



# The Possible Misclassification of Disinhibited Reactive Attachment Disorder as a Psychiatric Illness

## Reactive Attachment Disorder

Disinhibited Reactive Attachment Disorder (DAD) is currently categorized as a psychiatric illness by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). DAD is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as “diffuse attachments as manifest by indiscriminate sociability with marked inability to exhibit appropriate selective attachments (e.g., excessive familiarity with relative strangers or lack of selectivity in choice of attachment figures)”<sup>1</sup> Reactive Attachment Disorder arises in a young child when they are neglected, abused or lose their primary caregiver or “secure base”.<sup>2</sup> A secure base is defined by John Bowlby (a pioneer in the study of attachment theory) as reliable, sustained care which provides the infant with the protection and resources necessary for life. When this secure base is lost, a child searches for replacement care. The child may approach many possible caregivers in order to build a new, stronger secure base. This behavior is not seen as acceptable in modern society and in fact a child who seeks bonds with unknown adults may be exposing themselves to great risk. Perhaps most troubling is that this behavior persists even after the child is placed with a new care group equipped to handle his physical and emotional needs. DAD is most commonly diagnosed in children who have been in foster care or institutionalized in an orphanage system.

### Works Cited

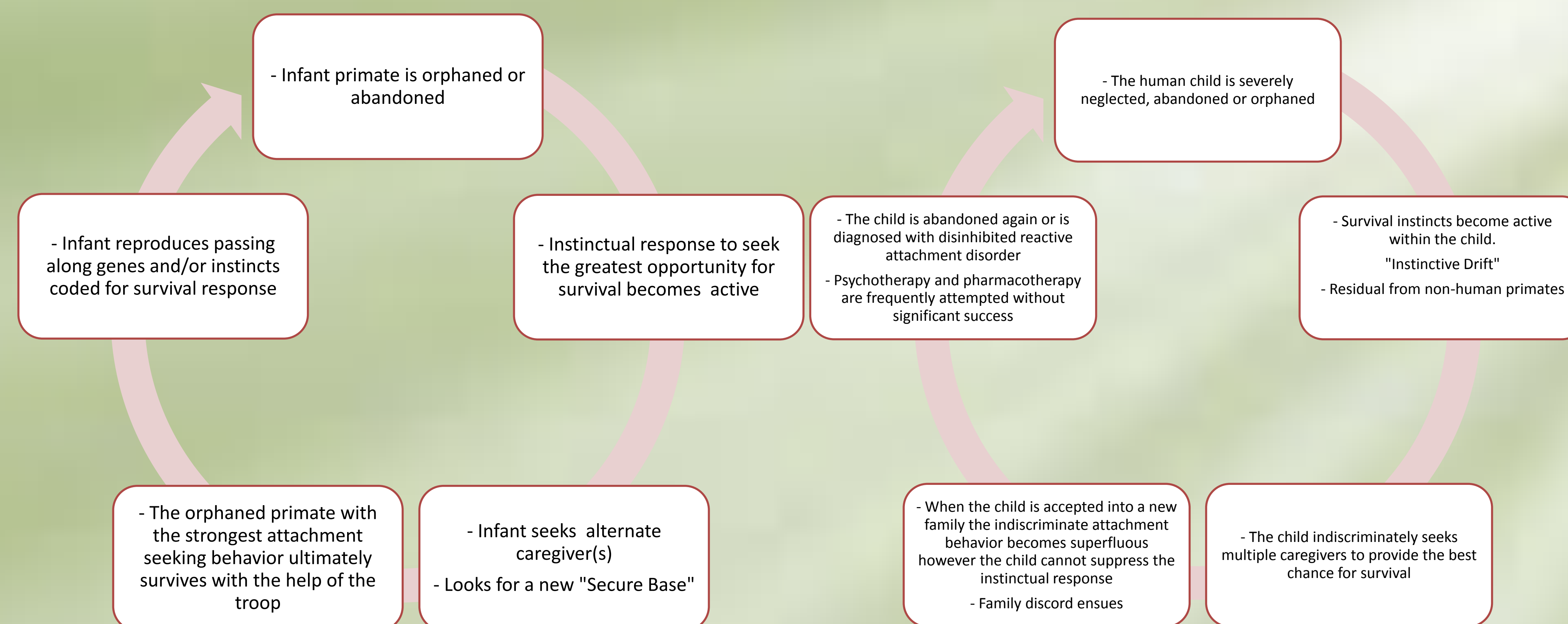
1. American Psychiatric Association (2000). "Diagnostic criteria for 313.89 Reactive attachment disorder of infancy or early childhood". *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., text revision (DSM-IV-TR) ed.)*. United States: American Psychiatric Press.

2. Bowlby, J. (1958), "The nature of the child's tie to his mother". *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, XXXIX, 1-23*.

## Issues With Diagnosis and Treatment

Difficulties arise during the diagnosis phase of the treatment of DAD. The criteria for diagnosis given by the American Psychiatric Association are broad and generalized. Any diagnosis is made further difficult because of the underlying conditions which often accompany this behavior. Children being screened for a DAD diagnosis are often traumatized and under vast amounts of emotional stress due to new living conditions and/or caregivers.

Treatment methods include both psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy. Neither of these methods boast great success and doctors are at a loss as to how to properly treat a child with a DAD diagnosis.<sup>3</sup>



3. Main M, Solomon J. "Procedures for identifying infants as disorganized/disoriented during the Ainsworth Strange Situation". In Greenberg M, Cicchetti D and Cummings E (Eds.) *Attachment in the preschool years: Theory, research and intervention*, 1990. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 121–60.

## The Non-Human Primate Connection

At first examination the behavior exhibited by the DAD diagnosed child seems illogical and disordered. The child may seem to be belligerent and attention-seeking. However, as we begin to look at primates who live in kinship groups we see very similar behavior. When a secure base is lost, a young primate actively seeks out a new group of caregivers. This instinctual behavior is beneficial as a lone young primate faces nearly impossible odds of survival. The troop accepts the infant and provides a new secure base because larger troops are better able to fend off predators and attacks from other troops.

## Conclusions

What we are seeing more and more of in the U.S. are children who have a diagnosis of DAD but are untreatable. If we consider the fact that humans are primates and have evolved from primate ancestors we begin to see a connection between non-human primates seeking a secure base and human infants displaying the characteristics of what we have classified as disordered behavior. This same behavior when viewed in a different societal context is very beneficial to the child. The issue at hand here is that society has changed but instinct has not. Treatment is failing because one cannot simply turn off an instinct. In neglected and abused children this survival mechanism becomes active and helps them to protect themselves from further harm.

### Acknowledgement

My research on disinhibited RAD (DAD) drew from the fields of Neuropsychology, Physical Anthropology and Human and Non-human Primate Psychology. As an undergraduate I was expertly guided through the literature review of each of these disciplines by the esteemed Dr. Phillips Stevens. Any errors contained within my research are entirely my own.