

Attachment, Deprivation, and Privation: The Robertson's Studies

James and Joyce Robertson's studies

James and Joyce Robertson conducted some observational studies of children who were between about seventeen months and three years, between 1948 and 1952, and followed these up later, during the 1960s. The children went into hospital or were placed in residential nurseries, separating them from their caregivers for periods from a few days up to several weeks. The Robertsons were convinced that separating babies from their mothers was harmful. The medical profession disagreed. The Robertsons obtained a cine camera and made eight films of children during their separation which could be shown to people involved in caring for children.

Here is a summary of the observations on one separated child.

John (aged seventeen months) was put into a fairly typical residential nursery for nine days while his mother had a second child in hospital. His father was at work all day, and there were no relatives nearby to look after him. Four of the five other children at the nursery had been there almost all of their lives. They were noisy, demanding, and aggressive. John was a quiet, loving child. He seemed troubled by the noise and fighting going on around him, and tried to approach the nurses for some attention. They had to spend most of their time with the more demanding children, and John was left out. Even when he managed to obtain their attention they soon had to put him down to tend to one of the others. John's protests and anger were ignored. After some days his distress worsened. He started to cry pitifully, for long periods of time.

This distress lasted for several days. The nurses gave John all the attention they could, but it was nowhere near enough. He began to refuse food, and he wouldn't sleep. With each day that passed John's condition worsened. His cries of distress became huge sobs of despair.

As the separation neared its end, John's behaviour changed again. He stopped trying to be near to the nurses. Instead he would play with whatever toys he could, particularly a large cuddly toy. He began to ignore his father on his nightly visits. John slowly became emotionally detached. When his mother finally came he didn't seem to want to know her. He wouldn't go to her, wouldn't look at her, and resisted her attempts to comfort him.

John had started by being loving, and seeking companionship. Over the nine-day separation he had changed to being distressed, despairing, and finally to appearing emotionally detached.

The Robertsons suggest that children who are separated from their mothers for several days will

pass through the same sequence of behaviour as John. They call it the syndrome of distress. The child becomes distressed, then despairing, and then, if not attended to, the child will become emotionally detached. However, the Robertsons are not saying that babies or children must always be near their mothers. What children do need is fairly continuous, high-quality care. They should have this from their caregivers. If they have to be separated from their main care givers, then continued high-quality care provided by someone else can help them through the separation.

Summary of the Robertson's research

James and Joyce Robertson made some challenging films of young children in periods of brief separation from their normal routines, and especially away from their parents' care. They wanted to make health-care

professionals realize that it is potentially damaging to separate children from their parents. Despite fierce resistance and criticism their message eventually won through and routines began to change.