

Attachment, Deprivation, and Privation: Rutter's Studies

Michael Rutter's Studies

Michael Rutter and his colleagues did not believe the claim that early experiences automatically would have a disturbing effect on later behaviour. They studied a group of 9- to 12-year-old boys on the Isle of Wight. They also conducted a study of a group of children in London whose parents had suffered some mental problems. Rutter was seeking to understand, in particular, the causes of anti-social behaviour, such as juvenile delinquency and theft, rather than the role of the mother in childrearing. However, he looked for any correlations between separation from either parent and increasing levels of anti-social behaviour. He found no positive correlation between juvenile delinquency and separation from either mother or father.

Rutter did find a positive correlation between the amount of stress which children felt, and the likelihood of their becoming involved in anti social behaviour. He asked a large number of questions about their early family lives and felt able to divide his sample of adolescents into those coming from good families, from fair families, and from poor families. Good families were those which provided warm, loving, and secure relationships, free from high levels of stress. Rutter found no increase in anti-social behaviour in the children from these homes, or in children from homes described as fair. However, he did find a positive correlation between coming from a poor, stressful home and being involved in anti social behaviour. In other words, children whose parents argue and fight constantly were more likely to behave in anti-social ways.

Ann and Alan Clarke have consistently challenged the idea that the early years are so important and have such great influences on future mental health. They quote several studies of baby animals and humans who have been separated from their parents yet who are not emotionally scarred for life. We will discuss some of them here.