focuses on the ability to development basic trust in others and the self
- Ijzendoorn's Transmission Model (1995)



# Emotion regulation & attachment

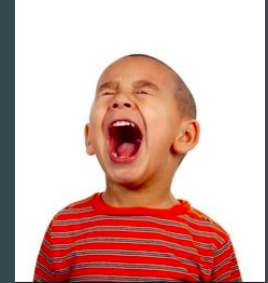
- Emotion regulation - the internal regulatory processes used to consciously or unconsciously direct and redirect the course of emotional responses (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003; Koole, 2009)
- Attachment - “A Self-Regulation Theory”
  - Relational feedback system shapes the individual’s adaptive or maladaptive self-regulation (physical and emotional regulation)

(Aherne, Moran, & Lonsdale, 2011; Elliott & Edmonson, 2008; Liew et al., 2011; McCraty & Childre, 2002; Porges, 2007; Stifter et al., 2011; Watson, McMullen, Prosser, & Bedard, 2011; Werner & Gross, 2010)



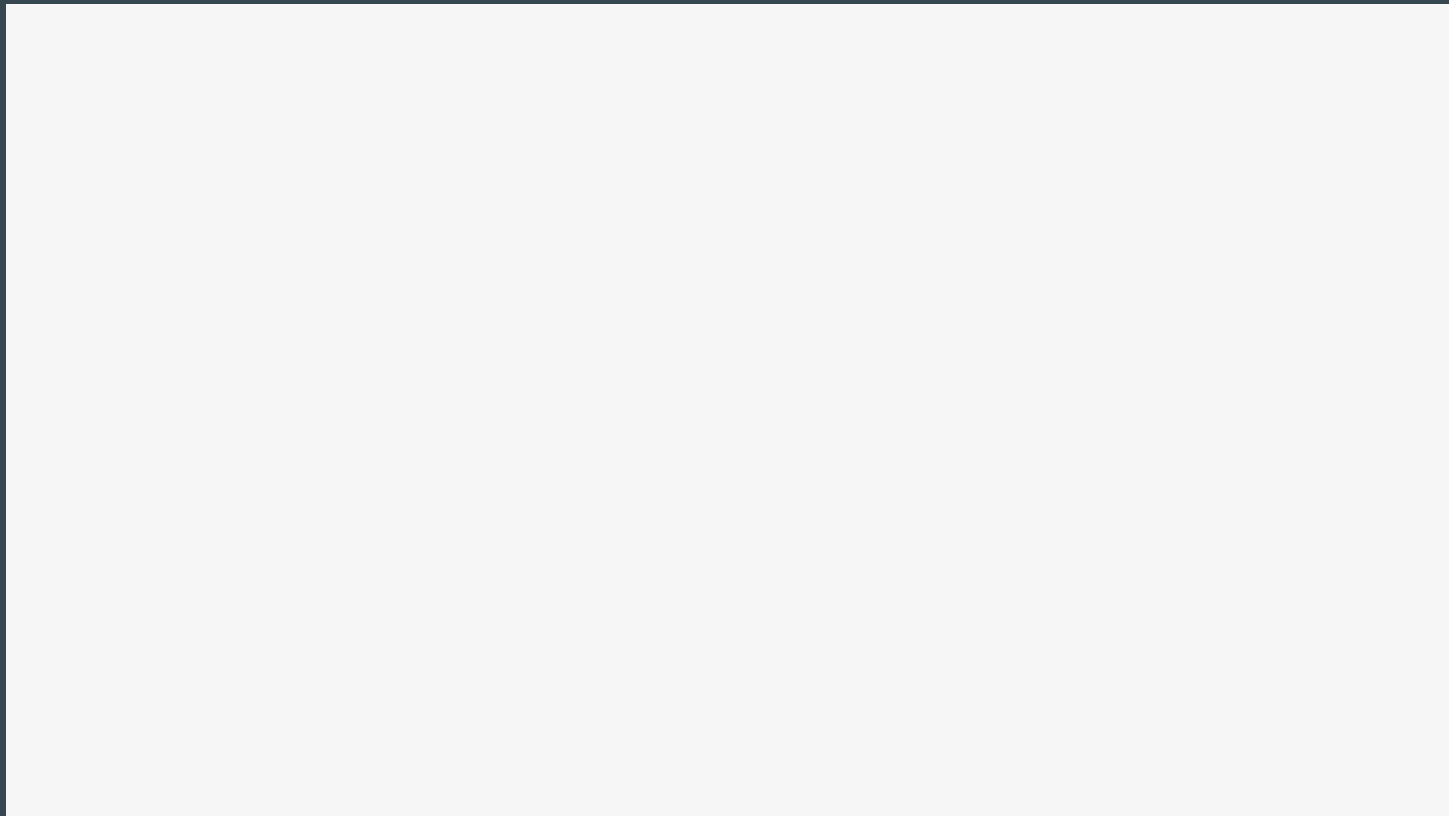
# Psychobiology - attachment and self regulation

- Psychobiology
- Secure attachment associated with adaptive physiological and emotion regulation strategies
- Insecure attachment - chronic stress response - maladaptive regulation strategies
- Attachment figure - Co-regulation of stress and relaxation response (beginning in utero!)



(Diamond, 2001; Fox & Hane, 2008; Kemp & Neimeyer, 1999)

# Affect Regulation and Neurophysiology





# Neurobiological Perspective & Trauma

- Limbic and autonomic systems
  - These systems are responsible for the interpretation and regulation of the human affective experience
- Co-regulation
  - Through interactions the primary caregiver shapes the stress coping systems directly connected to the limbic and autonomic nervous system of the developing infant brain (Schore, 2002).
- By age three all major neural pathways in the brain can be identified
  - Trauma experiences including but not limited to primary caregiver maltreatment have significant effects on the brain development in the areas most responsible for affect regulation (Schore & Schore, 2007)

# Mentalizing and Mindfulness

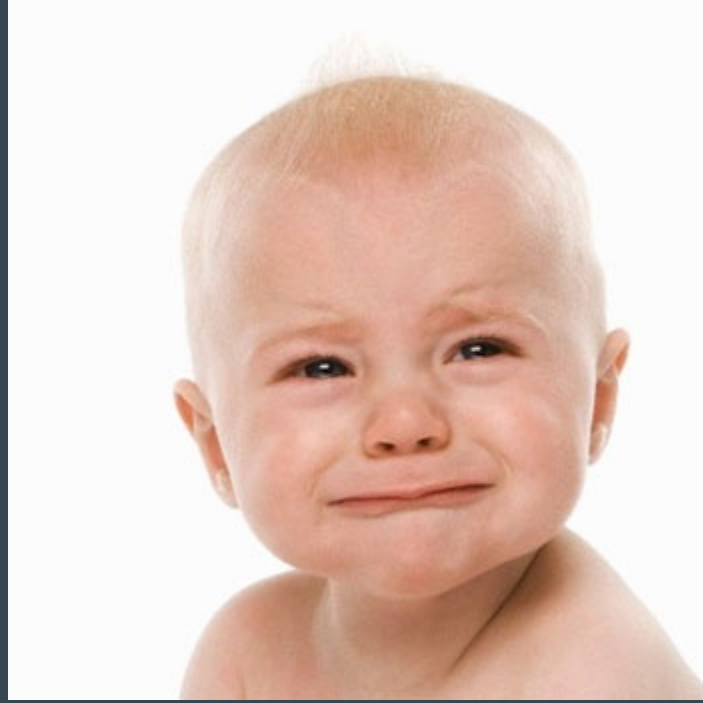
- Mentalizing
  - “Thinking about Thinking” Wallin, 2007



<http://moodsurfing.com/mentalize/>

- Mirror Neurons
  - Empathy neurons









# Mentalizing Modes

Wallin(2007)

Pretend  
Mode(Avoidant)

Reality

Experience

Psychic Equivalence  
(Preoccupied)

Experience=Reality

Mentalizing  
Mode(Secure)

Reality and Experience  
are separate but related

# Mentalizing Application

- Youth with more Avoid Attachment strategies need help experiencing and identifying emotional responses
  - Contingent Mirroring-Wallin
- Youth with more Anxious Attachment strategies need help reflecting and analyzing their experience-
  - Marked mirroring-Wallin

Put it into action

# Implications for practice

- Community members (eg. teachers, case workers, probation officers) as attachment figure and psychobiological regulator
- Know thy self
- Take the guilt out; be curious
- Think progress, not perfection

# Case Study

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# Marquel

## Attachment Timeline



Questions? Comments? Insights?