Annotations

Bonding babies

To place current views of the importance of the early mother-infant relationship in context, it is perhaps as well to begin by reminding ourselves how things have changed over the years. Among most psychologists, the emphasis 20 years ago was on the effects of disrupting already formed attachments and, as these were thought to be formed in the latter part of the first year, separation in the neonatal period was held to be of little consequence. One American author of the period, whose views were quite typical, stated that provided the baby received 'a minimal amount of stimulation, personal attention, and individualised care, the mother-infant relationship was of little importance in the first 6 months of life'.

By way of contrast, a colleague was recently talking to teenagers in a comprehensive school who had just completed a course on parenthood, and was asked to elaborate on the 'dire consequences' that the children had been told would follow any interruption of the early mother-infant relationship.

In the early 1970s when Marshall Klaus and John Kennell¹ began writing about bonding, they quickly found a receptive audience. Neonatal special and intensive care units had grown so that increasing numbers of babies were being nursed separately from their mothers. Some paediatricians and nurses were becoming uneasy about the effects this might have on mothers' feelings for their babies. Mothers, and indeed fathers and other relatives, were sometimes resentful that access to special care babies was often very restricted. For both parents and professionals, the claims about bonding seemed to provide a scientific basis for their anxieties about early separation and a justification for a dramatic change in policies. As a recent survey by the National Association for Welfare of Children in Hospital² has shown, doors are now open to parents (and often siblings and grandparents as well), and many other steps have been instituted to provide more support and help for those with new babies.

Questioning the concept

Ironically, as the notion of bonding has become a commonplace assumption behind neonatal services, the concept has become less and less acceptable to

developmental psychologists, and several of the early claims have been found to be without foundation. Does it matter, some might say, that we have done the right things for the wrong reasons? For none of this recent questioning has suggested we should cease striving to eliminate all neonatal separation. I suggest it does because in order to move beyond a notion of the absence of separation as a basis for organising care, we must understand the nature of infants' and parents' psychological needs. I think it is now clear that the notion of bonding has become a block to this understanding, at least in the simple formulations that seem to dominate in most discussions. We need to move on to build a psychology of parenthood based on an appreciation of the full complexities of human behaviour.

The basic notion of bonding

In its usual form the concept of bonding embodies the idea that a mother immediately after delivery enters a particular state in which she is able to 'bond' with her baby. If separation occurs during this time the relationship is damaged, more or less permanently according to many accounts. Recent reviews,^{3–5} however, of the experimental work do not suggest that there is a sensitive period for mothers, nor that there are important effects of early separation that persist beyond a matter of days or weeks after a reunion—at least according to our relatively crude assessments of mother-infant relations. Those effects that have been shown seem rather inconsistent and are perhaps specific to particular populations or situations. Some of the research suggests that separated mothers may feel less confident about their abilities to cope with their babies and may be particularly anxious about their baby's progress; effects that may persist in some situations.

Separation studies have been carried out with both term and preterm babies. A comparison of these indicates the difficulties that may face parents of preterm babies—regardless of separation—because of the initial unpredictability in the behaviour of immature infants which can make them frustrating and uneasy social partners.⁶ Though

frequent and sustained contact with a sick or preterm baby may increase the degree of parental anxiety, it is clear that the anxiety is usually psychologically productive and most parents want not only contact, but also a sense of being involved in the care of their children.

Dangers in the concept

The most obvious danger in the idea that early separation leads to more or less permanent damage to mother-infant relationships is the unnecessary upset it can cause to those who are separated from their babies and have heard about bonding. Many clinicians have encountered parents who can be very difficult to reassure. Given the frequency with which claims about the near irreversibility of separation effects are made in professional publications, the media, and material intended for parents, this is not surprising.

Other effects may run deeper than this. The idea that psychological development and the formation of a relationship can be upset by a single specific event is an old one but it runs in the face of what we know about adaptability and compensation in developmental processes. Instead of seeing parental relationships growing out of a life lived in a specific culture with many 'formative' experiences, attention is focussed on a brief moment in time. This can lead us to ignore the psychological and social worlds from which parents come and to which they will return with their infant. In addition, it promotes a distorted view of the nature of developmental processes. The idea of bonding also encourages us to ignore the complexities of human relationships. We have all heard of assessment procedures that ask someone to state whether or not a mother has bonded to her baby. Where is the space for the ambivalence that is universal in human relationships—for the joy, fear, anxiety, frustration, triumph, and many other feelings we may have for our offspring?

Ways forward

Perhaps the persistence of the concept of bonding is partly a function of our failure to provide anything better, or at least to explain clearly what is at issue. There is a comforting simplicity in the idea of bonding, but sadly, human behaviour is not simple and the contemplation of its full complexity often seems to have the discomforting effect of leading us to examine our own feelings. But attempts are underway to provide more satisfactory theoretical formulations of the growth of social relations.^{4 7}

Despite all the difficulties with the concept of bonding, we can say with certainty that conditions for infants and their parents in maternity and neonatal units have greatly improved in recent years, and much of the credit for that must go to those who, through the concept of bonding, drew attention to the problems. Now it is for us to build on their work and take the next step forward.

References

- ¹ Klaus MH, Kennell JH. *Maternal-infant bonding*. St Louis: CV Mosby, 1976.
- ² National Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital. *Update No 11*. London 1984.
- ³ Goldberg S. Parent-infant bonding: another look. *Child Dev* 1983;**54**:1355–82.
- ⁴ Richards MPM. Parent-child relationships: some general considerations. In: Davis JA, Richards MPM, Robertson NRC, eds. *Parent-baby attachment in premature infants*. London: Croom Helm, 1983.
- ⁵ Sluckin W, Herbert M, Sluckin A. *Maternal bonding*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
- ⁶ Goldberg S. Prematurity: effects on parent-infant interaction. *Pediatric Psychology* 1978;**3**:137–44.
- ⁷ Kaye K. *The mental and social life of babies*. London: Methuen, 1984.

M P M RICHARDS
Child Care and Development Group,
University of Cambridge,
Cambridge CB2 3RF