

# Thesis

## **Breastfeeding: Psychological Importance**

Name

Institution

## Abstract

Breastfeeding importance has been discussed in a number of revisions and breast milk has been identified as the idyllic nutrition source for children. It has an almost seamless combination of vitamins, fats and proteins that are necessary for development. However, this falls under the physiological importance of breastfeeding and the psychological benefits have not been subjected to the same level of research. Breastfeeding could play a part in attachment development; the stable day to day intimate encounters between mother and child provided in breastfeeding may create a calming maternal attunement that could be essential in healthy attachment development. Attachment is an affectionately close connection, a bond reciprocated that persists over a long time. Attachment theory has been addressed and analyzed in multiple studies, making valuable contributions in linking childhood experiences to adult life, specifically, childhood bonding, interaction with caregivers and how that will influence the development of future relationships. According to the theory, if one gets the proper attunement from their caregivers, they are most likely to develop a secure attachment style which helps them balance between autonomy and intimacy, without jeopardizing either. Therefore, the creation of a strong bond between mother and child during the early years plays a key role in child development. Skin to skin contact has been proven to stimulate oxytocin release in humans which aids in strengthening bonds and there are no better moments to bond than when one is breastfeeding. The purpose of this thesis proposal was to review psychological bonding in breastfeeding and its importance for an infant's current and future relationships as well as evaluate the evidence in psychological and behavioral studies on whether breastfeeding plays an important role in not only bonding mother and infant but also promoting healthy relationships when the infant reaches adulthood.

**Keywords:** breastfeeding, attachment style, attachment theory, oxytocin.

## Breastfeeding: Psychological Importance

Breastfeeding is the most common endorsed way of feeding infants worldwide. It is commended as it has significant physiological and psychological advantages. Physiological advantages have been well acknowledged, but the psychological benefits, specifically the relationship between breastfeeding and healthy attachment development, have not been agreed upon. A healthy attachment in human beings starts at an early age. Some research studies have pointed out that attachment starts in the womb and continues to grow during breastfeeding. The intimacy between mother and child creates secure emotional bonding (Jackson, 2016). A secure emotional bond has been suggested to create a platform for a secure attachment style that endures over time, from childhood to teenagehood and adulthood. This thesis proposal will be an in-depth review of existing studies and will evaluate attachment, breastfeeding, and the resulting psychological importance.

## **Problem Statement**

The psychological importance of breastfeeding has not been given the same attention as the physiological benefits of it, and this has created an information niche. This thesis proposal hopes to report some of the psychological benefits a child may get from breastfeeding.

## **Objectives**

- I. To determine the relationship between breastfeeding and emotional bonding
- II. To determine the relationship between breastfeeding and attachment development
- III. To determine the relationship between strong emotional bonding and secure attachment

## **Hypothesis**

If a mother creates a secure bond with the child during breastfeeding, then the child will develop a healthy attachment in existing and future relationships.

## **Literature Review**

Breastfeeding provides an environment for the infant and the mother to bond. Bonding between mother and child is essential for a healthy child development, the achievement of developmental milestones and attachment (Zeifman, 2019). During breastfeeding, mother's body increases its hormone release for prolactin and oxytocin (Linde, Lehnig, Nagl, & Kersting, 2019). Oxytocin, especially, has been linked to the expression of maternal love in humans and increased tolerance in stressful events (Linde, Lehnig, Nagl, & Kersting, 2019). Oxytocin starts working when a mother is in contact or knows or imagines there will be contact with the infant (Jackson, 2016). Keeping the mother and baby together is very crucial, and skin-to-skin contact is very much encouraged, as it helps with emotional bonding. The mother gets attuned to the child and the child's needs, and this promotes the development of such personal trait as trust in a child (Jackson, 2016). Trust and secure bonding with a caregiver have been linked to secure attachment, which helps establish healthy adult relationships.

Secure attachment, as identified by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in their theory of attachment, is an attachment style that is expressed by people who exhibit a positive view of not only themselves but others too (Zeifman, 2019). It has been proposed that it develops from a background of responsive and warm interactions with caregivers, thus its link to interactions between infant and mother (Zeifman, 2019). These people often have no trouble establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and are comfortable with both intimacy and independence. The secure attachment also entails adaptive

functioning, which has skills necessary to manage and go through stressors and demands of everyday life in a healthy, mature, and effective way.

## **Research Design**

The thesis proposal will be a systematic review of prior research on the topic in the school library database. The research will evaluate published sources located with help of advice from the school librarian and gather information through contacting experts in the field of present study. Published sources will not be more than 10 years old, and their applicability to the research will be screened by looking at their title and abstract. Synthesis of the data will be presented as a narrative summary in the final thesis.

## **Expected Findings and Implications**

This study hopes to show the psychological importance of breastfeeding by refining, justifying and giving structure to prior studies. Thus, explaining any gaps, inconsistencies or conflicts in data hence giving an in-depth exploration to provide a generalized view of the population. Infants are able to recognize their birth mothers, even in the womb (Spierling, Ciciolla, Tiemeyer, & Shreffler, 2018). If separated from their mothers, they develop separation anxiety, which if experienced for extended periods, will most likely result in unhealthy attachment styles (Linde, Lehnig, Nagl & Kersting, 2019). Interruption of breastfeeding during infancy may have a role in the development of unhealthy attachment styles that may persist into adulthood. The value of breastfeeding cannot be stressed enough, providing a strong case for the mothers who have adopted children and would desire to breastfeed them. Adopted infants, in most cases, have lost their birth mothers finding themselves being cared for by different people in different institutions and are prone to emotional and physical abuse. All these experiences negatively impact the child's relationships. The child may be unable to build healthy relationships with their adoptive mothers, which in turn can affect their adult relationships (Jackson, 2016). Mothers, who have adopted infants, can be stable primary caregivers and through breastfeeding can provide the infant with a secure emotional bond, in turn, increasing the likelihood of the infant being securely attached which trickles down to shape their adulthood.

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