Our intimate relationships are profoundly affected by the histories and experiences we bring to them. This is particularly the case for the attitudes and beliefs we have about close relationships because they are so strongly influenced by the emotional bond we formed as children with our primary caregivers. The proposition that this childhood emotional bond, known as attachment, plays such a critical role in our adult lives has been and continues to be a topic of extensive research.

Types of Attachment

Research focusing on adults’ close relationships from an attachment perspective have been strongly influenced by Bowlby’s seminal work on attachment and loss (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). In his studies, he explored the process by which bonds of affection are formed and broken between infants and their caregivers; more specifically, he investigated how infants become emotionally bonded to their caregivers and emotionally distressed when separated from them.

One of the most notable findings from Bowlby’s research is that children manifest different types of attachment. The most prevalent type he found is what he called secure attachment. This kind of attachment developed from caregivers who were consistently attentive and nurturing to their children. As a result, these youngsters came to rely on others comfortably, learning that other people were trustworthy sources of security and kindness.

However, other children encountered different situations. For some, attentive care was unpredictable and inconsistent. Their caregivers were warm and interested on some occasions but distracted, anxious, or unavailable on others. These children developed fretful, mixed feelings about others. Bowlby labeled these children as forming an anxious attachment. Being uncertain of their caregiver's behavior, such children become nervous and clingy, displaying excessive neediness in their relationships with others.

For still other children, attentive care was altogether lacking. For these children caregiving was provided reluctantly by rejecting or hostile adults. Such children learned that little good came from depending on others, leading them to withdraw from others with what Bowlby called avoidant attachment. These children were often suspicious of and angry at others, and did not easily form close relationships.

As a result of Bowlby's studies, different types of attachment became an important area of research. Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1987) found that when securely attached children were faced with a strange and unfamiliar environment, they ran to their mothers, calmed down, and then began to explore the unfamiliar new setting. In

* This is an edited and adapted article taken from Sharon Brehm (Ed.), Intimate Relationships, 2002, McGraw-Hill.
contrast, anxiously attached children cried and clung to their mothers, ignoring the their reassurances that all was well. And avoidantly attached children actually shunned their mothers, keeping their distance and evading close contact even when they were scared. Finally, these researchers also observed what they labeled as a “disorganized” attachment pattern in some infants where they rapidly vacillated between anxious and avoidant responses. These children were the most agitated and stymied by the return of their mothers.

Attachment Styles

Extending this type of research, Hazan and Shaver (1987) showed that similar orientations toward closeness, referred to as attachment styles, could also be observed among adults. Wide-ranging surveys have shown that about 50% of adults have secure attachment styles, 20% have anxious attachment styles, 25% have avoidant attachment styles, and 5% fall into the more troubled anxious–avoidant attachment style (Levine & Heller, 2010).

It is now well established that attachment styles broadly influence our thoughts, feelings, and behavior in our close relationships. People with secure styles tend to be more satisfied with their close partnerships than people with insecure styles (Feeney, 1999). Avoidant people have a lack of faith in others that leads them to warily avoid intimacy; anxious people seek out such closeness but nervously worry that it won't last; and anxious-avoidant people are the least secure and are agitated by both closeness and distance in their relationships (Shaver & Clark, 1994).

Parenting & Attachment Styles

While it is clear from the research that the quality of parenting has a major impact on children’s attachment and attachment styles, it is also the case that children's temperament and personality have an important effect on the quality of parenting (Carver, 1997; Vaugh & Bost, 1999). As any parents knows, babies are born with various temperaments and arousal levels. Some newborns have an easy going temperament, whereas others are more fussy and excitable. These differences, together with inborn differences in personality, make some children easier to parent than others. Consequently, the quality of care a child receives can depend, in part, on the child's own personality and behavior. In this manner, attachment style is thought to be influenced by the child's inborn traits (Carver, 1997; Vaugh & Bost, 1999).

As it turns out, however, a child's temperament and personality have only a moderate effect on the kind of parenting he or she receives (Vaughn & Bost, 1999), and people do not seem to be genetically predisposed to develop certain types of attachment styles (Waller & Shaver, 1994). Instead, our growing up experiences seem to play a larger part in shaping the styles we bring to subsequent relationships. For instance, mothers' behavior toward their infants when the babies are newborns predicts what styles of attachment the children will have when they are older (Isabella, 1998). In fact, it is possible to predict with 75% accuracy what attachment style a child will have by assessing the mother's style before her baby is even born (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991). Thereafter, the quality of parenting that adolescents receive predicts how well they will behave in their own romances when they are young adults (Conger et
Youngsters apparently import the lessons they learn at home into their subsequent intimate relationships with others.

**Changing Attachment Styles**

Unlike children, we as adults are not the prisoners of our experience because our attachment styles continue to be shaped by the experiences we encounter (Carnelley & Janllff-Bulman, 1992). Having been learned, attachment styles can be unlearned, and over time, attachment styles can and do change (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). A bad breakup of a relationship can make a formerly secure person insecure, and a good relationship can make an avoidant person less so (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). As many as a third of us may encounter real change in our attachment styles over a two year period (Fuller & Finham, 1995), and the good news is that the avoidant and anxious styles are more likely to change toward a more secure one (Davila, Burge, & Hammen, 1997).

Nevertheless, once they have been established, attachment styles can also be quite stable and enduring. One major reason for this is that people tend to enter into relationships that reinforce their existing tendencies (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). By remaining aloof and avoiding interdependency, for example, avoidant people may never learn that some people can be trusted and closeness can be comforting—and that tendency perpetuates their avoidant style. In the absence of dramatic new experiences, people's styles of attachment can persist for decades (Klohen & Bera, 1998).

One of the main findings from this research is that our attitudes and beliefs about the nature and worth of close relationships are shaped by our experiences with them. In addition, our earliest notions about our own interpersonal worth and the trustworthiness of others emerge from our interactions with our major caregivers, and thus they start us down a path of either trust or fear. However, the journey never stops, and later obstacles or assistance from fellow travelers may divert us and change our routes. Depending on our interpersonal experiences, our learned styles of attachment may either change with time or persist indefinitely.

**References**


