Attachment and Conduct Problems during the Preschool Years

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Abstract

How it may be that attachment security research has been able to predict developmental outcomes? In this article, the attachment theory and research relevant to the development of conduct problems in young children are reviewed first.

Then, a multi-pathway model of parent-child conflict that reflects the developmental changes in the child, the parent, and the attachment relationships is introduced. Finally, some of the clinical implications of this approach are outlined. The goal is to greater understanding how children’s behavior problems develop from the attachment theoretical perspective.

Key words: attachment theory, internal working model, conduct problems, operant parent training program

INTRODUCTION

Some children do well in their social relationships; they enjoy others and are enjoyed, and they develop a wide range of adaptive skills. However, as many as 15% of children do not develop as well (Bates & Bayles, 1988); they show problem behaviors and signs of internal and interpersonal disturbance. It is not apparent how these major variations in children’s adaptations come about. How do some children attain a wealth of socially valued roles, whereas others are comparatively attain a wealth of negative roles? The major goal is greater understanding of how children’s behavior problems development. Attachment concepts are increasingly relevant to this goal, and we use them as one way of examining the paths individual children follow toward differing social adaptations.

There has been an impressive accumulation of relation in the past 20 years on attachment security; the literature has been suggesting it as a major factor in children’s social competence and emotional adjustment outcomes (e.g., Belsky & Isabella, 1998; Lamb, Thompson, Gardner, & Charnov, 1985; Sroufe, 1983). The attachment literature leads toward a rich model of how personality develops, impressive gains in empirical data support the claim that there are coherent patterns of psychosocial development. The data generally support the argument that early characteristics of child in a basic relationship, especially the infant-mother one, predict socially meaningful characteristics at later times, even ones observed in relationships with peers and teachers.

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It is believed that attachment theory and its underlying developmental model as delineated by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) can provide a more encompassing theoretical framework in which to embed previous explanatory models of some childhood behavior disorders. Bowlby’s model of the development of attachment is particularly meaningful because it synthesizes ideas from evolutionary theory, psychoanalytic models, learning theory, control systems theory, and cognitive-developmental psychology. Importantly, it provides an explanatory framework that carefully elaborates the developmental changes both in the infant ad in the parent-child interaction. These developmental changes involve progression through hierarchically organized levels from: (a) behavioral interaction (attachment behaviors); to (b) the organization of behavior systems; to (c) development of representational models of both the self and other and the manner in which such models both influence and are influenced by observable behavior. Further, we believe that attachment theory can provide not only an etiological framework, but also lead to new models for treating conduct disorders during the preschool years.

Attachment Theory and Research

Attachment theory is influential in elaborating the approach that integrates developmental and behavioral formulations of preschool conduct problems. However, it is obvious that there have been theoretical additions and extensions as well as empirical explorations of these ideas by numerous researchers and theorists (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bretherton, 1985; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Sroufe, 1983; Sroufe & Waters, 1987). Further, concepts are also drawn from the developmental models of parent-child relations and personality development (Kegan, 1982 & Pine, 1985). The theory itself is reviewed first. A review of empirical findings on the predictive relationship of early attachment and later behavior follows. Finally, several developmental models that might explain such findings are contrasted.

Bowlby (1969) proposed a developmental model of attachment that includes four phases during early childhood. Phase I and II occur in early infancy and are characterized by increasing differentiation of caregivers. During the second half of the first year, Phase III begins. This phase is linked to Piaget’s State 4 of the sensorimotor period in which the child first shows primitive forms of object permanency, the differentiation of means and ends, and intentionality. Given suitable conditions of caregiving, the infant now develops a ‘set-goal’ of variable, but degree of proximity or contact with specific attachment figures. Over the months children develop a wide variety of behavioral plans to achieve this set-goal (Bischof, 1975). Having been provided with sensitive caregiving, a child is able to balance her/his desire to explore the environment and fear of novelty by intermittently directing attachment behavior to her/his “secure base” (the attachment figure). One way to characterize the child’s trust in the accessibility of her/his attachment figure(s) is by observing the balance of these various behavior systems (Bretherton, 1985).

Phase IV, which begins somewhere after the third birthday, is characterized by a new level of dyadic relationship terms the goal-corrected partnership. In this phase, the child and mother become increasingly able to construct and maintain joint plans for proximity and the attachment relationship is thus increasingly regulated by communicative and other symbolic processes (language, social inference) as well as by behavioral interactions.

In reviewing the contribution of attachment research, the primary focus is on Phase III of attachment because it has been studied in greatest detail. Later, we discuss the development of Phase IV and its implications for behavioral/personality disorders.

One of the major empirical contributions of attachment research has been the description of
reliable and valid patterns of individual differences during infancy, e.g. temperament (Ainsworth, 1982). Although these patterns of security (insecure-avoidant, secure, insecure-resistant) have been assessed through the use of the Strange Situation, Ainsworth’s independent validation of these patterns by assessment of concurrent home behavior demonstrate their trans-contextual validity (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Weston, 1982). Further, a series of independent replications with a variety of populations have now confirmed Ainsworth’s original formulations that sensitive and responsive caregiving throughout the first year of life are predictive of secure attachment (Bates, Maslin, & Frankel, 1985; Belsky, Kovnick, & Taylor, 1984; Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suree, & Unzner, 1985).

**Attachment Stability and Its Consequences**

Of particular interest in attempting to establish a connection between infant attachment and later behavioral problems is the demonstration of (1) the cross-time stability of attachment classification itself; and (2) the predictive validity of attachment security in infancy to later functioning. The stability of attachment classifications from 12 to 18 months has been reported in a number of projects. Stability estimates across this 6-month period range from approximately 60% in high-risk samples (Owen, Easterbrooks, Chase-Lansdale, & Goldberg, 1984; Thompson, Lamb, & Ester, 1982). Further, instability in classification has been directly related to changes in family life stress and caregiving arrangements. Main et al. (1985), studying a carefully chosen middle-class sample, reported a high correlation (r=.79) between infant attachment classification and a 9-point rating scale of attachment security when children were 6 years of age.

Although the stability of attachment classification has only been explored in the toddler period, a number of studies have examined the predictive validity of early attachment to later parent-child interaction and personality in a variety of samples. Matas, Arend, and Sroufe (1988) found that 2-year-olds who had been secure as infants showed more persistence, enthusiasm, and positive affect in attempting to solve a series of increasingly difficult problem-solving tasks than did insecure children. The secure children also were more effective at seeking their mothers’ assistance in the most difficult tasks. In contrast, resistant children were whiny, negativistic, and easily frustrated by the task; and avoidant oddlers were less compliant and less cooperative. Similarly, Main (1983) found that compared to toddlers earlier classified as insecure, secure toddlers showed more positive affect, more cognitively mature toy exploration, and longer attention spans in a free-play context.

Two recent longitudinal studies have examined the relationship between attachment security and toddler-parent interaction. Maslin and Bates (1992) examined the relationship between attachment security at 13 months and home observations of parent-child interaction at 24 months. They found that toddlers earlier classified as secure had lower levels of conflictive interaction with their mothers at 24 months than did avoidant or resistant children. Avoidant children showed particularly high conflict in the two interaction patterns that involved maternal physical restraint/contact. An examination of maternal control tactics indicated that mothers of avoidant and resistant toddlers were rated higher on restriction in control and thus lower on mutual, reciprocal control. However, no differences were found on ratings of affection, consistence of maternal control, or maternal nonpunitiveness. High contact-maintenance in the Strange Situation at 13 months was also related to increased compliance at 24 months.

Erikson and Faber (1983) examined 2 and 4-year observations of parent-child interaction from the Minnesota High-Risk Study. This report followed children who had been classified as
secure or insecure at both 12 and 18 months of age (approximately 60% of the total sample). Replicating the findings of Matas et al. (1978), they found that secure infants were more compliant, more enthusiastic and persistent in the problem-solving attempts, and expressed less anger and frustration than did the insecure toddlers. Gove (1982), using profile and cluster analysis to examine differential patterns of these infants at 24 months, found that resistant infants showed more mother-directed anger, whereas avoidant infants showed more object-related aggression and subtle forms of noncompliance. However, at 42 months, secure and avoidant infants looked quite similar in parent-child teaching interactions, whereas resistant infants showed significantly lower compliance, enthusiasm, persistence, and more reliance on their mothers for assistance. Finally, a number of studies have indicated as relationship between insecure attachment at 12 months and lower sociability and higher avoidance in later interactions with other adults (Londerville & Main, 1981; Thompson & Lamb, 1983).

Recently, the Minnesota High-Risk Study reported a number of findings concerning the quality of preschool behavior, peer relations, and measures of personality organization. Once again, in these reports only children who maintained a stable attachment classification from 12 to 18 months were examined. Sroufe (1983) reported that children classified as insecure as infants now showed higher negative and lower positive affect rating in the preschool and that teachers rated these children as more compliant. The secure group showed less whining, and were higher in positive social engagement. Secure preschoolers also showed higher ego-resilience as assessed by teacher-Q-sorts. Finally, Sroufe, Fox and Pancake (1983) utilized a number of scales to examine preschool measures of dependence and its relationship to earlier attachment security. Results indicated that the secure group showed greater positive attention-seeking, whereas both avoidant and resistant groups showed greater negative attention-seeking as well as greater dependence on the teacher in self and social management context.

In summary, a number of independent projects have demonstrated that infant attachment security is related to optimal parent-child interaction, interaction with other adults, measures of personality functioning, and preschool social behavior. Furthermore, the quality of early attachment has been specifically related to behaviors that are later associated with clinic referrals for treatment. Thus, insecure infants may be more at risk for behavior disorders in the preschool years. This idea has recently received some support from two studies that directly address the relationship between early attachment and behavioral problems in 3- to 6-year-olds.

**Developmental Models: Linkages between Infant Attachment and Later Behavior**

The preceding review has provided some evidence of the relationship between infant attachment and preschool-age behavioral problems and competencies as well as characteristic child and parent behaviors associated with conduct disorders. However, findings on the prediction of behavioral problems are moderate at best and it is unclear how these effects are to be understood.

A number of theorists have proposed an explanatory model in which these developmental continuities are mediated by the child’s cognitive/affective schema(s) derived from his/her early relationship(s) (Bretherton, 1985; Main et al., 1985; Scoufe4& Fleeson, impress). These “working models” of self and other that the child constructs result from the behavioral and communicative transactions he/she experiences beginning in infancy.

Because the internal working models of self and attachment figures are constructed out of dyadic experience, they may at first be closely intertwined. In deed, in early development it may be preferable to speak of an internal working model of the relationship (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). For
example, if an attachment figure frequently rejects of ridicules the child’s bids for comfort in stressful situations, the child may come to develop not only an internal working model of the parent as rejecting but also one of himself or herself as not worthy of help or needed. Conversely, if the attachment figure gives help and comfort when needed, the child will tend to develop a working model of the parent as loving and of himself or herself as a person worthy of such support. (Bowlby).

As the child’s representational skills and understanding of affective states become increasingly complex, these models undergo further specification and differentiation. Main et al. (1985) define the internal working model “as a set of conscious and/or unconscious rules for the organization of information relevant to attachment, and for obtaining and limiting access to that information, i.e., to information regarding attachment related experiences, feelings, ideations” (pp. 66-67). Thus, individual differs in the child’s internal working models of specific relationships.

A strong version of this explanatory model work proposes that during late infancy the child develops cognitive-affective representations of self and other that reflect the nature of attachment interactions and that tend to resist revision. Further, these expectancies direct attention and behavior and lead to conscious and unconscious processes (such as cognitive distortions) that influence memory, attention, and affect (Main et al., 1985). Thus, given relative stability in caregiving, the child’s working models will be self-perpetuating and mediate between early relationships and later personality and behavior. However, Bowlby has also stated that even though working models become increasingly resistant to change during childhood, they are continually being revised throughout childhood and adolescence.

A second assumption of this model is that the infant and toddler are continually attempting to interpret or ‘make meaning’ (Kegan, 1982) of his/her experience in close relationships and that these developing cognitive models of self and other: (a) have an increasingly strong effect on behavior and personality; and (b) become increasingly resistant to change. However, we also propose that the child’s working models are quite resilient and that in the early years of life may undergo significant change. Although attachment researcher have focused almost exclusively on 12 to 18 moth period, it may very well be that the child’s working models are equally influenced by changes that occur between 18 months and age 3 to 4, in which significant structural and functional changes occur in the child, parent, and the parent-child relationship (Lieberman & Pawl, in press). This assumption necessitates incorporation of specific hypotheses into the model regarding developmental phase changes between infancy and the preschool years. Furthermore, in order to develop appropriate treatment recommendations that are derived from attachment theory, it is necessary to examine changes in the structure of attachment relations in the preschool years. It is to these issues that we turn.

**Developmental Changes in the Child, Parent, and Their Relationship**

**The Child**

Although developmental psychology has been revolutionized by new knowledge regarding the previously unknown competencies of infants, it is during the period beginning at around 18 moths that new and critical aspects of the development of ‘personhood’ emerge. The toddler has an increasing desire for self-determination and control that co-occur with the realization of his/her individuality and sense of separateness. The child’s newly acquired skills of locomotion, increased interest in exploration, the beginning of both symbolic play and
representation, the use of language, and the developing recognition of self, all play important roles in the transition to toddlerhood for personality formation, which is described as the process of separation-individuation. During this period that surrounds the second birthday, the child asserts control, but also requires guidance and support from caregivers in order to develop a sense of autonomy (Erikson, 1963).

Although the foregoing description captures aspects of the second year of life that might affect attachment relations and security, a number of critical changes also occur during the third and fourth years (Marvin, 1987; Marvin & Greenberg, 1992). First, as cognitive/representational abilities increase, the child is increasingly able to anticipate and to plan longer and more complex sequence of behavior. Second, as language develops, the child is now able to represent the external world symbolically, discuss and consider nonpresent events, utilize internal talk to begin to control impulse, and begin to communicate and understand the feelings, attitudes, and desires of self and others. Third, the development of social-cognitive skills such as perspective-taking allow the child to begin to differentiate his/her own feelings and plans from those of the attachment figure(s) (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, in press).

The Parent

The role of the parent also shifts in the second year from one characterized primarily by sensitivity and nurturance mediated by close physical contact to sensitivity that is characterized not only by warmth and affection, but also by providing appropriate limit-setting while simultaneously supporting the child’s growing sense of independence and autonomous action. Further, the parent is now confronted by a more willful child with a separate sense of self, as well as a bundle of impulses, that need to be both accepted and guided. Optimal parenting in this stage might be characterized by a “relaxed-firmness” in which the parent allows the child to express his/her emotions fully, and also socializes the child by making important norms for behavior salient and by providing appropriate limit-setting when necessary.

The Parent-Child Relationships

As conflict between parent and child is inevitable in the preschool years, what is of crucial importance to the quality of their relationship is the manner in which the day handles such conflict. Further, we believe that conflicts regarding attachment-related interactions should be especially salient to the development of a wide range of competence. An important goal of the parent-child relationship in this period is the development of strategies that both assist the child and parent in (a) promoting autonomy; and (b) moving toward more mutual and reciprocal regulation of aspects of their relationship. Through this process, the child’s autonomy is supported by assisting her/him in gaining more awareness of self and other, and by the increasing power of communication, strategies that develop joint goals and plans, or described previously as “partnership skills”.

Clearly, the parent plays a crucial role in this developmental achievement. Stern (1995) has discussed how the sensitive and responsive parent attunes to the child’s affect at a nonverbal level during infancy. By doing so, the infant learns what affective states are sharable and allowable in social relationships. Similarly, one aspect of parental sensitivity and responsiveness during the preschool years is the ability to attune to and discuss the child’s affective states. As Pine (1985) states, “the parent who labels feelings and inner states for the child brings them into the region of social communication—they are shared, the child is not unique and alone with them, they are capable of being understood, the power of words and the psychological achievements words facilitate can be applied to them” (p. 169). Thus, through the use of emotion language, the child
develops greater affect tolerance and self-control, as well as a new way to cope with his/her needs and desires.

Summary

It is believed that preschoolers who have developed cognitive-affective models of insecure attachment relationships are more likely to show behavioral problems than children with secure models of attachment. This is primarily due to insensitive, nonresponsive caregiving, which in turn leads to the child’s acquisition of maladaptive patterns of emotional control and interpersonal communication. In many cases, behaviors commonly labeled as “conduct problems” can be viewed as strategies for gaining the attention or proximity of caregivers who are unresponsive to the child’s other signals. In other words, the child may resort to conflict producing behaviors as his/her primary means of regulating caretaking. Given the preschooler’s drive for self-control and self-reliance, conduct problems can also be understood as part of the child’s affect reaction (often a mixture of fear, anger, sadness, and frustration) to his/her inability to regulate or have accessibility to attachment figure(s).

Clinical Implication

As the internal working model of the 4-year-old is becoming more stable and increasingly resistant to change, i.e., some degree of object constancy has been attained, it should be more difficult to alter the child’s working model of both self and others. This aspect of cognitive/affective development may explain the lack of generalization in the existing operant parent training programs. Thus, whereas in many instances an insecure attachment may be a critical precursor of later conduct disorders, the most commonly researched and well-known intervention (operant parent training) has as its goal to produce surface change, although it does not attempt to impact the “deep mental structure” or either the child’s working models of relationships or of he parents’ view of the child (i.e., “my child only complies because I learned new techniques, not because we have a warm, loving relationship”). In this sense, this approach may also undermines the parents’ own abilities. This is not to say that behavioral techniques are not important or effective. They can be both; parents with harmonious relationships with their children use them consistently. The concern here is that their use in disjointed, disharmonious relationships is likely to do little to influence the organization of affect, personality, and sense of self and others.

How would the existing “operant parent training” be modified to incorporate the formulation presented here? In other words, what is the clinical practice side of attachment related research? It is useful to consider that some behavior problems could be related to insecure attachment. In several instances in Bates and Bayles (1998) clinical work with 2 to 6-year-olds, they have seen problems partly fueled by attachment insecurity. In these cases, without using attachment terms directly with the family, they promoted changes to increase the child’s sense that the parents would be supportive in times of stress. They also tried to reduce the parents’ natural tendency to react negatively to child avoidant and resistant behavior in separation and reunion-type situation. In other cases, where they were helping a family through a stressful period, they have found it useful to give special emphasis to the child’s attachment needs.

Speltz (in press) has described a dyadic skills training program that has evolved from Forehand and Mcmahon’s (1991) model. In Speltz’s approach, the emphasis is to show the parents how to discuss their own affects appropriately as well as to help their children to identify and label a variety of internal states; and to enhance children’s attributions of change to themselves as well as their parents. Further, it is proposed that in many cases children’s growing independence
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(Greenspan, 1981), as well as issues in their own working models regarding intimacy (Lieberman & Pawl, in press; Main & Goldwyn, 1984).

In this model, then, important operant parenting skills (praising, limit-setting) are combined with skills that reflect the attachment-based cognitive and affectual variables presented in this formulation. This approach offers the advantage of including the child actively in the learning process; child and parent both lean to use negotiating skills that should have more global applicability in interpersonal conflict situations than teaching the parent simple to give directions and requiring the child to comply without reasoning.

References

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摘要

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