



# **Encyclopedia of Human Relationships**

## **Attachment Typologies, Childhood**

Contributors: Ashley C. Seibert & Kathryn A. Kerns

Edited by: Harry T. Reis & Susan Sprecher

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John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, pioneers of Attachment Theory, have set forth several criteria that need to be met in order for a relationship to be considered an attachment relationship. Attachment relationships in childhood have been described as enduring, emotional bonds that a child forms with a particular caregiver, typically a parent. Ideally, the relationship provides the child with security and comfort so that he or she can use the attachment figure as a secure base from which to explore the environment and as a safe haven in times of distress. The formation of attachment to caregivers is a normative event. That is, all children form attachments to their caregivers even if they do not receive adequate care. Attachment relationships are thought to be long-enduring, and the attachment figure is not interchangeable with another person. There is a desire to maintain closeness to the attachment figure and reestablish proximity if the bond is threatened. In an attachment relationship, a child may experience distress if separated from his or her attachment figure and will experience grief if there is permanent loss. This entry will focus on parent–child attachment during childhood (1 to 10 years of age).

This entry begins with a discussion of normative changes in the attachment system from infancy through middle childhood and then moves to a description of individual differences in the quality of attachment and on how differences in attachment organization are related to children's developmental outcomes. A number of complex issues surrounding measuring attachment during this age period are also highlighted. The entry ends with current directions in the study of attachment during childhood.

### **Changes in the Attachment System from Infancy to Middle Childhood**

During infancy, children begin to organize their affect, cognition, and behavior in relation to a particular figure. Their behavior is organized around the set goal of the attachment system. The set goal refers to a desired state children try to achieve, which in infancy is proximity to an attachment figure. When infants experience a threat or distress, their attachment systems are activated and they will display several attachment behaviors (e.g., crying) to achieve the goal of proximity (e.g., physical contact with an attachment figure). Once the goal is achieved, and distress is alleviated, the attachment system is less activated, and infants can explore their environment.

As children move from infancy to early childhood, there are some changes in the attachment system. One change is that children develop more elaborate internal working models, or representations, about the self and others. These representations develop from earlier interactions children have had with their attachment figures and include expectations for how others will react or respond to the child in times of distress, views about whether the world is an interesting place to explore, information about how conflicts are resolved, and information about how to cope with emotions. Additionally, there is an increase in the use of language during early childhood. This increase allows children and their attachment figures to talk about and make plans for situations that may be potentially upsetting. For example, attachment figures may reassure children that they will continue to be accessible and responsive.

As children enter middle childhood they experience many changes including increased time spent outside the home, shifts in their responsibility to assist in parental supervision, and greater contact with and interest in peers. They also experience changes in parent–child attachments. Some researchers have suggested that this is when the set goal of the attachment system changes from proximity of the attachment

figure to the availability of the attachment figure. Children in middle childhood can tolerate longer separations and increased distance from attachment figures as long as they know that it is possible to contact the figure if needed. Another change during middle childhood is a decline in the frequency and intensity of attachment behaviors. For example, it is rare to see a 7-to-12-year-old child following and clinging to their attachment figure in the presence of a stranger, even though these behaviors were quite common during infancy and early childhood. Finally, as children enter middle childhood, they begin to share responsibility for communicating to and maintaining contact with the attachment figure. For example, children at this age must notify their parents about where they are and any changes that may occur in their plans.

### **Individual Differences in the Quality of Attachment**

The above is a brief introduction to normative, age-related changes in parent–child attachment. However, the majority of attachment research has focused on individual differences (i.e., how attachments vary in quality), not normative changes. Although children's relationships with their parents may vary in many important ways, Attachment Theory has conceptualized these variations in terms of attachment security, which reflects differences in how children organize their behavior in relation to an attachment figure. Further, Attachment Theory emphasizes that differences in attachment security reflect the strategies children develop to regulate contact with the attachment figure and thus represent adaptations to a particular caregiving environment.

Children who experience sensitive and responsive care are expected to form a secure relationship with their caregiver. A sensitive and responsive parent is able to notice his or her child's communication signals, respond appropriately, and is warm, accepting, and affectionate. In this relationship, the child is able to use the parent as a secure base from which to explore the environment and as a haven of safety in times of distress. Additionally, because they have received sensitive and responsive care, securely attached children are likely to develop an internal working model of the attachment figure as sensitive and responsive and as an internal working model of the self as worthy of care. The perception of the attachment figure's availability gives the securely attached child the confidence to explore new situations.

Children who are not able to use their attachment figures as a secure base and safe haven may develop insecure attachments to their attachment figures. Insecurely attached children have failed to develop confidence in the responsiveness and availability of the caregiver. There are three forms of insecure attachment that are characterized by avoidance, ambivalence, or disorganization in relation to a particular attachment figure. Each has been associated with a distinct pattern of caregiving.

Children who experience rejecting caregiving are expected to form an insecure-avoidant relationship with their caregiver. Rejecting parents tend to ignore or punish their child's bids for contact and attention, especially when the child is expressing negative emotions. Insecure-avoidant children are likely to develop an internal working model of the attachment figure as consistently rejecting. Because their parents reject the children's expression of negative emotion, these children tend to minimize (i.e., hide or mask) their emotions. The minimizing of emotion is thought to be adaptive because it is a way for the child to maintain a connection with his or her attachment figure. That is, when insecure-avoidant children minimize their emotions, they reduce the risk of isolating themselves from their rejecting care-giver. Minimizing emotions to less stressful events also leaves open the possibility for the caregiver to be responsive if a

more stressful or serious event occurs.

Parents of insecure-ambivalent children tend to be inconsistently responsive or somewhat inept at reading social signals of their child. As a result, children are unsure they can count on the parent's support. Insecure-ambivalent children are likely to develop an internal working model of the attachment figure as inconsistently available and heighten their displays of emotion. Just as minimizing emotions is adaptive for insecure-avoidant children, heightening emotions is adaptive for insecure-ambivalent children because it serves as a way to maintain a connection with an inconsistently available caregiver (i.e., displays of emotion draw the attention of their attachment figure). By maximizing their emotions, these children are ensuring that their inconsistent caregiver will be available if a serious, stressful event does occur.

Parents of insecure-disorganized children are often psychologically unavailable. They may be coping with stress in their own lives such as adapting to their own loss or trauma (e.g., death of a parent) or marital problems. Other parents of insecure-disorganized children may be abusive or neglectful. Children who form a disorganized attachment to a caregiver are unable to use the attachment figure as a secure base or safe haven in a coherent and organized way. At times, they may show a combination of avoidance and ambivalence. These children also may show bizarre behaviors, such as freezing when the attachment figure is around because the caregiver is a source of fear as well as a safe haven (e.g., if the child has experienced abuse). Some older insecure-disorganized children respond to the psychological unavailability of their parent by adopting the parental role, and the role reversal may be manifested in the child's either serving as a caregiver to the parent or treating the parent in a punitive way.

### **Associations between Attachment and Developmental Outcomes**

The quality of parent–child attachment has been found to have implications for later development. Attachment Theory predicts that children who form secure attachments will have a developmental advantage over children who form insecure attachments in terms of their ability to manage stage salient tasks. Securely attached children show benefits in areas such as school competence, self-concept, emotion regulation, peer competence, and lack of behavior problems. There is less consistent evidence regarding whether particular forms of insecure attachment are related to particular difficulties. Most research has investigated children's behaviors that are correlated with different categories of mother–child attachment.

### **School Competence and Self-Concept**

The quality of attachment may be related to school competence in that securely attached children may show better adaptation to school due the sense of confidence, competence, and self-efficacy that they gain from experiencing a secure attachment relationship. Research generally supports this hypothesis. Secure attachment seems to be related to better adaptation to school as shown in children's work habits, attitudes, and persistence. However, secure attachment has not been consistently linked to intelligence or specific cognitive skills, although insecure-disorganized children have been found to have the lowest grades or performances on tests of cognitive skills.

Attachment quality may be related to a child's view of the self in that securely attached children who experience sensitive and responsive care are likely to view themselves as worthy of the care of others. Securely attached children are also predicted to have an

open and balanced view of the self in that they can recognize their own limitations. Consistent with this hypothesis, securely attached children tend to report higher self-esteem and are reported by teachers to have higher self-confidence. Securely attached children also tend to have positive views of the self and others. These linkages may be explained by the fact that secure children know that their attachment figure will be available if needed, and they view the self as worthy of care. By contrast, insecurely attached children may view their attachment figure as unavailable, unhelpful, and even hurtful, and they view the self as unworthy of care.

### **Emotion Regulation and Peer Competence**

Emotion regulation is related in meaningful ways to Attachment Theory. Securely attached children use their attachment figure as a safe haven when distressed. Emotional distress is handled effectively in a secure attachment relationship, and eventually securely attached children may internalize effective emotion regulation strategies. Studies show that securely attached children do tend to use more constructive coping strategies such as support seeking or problem solving. Secure attachment is also related to more positive and less negative mood in daily interactions. Insecure-disorganized children are especially likely to show problems with emotion-regulation skills.

Attachment quality is also hypothesized to predict the quality of children's relationships with their peers. One reason is that a history of secure attachment is associated with the confidence to explore new environments, including environments involving peers. Another reason is that securely attached children learn how to behave in relationships through interactions with their caregivers. Additionally, as mentioned above, securely attached children have more effective emotion-regulation capabilities that are important for maintaining peer relationships. In empirical studies, securely attached children have been found to experience higher quality friendships and have higher peer competence. In terms of the relations of attachment to peer competence, insecure-avoidant children tend to victimize their peers while insecure-ambivalent children tend to be victims.

### **Behavior Problems**

One of the most extensively studied propositions regarding the behavioral correlates of differences in security of attachment is that a secure attachment relationship lays a healthy, solid foundation for development, while an insecure attachment relationship is associated with behavior problems. The results for internalizing and externalizing behavior problems are mixed, however. Although several studies have found that secure attachments are related to lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, it is less clear how the specific forms of insecurity are related to behavior problems. Researchers predicted that internalizing behavior problems would be most related to insecure-ambivalent attachment, but studies have found that internalizing behavior problems are linked to insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-disorganized attachment. Similarly, externalizing behavior problems have been linked to both avoidant and disorganized attachments.

### **Measurement**

Initially, parent-child attachment was studied with infants, and measures were developed that could describe a child's attachment behavior in relation to a particular

parent. For example, some measures such as Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation procedures used separation-reunion procedures to assess attachment behavior. As researchers became more interested in studying attachment in older children, newer attachment measures were developed to assess attachment representations, which are scripts or schemas that capture children's ideas about their relationship with an attachment figure. Representation measures include storytelling tasks or autobiographical interviews. Because of the developmental changes taking place throughout early and middle childhood, different measures may be more appropriate at different ages. For example, autobiographical approaches may be too cognitively demanding for a 6-year-old, while separation-reunion measures may not sufficiently stress an older child to invoke attachment behavior.

During infancy, there are validated measures of attachment, including the Strange Situation and the Attachment Q-sort that assess parent-child attachment by describing a child's secure base behavior in relation to a parent either at home or in the laboratory. In early and middle childhood there is not yet a single standard for measuring attachment. Behavioral observations (separation-reunion procedures) are most common for 3-to-6-year-olds. Story stem techniques (i.e., asking children to complete attachment-themed stories) are most common for 3-to-12-year-olds. Questionnaires that assess security, avoidance, or ambivalence are common for 9-to-18-year-olds. Autobiographical interviews are common for children 11 years or older. None of the measures used after infancy have been validated to the extent of the Strange Situation. However, there is some evidence for validity for these measures as behavioral observations of 3-to-6-year-olds have been found to be related to earlier Strange Situation assessments, and observational measures of attachment in early childhood are related to representation measures of attachment in early childhood and middle childhood.

### **Current Directions**

As is evident from the measurement section, there is a great need to give more consideration to how the manifestations of attachment change over time. Relatively little research has documented age-related changes in attachment, especially beyond early childhood. Across childhood and adolescence, individuals experience multiple attachment relationships. Adolescent children are thought to have the ability to form generalized representations of attachment, or to have a state of mind in regard to attachment. It is not yet known how experiences in individual relationships come to be integrated into a generalized representation. One's conceptualization of attachment also has implications for which form of measurement is appropriate. With the recent proliferation of measures, it is important to evaluate specific evidence that any measure labeled as *attachment* is in fact valid for assessing the phenomena specified in Attachment Theory.

One important limitation of attachment research is that most studies to date have focused only on mother-child attachment. Only a few studies have demonstrated that fathers contribute a unique, rather than a redundant, role in children's development. To fully understand how parent-child attachment influences developmental outcomes, however, it may be necessary to examine both mother-child and father-child attachment across childhood. In addition, more information is needed about the little studied role and importance of nonparental attachment figures such as siblings and grandparents.

Additionally, it is important to remember that attachment is just one source of influence on child development. More research should examine how attachment, in combination with other aspects of social experience, influences children's development. For example, the finding that attachment influences peer relationships should inspire research on how early attachment history and previous peer experience work together to influence children's later peer relationships. Another direction is to examine variables that may explain the links between attachment and peer relationships.

- attachment
- secure attachment
- parent-child attachment
- children
- caregiving
- strange situation
- safe havens

Ashley C. Seibert, and Kathryn A. Kerns

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**See also**

- [Adult Attachment, Individual Differences](#)
- [Adult Attachment Interview](#)
- [Attachment Theory](#)
- [Emotion Regulation, Developmental Influences](#)
- [Parent-Child Relationships](#)
- [Parenting](#)
- [Strange Situation](#)

**Further Readings**

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