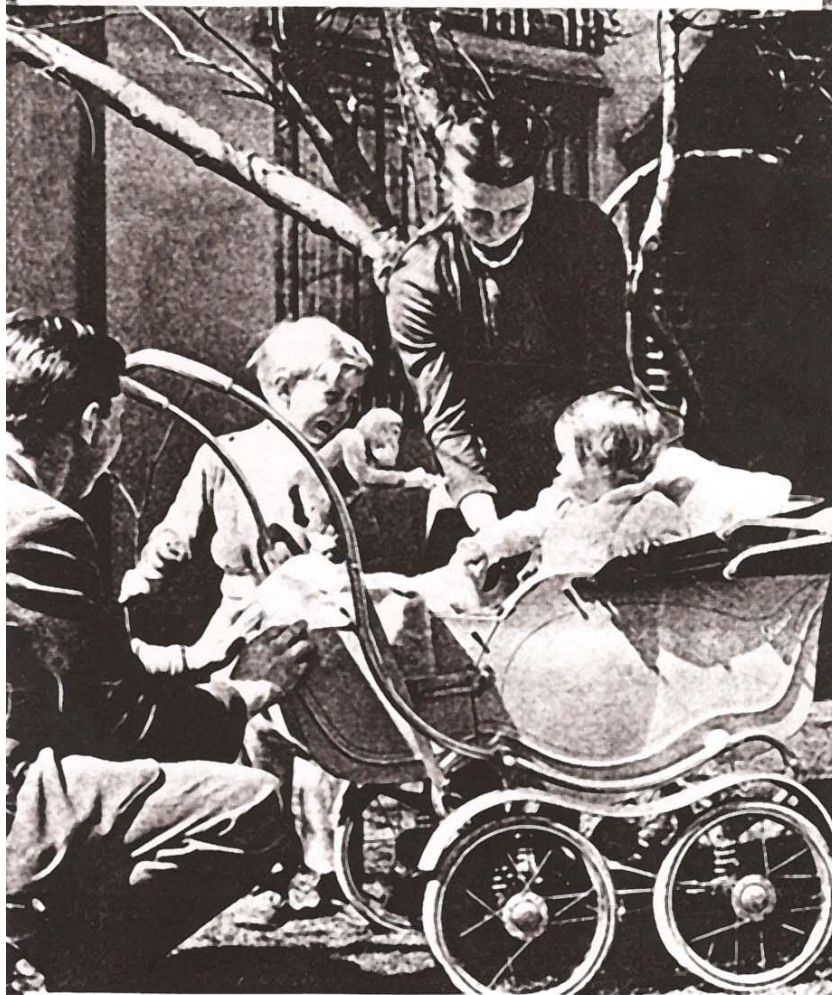


Can I leave my baby?



by Dr. John Bowlby

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ALL of us find security in being with people we know well and are apt to feel anxious and insecure in a crowd of strangers. Particularly in times of crisis or distress do we seek our closest friends and relatives. The need for companionship and the comfort it brings is a very deep need in human nature-and one we share with many of the higher animals.

This need for companionship is even stronger in young creatures than in grown-ups. Whether it is a brood of ducklings on a pond, twin lambs in a meadow, or a human toddler around the house, the young are quickly distressed if they get lost and scamper to get close to their mothers as soon as anything happens which frightens them.

There seems little doubt that this tendency of young animals to attach themselves closely to their parents is a primary 'instinct'-as primary as the 'instincts' to feed and to avoid pain. This is hardly surprising when we come to consider it, since it is plain that in a state of nature the young animal would fare very badly if he were to become isolated from his parents. Human young are no exceptions. As every parent comes to learn, toddlers and young children are very demanding of company; and if they are frightened and upset, they cling to their parents like leeches. All parents find this irksome and at times wish to be free of it. Some become alarmed lest it go on for ever.

Advice given is often contradictory. At one time it was common to see in the young child's demanding ways a sure sign that he had been spoilt. 'Stand no nonsense' was the advice given. More recently it has come to be realised that not only is this attachment a natural thing but that if we fail to respect it we may create a sense of insecurity which

can become serious. The pendulum has thus swung the other way. What then is a poor mother to do?

When parents know what to expect of children they usually do the right thing. Many mistakes come from plain ignorance. What do we know about this need for an attachment in human infants and about the insecurities which result from separation?

Lambs and ducklings become closely attached to their mothers in their first few days of life. Almost from the first, therefore, this attachment is at its peak. Later it starts diminishing. What puzzles so many human parents is that, instead of becoming more independent during their first two years or so, their infants become more and more attached as they get older. In their early months some babies are fairly demanding, but many, provided they are fed, kept warm and given a little company now and then, are easy and content. By the time they are seven or eight months, however, things have begun to change: Instead of greeting everyone with a cheery smile, they often cry at every strange face. From then on they come to concentrate especially on mother. When they start crawling they may rush off on their own at times, but they quickly panic if they get lost or hurt. Then it is mother, and mother only, they want.

The parents of first babies often live in the fond belief that these demands will diminish after their child's first birthday -and picture him going cheerfully to Nursery School by the time he is two. Their disappointment is intense when the opposite occurs. Instead of becoming more independent he becomes more clinging and demanding. By the time he is two he is kicking up a fuss almost every time his mother

leaves the room. Both she and father begin desperately to wonder if he'll ever become independent.

Although children differ tremendously, the truth is that the majority seem to be at their most clinging around their second birthday. Indeed, with many there is no easing off until they are nearly three or even older. Then they change. They seem to take to new people more readily, are more confident in strange surroundings, and in other ways become more grown-up. At last the tide has turned. Nevertheless the three- and four-year old is going to be upset if he is away from his mother for long. His security is still inextricably bound up with her.

The main point to realise in all this is that the young child needs some *one* person to give him security. Usually it is his real mother, but an adopted mother, or a granny, or nanny, who loves him and cares for him will do equally well. In his first two or three months he probably does not know one person from another, and so a change to another person does not matter so much. But by the time he is six months he is becoming choosy-and in the next year or two the older he gets the choosier he becomes. So it is important that whoever is going to be the mainstay in his life should be caring for him by the time he is six months old. Thence-forward she is going to be his anchor-whether she likes it or not-and separations from her are going to give rise to problems.

Most experienced mothers know all about the dangers of separation. It would be preaching to the converted to tell them that if they leave their young children with strangers they will react. And the reactions may be more distressing than the temporary freedom was worth. "When you have

a baby," it has been said, "you have five years of hard labour ahead of you. If you don't get it over at the beginning you've got it coming to you later on." A mother's job is inevitably exacting, especially when her children are small. It is a craftsman's job and perhaps the most skilled in the world. But what worthwhile job is not exacting? And the very fact that a mother's role is so essential and worthwhile is largely responsible for the satisfaction which most mothers find in their families. They may be dog-tired and consider themselves shorter-tempered than they could wish, but it is a great compensation to feel that they *really matter*, that no one else will do.

This exacting job is scamped at one's peril. One cannot ever really give back to a child the love and attention he needed and did not receive when he was small. With understanding and affection, and perhaps skilled help, one can go a long way towards it, sometimes a very long way, but it will never be quite the same.

Mothers sometimes ask: then can we *never* leave our small children? I do not believe that anyone has ever suggested that they should not. It is an excellent plan to accustom babies and small children to being cared for now and then by someone else-father, for instance, or granny, or some other relation or neighbour. Then if a mother is suddenly taken ill or there is some other family emergency, the child will be used to someone else looking after him and will not be as frightened as he might be with a stranger. And in this way mothers can have some freedom too-for an afternoon's shopping in peace, visits to doctor or dentist, the cinema or to tea with friends.

Leaving a small child whilst you go out to work needs much more care. If your own mother is living nearby or

a dependable neighbour can be daily guardian, it may work out all right. But it needs regularity, and it must be the same woman who cares for him.

It is the same with nannies. People often point to the happy and successful who have been brought up by nannies, and say "What about that?". Well, nannies are valuable people, provided they are good ones and *provided they stay*. It is the chopping and changing of people in charge of a young child which upsets him. And if a mother hands over her baby completely to a nanny, she should realise that in her child's eyes Nanny will be the real mother-figure, and not Mummy. This may be no bad thing, always provided that the care is continuous. But for a child to be looked after entirely by a loving nanny and then for her to leave when he is two or three, or even four or five, can be almost as tragic as the loss of a mother.

In many homes nowadays fathers are playing a large part in the care of their young children, and at least from the children's point of view there is much to be said for it. When mother is present it spreads the load, and when she is unavoidably absent it provides a 'spare Mummy'. Nevertheless he must not be too irked if his child refuses his well-intentioned efforts. Often it is not the work which he finds difficult-feeding, bathing, dressing, putting to bed-but the child's refusal to have him do it.

Inevitably while children are small it is their mothers who are most important to them. When the little child wakes and cries in the night, there are few fathers who are as welcome as mother. And it is mummy's comforting arms which he seeks when he hurts himself. During these early years most fathers come a poor second, and they are wise

not to feel too hurt about it. Being absent for so much of the small child's waking life, they can hardly compete. But they have a crucial role to play just the same. Remove Father permanently from the scene-by death or divorce or any other reason-and the whole picture changes tragically for the worse. Not only is the economic security of the family in grave peril, but the mother no longer has her husband's company to cheer and support her. It is in this indirect but immensely important way, through keeping his wife secure and happy, that fathers play such a vital part where their young children are concerned. As time goes on, of course, fathers are increasingly valued by their children for their own sakes.

In his role as 'spare Mum' father is particularly valuable when there is a new baby. If mother is away in hospital, father can often cope with the 'old baby' at morning and evening whilst Granny or 'home help' hold the fort during the day. The same is true if she is confined at home-which has much to recommend it. For the 'old baby' the experience of acquiring a new brother or sister is made a great deal easier if mother remains at home. If she is away he has to contend not only with the new baby, which is bad enough, but also with the separation. If she remains at home his emotional task is halved. And mother's problems will be easier too because, when she is about again, she will find the 'old baby' who has not been separated from her, less demanding and clinging than one who has had none of her care for the ten days or a fortnight she has been away.

If for any reason you have to be away from *your* child for a time, it is as well to be prepared for what to expect when you return (and what I am saying now goes not only for mother but also for anyone who is filling the place of a

mother and to whom the child is looking for security). Don't expect a cheerful welcome and a warm hug. Expect instead a rather bemused little person who keeps his distance and hardly knows what to make of things. He may even run away from you or claim that you are not his mother at all. This is all very upsetting, and many a mother has felt wounded by this 'forgetfulness'. But it is not forgetfulness at all. It is because he wants you so much and has been perplexed and puzzled, and perhaps angered, by your absence that he behaves like this. Try to give him time to recover himself and avoid rushing him. After a while he will thaw out. It may take only ten minutes or half an hour but, if you've been away for a week or more, don't be surprised if it takes a day or so. Sooner or later he'll recover all his old feelings-but even then there will probably be a difference. For a time he is likely to be even more demanding than before, and he may refuse to let you out of his sight. Wherever you go he must go-no door must be shut between him and you. And woe betide if he is thwarted! Whatever temper he has may be let loose, and he may let you know in no uncertain terms what he thinks of your desertion of him.

A fairly common way in which a small child expresses feelings of insecurity is to wake up at night and cry for no apparent reason. He is quite likely to do this if Mummy has gone away and left him, even for a short time and with some-one he likes and even if he has seemed quite happy in her absence. If she goes to comfort and re-assure him at night, the phase will probably soon pass. But if she takes a firm line-that "we're not going to start giving in to that sort of nonsense"-she may have months of broken nights ahead of her. I do not underestimate the strain of getting up in the middle of the night to go to a child. Indeed for many it is

one of the worst trials a parent has to bear. But usually there is a reason for this wakefulness and often it is a feeling of insecurity. The quickest way to get a child back to sleep is also the best way to make him feel secure and happy again.

This behaviour is very trying, but at least it can be understood if we realise that infants and young children are meant to be attached to figures they love and trust and that much of their strength is diverted to ensuring that they are. If mother has been lost once she may be lost again-and that at all costs is to be prevented. Many children who do not show this behaviour are children who have had their hearts broken so often that they despair of finding anyone to trust. In other words this behaviour is normal in the circumstances, and it is when it is completely absent that we have grounds for worry.

If we look at his behaviour in this way, we shall avoid two very common mistakes. The first is to blame it on to the person who was caring for him whilst we were away. Nothing is more common than for this demanding and difficult behaviour to be attributed by parents to Granny or Auntie spoiling their child during *his* stay with her. This is not only foolish but grossly unfair. Whilst we were away, Granny or Auntie may have had quite a difficult time with a child who was a little anxious and worried by his mother's absence and may have coped with the situation very well. The trouble lies not *in her* spoiling but in *our* absence.

The second mistake is to suppose that this demanding and difficult *child* needs discipline. On the contrary, what he needs is a lot of love and reassurance: the more he can be

given, the sooner he'll recover his sense of security and be himself again.

If the separation has been a short one—say a few weeks—this upset behaviour may go on for a month or two. In some children it seems to disappear much sooner, but don't be surprised if it goes on even longer. In general the longer the separation and the stranger the surroundings he is in whilst away, the longer the subsequent upsets. Long periods away in strange surroundings with no one person to attach himself to, can sometimes have very serious consequences. For instance, he may become an intensely anxious and difficult child or alternatively so hard-boiled that he is unable to give or receive love from other people. This kind of crippling is far worse than the crippling of the body.

It is true that there are some young children who at least appear to be unharmed by even major separations from their mothers, though why this should be we still do not know. The main point is that a sufficient proportion are upset by this experience, some mildly and some severely, to make it wise to keep separations down to a minimum while children are under the age of three.

This raises the difficult question of infants and small children going into hospital. There is no doubt that in the strange surroundings of a hospital infants and toddlers are particularly vulnerable to separation from their mothers. They are often feeling ill and in pain and are naturally frightened by the very strangeness of it all. And unfortunately they are still looked after usually by a succession of nurses so that they have no one person to cling to. Also they often have to be kept in their cots a good deal which, if they are not feeling particularly ill, they find frustrating;

they are active little creatures with no resources like reading or listening to the wireless. So hospital is to be avoided whenever possible.

Fortunately there are often many alternatives. If your doctor will agree, make every effort to care for your child at home. As regards nursing, your devoted care, guided by your doctor and perhaps with help from your local nursing service, will provide all and more than can be provided by the best of hospitals, understaffed and overworked as they so often are. If it is some minor operation, enquire whether it can be done in Out-patients so that you can take him straight home again. Or see if it can be postponed until he is a little older. Only if none of these arrangements will suit the case is it really necessary for him to go into hospital.

And even then his separation from you may not be inevitable. At some hospitals now, mothers are admitted with their babies and young children. The pair share a bed-sitting room, and the mother does all the routine care of her child. I am sure this is the right method of treating the pre-school child who for some reason cannot be treated in his own home and whose mother is free to come in with him, and I hope that before long the system will be general. So, if he has to be admitted, enquire whether your hospital has arrangements of this kind and, if it has, do your best to make use of them. If you've only one child, it's usually easy. If you've others, father, a granny or neighbours are often willing to lend a hand. For the sake of your child and your own peace of mind, you'll find it infinitely worthwhile taking advantage of these facilities.

Until arrangements for mothers to live in with their young children are more widely available, you may have no

choice but to let him be admitted without you. If this is the position, try to see that he is able to have his favourite toy with him, and try also to visit him every day. Most hospitals now allow daily visiting, and this is the official policy of the National Health Service. So if your local hospital is difficult about it, don't hesitate to make a fuss. Fortunately even if a few are still awkward about it, most hospitals nowadays recognize the value to children of their parents visiting and make them welcome.

And what has been said about illness goes also for holidays. Unless you can really make satisfactory arrangements. I do not think that a week's holiday away from your child is worth the inevitable upset. A long week-end is a safer proposition. After his third birthday things become a good deal easier, although the same general considerations still apply.

Leaving a child in a residential nursery is usually a bad idea. The strange surroundings and strange people are bound to upset him and, however kind the people who run it may be, not many nurseries are so planned that each child has only one person to care for him. Usually they are looked after by several and have no chance to attach themselves to one-which is what they need.

So it is wise to remember that the most vulnerable stage for children is roughly between the ages of six months and three years (though it must be said there is much controversy about the lower limit). Before and after these ages, a child does not enjoy being separated from his mother, but he seems to bear it more easily. This 'clinging stage' should be respected whenever possible. By all means let a mother take a half-day off, or even an occasional whole day, but any-

thing longer needs careful management. By this I mean that it is better to leave a child at home in familiar surroundings than in a strange place. It is better to leave him with someone he knows and likes than with a stranger. It is essential to leave him in the care of one person, who will be a mother-figure to him while you are away. If you can follow this plan, you will be providing for your child the essential security which he needs in his early years, the benefits of which both of you will reap in the years to come.