

The Legacy of the First 3 Years

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Abstract

The Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation, a 45-year study of children born into poverty, offers a number of lessons for practitioners. Among these are the potency of early relationship experiences for predicting developmental outcomes and the fate of early experience following developmental change. This article describes the lawfulness of both continuity and change in development, why early experience is so powerful, why change can be difficult, and why it is nonetheless possible. Case examples as well as group data are provided.

Andrea's early years were filled with adversity, including exposure to domestic violence, heavy alcohol and drug use, chronic instability, and chaos. She was both mistreated and neglected. There was no stable male figure, and her attachment to her mother was assessed by me and my team to be both avoidant and disorganized, a most pernicious pattern. She was the most emotionally disturbed preschooler that the team saw in our systematic study of 180 children born into poverty.

Imagine our surprise when we saw Andrea at age 10 in one of our research summer camps; she was a graceful, appealing, and competent child, one of the most popular girls in the camp. How could this be? Graduate students on our project were perplexed. If this dramatic change we saw was real, what of her earlier experience and earlier pattern of adaptation? Were they erased?

Mikel was a contrasting, mirror image case. For Mikel everything went very well in his first years. He was well supported and clearly securely attached. He was thriving as determined by our detailed laboratory assessments at 2, 3, and 4 years old, and was well behaved and socially engaged in preschool and the early school years. Then a series of devastating events occurred, including an acrimonious divorce by his parents, separation from his father and siblings, and the untimely death of his mother. As a teenager, we hardly recognized him. He was clearly depressed and was engaging in delinquent

behavior. What of his early experience? Was it erased? Did it no longer matter?

Not according to the developmental attachment theory of John Bowlby (1973). According to this theory, the functioning of the person is always a product of the entire, cumulative history of the person, as well as their current circumstances. Early history is never erased. Even though it may be transformed, it maintains its potential to influence the person.

In the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation (see Sroufe, 2020, for a summary), we were able to test the validity of this position. Examining the ongoing fate of early experience required a particular kind of study. Obviously, a first ingredient was to have detailed, valid measures of early experience itself. We directly assessed the quality of parent-child relationships on numerous occasions, with special emphasis on the sensitive responsiveness of parents to the changing needs of the developing child and the quality of primary attachment relationships. Beyond this, of course, we had to measure parent IQ and education, as well as newborn neurological status, infant temperament, and child cognitive capacities, because these things might explain outcomes as well and had to be examined. We measured a panoply of child behavioral and emotional outcomes, as well as later parenting and other experiences, so that we could test whether early experience had special or lasting power above and beyond later experience. We measured stress and support families were experiencing to understand the context of development and to begin to understand the process of change. All of this was done age by age so that individual trajectories could be followed carefully.

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A major tenet of the work is that behavior is coherent and lawful. This proposition meant to us that not only would early experience matter, but that connections between particular qualities of experience and later functioning would be explicable in terms of definable developmental processes. Moreover, developmental change would likewise be lawful, being based on changing relationship experiences and changing circumstances. Both continuity and change were expected, and both were expected to be predictable and understandable.

Some Basic Findings

As summarized in some 200 journal articles and two books (Sroufe, 2020; Sroufe et al., 2005), we did indeed find that early experience predicted functioning throughout childhood, adolescence, and on into adulthood. Regarding quality of infant attachment specifically, predictions were especially notable regarding later social engagement and competence with peers, empathy, and, ultimately, emotional closeness and trust in relationships. Attachment was also related to self-management, self-esteem, and dependence-independence. This last finding was interesting in that even those showing avoidant attachment in infancy were later more dependent on teachers than were those with histories of secure attachment. Infants with avoidant relationships fail to go to parents following the brief separations of the Strange Situation procedure, giving an appearance of precocious independence. But according to Bowlby's theory, when infants' needs for nurturing are not met, they will later be prone to emotional dependency. All of these outcomes were more strongly predicted when attachment history was combined with other aspects of early care, such as other measures of caregiver sensitivity, limit setting, and provision of structure.

These findings on the direct links between infant attachment and later outcomes, and there were many more, are only the beginning of the story (Sroufe, 2020). Given our extensive

measures of exploration, agency, emotion regulation, and mental representation, we could see how attachment experiences produced the affect they did. When the child with a secure attachment history enters the preschool classroom, they bring with them an attitude that relationships are valuable, an inner sense that they are capable partners, a capacity to explore and discover, and the ability to regulate themselves that has been entrained within their caregiving relationships. Thus, they are attractive play partners and are able to sustain interactions in the face of the inevitable challenges that arise with preschool peers. We directly observed them to approach others with more positive affect, to respond more positively to the overtures of others, and to introduce more fun into their play than did those with histories of anxious attachment.

Development continues to work this way throughout the lifespan. For example, secure attachment history predicts competent relationships with peers in middle childhood; such peer competence in turn predicts the capacity to smoothly resolve conflicts in adult partnerships. Development always builds upon itself, with each emerging capacity drawing from previous history while also providing the foundation for future development. This is why early experience is so important.

The Lawfulness of Adaptation

Both the origins and impact of secure infant attachment make sense. They are logical and understandable. When parents are able to draw upon inner and outer resources to be reliably sensitive and responsive to infants, the infants will become confident that such responsiveness is available to them. At the same time, they will reciprocally come to believe that they are potent in eliciting responses from the world, that they are capable, and that social relationships are gratifying.

Perhaps more thought-provoking, anxious attachments also are coherent and understandable. When care has been inconsistent, haphazard, hit-or-miss, or chaotic, it makes sense for the infant to be preoccupied with the parent, to hover nearby, to become alarmed at the slightest hint of threat, and to signal needs both frequently and intensely. They are fretful and often difficult to settle because they have come to doubt that contact will work. (This is described as the anxious/resistant pattern of attachment because it is often accompanied by angry struggles with the caregiver.) This pattern is the logical outcome when the parent is likely to miss subtle signals and can't be counted on to respond quickly and appropriately, requiring the infant to pick up the load. If parents are not going to respond consistently to signals, then frequent, intense signals are needed for any possibility of response. These infants have learned that the caregiver can't be counted on and, in turn, that they themselves are limited in their effectiveness and that the world is a threatening place. While this is the best adaptation available to them, it is somewhat handicapping when generalized to the wider social world.

Avoidant attachment is likewise a coherent and understandable adaptation. When caregivers are chronically rejecting or emotionally unavailable, it is reasonable for infants to withhold

turning to them in conditions of moderate stress such as are encountered in the Strange Situation. Rejection when tender needs are aroused is painful. Moreover, as Mary Main (2000) has pointed out, avoidance may prevent further alienation of the parent and allows the infant to contain feelings in order to stay in the vicinity of the caregiver. This keeps open the possibility that they will in fact protect the infant should dire circumstances arise. Still, when taken forward, such a withholding in the expression of emotional needs interferes with getting closeness and support from others. Such an internalized view that the world is hostile was confirmed in work by German colleagues (Suess et al., 1992). In this research, the children were shown three panels of drawings. In the first, a child was shown building a tower with blocks. In the second drawing, another child is shown walking by. In the final panel the tower has fallen down. The child is asked what happened. Those with secure histories say things like, “He might have accidentally knocked it down; he’ll help him fix it up.” Those with avoidant histories say he knocked it down on purpose, though nothing in the drawing suggests that. This is their view of the world.

Finally, even disorganized attachment is an understandable response when caregivers are abusive or in other ways frightening. What is the infant to do when the supposed source of safety is also the source of fear? It is impossible to maintain an organized strategy in such a circumstance; yet, even disorganized infants are attached to their caregivers. This is better than having no attachment at all, though it severely compromises the development of the self (Ogawa et al., 1997).

The outcomes associated with each of these patterns also were coherent (Sroufe et al., 2005). Given the chronic vigilance and low threshold for threat of those with anxious/resistant attachment, it was no surprise that this pattern was rather uniquely associated with later anxiety problems in our research. Nor was it surprising that avoidance was associated with social isolation, alienation, and hostility. Finally, it makes sense that the disorganized pattern, especially when coupled with another pattern of anxious attachment, is most prognostic of a wide range of later behavioral and emotional problems. Secure attachment was associated with none of this; yet, there are of course exceptions.

The Lawfulness of Change

The argument in the previous section is that there is lawful continuity of behavior. Early experience is internalized and frames the way the child later sees and engages the environment. Therefore, later behavior is predictable. Moreover, each particular pattern of adaptation is to a degree self-perpetuating. For example, the anxious/resistant infant more often is a fretful, easily frustrated toddler, needing even more consistency from caregivers than most infants; yet consistency was challenging for this parent in the first place. Limits are not set clearly and firmly; support is intermittent. The child is now even less equipped for the challenges of the preschool. He or she is easily upset, quickly dysregulated, and inept in interactions



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Early experience predicted functioning throughout childhood, adolescence, and on into adulthood.

with peers. The developmental snowball is rolling down the hill (Sroufe, 2020).

Still, change can and does happen. But change too is coherent. It occurs for definable and observable reasons. My colleagues and I found, for example, that some of those who had anxious attachments at 12 months old had secure attachments at 18 months. This change was predictable from decreasing life stress in those families where the infant showed positive change (Vaughn et al., 1979). Likewise, while those with anxious histories had more behavior problems at 5 years old than those with secure histories, some children with anxious attachments were free from behavior problems. Such positive change was related to increasing social support in these families in the intervening years (Erickson et al., 1985). Age by age, when stress decreased, or social support for families increased, or both, quality of adaptation improved. Behavioral and emotional problems also mirrored the fluctuations in parental depression.

Our work showed a dynamic relationship between patterns of adaptation and measures of internalized experience. In parallel to measures of child behavior, in each period we had age-appropriate measures of representation (e.g., story completions, drawings, various projective techniques, and interview-based measures). Tracking adaptation and representation over time allowed us to show their mutual, ongoing influence (Carlson et al., 2004). While the child’s prior history framed how they saw the world, changing representations based on new experiences predicted changed behavior at the next age.

Such findings provided a new outlook regarding the nature of resiliency. Yes, some children fare well even in the face of adversity, and some children recover from a period of problems. These are classic definitions of resilience. But repeatedly we found that those who coped well more likely had a history of early support, current support, or both. Resiliency too is coherent and lawful. It is an outcome of development.

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The Fate of Early Experience Following Developmental Change

Our work on resilience suggested that early experience is not lost after developmental change. In the first illustration of this, we defined two groups of children. The groups were completely similar in the degree of behavior problems they showed between 3–5 years old. However, they were different in one notable respect. One group was characterized by secure attachment in infancy; the other by anxious attachment. Note that if early history is erased, there is only one group. If not, there are two. Results were clear. When we looked at behavior problems in the third grade, that group with secure histories had significantly fewer problems than did the group with anxious attachment histories. Their early experience may have been temporarily suppressed by current circumstances, but it was not erased.

Alas, prior negative histories are also preserved. In general, children with histories of anxious attachment who, with the help of current supports, are functioning well, nonetheless remain more vulnerable to later hardships, challenges, and losses. (For more examples of how this works, see Sroufe, 2020.)

What then of the two children from the beginning of this essay? Is Andrea out of the woods? Is Mikel lost? Obviously, it depends on the future as well as the past. I explained at the beginning of this article all that happened to undercut Mikel. And in fact, he had a hard time for a number of years. He still seemed quite depressed and defended when we saw him at age 19. On the Adult Attachment Interview at that time, he even said that the death of his mother hardly bothered him at all, which was very sad to hear him say. But all along, some positive things could still be seen in him. In his delinquent period he never engaged in crimes against people, and he was always liked by peers. Then in early adulthood, he met and married a

supportive woman. Our 26-year interview showed him much improved, and he was one of the best fathers we observed with his own toddler. His story is consistent with our group data showing that those who have secure attachment histories, and yet struggle for a time, are better able to take advantage of new opportunities when they arise.

Andrea's trajectory also makes sense. There were reasons for her change in functioning from age 5 to age 10. It was the case that in the early elementary years both she and her mother had extensive therapy, and that her mother recovered from her alcoholism and separated from an abusive partner. We believe this is what accounted for Andrea's remarkable change. Still, as with Mikel, one could see the shadows of her early history even at 10 years old. Our interviews with her showed that she retained rather profound doubts that the others genuinely liked her or would continue to do so when they knew her better. Sadly, the challenges of adolescence were too much for her and she became quite troubled again, as indicated by distorted thinking and serious self-injurious behavior. Does this mean that the growth she experienced in middle childhood was now erased? We think not. In fact, in subsequent decades she again improved.

Implications for Working With Children and Families

Bowlby's theory emphasizes that an individual's worldviews are gradually built up through all of the years of childhood and adolescence and that change is always possible. However, the theory also posits, and our work confirms, that the longer a maladaptive pathway is followed, the more difficult it is to change. The first implication of both theory and developmental research is that prevention and early intervention are crucial. The early years are the platform upon which all else builds. Society must provide more support for families of young children than it currently does.

The second thing our work teaches is that it is understandable why change is so difficult. Young children make adaptations that are necessary given their circumstances. They once were the best option. They were protective. If one experiences abuse from parents, the supposed havens of safety, it makes sense to withhold closeness and trust of others. Consider the case of an emotionally explosive preschooler named Vera, who had a very abusive history. Vera dreamt that her beloved preschool teacher had hurled her against a wall. When the teacher said she would never do that, Vera even required an explanation about why she would not. What would prompt such a worldview and such a dream regarding this completely nurturing teacher? It is because as Vera started to draw close to this teacher, something inside of her rose up and said, "Oh no, you mustn't; this is what could happen." Or consider the child with an avoidant history who, when injured or disappointed, would go off by himself into a corner, preempting the very care he needed. Or, finally, the child who would run into the classroom, knocking things over and shouting as his way of gaining contact with the teacher. These legitimately acquired adaptations

are difficult to change because they are what the child has relied on to get to where they are. Thus, many children, and many adults, behave in ways that keep them from getting what they need in order to change.

Still, change can and does happen. Repeatedly we found that the key to change was changing relationship experiences. For example, early in our study we found that some of our mothers with histories of abuse were providing adequate treatment for their children. Three things distinguished these mothers from those who continued the abuse pattern. For one thing, they may have had an alternative, supportive caregiving figure in childhood, or, secondly, they had experienced therapy lasting more than 6 months, and/or they had a loving, supportive partner currently. Subsequently, across the course of our study, we found that positive changes in parenting or other relationship experiences promoted better adjustment. This finding applied even to some of those with long histories of conduct problems. Those who formed stable, supportive relationships with partners in early adulthood at times remitted their problems. Often, capitalizing on this opportunity was promoted by a history of secure infant attachment prior to the onset of conduct problems.

Change in individual adaptation is not always rapid; it can occur by fits and starts. Moreover, the impact of new, positive relationship experiences is not always obvious. Preschool teachers involved in the research lamented that progress made during the week with troubled children frequently seemed to erode over the weekend, and they worried about the future of some of the children when the term ended. The other researchers and I encouraged them to know that what they did mattered. They were providing islands of security and nurturance in what was otherwise sometimes a sea of adversity. Both Andrea and

volatile Vera had very successful therapy in middle childhood. While I cannot prove it, I believe that this successful work drew upon the seeds that were planted in preschool.

To be sure, both of these children subsequently struggled in adolescence and early adulthood. Vera, especially, encountered more significant trauma. Still, both are doing relatively well now that they are in their 40s. I believe that their more stable functioning is in part because of the islands established in early childhood, including the love that they actually did receive from their struggling parents.

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