

Classic Reactions to Separation and Loss

Attachment Theory, or the study of how a child attaches to its mother, was defined in the 1950s by Dr. John Bowlby, “the founding father of attachment theory,” and James Robertson, a social worker and psychoanalyst.

Bowlby and Robertson observed infants’ reactions to separation from the mother, for example when the child was hospitalized and alone in a room. Later, controlled experiments confirmed much of what Bowlby and Robertson had observed.

They described an infant or young child’s reaction to separation as occurring in three phases – protest, despair, then detachment. Although this theory is less popular today, it provides a framework that can help foster parents understand a child’s experience.

1. **Protest**

The child is distressed about the separation from his mother. He or she cries, attempts to follow, points at the door mother exited, whines, and calls to the mother. The intent seems to be to get his mother back. Proximity and contact are what the child is after. He is angry and rages or shows displeasure until those occur. (Even after the mother reenters, the infant may temporarily remain angry and, in effect, “punish” her for having been gone.)

2. **Despair**

However, as the period of separation continues despite the child’s protest, the child can show sadness, grow quiet, and become lethargic. He or she appears miserable and unhappy. He might quit playing or exploring. Eventually, though, the child can seem less overtly upset than in the Protest phase and can even come across as calming down, settling in, and moving on with life. This may be deceiving, as the child may still have strong negative feelings about the separation.

3. **Detachment**

The child may begin to be less withdrawn and on the surface appear less sullen. However, upon the mother’s return, the child may seem disinterested and distant. In some instances, the child appears barely to know his or her mother. This gives the impression that the child has had to pull back from the mother as part of his recovery from the pain of separation. The mistrustful child, in effect, separates himself from mother even as she tries to reunite with him.

As others joined the field of attachment theory research, other theories gained prominence.

The Kübler-Ross Model, commonly known as The Five Stages of Grief, was first introduced by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. The model has been widely embraced by medical and mental health care professionals for four decades.

The model purports that most individuals, both children and adults, go through a fairly predictable pattern of grief following a loss: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.

The Kübler-Ross Model is still helpful and widely used, but a more recent theory has gained acceptance and it is this theory, the Five Reactions, which is used in this course.

In essence, children who experience a loss show effects or reactions in five areas:

1. **Emotional reactions**

These can include feeling sad, angry, anxious, numb, lonely, guilty, powerless, ashamed, insecure, and remorseful.

2. **Changes in behaviors**

These can involve lack of interest and participation in usual activities, diminished self-care, and/or changes in sleeping.

3. **Interpersonal interactions**

This covers issues such as withdrawal, social isolation, and peer difficulties.

4. **Changes in thinking and perception**

The child may have constant thoughts and memories about the loved one, preoccupation with one's own or another loved one's physical health, and thoughts such as, "I think I see my daddy. I miss my daddy."

5. **Physical reactions**

There can be susceptibility to illness, loss of energy, physical complaints, and changes in physiological arousal.