

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO MENTAL HEALTH

Background.

The authors of this paper, Heather and Rob Firth, commend the Productivity Commission on conducting the inquiry into Mental Health and welcome the opportunity to make a submission.

Our situation is probably different from others who make formal submissions to the study, as we are both retired and not attached to any professional organisation. Rob is a retired chemical engineer and MBA and Heather retired in May 2018 from her work as a qualified Psychotherapist in private practice in the Sydney CBD. In her private practice, Heather worked solely with permanently-employed adults who experienced dysfunctional relationships and emotional dis-ease. Further biographical details are attached.

Everyone lies somewhere on a continuum from good mental health to poor mental health (or 'mental ill health') and an individual's state of mental health is manifest in their behaviour and relationships.

Over the years of face-to-face counselling work with adults, Heather used a model of psychotherapy founded on the fact that an overwhelming number of mental health problems can be traced back to a client's early childhood experiences and bonding, which in turn, underscores the importance of good parenting in the development of babies and young children. This approach is informed by the strong body of evidence from researchers and practitioners in the fields of child development, infant observation and the underlying 'attachment theory', pioneered by Dr John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

Attachment theory.

A summary of the extensive and seminal works of Bowlby and Ainsworth was written by Inge Bretherton, "The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth" ¹ in 1992.

Selected excerpts from Bretherton's paper are:

"Attachment theory is the joint work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). .. [Bowlby] revolutionised our thinking about a child's tie to the mother and its disruption through separation, deprivation and bereavement. ...

Ainsworth contributed the concept of the attachment figure as a secure base from which and infant can explore the world. In addition, she formulated the concept of maternal sensitivity to infant signals and its role in the development of infant-mother attachment patterns.

The ideas now guiding attachment theory have a long development history. Although Bowlby and Ainsworth worked independently of each other during their early careers, both were influenced by Freud and other psychoanalytic thinkers – directly in Bowlby's case, indirectly in Ainsworth's. ...

[The Bowlby work started nearly a century ago] ... After graduating from the University of Cambridge in 1928, where he received rigorous scientific training and some instruction in what is now called developmental psychology, Bowlby performed volunteer work at a school for maladjusted children while reconsidering his career goals. ...

Concurrently with his studies in medicine and psychiatry, Bowlby undertook training at the British Psychoanalytic Institute Bowlby was exposed to Kleinian (Melanie Klein, 1932) ² ideas through his training analyst, Joan Riviere .. and eventually through supervision by Melanie Klein herself ... although he had grave reservations about aspects about the Kleinian approach to child psychoanalysis...

At the end of World War II, Bowlby was invited to become head of the Children's Department at the Tavistock Institute. In line with his earlier ideas on the importance of family relationships in child therapy, he promptly renamed it the Department for Children and Parents. Indeed, in what is credited as the first published paper in family therapy, Bowlby (1949) ³ describes how he was often able to achieve clinical breakthroughs by interviewing parents about their childhood experiences in the presence of their troubled children. ...

Mary Ainsworth (nee Salter), 6 years younger than Bowlby, finished graduate study at the University of Toronto just before World War II [and] courses with William Blatz had introduced her to security theory (Blatz, 1940) ⁴ ... One of the major tenets of security theory is that infants and young children need to develop a secure dependence on parents before launching out into unfamiliar situations. In her dissertation, entitled "An Evaluation of Adjustment Based Upon the Concept of Security" ⁵, Mary Salter (1940) states it this way: Familial security in the early stages is of a dependent type and forms a basis from which the individual can work out gradually, forming new skills and interests in other fields. 'Where

familial security is lacking, the individual is handicapped by the lack of what might be called a secure base .. from which to work. '(p45). ...

Bowlby's earlier writings about the familial experiences of affectionless children had led Ronald Hargreaves of the World Health Organisation (WHO) to commission him to write a report on the mental health of homeless children in postwar Europe. Preparation of the WHO report gave Bowlby an opportunity to pick the brains of many practitioners and researchers across Europe and the United States who were concerned with the effects of maternal separation and deprivation on young children, including Spitz (1946) and Goldfarb (1943, 1945). The report was written in 6 months and translated into 14 languages, with sales of 400,000 copies in the English paperback edition: it was published in 1951 as *Maternal Care and Mental Health*⁶ by the WHO. A second edition, entitled *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, with review chapters by Mary Ainsworth, was published by Penguin Books in 1965. ...

Bowlby's major conclusion, grounded in the available empirical evidence, was that to grow up mentally healthy, "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment" (Bowlby, 1951, p13)⁶. Later summaries often overlook the reference to the [permanent] substitute mother and to the partners' mutual enjoyment. They also neglect Bowlby's emphasis on the role of social networks and on economic as well as health factors in the development of well-functioning mother-child relationships. His call to society to provide support for parents is still not heeded today [note this was 1992]: "Just as children are absolutely dependent on their parents for sustenance, so in all but the most primitive communities, are parents, especially their mothers, dependent on a greater society for economic provision. If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents (Bowlby, 1951, p84). ..."

Longer term outcomes

Heather saw, in the histories of many of her clients' behavioural and relationship problems, strong anecdotal evidence of damage from insecure attachment in their childhood.

Furthermore, Bowlby's predictions of the longer-term impacts of secure and insecure attachment have been supported by research evidence, including a 30-year, multi-faceted longitudinal study of children, their parents and surrounding circumstances (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005), which tested and generally extended the findings of Bowlby and Ainsworth.

The 30-year study is summarised in "Attachment and development: A prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood" (2005) by L. Alan Sroufe University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA ⁷. This was an extensive and rigorous study, outstanding in its scale, research design and methodology. The work examined development in relation to secure attachment and the three sub-categories of insecure attachment (anxious/resistant attachment, anxious/avoidant attachment, and disorganised attachment).

The Sroufe paper is rich with findings about the link between attachment and long-term outcomes. The following selection of quotes, taken directly from the Sroufe paper, give an indication of the approach and findings. Please note, the "we" referred to in the following excerpts means Sroufe and his team:

"Attachment history was shown in the Minnesota study to be clearly related to the growth of self-reliance, the capacity for emotional regulation, and the emergence and course of social competence, among other things. Moreover, specific patterns of attachment had implications for both normal development and pathology. ...

It is well known that Bowlby put forward two central hypotheses; first, that individual differences in the quality or effectiveness of infant-caregiver attachment relationships were largely the product of the history of interaction with the caregiver, and second, that variations in attachment quality were the foundation for later individual differences in personality. We set out to test both of these hypotheses, with emphasis on the second one because it was so much the more prodigious task, requiring a 30-year rather than a 1-year study. ...

The Minnesota study was carried out with an eye on the place of attachment in the broader process of development. ...

In our approach, we defined each age in its own terms. We did not attempt to measure infant–caregiver attachment at each age (though we did assess attachment representation at multiple times). Our goal was not to demonstrate the stability of attachment, but rather to illustrate the coherent emergence of the self or personality. Thus, we defined a changing set of issues, ranging from self-regulation, curiosity, and effective entry into the peer group in preschool, to real-world competence, loyal friendships, and coordination of friendship and group functioning in middle childhood, to identity, intimacy, and self-reflection by late adolescence. The proposal was that if the issues are properly chosen at each phase, and if individual variations with regard to these developmental issues are properly assessed, then the particular organization shown by individuals in facing the challenges of one age will forecast probabilistically the pattern of organization shown at the next. ...

In the mid-1970s, we recruited an urban sample of more than 200 mothers who were viewed as being at moderate risk for parenting difficulties due to the challenges associated with poverty. ...

A primary focus of the study was, of course, assessment of the early caregiver relationship. We studied both the antecedents of attachment, through observations of infant–caregiver interaction at two points in the first half-year, and the quality of the formed attachment relationship. We used Ainsworth’s exact method, and we made our assessments at both 12 and 18 months....

Because we were interested in developmental process, and change as well as continuity, we also found it to be essential to do very frequent assessments. For example, we had 13 direct observational assessments between birth and 30 months, and frequent assessments thereafter throughout childhood and adolescence and into adulthood. ...

We wanted to make it clear from the outset that the emphasis on quality of care in shaping development was not conceived within a concept of blaming parents. The parents we studied were striving to do the best they could for their children.”

Just one example of the depth of the Minnesota study - and the number of key stages of development investigated – is the following passage about *social competence*, which is one of the earlier hypotheses of Bowlby’s theories

“.. those with histories of secure attachment exhibit higher social competence than those with histories of avoidant or resistant attachment. In addition to these global differences in social competence, those with secure histories were found to be higher than those with avoidant or resistant histories on more specific aspects of

competence as well (see Sroufe et al., 2005a, for a review). In both preschool and middle childhood, for example, they were more active participants in the peer group and less frequently isolated. In preschool, they were higher on rated and directly observed measures of empathy and were observed to have deeper, more mutual relationships in an extensive series of play pair observations. In middle childhood, they more frequently had reciprocated, close friendships, abided by the rules of the same-gender peer group (including maintenance of gender boundaries), and coordinated friendships with group functioning; that is, they were able to maintain their close connection with a friend even while participating with other children. In adolescence, those with histories of secure attachment were more effective in the mixed-gender peer group, were observed to participate smoothly in a wider range of social encounters (including those that entailed a degree of emotional vulnerability), and had notable leadership qualities. In a camp study, not only were these teens significantly more frequently elected spokespersons for their small groups in designed assessments, but they were observed to be the young persons most frequently looked to by others at critical junctures in the discussion (Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000). They manifested social assurance and a quiet authority. Finally, we have found security of attachment to be related to the emotional tone of adult romantic relationships....”

Sroufe’s paper also touches on some psychopathology related to insecure attachment. For example

“Our data show that [serious self-injurious behaviour ‘SIB’] e.g. cutting, burning in early adulthood was strongly related to a history of disorganised attachment, maltreatment (especially sexual abuse) and, ultimately dissociation”. (p361)

It is difficult to summarise the numerous findings of Sroufe’s work, although in the paper’s Abstract, it includes a clear statement that:

“.. attachment history was shown in the Minnesota study to be clearly related to the growth of self-reliance, the capacity for emotional regulation, and the emergence and course of social competence, among other things. Moreover, specific patterns of attachment had implications for both normal development and pathology.” (p 349)

Sroufe’s paper emphasises that attachment is one factor in complex development systems, however he also states that “nothing can be assessed in infancy that is more important” (Conclusion, p 365).

Recommendation

Although Heather is now retired, she remains passionate about the lifetime mental health benefits of good parenting for the child, and equally aware of the wide-ranging mental health problems if good parenting is not available to the child in those very early years. As described above, secure attachment with the parent, from the beginning of a baby's life, enables secure feelings, confidence and resilience in all stages - baby/child/adult. We suggest the Commission considers secure infant attachment as the essential ingredient for an individual's mental health and development.

Our recommendation to the Commission is that there should be a radical, new paradigm for parenting in Australia, with the provision of sound education for parents in the art, joy and 'connection' in parenting for babies and young children. This would be the earliest of 'early interventions', to provide the foundation for good mental health across Australia.

There would be not only benefits in terms of individuals' confidence and resilience and general mental health, but also potentially very large social and economic benefits for the Community. For example, there is likely to be an improved level of mental health across the general community, fewer hospital presentations and admissions, reduced demand on the national health budget, lower incidence of substance abuse, crime, street violence, domestic violence and suicide. Also, in this scenario, there would be many more individuals fit for productive employment in Australian society.

The question is how to achieve this ideal? We think there should be a change to parenting leave from the workplace, to enable parents to have, say, 12 months time off work to undertake both parenting education and to focus on creating the strong attachment and early emotional development of the child, in other words, a loving, firm foundation for future mental health.

This program could be along the lines of the system that we understand exists in Norway. In the recently-published book "From Cradle to Global Citizen, finding our way in turbulent times" ⁸, the clinical psychologist, psychoanalytic psychotherapist and author Lorraine Rose cited the Nordic countries in

"... what might be regarded as the holy grail of a healthy economy and society: very high wages and productivity, flexible working arrangements, and the world highest workforce participation, especially among women". (p186)

Rose continues with specific reference to Norway:

“Norway’s high taxes, levied on oil companies and individuals alike pay for [the] generous benefits. The success of the system reflects a political consensus that places a high priority on family-friendly policies, in particular, those that encourage the nurturing of children through workplace flexibility. Norwegians can have 46 weeks of parental leave at 100% of pay, or 56 weeks at 80% of pay. The father can take up to 14 weeks of this leave. If he doesn’t take the leave it is forfeited as it is for him only. Norway’s social welfare spending is 22% of GDP, while Australia’s is 18%. As a proportion of gross domestic product, the cost of Norway’s social welfare is not that much more than Australia’s. It just appears to be more targeted towards child-rearing, and the needs of the individual and the society. Australia could achieve what Norway has achieved if we had the collective will to do so.”⁷ (p186).

Ideally, for Australia, the proposed parental leave and parenting education would be a fully-resourced program, in which participating parents would be assured no loss of salary, benefits or seniority. A key condition for receiving these benefits would be **mandatory** participation and completion of the prescribed parenting education.

Possible sources of funding would be government, corporations and philanthropic organisations who recognise the potential benefits for families and society.

Education of parents, during the period of extended parenting leave, would be the key to its success. Given the potential benefits of good parenting, it is reasonable to say that parenting is one of the most important jobs an adult will do in their lifetime. However, for most people there is no formal education or training in parenting, even at high school, so for many parents it is a case of “we don’t know what we don’t know.” Some established parenting programs do exist and training is undertaken by some individuals and couples, although we have no knowledge of the numbers.

There is an established evidence-based parenting program known as the “Circle of Security Parenting” program, which was created in the USA and which Heather believes would be ideally suited for an early intervention program. She has no connection with the Circle of Security organisation - other than being aware of it and having completed training some years ago as a facilitator - however she believes it could be very suitable for wider roll-out into the Australian community.

The “Circle of Security” Parenting program

The Circle of Security International website can be found at

<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/circle-of-security-model/what-is-the-circle-of-security/>

This parenting program has been designed around attachment theory and related research outlined earlier. Indeed, the website has a direct quote from John Bowlby, whom they refer to as the “Father” of attachment theory:

"Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only as an infant or a toddler or a schoolchild but throughout adolescence and years of maturity as well, and on into old age. From these intimate attachments a person draws strength and enjoyment of life and, through what he contributes, gives strength and enjoyment to others. These are matters about which current science and traditional wisdom are at one." (Bowlby, J. (1980) Attachment and Loss: Volume 1. Attachment. Basic Books: New York.)

In many ways, this particular quote from Bowlby encapsulates the themes and recommendations of this submission.

The Circle of Security website states that the Circle of Security is a “visual map of attachment”. The website also states that

“The characteristics of secure attachment are one of the most researched aspects of attachment. It has been studied for well over 50 years by many different professionals researching cultures from many different countries. Overall, the list [of characteristics] says children who have a secure attachment will benefit from the following ways:

- They will feel more happiness and less anger at their parents
- They can solve problems on their own and ask for help when they are in trouble
- They have lasting friendships and get along better with their friends
- They have better sibling relationships
- They feel better about themselves and what they can contribute
- They are more protected against feeling hopeless or helpless about life
- They trust the people they love and know how to be kind
- They believe that good things will happen”

The Circle of Security Parenting program stresses that the parent’s sensitivity to the needs of the child is a major determinant in whether a secure or insecure attachment will develop. A feature of this parenting program appears to be universal applicability, across many cultures and all socio-economic groups.

Conclusion

We are proposing a radical re-think of parenting for the new baby, centred around the emotional needs of the baby and young children, for the long-term mental health of Australian children and adults. The proposed parenting education program and other ideas in this submission are all evidenced-based.

The key to secure attachment is the emotional sensitivity of the mother and the father, who have the best interests of the baby at heart. The proposed parenting education will build parents' confidence in their ability to establish secure bonding and it could be beneficial if the parents are introduced to the parenting education program before the baby's birth, when both parents can participate and presumably have time to reflect and plan for their new roles.

We sometimes hear others talk of getting children "school ready". The aim during this early period of life is for toddlers to become secure and then "pre-school" ready.

The funding of such a program would be substantial. However, the main point is it would be an investment by the Nation for the future. We do not know the social return on investment for such an intervention but suspect it would be very large, because of the potentially large mental health impacts in so many areas of society. It would be true preventative health care (preventative mental health care), at the start of life, rather than attempts to repair mental health in later years.

It should also be noted that, while it has been established that secure attachment in the child has long term benefits into adolescence and adulthood, the bonding will start to have effect almost immediately, with the rapid growth of the baby's brain including the process of 'hardwiring' for relationships.

We realise that a submission along these lines can only plant a seed. The proposed program would need the collaboration of many parties for development of the concept, formulation of a policy framework, engagement with an appropriate provider, for example the Circle of Security organisation, and establishment of a trial program and rigorous evaluation.

We would be pleased to discuss the matters raised in this submission with members of the Commission's "Mental Health" study team, or to answer any questions, if that would be helpful.

References

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Biographical notes

Heather Firth

With earlier qualifications in microbiology, Heather commenced her counselling career in 1989, in Japan, as a telephone counsellor for Tokyo English Lifeline. She Continued voluntary counselling work with Lifeline in Sydney, gained a Graduate Diploma in Counselling (Institute of Counselling, Sydney) in 2004 and has been a clinical member of CAPA and PACFA. Heather was a founding member of Mandala Community Counselling, which provides pro-bono counselling for selected clients on a needs basis (2003 to 2013). She commenced her private counselling practice at Bondi in 2008 and continued her private practice as an associate with Jacqueline Stone and Associates in the Sydney CBD until retirement in May 2018. In her Mandala face-to-face counselling and her private practice, Heather received clinical supervision from Celia Connolly (B. Sc. (Psychol) Hons. Class 1, PhD, MAPS) and Lorraine Rose, (B.Psych. (Uni WA), M.Psychol, UNSW, MAPS) respectively. Heather is married to Rob, and they have three children and seven grandchildren. Heather retired from her private psychotherapy practice in May 2018.

Rob Firth

Rob has qualifications as a chemical engineer and MBA, both from UNSW, and held senior management positions at CSR and Goodman Fielder, in Australia and Japan. In 1995 he established a private company Protoco Pty Ltd and, with several partners, formed a start-up company Eco Logical Polymers Pty Ltd, which was active from 1995 until 2008. He spent 5 years as Business Development Manager for a newly-formed Innovation and Consulting unit at the Western Sydney University (then known as UWS) until his retirement in 2013.

Sydney

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