

**Dr Helene Guldborg**, author of *Just Another Ape?* (Societas, 2010) and *Reclaiming Childhood: Freedom and Play in an Age of Fear* (Routledge, 2009) comments on the problem with deterministic neuroscientific claims about child development.

<http://www.heleneguldborg.co.uk/>

We are continually told that recent research in neuroscience shows that we are determined by the care and attention we receive in infancy. But it does not. If there is anything we can say with any degree of certainty it is that a complete absence of stimuli during infancy could have irreversible negative consequences. Beyond that, we still know very little about how experiences impact upon brain development. As I argue in 'Reclaiming Childhood: freedom and play in an age of fear' (2009): 'The brain produces an immense number of synapses (neural connections) in the first few years of a child's life. After this there is a prolonged period of 'pruning', or withering away, of synapses. But neuroscience has not come up with any clear answers as to how synaptic circuits are shaped or altered by experience. There is no firm evidence demonstrating that the type of care received in infancy has an effect on synaptogenesis – the creation of new synapses – or on synaptic pruning. These processes take place regardless of infants' experiences.' (p135).

Parental and Infant determinists invariably draw on research carried out by the late UK psychiatrist John Bowlby. He argued that an important difference between 'vulnerable' and 'resilient' children is found in the quality of their earliest relationships, particularly attachment to a mother figure. A secure relationship with their care-giver makes children more secure and able to cope with stressful situations later in life, claimed Bowlby; while children who haven't developed secure attachments in infancy fail to develop lasting relationships as adults.

But the reality is that it is far from obvious how early attachments shape our development. Although a number of longitudinal studies have been conducted that follow children from infancy to adulthood; the results of these studies are inconsistent. Research has not conclusively established a link between parenting styles and types of attachment, nor has it shown that there are 'critical periods' for emotional and social development.

I would therefore argue that infant determinists and Attachment Theorists should be honest and admit that their theory is just a hypothesis. The claim that 'research shows' we are determined by the type of care we receive in early infancy, does not stand up to closer scrutiny.