

# The Parent-Child Attachment and its Influence on Children Developing beyond the Binary Sex/Gender Norm<sup>1</sup>

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## SUMMARY

This contribution begins with two initial hypotheses and then goes on to present a number of fundamental assumptions of the attachment theory. This is followed by a digression each on normalization and on the rhetoric of difference. The contribution concludes with a discussion of the question what a child needs to be able to live its idiosyncrasies and differences in a positive way.

## INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt about the significance of the parent-child-relationship for the development of a human being. The topic has been the subject of extensive research and the relevant studies have been consistent for decades (Grossmann 1988; Grossmann et. al. 1997; Grossmann/Grossmann 2009; Laucht 2003). The findings of the attachment theory as it has developed since Bowlby (1955) and Ainsworth (1985) have in general met with little criticism that can hold its ground. While Bowlby was still very much fixated on the mother as the only possible attachment figure, we know today that the function of attachment is neither linked to sex/gender nor to biological parenthood (Grossmann/Grossmann 2009). Furthermore, the crucial significance of the parent-child attachment for the development of a human being is undeniable (Grossmann/Grossmann 2009; Strauss 2008). Here, this article might as well end with reference to the relevant studies.

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**1** | Original version in German.

However, what do the scientifically based findings of attachment research signify for the development of so-called LGT<sup>2</sup> children and adolescents, i.e. for homosexual adolescents/children or those whose self-positioning regarding their sex/gender does not agree with the sex/gender assigned to them at birth?<sup>3</sup> The recurring question will always be: which insights does the attachment theory provide? Moreover, extrapolated from this: What does this mean for children who develop differently, beyond the dualistic sex/gender norm and mandatory heterosexuality? These are justified hypotheses that have yet to be tested scientifically.

### Initial hypotheses

The first initial hypothesis concerns the side of the parents. A secure parent-child attachment is an excellent basis for parents wishing to support their child on its own individual path.

As a rule parents have their child's best interests at heart. What these are is something they as well as important others (grandparents, teachers, neighbors, coworkers etc.) think they already know before the child has been born. It is only when they are actually together with their child do they become aware of what it really means to have such a fragile and tiny human being entrusted to their care, and provided the parents are sensitive enough they will also soon discover what is best for their child. There was a time when parents, grandparents, teachers, neighbors, coworkers and doctors believed that it is best not to breast-feed the child.<sup>4</sup> In my practice as a psychologist I always encounter mothers who even today confess with a guilty conscience: "But it was important for me to breast-feed my child, and I did." These mothers have persevered, have stood up for their child against the zeitgeist prevalent at the time. From where did they take their strength? Mothers often respond to this question of mine with "The love for my child gave me the strength." Experts also describe this love as a sensitivity for the child's signals and the resulting attachment. Parents need a similar strength when they want to stand up for their homosexual child or when it does not correspond to the usual sex/gender norms. The zeitgeist, society, grandparents, teachers, neighbors and coworkers have their own ideas. The widely held view is that what is supposedly best for the child is adjustment, being like everybody else.<sup>5</sup> The parents also here need the sensitivity to comprehend the signals coming from their child and the attachment gives them the strength to remain on their child's side or always return to it.

**2** | Lesbian, Gay, Trans.

**3** | The bisexual adolescents included in the concept of LGBT are not considered here.

**4** | Personal reports by mothers in therapy. The WHO recommends breast-feeding children until the age of two. But that too rarely happens in Luxembourg and requires a great deal of self-confidence from the mothers.

**5** | During supervisions in Luxembourg I frequently heard that it is the task of the educator to teach the child to function and conform. These statements come from educators who have been in the profession for some time as well as from educators who have graduated one or two years ago.

So far the first hypothesis: A secure parent-child attachment is an excellent basis for parents wishing to support their child on its own individual path. The second initial hypothesis concerns the side of the child. Secure attachment is for the children the best basis for developing their own potentials and the best protection against destructive effects of pressure to conform and possible hostilities, exclusions and discriminations.

If you want to build a stable house, you need a good foundation. For the human being this foundation is a secure attachment. If that is guaranteed the child can turn to more exciting things, namely life, can discover and develop its potentials. In addition, here the child needs support and assistance. However, for the child to be able to discover and develop its potentials in the first place secure attachment is essential. Otherwise, the child is too busy trying to figure out whether the relationship to its parents is stable, whether it is really loved or whether it has to protect itself from injury. Secure attachment forms a security net what cushions the small and large imponderabilities of life. Whether it is the pet that dies or the parents that separate, or other small and large dramas in the child's life – a secure attachment offers protection. This protection then presumably also helps when dealing with pressure to conform, with hostilities and exclusions.

At this point, I would like to emphasize that I assume that secure attachment plays a crucial role for the child's healthy mental development. If this attachment is unstable, however, there is the chance that the necessary support of the child is less fruitful and helpful than it could and should be in the case of a secure attachment.

### Definitions and scientific basis

First, I will give a brief overview of that what is regarded as secure attachment and which effects it has on the later life. Secure attachment: All research on attachment is based on John Bowlby (1955) and was further developed by Mary Ainsworth (1985). In the German speaking countries, key figures of this research are Klaus and Karin Grossmann (2009) and Karl Heinz Brisch (2009). Attachment is the emotional tie that develops between an adult, usually a parent, and an infant or toddler. The quality of this attachment can differ greatly. The secure attachment is the quality that carries best, in the true sense of the word carries a person through her or his life. If a secure attachment is created in early childhood, the child will, later in life, achieve a higher degree of social competence, show fewer anomalies, develop a better cognitive ability and can fully realize its potentials.

We can therefore say that a secure attachment is the best protection against the imponderabilities of a child's life and in addition has a protective effect in adulthood. It is the security to be able, if necessary, to fall back on help and support. The toddler, which on the playground crawls away from its mother, pauses, turns to look back and continues on its way after a reassuring nod from its mother. Or the infant that climbs on its mother's lap after it has fallen and hurt itself. Here one should not equate attachment with love nor with having a relationship with the child. Love is surely part of it, and having a relationship is a precondition for attachment, but attachment is marked by continuity, intensity, depth and intimacy of the relationship. If parents – as I have witnessed – leave their 3 months old baby with the grandparents to go on a holiday then something is wrong. I also ask myself how a relationship of attachment can develop if the child, from two months onwards, spends 8-12 hours a day in the crèche, as is often the case in Luxembourg. In such situations, there is a greater risk of an attachment disorder.<sup>6</sup>

### **What prevents the development of a secure attachment?**

The lack of secure attachment means, among other things, insufficient support for the child when it develops beyond the so-called norm. In the following we will name a number of phantoms that often frequent the nursery and prevent a secure attachment from developing. The term 'phantom' is used here because we are dealing with invisible phenomena whose effect has to be regarded as dangerous. We can distinguish between phantoms I and II.

Phantoms I refer to those that have emerged from the mother's early childhood and can stand in the way of a secure attachment. These phantoms I in the nursery include the mothers' own bad experiences or of the person that spends most time with the child and is the principal caregiver. If this person herself has not experienced sufficient sensitive care as an infant and perhaps suffered from neglect, there is a great risk that she will not be able to meet the needs of the child in a sufficiently sensitive way. In addition, these can be the mothers' traumatic experiences of neglect in early childhood that lead to new enactments in the nursery.

Phantoms II refer to those that cannot be so simply traced back to the mothers' individual and specific experiences. These are rather general, mostly adopted guidelines of behavior and being that are projected onto the children. Not being able to be as I am. Subordination, the obligation to perform, fear of exclusion and accompanying pressure to conform, ideologies and religions as well as social pressure play a significant role here.

6 | Bertelsmann-Stiftung (2007); Brisch, K. H., Hellbrügge, T. (2003); Stroppel, S., Weyer, K. (2007).

The more of these phantoms haunt the nursery the more they will know how to prevent the development of a secure attachment. Social pressure is one side; the other should be the true appreciation of differences, which is sadly often not the case. Diversity is invoked in an attempt to be politically correct, but more often than not this is pure rhetoric.

### Rhetoric of difference

There is increasing more talk of diversity management, and also gender mainstreaming and gender pedagogy<sup>7</sup> are increasingly addressed. But with initiatives such as these one has to ask how much diversity is really desired. How much difference do we want to bear, live, encourage? We all remember the advertisements of years ago which featured a row of men sitting in always the same uniform, called suit, and one dared to wear colored socks. This was an advertisement for diversity. In addition, this exactly is my impression of the diversity, which is just tolerated by large sectors of society. Conforming diversity as difference, which can perhaps show in the color of skin or in sexual orientation. However, with the uniform way of dressing – at least for men – there is no question of acceptancy, let alone tolerance or even habitus, when dealing with the so-called feminized behavior of men.

The following example from gender pedagogy is closer to the issues addressed: a few years ago, the Luxembourg ministry for women's affairs organized a lecture on gender-inclusive pedagogy. Employed in the ministry at the time, I suggested the title "Anna builds a tower and Paul paints his fingernails". This was rejected and ultimately the lecture was called "Anna builds towers and Paul knits a shawl". The homophobia and transphobia behind the decision is obvious. A boy may knit, but painting fingernails – that is taking gender pedagogy a bit too far.

I often feel the same with the much-invoked multicultural society. Here we get a child care institution championing multiculturalism and at the same time not allowing the children to speak their mother tongue. If they speak it nevertheless they are punished. What kind of appreciation for other cultures does this convey? Another pedagogical institution has codified in its concept that it is also open for people with a handicap. My question as supervisor how a wheelchair user would be able to enter the premises sparked a debate which revealed that it was possible without too much trouble to create such an access. However, co-workers were not prepared to give up their parking space that would have had to be sacrificed for it. On the one hand codifying in writing the openness towards handicapped persons, but on the other hand not implementing it in everyday

7 | Ministère de l'égalité des chances (2012).

life is astonishing, to say the least. My questions stimulated further discussion and finally the passage about accessibility was removed from the concept for the sake of honesty. Diversity requires much more than rhetoric, it is a process that can be exciting if one is prepared to go along with it. But it is also a process that questions self-evidences, habits and securities and always shows us the boundaries of our own tolerance. Embracing it is sometimes exhausting and requires a certain amount of alertness in order to recognize, reflect and change one's own exclusive and norming behavior.

In a final example, I will show how little difference we actually allow. Children who play, jump, romp, who are not capable or willing to conform at the age of three, four and five to an everyday life that consists predominantly of sitting down, are medicalized. The diagnosis is ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and methylphenidate the drug of choice. The child is expected to function at school and in the care facilities, sit, preferably still, and play, preferably at the table, at best in the play corner. After all, we do want to encourage the abilities and potentials of the children, provided they don't disrupt the strictly organized run of affairs. More difference is medicalized away, then everyone proceeds in lockstep to washing their hands. Oh, hold on, with the little ones we call this, more pedagogically correct, making a train for washing our hands. The essence from my observations could be: when it says 'difference' on the package or in a concept then it should also be realized.

I would like to end this digression by emphasizing the joys and the gain in insight that embracing diversity yields. Today, I am always happy when I become aware of an old prejudice, when I stumble across my own boundaries and can shift these another bit further in the direction of more understanding, of seeing more, including more. Because I can only change those self-evidences, generalizations and prejudices that I know about, that I notice.

## **WHAT DOES A CHILD NEED TO BE ABLE TO LIVE A FULFILLED LIFE IN DIFFERENCE?**

### **Knowledge of the child**

The diversity of possibilities of life can be made clear to a child starting from birth. A very religious friend asked me once: "Don't you first have to explain the biology, I mean, the normal?" Such a question presupposes deviation, abnormality etc. I also used to say that – in the old days. But when our son asked me at the age of three whether he will become a woman later, my first reaction was

very close to that of my friend and I replied: “You’re a boy and will later become a man”. Since at that time I was already working on this lecture, I was not quite happy with my reply. Shouldn’t I have said that we’ll see about that later or even: “You can decide for yourself later”. That too would not have been very satisfying. To formulate all the complexity of the correct reply spontaneously in a way that is appropriate for children and pack it into the attention span of two to three short sentences was simply not possible. In addition, maybe it is not possible. However, what then? My temporary solution: in case he should ask again I will not reply but ask: “What do you think a woman is or a man?” or “Why do you ask whether you will become a woman?”

### **Openness of the parents and a climate of true appreciation of differences**

It may sound good, right and simple, but it isn’t. We have all grown up in a society in which there are and have been prejudices. We can consciously decide to put these ideas aside. For many studies still show (Stapel/Koomen 1998) that prejudices (also those we consciously reject – and some others we are simply not aware of) have their effect. This is shown for instance by the Implicit Association Test on all kinds of prejudices. The test can be found on the internet;<sup>8</sup> it deals with areas such as sex/gender, sexual orientation, religions, color of skin, disability. The test maps implicit associations with selected terms. As a rule, the reactions of people are significantly faster if the suggested associations correspond to the common clichés as, for instance, man and success. Even if we have explicitly worked on prejudices this does not mean that we are completely free of them. The only thing that helps here in my view is to perceive emerging prejudices and use them as an opportunity to get to know each other better. An “I’m tolerant and have no prejudices” is, as a rule, an extreme overestimation of oneself and a self-delusion that serves no one.

### **Supporting the child’s own path**

Recognizing, appreciating and offering possibilities for further development does not refer to the ballet class for two-year-olds or the music activities for toddlers. Supporting the child’s path requires also courage from the part of the parents. In many situations, the parents have to decide whether they want to support the child or attempt to avoid a possibly emerging complication. I myself have experienced a vivid example in my personal environment. On the kindergarten toy day when children can bring toys from home, our son filled his doll’s pram enthusiastically with diapers, nursing bottle and a change of clothes. We were, for a brief moment, confused and asked ourselves whether we should not

**8** | Implicit Association Test (IAT). URL: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/> [14.07.2013].

try to divert and persuade our son to take along another toy. Our questions and thoughts went something along the lines of: "He's so proud and enthusiastic about preparing his pram, let's just hope it won't be spoilt for him." "Will he be made fun of?" "O dear, the son of a lesbian couple bringing along a pink pram ... with all the prejudices you can think of ..." In the end we let him take the pram and we braced ourselves for giving our son, possibly hurt and offended on his return from the kindergarten a morale-boosting pep talk. However, things turned out differently. The teacher reported that the pram was very popular, particularly with the boys. She said, maybe it was good that it was a boy who brought the pram, in this way the other boys could safely take an interest in the pram.

All parents want to support their child, but meeting the critical glances of mothers- and fathers-in-law and the neighbors and whoever is not always that easy. Parents do not have to have prior knowledge, openness or appreciation, but a secure parent-child attachment is the best basis for parents to be willing to adopt and develop them. A further example from my own biography may illustrate this development process on the part of the parents. As a little girl I resented putting on dresses. Every attempt by my mother ended in a struggle with tears and a foul mood on all sides. When I was around three the fights had stopped. My mother wanted above all her child to be happy and, for the most part, dropped the issue with the dresses. At the First Holy Communion there was a compromise between conformity and independence. I was to put on the dress for church and would be allowed to change immediately afterwards into a fancy pair of trousers. Seen from today, this is not an ideal support of the child. However, around 40 years ago this good compromise attempted to respect the wishes of the child. "I know you don't like the dress, and that's okay", this was one message, and the other was: "Important for me is that I don't want to have any stress with the teachers, grandma and the vicar, it's supposed to be a nice day for everyone." A few things have been mentioned now that parents can do to support their child.

A secure parent-child attachment thus generates the strength that parents need to stand up for their child and assert their influence on those institutions the child is exposed to, so that it can find a framework there that supports it in its being and development. The phantoms that have developed owing to own bad experiences of the parents at an early age are best hunted down and defanged during a psychotherapy. Ideally, psychotherapy should take place before these persons become parents. The phantoms that emanate from beliefs and social circumstances can be influenced and eliminated through self-reflection, self-experience, exchange with others, openness and curiosity. Standing up for



a child, supporting it, engaging in the necessary struggles with the child and, depending on the situation, for the child, requires considerable strength from the parents. These struggles include discussions with the teacher in the kindergarten, the teachers at school and possibly also with the doctors and others, for instance about whether one shouldn't purchase also other picture books in the kindergarten, such as "And Tango Makes Three", or discussing with the teacher that the son has chosen pink plush slippers and one expects her or him to support this choice, in case other children should make fun of it. The teachers should be made aware to statements and epithets such as 'Yuck, he's gay', 'fag/dyke' or 'tranny' and asked to not tolerate them and call in, if necessary, higher authorities in order to protect children exposed to such slurs. Another possibility consists in advocating more tolerance and acceptance among parents, at one's workplace and in society in general.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this contribution was to emphasize that the two initial hypotheses are well founded. I will repeat them here again:

A secure parent-child attachment is an excellent basis for parents wishing to support their child on its own individual path. Secure attachment is for the children the best basis for developing their own potentials and the best protection against destructive effects of pressure to conform and possible hostilities, exclusions and discriminations.

Research is needed in order to support these hypotheses scientifically. In giving, a more specific form to the significance of discourses and their application to individual educational and pedagogical situations can serve to enhance them with more diversity and tolerance. Therefore, if the theories are applied in a way that is relevant to practice and an impulse is relayed back to the formation of theory via this application, then there is a chance of social change to the benefit of all human beings.

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**IAT:** Implicit Association Test. URL: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/> [14.07.2013].

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