

The Effects of Maternal Deprivation



This activity will help you to:

- Understand and recall studies of maternal deprivation
- Draw conclusions from such studies about the effects of maternal deprivation

Studies of Maternal Deprivation

Goldfarb (1943) studied two groups of children. One group were raised in almost complete social isolation in an institution, the other were raised in foster care. There were 15 children in each group, aged between 6 months and three years. The 'institution' group lagged behind the 'foster' group on all the measures taken, including IQ (measured intelligence), abstract thinking, social maturity and rule following.

Spitz (1945) and **Spitz & Wolf (1946)** studied institutionalised children in orphanages and hospitals. The institutions were poor quality and staff rarely interacted with the children. They found that a third of institutionalised children died before the age of 1 year. The remainder failed to thrive and showed signs of 'anaclitic depression': apathy, withdrawal, and helplessness. These symptoms reversed if the period of maternal deprivation was less than three months but not if it was longer. Spitz compared children living in an orphanage with others living in a penal institution where they were cared for by their mothers. Although physical conditions in the orphanage were better, the children were 'developmentally inferior'. Within two years 37% of the orphanage children were dead whereas 5 years later all the 'prison' children were still alive.

Bowlby (1944; 1946) compared two groups of adolescent boys. One group were known to have criminal tendencies (theft). The other group, whilst emotionally disturbed, did not have criminal records. On interviewing the boys and investigating their backgrounds Bowlby found that 86% of the 'thieves' had experienced maternal deprivation early in life. Only two of the 'disturbed' group had experienced maternal deprivation. Of the 'thieves', Bowlby suggested that 36% displayed signs of 'affectionless psychopathy' – they appeared incapable of forming relationships with others.

What do these studies suggest about the way(s) maternal deprivation can affect a child's development?

Why could it be considered problematic that the Spitz & Wolf studies were carried out in poor quality institutions?