

What About The Children?

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Secure Attachment in Infancy Predicts Context-Dependent Emotion Expression in Middle Childhood.

Tabachnick, A. R., He, Y., Zajac, L., Carlson, E.A. & Dozier, M.

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American Psychological Association.

This research analysed any associations between securely attached and insecurely attached children in their infant years, and their videoed behaviour during two discussions (first negative and then positive situations), with their parents at aged 9. All the children from this study were in families which had been referred to Child Protective Services for risk of maltreatment when they were infants.

Method

The families had joined the study when the children were infants (average 20 months) because there was a risk of maltreatment. At that time, the families were scored for one of four types of attachment: securely attached or insecurely attached (avoidant, resistant or disorganised). Theoretically, early experiences of frequent rejection could lead to avoidant attachment, experiences of inconsistent care may lead to resistant attachment and abuse, or frightening parental behaviours may lead to disorganized attachment. For the current study, 77 families were revisited when the children were 9 years old. There were a high number of children with black ethnicity (70%) or more than one race (17%), also white (14%) and Latin American (20%). The ratio of male to female children was 54%:46%. The percentage of securely attached children was 47% (36 children) and 53% (41 children) insecurely attached (i.e. 32 children disorganized, 8 avoidant and 1 resistant).

Each pair of parent and child were video-recorded for 13 minutes during a set-up discussion and scored using methods developed at the University of Delaware, U.S.A. The parent and child first discussed a recent event which was distressing for the child (8 minutes). Then they together planned a perfect day trip for the child (5 minutes). The researchers coded the videos according to positive affect, negative affect and appropriateness of the child's expression for each task. Affectivity refers to emotions and feelings that we experience and display. Emotions and feelings with positive affect include joy, cheerfulness, contentment, pride, enthusiasm, energy, engagement. Those with negative affect include anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression, lethargy, distress, disgust.

The researchers wanted to test two hypotheses:

- 1) Did children who were securely attached as an infant, show more negative affect in a distressing situation and more positive affect in a positive situation?
- 2) Did children who were securely attached as an infant, reduce their negative response and increase their positive response in the transition between one conversation and the next, more rapidly than insecurely attached children?

Results

The securely attached children showed fewer positive reactions in a negative discussion, and fewer negative reactions in a positive discussion as well as a

sharper decrease in negative emotion between the negative discussion and the positive discussion. In addition, the secure children were rated as more appropriate in their emotion expression than insecure children. The statistical tests showed:

- 1) No difference in negative affect in a **distressing** situation or in positive affect in a **positive situation/task** between attached and insecurely attached children.
- 2) No difference in appropriateness of expression in a **distressing** situation between attached and insecurely attached children.
- 3) **Significantly** more appropriateness of expression in a **positive situation/task** in the attached children, than insecurely attached group.
- 4) **Significantly** less incongruous expression (less positive emotion in a distressing situation or less negative emotion in a positive situation) in the attached children, than insecurely attached group.

Discussion

In the interactions which were not significantly different, which was unexpected, the researchers discussed the possible reasons behind this. Children with a history of insecure attachment may have a deficit in understanding the emotional context of a situation, thus exhibiting greater task-incongruous 'affect' than children with a history of secure attachment as discussed by Cooke et al (2016).

In the insecurely attached children, the three sub-groups (avoidant, resistant or disorganised) were classed as one group, because of the limited sample size. To get a group with larger numbers of each of the three insecure subgroups, a group varying in risk for maltreatment could be used.

The results suggest that **securely attached** children may be better able to 'down-regulate' their distress following a discussion with their parents.

The researchers suggested modifications to the experiments for further research:

- Negative emotions had been scored together in this present research, but in further work 'anger' or 'sadness' could be scored separately. For example, insecurely attached children may be expressing anger and frustration in a distressing situation, but securely attached children may be expressing sadness about the event, in order to seek support from their parent.
- There could be a non-mal-treated sample of children for a comparison sample.
- Collapsing the three insecure groups may have obscured some of the effects in the study; avoidant attachment is linked to blunted emotion expression and resistant attachment is linked to exaggerated emotion expression.
- In this study, the majority of the insecurely attached children (32 out of 41) were scored as disorganised. In a future study, it might be possible to find a group with more equal numbers in the three insecurely attached subgroups or just make a comparison between attached and disorganised insecurely attached children.

Future research may include recording parent behaviour as well, to better understand the interaction between parent and child occurring during the interviews.

Dr Elizabeth Bland