

# What About The Children?

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## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### **The Uniqueness of the child-father attachment relationship: Fathers' sensitive and challenging play as a pivotal variable in a 16-year longitudinal study**

**By Karin Grossmann et al., *Social Development* 2002, vol. 11**

This longitudinal study of 44 families from northern Germany set out to explore "fathers' as compared to mothers' specific contribution to their children's attachment representation at ages 6, 10 and 16 years" (p. 308, para 1).

Most studies of infant-father attachment have used the same assessment (the Strange Situation Procedure) as the one for infant-mother attachment. This tacitly assumes that the tender loving care or caregiving sensitivity that promotes infant-mother attachment is also essential for promoting infant-father attachment. However, this method has failed to demonstrate any strong relationship between "paternal caregiving sensitivity during the first year and father-infant attachment quality" (p. 308, para 3). In spite of this, "other studies [suggest] that the best prediction for later psychosocial functioning of the children was derived from infant-mother *and* infant-father attachment combined" (p. 309, para3).

In an effort to pin down the variables that affect infant-father attachment and to study their longitudinal impact, if any, on the attachment representation of children, this study added a new assessment, the sensitive and challenging interactive play scale (SCIP) for the parents. The SCIP scale is designed to test parental "sensitivity, support and gentle challenges of their child's exploratory play activity" (p. 324, para 3) in normal, distress-free situations as opposed to the Strange Situation Procedure which examines children's coping strategies when dealing with separation from parents.

The SCIP was administered in addition to the traditional tests of attachment, viz. the Strange Situation, the Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) at 6 years, the Attachment and Current Relationship Interview at age 10 and the Adult Attachment Interview at age 16, which are administered to the children.

The results showed that

- 1) the mothers' sensitivity of care in the first year predicted their child's quality of attachment at 12 months (p. 320, last para) and was positively correlated to the child's emotional security at ages 6 and 10 (p. 322, paras 2 and 3);
- 2) mothers' play quality, as assessed on the SCIP scale from ages 2 to 6, was not significantly related to the child's emotional security at any age;
- 3) the fathers' sensitivity of care in the first year was not significantly related to the child's attachment security at 18 months (p. 322, paras 2, 3 and 4); however,
- 4) fathers' play quality with their children, when the children were 2 to 6 years old, was significantly related to children's emotional security at ages 10 and 16 (p. 322, paras 3 and 4). In fact, at the age of 16, fathers' play quality, as measured through the SCIP, was the only factor which predicted the adolescents' security of attachment. Infant-mother attachment, infant-father attachment and mothers' play scores all failed to predict the state of the children's emotional security at 16.

The authors have interpreted the results to demonstrate that both mothers and fathers make important and unique contributions to the emotional security of their children. The fact that infant-mother attachment (as assessed at 12 months through the SSP) and fathers' SCIP scores (as assessed between the ages of 2 to 6 years) were both significantly related to children's emotional security at 6, 10 and 16 years means that both factors together are providing the building blocks of the children's emotional development.

The results, the authors believe, fit in with Bowlby's definition of the two variables that affect the individual's later capacity "to make affectional bonds: (1) the extent to which a child's parents provide him with a secure base, and (2) the extent to which they encourage him to explore from it" (p. 311, para 1)<sup>1</sup>. Within the context of this definition, the results indicate that the two roles are shared by the two parents but both have long-term impact. This is a very significant finding in that it allots a role to fathers in the emotional growth and development of their children which is as important and unique as the mothers'. The distinctive finding of this study is to suggest the dynamics of infant-father attachment which has proved to be elusive so far. It seems, from these results, that the contribution of fathers to the emotional wellbeing of their children is made through the quality of their play rather than through tender loving care as is the case with the mothers. However, its long-term impact would seem to be as clear as that of the infant-mother attachment.

Mothers, through the sensitive care they provide in infancy, assure the child of a safe haven in times of distress and need. This is why, they argue, the Strange Situation Procedure, an artificially created stressful situation, has proved to be a good predictor of infant-mother attachment. Fathers, on the other hand, make their contribution when their children are toddlers by being sensitive and trusted companions to their children in gently challenging play. Through their more vigorous play they encourage the child to explore his/her surroundings and gain confidence in dealing with the world around them. This is why, they say, infant-mother attachment (but not infant-father attachment) and fathers' SCIP scores (though not the mothers' SCIP scores) were predictive of their children's emotional security in later years.

The authors do, however, caution, in their summary of the findings, that this study had a small sample and the participants basically conformed to the traditional family model of the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the homemaker. The results do not preclude the possibility of one parent combining both roles, or two parents sharing the roles in ways other than those presented here.

Summary by Dr Sasmita Sinha

<sup>1</sup> Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. London: Tavistock Publications.