

Attachment, Deprivation, and Privation: Robertsons and John

The Robertsons and John

Earlier we mentioned the Robertson's study of a seventeen-month-old infant called John, in a residential nursery. The Robertsons studied several such children, and noticed the same sequence of behaviour in each of them. The sequence started with protest or distress, this gave way to despair, and finally turned into detachment. One reason why John had suffered was because no one would offer to be a substitute caregiver for him.

Thomas was one of four children to whom the Robertsons offered temporary fostering in their own home. He was twenty-eight months old (a year older than John) when his mother went into hospital to have another baby. The Robertsons visited Thomas in his own home before his mother went away and he visited their home to become familiar with it.

Thomas settled in with the Robertsons well, although he obviously missed his mother. Every day during the separation Thomas received constant, patient, high-quality care from Joyce Robertson, supported by her husband and teenage daughter, Jean. Thomas had brought some favourite things from home, including a photograph of his mother and him together. Thomas was pleased when his father visited each night, but became understandably upset when his father had to leave. Thomas also had a few problems with food and sleep, and as the separation went into the second week he did cry more for his mother. Nevertheless Joyce Robertsons' patience and reassurance always quietened him.

When Thomas's mother finally came to take him home he was happily and successfully reunited with her. He had changed a little. He was rather more aggressive and harder to control than he had been before. Separating him from his usual routines may have had some unfortunate effects, despite the care he had received. However, there was a new baby in the family and Thomas wouldn't be quite the centre of attention that he had been. This may have been enough, anyway, to affect some of his behaviour following his return.