**Attachment is an emotional bond to another person**.

Psychologist John Bowlby was the first attachment theorist, describing four characteristics of attachment observed in developing children between the ages of six months and two years old.

Bowlby believed that the bonds formed as a result of these observed characteristics continued throughout life, becoming a blueprint used in the development of subsequent relationships.     Mary Ainsworth, initially conducted research into attachment theory with Bowlby, and later on her own. She expanded the theory to include three styles of attachment (with a fourth being added later).

By being responsive to an infant's needs, a caregiver (usually the mother) establishes a sense of security for the infant. Once the infant establishes this feeling of security, it develops a secure base to explore the world.

The basic idea of attachment theory is that if a caregiver (usually the caregiver) is attentive and dependable, then that caregivers child will be secure in their environment and will use the security of this relationship with the caregiver as a base from which to explore their world.  Once a child has established this primary relationship, it uses it as a template for other relationships.

Bowlby introduced a revolutionary way of thinking about how a mother and child bond, and the repercussions of the disruption of that bond and that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life.

Bowlby and Ainsworth  
John Bowlbys work defines attachment theory as a lasting psychological 'connectedness' between human beings. He theorized that by being closer to its caregiver, an infant is more likely to survive. He also theorized that not only is the infant innately programmed to form attachments, but the caregiver is also programmed to respond.    Mary Ainsworth expanded on Bowlbys research with her series of "strange situation" experiments; Ainsworth described three major styles of attachment: secure attachment, ambivalent-insecure attachment, and avoidant-insecure attachment (Brittany, 2010). A fourth category was added later based upon additional research.

Attachment theory defines four characteristics: proximity maintenance, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress (Bowlby, 1969).

Proximity Maintenance is demonstrated by how a child will stay near the caregiver. The constant proximity of the caregiver causes the child to regard the caregiver as a safe haven (because the caregiver has been a constant and responsive presence to them).

The caregiver, by providing the safe haven to the child becomes a secure base from which the child can begin to explore its world. When the child feels that there is danger nearby he can return to his caregiver. Bowlby defined this behavioral system of moving between 'exploring behavior' and 'safe haven behaviour'.

The first style is "secure attachment". A child in this category will explore freely while the caregiver is present. This includes engaging strangers. However, when the caregiver leaves the child, it becomes visibly upset and stops interacting with the stranger. When the caregiver comes back, the child calms down and starts interacting again.

The second style is "anxious-resistant insecure attachment." This category is more dramatic. Even when the caregiver is present, the child is anxious when a stranger is around, and becomes upset when the caregiver leaves. When the caregiver returns, the child is resentful and resistant to attention.

The third style is "anxious-avoidant insecure attachment". A child who exhibits the behavior associated with this style acts indifferent to anyone present. The strangers and the caregiver alike are ignored and receive little attention. This represents a disengaged relationship between the child and caregiver.

The last style is "disorganized/disoriented attachment." Children exhibiting this style often have caregivers that experienced something traumatic after the birth that left them suffering from depression. The disorganized/disoriented child will usually cry when the caregiver leaves, and then freeze or fall to the floor when the caregiver returns. When strangers are present, the child is slightly upset and confused.

Attachment Disorder  
What happens when proximity maintenance, safe haven, and secure base aren't present for a child? A child can develop Reactive Attachment Disorder because of neglect, abuse, or just inconsistent response by the caregiver.   Because of this a child may be unable to attach to a primary caregiver and go through the normal development necessary to function in relationships. Instead of learning to trust as an infant experiencing normal attachment characteristics, an infant subjected to the above responses learns that the world is an unsafe place, and that he can trust no one. He learns that he cannot depend on adults. Children with reactive attachment disorder feel the need to always be in control.

​

Grateful acknowledgment to the original author:

The Attachment System Throughout the Life Course: Review and Criticisms of Attachment Theory. Erin J. Lee. Rochester.

Accessed online March 2017.