

DIVORCE AND ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIPS: THE LONGITUDINAL JOURNEY

Alan Sroufe and Jennifer McIntosh

What are the longitudinal consequences of disrupted attachment relationships, and what bearing might that have on our thinking about divorce custody matters? In this paper, Alan Sroufe, William Harris Professor of Child Development, University of Minnesota, addresses these issues. Sroufe is a lead researcher on the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Childhood, now a 30-year research program that sets out to explore the development of children growing up in climates of chronic socioeconomic risk. This study is widely attributed with providing an “organizational perspective” on early attachment and an ecological map of the child’s growing ability to cope with chronic environmental and familial strain across lifetime. In this interview, Sroufe offers candid views from his longitudinal research, emphasizing the influence of attachment security in the progression of relationship competence across the life span, and considers implications for complex custody matters.

Keywords: attachment theory; divorce; child development; parenting plan; family law

McIntosh: Professor Sroufe, it is a privilege to talk with you. I hope to address with you some of the questions that emerged through our survey of the family law field about children’s development in high conflict climates, and the place of attachment security in their pathways through and beyond complex divorce.

EARLY ATTACHMENT AS DESTINY?

Sroufe: In reading the results of your survey, I had this response. If people want guidelines, we can provide that, but if people want specific answers, I do not think we can. We cannot definitively say, based on attachment assessment, this child should be with this parent more than with that parent. I think that if parents, judges, lawyers and so on took the view that attachment is a gradual building process, and that each relationship is built in its own terms, then there would be less paranoia about this. The major thing that I think a judge would do well to know is that attachment relationships are a lifetime thing. The major thing that I want divorcing noncustodial parents to know is they can have the most full relationship with this child that any parent on this planet will ever have, even if they had no overnights for the first 2 years. Depending on your age, you will have the next 50 or 60 years for a relationship with this child. And they are going to need you all that time. You will not be displaced: attachment relationships aren’t interchangeable. The relationship with any parent is as much as they make of it. If a stepparent comes along, they can also be a really useful figure in a child’s life. But they will never replace that other parent.

McIntosh: You raise an interesting point. There is a widespread belief that if a parent does not get involved actively in the first few years of life, he or she has missed the attachment boat. I believe that idea comes from research in the 1980s, Mary Main’s work amongst it, tracing the trajectory of secure-base attachment—where the pattern at one year predicted fairly well the pattern at six years. From that I think

Correspondence: srouf001@umn.edu; mcintosh@familytransitions.com.au

came some mythology amidst laymen that attachment is somehow set in concrete by twelve months, and whatever is there by twelve months stays there, and whatever is absent remains absent.

Sroufe: Here is what we have found in our longitudinal research. It is true on the one hand that probabilistically, the attachment you have as an infant is a predictor of important aspects of later development. But it is also the case that it is changeable. One reason it is predictive is because often times, the circumstances of children who have no secure attachments do not change, and their lives go on being full of stress, with a lack of social support from the families, and the general chaos does not change. As we have documented, if the family does experience significant changes, the attachment relationship of the baby may change. If social and family support increases between 18 months and five years, those children who were insecure at 12 or 18 months, are not so likely to have behavior problems at 5 years.

McIntosh: Can you elaborate on the connection you found between social support and change in attachment status?

Sroufe: The presumption is that parents are able to be responsive to children to the degree that their own emotional needs are being met, to the degree that their lives are not overly stressful and taxing, and to the degree that mothers are not suffering with depression. I say maternal depression because it was a poverty sample and primarily we had mothers in our study. As maternal depression went up, child behavior problems went up. As it went down, child behavior problems came down. We presume again, because parents were less depressed, they were more responsive to their children.

The thing that is absolutely certain is that attachments may change in their quality, that early attachment is not destiny. I have this folksy example. Building a house, do you want to say that the foundation of the house is the most important thing or the only important thing? Frankly, I would say neither, because what good is a foundation if you don't put a roof on the house? The whole thing gets destroyed. On the other hand, does the foundation have a special significance? Well it does, because first of all, if the foundation is not strong, it is difficult to make a strong house. You could put in supports and whatnot, but you would have a different problem on your hands if the foundation is not good. Secondly, the foundation sets boundaries on what the house can become. But many different foundations can allow you to build a good enough house.

It is a metaphor for people to see that attachment theorists are not saying early attachment is the end of all development, and at the same time, we do see it as being very significant. If you build healthy relationships in the first 3 years, that child has much better opportunities to deal with things. In fact, we've shown that many times. There is a concept in the field called resilience, which we think has been misinterpreted. It is being interpreted as though some children just have the right stuff somehow or not. And that is not the case at all. Resilience is a constructed capacity. We have a number of publications where we show that for children facing the same degree of stress, where some of them had secure attachments with other supportive care in the early years, and some of them not, the children who had the good early support did not develop behavior problems, the ones that did develop behavior problems did not.

Early experience is important, it stays with you for your life, that is true. It does not get erased. But it gets interpreted in light of subsequent events. So individuals can look back on their lives and say, "boy, my parents were really so emotionally impoverished, and so trodden down, they weren't really able to give me very much when I was little, but as I got older, it became clear to me that they did love me, and they did everything they could, and now when I look at it, I realize they did incredible things given how hard their lives were. They did a lot for me and so I can forgive them for what they did not do, I've got my problems but I can manage." That is not an unreasonable scenario.

ATTACHMENT: PRIMACY AND HIERARCHY DEFINED

McIntosh: Your longitudinal findings pertain to children's outcomes into adulthood and the links therein to the security of their early attachment relationship. Like many attachment researchers, you use the term "attachment hierarchy." What does it mean to have a hierarchy of attachment relationships?

Sroufe: That was Bowlby's idea. First of all, I think someone needs to write a little primer on evolutionary attachment for judges and lawyers. Ten pages could do it. And from reading that primer, you come to take the point of view of the infant, and understand that human infants are extraordinarily dependent when they are born. Without parenting, they would not survive. In the wild, they would not survive ten minutes, much less become adults. So they are very dependent, and very much need adult care and protection, especially given that in earlier human times, we were nomadic. Nature built in a system to guarantee that infants would have that kind of care, and that is the attachment system. It is designed to get you to focus and organize your behavior around an available adult. The advantage of that in evolutionary terms is when you become mobile, and you're foraging for yourself, and a threat comes along like a panther, you know right away where your haven of safety is because you are monitoring them. You will immediately flee to them or call to them, get swooped up and carried to safety.

Now, why a *primary* attachment figure in the hierarchy? Suppose we were disposed to form two exactly equal attachments, and we're out here in the forest and a panther comes along, and we go through a process like this: "O.K. Attachment figure #1 is approximately ten metres away, but there is a bush between me and them, I would have to go around that to get to them. Attachment figure #2 is approximately twelve metres away, there is no bush but on the other hand, I would have to go uphill." By the time you go through that process, you would be dead. You do not go through that cognitive process, you just go and you do it: it is automatic. Now, on the other hand, suppose your primary attachment figure climbed up in a tree without you, that would not be ideal but suppose they did, and your secondary attachment figure is nearby, then the system switches. You would automatically go to them. Or if your primary figure died, if we did not have the capacity to form multiple attachments, anytime an infant's parent figure died, the infant would be dead. And research, including human and monkey research, shows us that the better the relationship infants have with the mother, the more readily they could form another attachment.

Now that challenges certain misunderstandings. A good attachment with one parent does not mean you will not be attached to another or will not be able to form another attachment. So, in family law matters, fathers sometimes worry if the mother has exclusive overnights to this child, she will have a stronger attachment or the child will develop a stronger attachment to her. Well that is probably true short term. But it is not a zero-sum game. It does not subtract from the attachment you can develop with the child. Children are routinely attached to mother, father, and grandparents if they are involved with them. Those relationships are all important.

OVERNIGHT CARE AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF THE YOUNG CHILD

Sroufe: I do not like arbitrary guidelines about children's ages and overnights, for example, because you need to consider a number of factors in the child, like language development and representational capacity to understand what they can handle. OK, say, the child is three, but his language is delayed. That makes a huge difference. When the child can fully understand, "you can be here and mom's at home, and we're going to take you there tomorrow, and then when you wake up in the morning, we'll go see mom," then we have something we can work with. Well first of all, 12-month-olds cannot understand that, period, and have no concept of time like we adults do. You might as well be saying, "you are going to be here forever." What would they understand about that? If for some reason the child is five days with mom and two days overnight with dad, can the child get used to it, can they survive? Yes, *but you're making their job harder*.

What I want people to do is think about it from the infant's situation. What is the infant's task? Their task is to try to organize their behavior, to make the world be a predictable and understandable place where they can get their needs met and they will not be too stressed. Their job is to try and keep their arousal modulated. They are unable to do that by themselves. They can only do that with adult help. Their job is the easiest when things are regular, predictable, and responsive to them. Their job is harder the more transitions they have to deal with, the more uncertainty there is.

McIntosh: The idea of keeping their arousal modulated seems key to this discussion. Your longitudinal study unpacks how co-regulation of affect leads to self-regulatory capacities in a young child. Where do attachment relationships fit in with that? Specifically, if an infant of divorced parents is moving back and forth between two homes, what does that mean for that infant's growing capacity for self-regulation?

Sroufe: Well, let's drop back to the way it usually works in our evolutionary history. You have a primary attachment figure and since you cannot regulate yourself, nature has provided for this system where your emotional reactions provoke responses from your attachment figure. Even from the beginning, your distress is distressing to them and they will do something about it. As you get a little older, even 5 or 6 months, you would begin to be able to show a broader range of signals of emotion. And when you get to seven or eight months, you can usually purposefully signal. So you want to be picked up, you put your arms up and communicate that you want that. These are the first three steps in co-regulation, even though you're not really an equal partner by any means yet. By seven or eight months, you cannot regulate yourself, but you can more purposefully indicate what you need. And when the signal does not work at first, you can change the behavior, so you put your hands up, caregiver misreads that, you do not pick me up, I crawl over to you and put my hands up. "Oh, you want to be picked up!" So you pick me up. Then you get to be 12 months of age, and now the infant is not only more explicit in the signalling, but they have a broadened capacity to be reassured. So sometimes, I am a little worried about something, I look at you, and you just nod your head and smile at me, that means it is ok, that can settle me. So you can see where the partnership is growing. As the infant, my world is expanding, my capacity to use you is getting better and more flexible. When I am 2 years of age, now I can sometimes regulate myself a little bit, but often times, I get dysregulated and you step in. And you're watching closely over me, when I start getting frustrated, you come in and help me out before it goes too far. And when I do get upset, you step in and settle me down. It is not until I am four or five that I can actually regulate myself.

McIntosh: Does co-regulation go on in the same way with both parents, and what are the implications of repeat separations on this growing ability, such as those involved in spending overnights between two homes?

Sroufe: In the context of modern families, there is usually more than one adult around. There is a lot more co-parenting that goes on now, but it is still not the rule, and often the fathers aren't as involved with the infant emotionally as mothers are, and in the early years are not functioning in the same secure-base way as mother is. It is not about the amount of time they spend. It is about quality of emotional response. Over the years, I've done a lot of observations on this. When I say fathers aren't as emotionally engaged with children as mothers, I am fully aware that some are, and some mothers are not. There are without any doubt cases where the father is the primary attachment figure.

But, on this question of what would it do to this process to have a young child 3 days with Mom, 3 days with Dad, three days with Mom? Well, it can work, but it would dramatically increase the job of the child. Why? Because they've got to construct two of these organizations of dyadic emotion regulation behavior instead of one. That is harder.

Let me explain some history here. Attachment research got its impetus from two things: (1) studies of war orphans and (2) observations of children when the child or mother went to the hospital. In the olden days, those separations would go on for a couple of weeks. And after 2 weeks, any child over 7 months of age shows rather disturbing reactions to this.

McIntosh: In their films of children in separation in the 1950s, James and Joyce Robertson showed this effect even following a few days of separation (e.g., as documented in Robertson & Robertson, 1989).

Sroufe: You're right, the effects are there even after days, and over time, the process of recovery is tedious. Why do you want to do this to a child repeatedly? I appreciate the concerns of the fathers' rights movement, but what father needs that? I think the main reason fathers are doing it has to do with feeling like they are unfairly treated. I wish I could help them know that it will be all right in time.

Mothers carried this baby, that is a different deal. We (men) did not, we cannot nurse. It is a different deal. It does not mean fathers are less important. Why would it make you feel less important

as a father if you're not a primary attachment figure? Children need way more than that. They need guidance, they need limits, they need role models, they need to believe that they can do things, they need a ton. And frankly I think there are some things that fathers are better at than mothers. Number one, I think fathers are better at helping the child from the transition from being an infant to being a child. I think it is hard for mothers to let their baby grow up and not need them so much. I think it is harder for mothers to let their child go away to college. And I think it is kind of nice that fathers have a different way of interacting. Michael Lamb wrote about the playful nature of fathers, that is a good thing for children. But that does not require you to have the child overnight.

PRE-LANGUAGE: A CRITICAL PERIOD

McIntosh: So, whilst exact timelines are somewhat arbitrary, is there a critical period that you are talking about for overnight care?

Sroufe: Pre-language. And that brings up certain complexities for judges. There are children who have vast language skills at 2, and probably could deal with this better than some other children. Before that, it is not that you couldn't sometimes have overnights. I mean, sometimes that is even necessary. But it is not ideal.

I can tell you that absolutely every person that has won the Bowlby-Ainsworth award¹ for attachment research would endorse the position I have. You have the huge weight of informed attachment researchers saying it is better if there is a primary figure. And you have a couple of people saying the opposite. Opinion is divided on this, but not evenly.

WHAT TYPE OF TIME BUILDS ATTACHMENT?

McIntosh: The essence of the concern amongst fathers' rights groups appears to me to be the genuine worry that attachment cannot be built between a child and a father unless there is adequate time, including the opportunity for father to bathe and put the child to bed and be the person the baby wakes up to. Your thoughts?

Sroufe: Only the first part of this is true. You cannot form an attachment without regular ongoing interaction. That is true. In fact, even that is not enough. Most babies are not attached to their day care providers. Most children are not attached to their teachers. Most people aren't attached to their therapists. Attachment is a particular kind of relationship that involves secure-base behavior and the real proof for whether someone is an attachment figure is that you go through grief and mourning when you lose them. Attachment is built on the history of interaction. There is nothing in Bowlby's work about the need to put a baby to bed and get them up. If you could do an experiment studying fathers who never put their baby to bed, who never go in and be the one that they see when they wake up, but otherwise go on with their lives normally, I have no doubt that those infants would be attached to their fathers.

McIntosh: Some of the concern is around what keeps the father invested, what keeps him hooked in, especially in a high-conflict situation, where the temptation to flee the battle is often very strong and understandable.

Sroufe: That is why you need regular contact. Not for the baby, but for the father to have an ongoing relationship which ultimately is a useful thing for the child. For that, the father needs regular contact. In my view, if it can work out transportation-wise, two short visits during the week and one odd day during the weekend would be plenty for a young child to be attached to the father. Let's take the analogy of grandparents, which I now am. Children see grandparents often on weekends or more rarely, yet children definitely develop attachments to them and definitely suffer the loss when they die or are otherwise parted. Attachment is not about a fixed quantity of time.

McIntosh: There is something primitive and raw underneath the emotional quality of the protest from some separated parents. They've had a major loss. Sometimes that grief and anguish is covered up with the protest of "Why shouldn't I have the same amount of time? I am just as good a parent!"

Sroufe: That may be true of both genders. If in fact the father has been the primary parent, then I think that should be the state they hold on to. But often times, it is a case that both parents really care about the child and they've been involved with them. Well, my opinion, informed by long years of research, is the infant is better off having one base until that is completely consolidated, organized, in the bank, and they know it. What secure attachment means is the child takes forward an abiding belief that things are ok, and will be ok. If something happens so that things aren't ok, they will be ok again. I am alright, I know I can get what I need from other people. That is what you want them to have, you do not want them to have doubts about that, uncertainty, ambiguity. So once they have that in the bank, which they can usually get in the first 2 or 3 years, then it is not the same type of a problem to start going back and forth.

WHEN ATTACHMENT IS NOT IN THE BANK: RAMIFICATIONS OF INSECURITY

McIntosh: You and your colleagues "wrote the book"² about what happens when children do not get a secure attachment in the bank in the early years. What kind of trajectory are we then talking about?

Sroufe: I always prefer to start with a normative secure case; what is true for most children. The major legacy of secure attachment is that those children go forward into the social world armed with a belief that relationships with others are valuable, a belief that others will be interested in them and in being with them, a belief that they have the capability of eliciting emotional responses from other people, and a confidence about their ability to deal with emotions that arise in these interactions. You get a lot from other social partners as you go along too. For example, you do not learn very well from your parents how to give and take in conflict negotiation. You learn that with peers, and it is a challenging task because they are not so good at it themselves. You really have to go back and forth to have meeting of the minds with other pre-school children in a way you do not usually with your attachment figures. To form a close friendship with another child, you really have to wrestle with the issues of loyalty and so forth.

But the legacy of attachment is the belief in a worthwhile relationship and the capacity to emotionally connect. For example, when we followed up the study of children as adolescents, we found that adolescence is a very vulnerable time. In fact to really gain what you need to gain from adolescence, you need to be able to be vulnerable. You need to take a chance on feelings. You need to go into situations even when you realize you could get your feelings hurt. And what we found is that children who have a history of being securely attached in infancy, are more able to go ahead and take that chance. That is a very valuable capacity because if you do not, you say, "I am not going to risk that." You do not find out.

Now we turn that around and say "what is the problem with having had an anxious attachment?" In the case of those children who are referred to as having avoidant attachment, because of chronic rejection or parents' sporadic availability early on when they've been needy, they learn to not take their feelings to other people. So you watch them go out to pre-school and they do not initiate contacts with other children and they are not very responsive. And when they get disappointed or injured, they do not turn to the teachers. What is the problem with that? The problem with that is if they had turned to the teachers, they will find out that not everybody is rejecting. But they do not do it.

We are now up to adulthood in our study, and we found first that those with secure attachment histories are better able to enter into the preschool peer group and to engage in the back-and-forth sustained interaction with their peers. They are in the game. In middle childhood, they were able to form closer relationships with peers, and be in an organized peer group, and they were more able to balance being in close friendships and participating in a group. They can participate in the group without losing their connection with their friend. It is a beautiful thing to see. They may even have been chosen on different teams, but you still see them maintain their friendship. Then, in adolescence, they are more able to cope with greater complexity in the mixed-gender peer group. And in adulthood, they are better able to trust, with less hostility in relationships.

McIntosh: Given this longitudinal take on attachment pathways, family law decisions made about children in early childhood can potentially have a lasting legacy if they somehow alter the course of attachment security, one way or the other.

Sroufe: I think one of the reasons it is pretty difficult for people to sort through this is that lots of children who have nonideal custody arrangements do ok. It is just more of them will not than those who have more ideal arrangements. And our job in this society is to set this up, to give them the best chance we can. The fact that they are robust does not mean that we do not have an obligation to design things to make their challenges easier.

TAXING ATTACHMENT: THE HIGH-CONFLICT JOURNEY

McIntosh: You spoke before about giving an infant a harder job when they have to frequent between two parents, and set up two equally reliable, dependable attachments. When the hatred, animosity, and acrimony between those two attachment figures is rife and quite uncontained, what if any difference is there for the infant? The conflict may not be physical, for example, it may be a coercive, controlling type of abuse, or other significant levels of emotional abuse and manipulation. In the child's shoes, what does that do to their developmental task?

Sroufe: Well, I think that the best connection I can make with that is the role of stress on taxing the attachment system. There were three things that we've studied that impact on the attachment system and may be all involved in the situation that you described: stress, depression/anxiety and social support. Decreased social support, increased stress, and increased anxiety and/or depression on the part of the parent all interfere with developing a secure attachment. And that is apart from the direct consequence of stress and unpredictability on the child itself, which is certainly going on too.

Within our study, independent of attachment, abuse of the child and also interparental violence, contributed to behavior problems for the boys in our study. And it is worse later. As boys get a little older, there is an additional ingredient that they come to think they should do something about this, they should protect their mom and so on. So we find that witnessing violence in the preschool years is worse than having it around when you're a baby. But when you're a baby, it is part of a life stress package.

It is a burden on the child, requiring the child to meet adult needs. That is another thing we studied, and we call it "boundary dissolution." It would seem reasonable that in these families you're describing with inter-parental violence, ultimately the child is going to feel the burden of needing to take care of these wounded parents.

ATTACHMENT AND TEMPERAMENT

McIntosh: I wonder if you could give us your take on temperament in all of this?

Sroufe: That has been rather thoroughly studied. No meta-analytic study has shown that attachment variations are due to temperament. I include here studies using modern temperament measures, like cortisol reactivity, by Megan Gunner in this department.

I think there are two things here. Bowlby's theory was that quality of attachment is the product of the quality of the interaction between the child and the parent, and that holds up. This is one reason why quality of attachment to mother and father may be different. If temperament played a major role, there should be much greater concordance in those attachments, where in fact it is rather small. One reason it is small by the way, is that a lot of the attachment assessments with fathers are not valid because the father is not an attachment figure at the time of the assessment.

I do not know why people are so big on the temperament question. It probably is because they haven't ever read Ainsworth's sensitivity scales. If you read her scales of sensitivity, you will see that as the baby's mood and state change, the meaning of sensitive response by the parent changes. Sometimes a behavior that is sensitive at one time may not be sensitive at other times because the

baby's too tired now to deal with that. And similarly, if a baby has a temperament that is very easily brought to too high a level of arousal, it is not sensitive to be very stimulating to that baby. A sensitive caregiver learns to adjust behavior so that they do things gently and make transitions smoothly with a baby like that. On the other hand, there may be a baby that needs a lot of pumping up. Then it is sensitive to pump them up. So Bowlby talks about the quality of interaction, and if there are variations in temperament which are inborn, which I think is still personally a great question, but if there are, they are taken into account in the sensitive response of the parent. It is part of the job of caregiving. So it is not a surprise that variations in temperament do not predict attachment classification.

And then there is another consideration. Why do people want attachment and temperament to be the same thing? If they are different and if we actually have valid measures of temperament, and valid measures of attachment, we can use those two together, and wouldn't we understand children better? So I never have understood why people have wanted to assimilate attachment to temperament constructs.

McIntosh: There are many misconceptions about attachment that plague the family law field, and this special edition aims to chip away at finding a shared and accurate language. Another misunderstanding is around infant distress when leaving and returning to the primary parent. Sometimes it goes against the mother to report that the infant becomes upset on returning to her, rather than understanding that behavior to be a common element of reunion.

Sroufe: To be secure means that to whatever extent I need contact and reassurance, I seek it. If you look at secure infants, they manifest security in dramatically different ways. Some of them cling to caregivers a lot, while some do not cling at all. Some need less reassurance and ask for less. A baby may be thoroughly distressed by the separation, but are they anxiously attached? No, because when the mother comes back again, they go right over there, they get picked up, they hug, and they get settled rather quickly and smoothly. We know that a baby is secure with the mother because of the sharing of the affect with her on her return, the noncasual response to her return, and the way in which the infant can pick up the pieces in her presence.

This is why, (in the case where the mother is primary parent) when a baby comes back home from visiting his father, the baby is upset. That does not mean anything is wrong. That does not mean anything happened badly there. It means these adjustments are difficult, and they are. This was hard for the baby, so now his feelings of need are greater. He needs reassurance and he will settle down again, but it'll be disruptive again the next time. And no, it is not ideal to do that to them all the time. On the other hand, all babies experience this at times. Early full-time day care in particular is hard on children, and I think it accounts in part for the increase we are seeing in disorganized attachment, disorganized attachment being certainly the most pathogenic form. In short, if you make the child's job hard enough, they will not be able to form and maintain an organized pattern.

McIntosh: What of the early primary school and latency age group in high-conflict divorce?

Sroufe: I do support heartily those studies that primarily show custody arrangements do not matter as much as ongoing relationships with both parents (note that does not mean identical ongoing relationships with both, that was never in the literature), and an end to the war. I do not know that attachment research per se has much to add to the general literature around divorce. But my educated guess would be, if you could do the prospective study, you would find that children who had been securely attached to their primary caregiver would do rather better, that it would be less shaking of their belief that relationships are valuable. I think you would find that the tendency for divorced children to divorce themselves in their adult lives is moderated by a history of secure attachment. From my theoretical point of view, early secure belief in relationships and their permanence and my worth and that you will find me worthy will be shaken by divorce, but could more readily be recovered.

ON LEGISLATING FOR SHARED PARENTING

McIntosh: In that light, it is interesting to consider where some of the legislative change around shared parenting is coming from. For example, in Australia shared parenting time is now actively

supported by our revised legislation. This reflected in part an aspiration of keeping meaningful relationships with each parent after divorce. That goal was then linked to time, specifically saying that nearly equal or equal time with each parent was in the best interest of the child, so that they could maintain two equally meaningful relationships. Your thoughts?

Sroufe: Children do not need that kind of time formula to achieve two meaningful relationships. That is developmentally ignorant and it also shows no understanding of attachment relationships. It puts too much into the quantity part of it. I mean, there are children who spend more waking hours with an adult other than their parent, and their primary attachments are still with their parent. Parents who have children in day care probably understand that they are more special to their children than the day care providers. It is not quantitative.

You do need regular, ongoing contact and I don't think it would work very well to see a parent once a month. I would be strongly opposed to resolutions like that. For example, if a father of a preschooler has two short sessions a week, and on the weekend most of one day, that is plenty. That is plenty for there to be a tremendous attachment relationship. It is all up to him then and the emotion he puts into it. The hazard of fathers is that they try to make up for it with "we're going to the circus, we'll do this, and do that." All the child will need is just to be with dad. Go to the park, go to the playground, just be with them.

McIntosh: Provided there is shared affect and delight?

Sroufe: Yes, and so long as dad can accommodate the child missing mom. Some fathers want to distract them from that. And when they do that, man, you just blew a great opportunity. You can be the secure base for them right there in that moment: "Yeah, I know you miss mom, it is hard isn't it? But it will be ok, you're with me, I'll take care of you, and you will go back and see her soon." That is the interaction that builds attachment. You do not build attachment while your child is asleep. Yes, there is something to being the parent that when they wake up frightened, and you are there to comfort them. But believe me, he will get plenty of chances when they are older. In fact, when children are four, they will have more nightmares than they have in the early years by a long shot. The age of monsters under the bed is yet to come, and the father who wasn't doing overnights when the child was a baby can be there for all of that. And the age of disappointments is still to come, like my first date, and "it was terrible, everybody laughed at my dress." Both parents will have *plenty* of opportunities for comforting and supporting their child.

So when there is a baby involved, the judges need to set up the situation so that the baby can have one secure base first. The weight of expert attachment opinion is on that side.

RECOGNIZING ARRANGEMENTS THAT STRAIN THE YOUNG CHILD

McIntosh: We talked about lengthy or unsupported separations as studied by the Robertsons, and the young child's attachment system not being able to calm down or deactivate when it is aroused for too long. Part of the conundrum in family law is the question of what is too long, for which infant, and under what circumstances? When does a situation become a chronic strain, what does that look like and what damage is it doing?

Sroufe: As I said, I expect when a child returns from one place to the other, the child might be clingy. But it should not be unremitting, and they should settle down again. If they are clingy a lot, it has been too hard for them. There could be worse signs, such as the child who becomes apathetic, withdrawn and depressed. I don't know that there is a laboratory assessment that we can do. We can develop one, but we'd have to use the same procedures that Ainsworth used originally. One would have to capture what normally happens in the home to understand the context. To just say "the baby did this, and that means X or Y" is false. The criterion is what they do normally in their actual life.

I think the original Minnesota Family Law guidelines were very good. My opinion, informed by our research is this: for babies, prior to 18 months of age, overnights away from the primary carer should be quite rare. It is not that you couldn't do something like one every two weeks. But I would not start with that. The situation needs to grow and change over time. So you say for the first 3 months,

there are no overnights, but in fact, maybe even more frequent day contacts than we'll have later. After that first 3 months, we can do an overnight every few weeks, but we'll back down a little bit on the frequent day contact. You would get to more overnights at the right pace. Why can't court orders be written like that? It would be very reassuring to fathers, who would look at this, and say, "Geez, by age 3 or 4, the child is with me *a lot*."

At 3, I would not recommend it to be equal time. It is easier to see that kind of arrangement happening when the child is 6 or 8. I fully support the idea of distinctions between regular contact and equal contact, and between regular contact and overnight contact. It is the rhythmic, steady, reliable nature of contact that is needed for attachment bonds.

McIntosh: Professor Sroufe, thank you for your time and insights.

NOTES

1. The Bowlby-Ainsworth Award recognizes senior scholars who exemplified the standards of scholarship, collegiality and service that John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth shared, taught, and valued. Selections are made by the Awards Committee of the Center For Mental Health Promotion and The New York Attachment Consortium, in consultation with distinguished colleagues from several continents. http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/cmhp2005/bowlby_ainsworth_award/bowlby_ainsworth_award_main.htm.

2. Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Collins, W. A. (2005). *The development of the person: The Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood*. New York: Guilford.

SELECTED REFERENCES

- Appleyard, K., Egeland, B., & Sroufe, L. A. (2007). Direct social support for young high risk children: Relations with behavioral and emotional outcomes across time. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *35*, 443–457.
- Gunnar, M. R. (2000). Early adversity and the development of stress reactivity and regulation. In C. A. Nelson (Ed.), *The effects of adversity on neurobehavioral development: The Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology* (Vol. 31, pp. 163–200). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kovan, N., Levy-Chung, A., & Sroufe, L. A. (2009). The intergenerational continuity of observed early parenting: A prospective, longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology*, *45*, 1205–1213.
- Robertson, J., & Robertson, J. (1989). *Separation and the very young*. London: Free Association Books.
- Sroufe, L. A. (2005). Attachment and development: A prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood. *Attachment and Human Development*, *7*, 349–367.
- Sroufe, L. A. (2009). The concept of development in developmental psychopathology. *Child Development Perspectives*, *3*, 178–183.
- Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Collins, W. A. (2005). *The development of the person: The Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood*. New York: Guilford.
- Weinfield, N. S., Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., & Carlson, E. (2008). Individual differences in infant-caregiver attachment: Conceptual and empirical aspects of security. In J. Cassidy & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 78–101). New York: Guilford.

Allan Schore is on the clinical faculty of the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, David Geffen School of Medicine, University of California, Los Angeles, and Editor of the Norton series on Interpersonal Neurobiology.

Jennifer McIntosh is a clinical and developmental psychologist, family therapist, and researcher based in Melbourne. She is the Director of Family Transitions, and Adjunct Associate Professor at La Trobe University (School of Public Health).