

Attachment, Deprivation, and Privation: Bulldogs Bank Study

The Bulldogs Bank study

In 1946 Anna Freud (Sigmund Freud's daughter) and Sophie Dann began a case study of six war orphans who, with their mothers, had been placed in concentration camps by the Nazis during the second World War. Their parents had been killed not long after their imprisonment and the infants were looked after as well as possible by some of the other prisoners. Conditions were very hard, food was scarce, and there were no toys. It would have been impossible to form any strong bonds with adults, as none would have been around for long enough. After the war the infants were moved to several camps, until they eventually arrived at the Bulldogs Bank reception centre in the Lake District in England. At the time of their arrival, the youngest was approximately three years old, and the oldest was about three years and ten months.

The six children had several things in common. They had probably never known their mothers. They had no opportunities to form attachments with caregivers. They had endured awful living conditions and received virtually no stimulation of any kind. They had been moved around a lot, and so were not pleased at being moved again. They couldn't talk very much, and they knew only a few German and Czechoslovakian swear words. They didn't know what to do with normal toys, and they destroyed all of the toys they could find - and most of the furniture too! They did each adopt one special toy, usually a cuddly toy, which they kept near them and always took to bed with them.

They were also fairly hostile and aggressive towards adults. They would only turn to an adult if they actually needed something which they couldn't have in any other way. Two other things they had in common were that they had been together for all their lives and they were totally devoted to each other. They did everything together and refused to be separated for any reason. For example, if one couldn't go out, none would want to go out. If one woke up at night, the others would soon be awake. When one stopped eating, they would all stop eating. They did everything as a group. There wasn't any single child who was always the leader, each would take the lead in different activities. To put it simply, they appeared to be totally attached to each other.

Although they each had different needs it was impossible to treat any one of them as an individual, as they were always together as a group. No one child was dominant all the time: they cooperated over nearly everything. Eventually they learned to speak and play like normal children. Gradually they formed emotional relationships with some of the adult members of staff. They slowly recovered from their early deprivation, but remained attached to each other.

What this study shows is that children can survive without mothers, although we do not know if any of these children suffered emotional problems in their later lives.