

Attachment and Adult-Child Relationships: Contributions to Children's Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Competences

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Discussant: Shelley Hawver

Presenters: Patricia M. Crittenden, Jean-François Bureau, Keith A. Crnic, Jason T. Downer

- **The Dynamic-Maturational Model of Attachment**

Patricia M. Crittenden

- **The Roles of Attachment and Individual and Familial Processes in the Prediction of Academic and Cognitive Functioning**

Jean-François Bureau, Ellen Moss, Diane St-Laurent, Karlen Lyons-Ruth

- **Parenting and the Emergence of Regulatory Competence in Preschoolers: Exploring Affective Processes in Mother-Child Relationships**

Keith A. Crnic

- **Teacher-Child Interactions in the Classroom: Implication of Attachment History**

Jason Downer

Crittenden: A different perspective on attachment theory was presented. Two central points were emphasized: a) anxious attachment is good for children who are at risk because it protects them, and b) troubled parents intend to protect their children, but intentions and effects are not necessarily the same.

Attachment is a pattern of a specific relationship with a mother, father, an important sibling, spouse. Attachment has a pattern of information processing that underlies a self-protective strategy. What does one do with incoming sensory stimulation to have an output of strategic and self-protective behavior? Attachment involves short-term adaptation. Long-term, parents teach their children to make meaning of information, and children process information with these same emphases and biases for the rest of their lives.

According to Mary Ainsworth, Type B Attachment is secure and balanced, Type A Attachment is avoidant of negative affect and highly predictable, and Type C Attachment is unpredictable and preoccupied with negative affect. Empirical findings show that secure Type B Attachment is associated with safe, comforting environments, and optimal child functioning. Anxious attachment, Types A and C, are associated with exposure to danger and lack of comfort; therefore, these children are at developmental risk. Attachment exists as a genetic propensity because life is dangerous and parents are not always protective and comforting. Attachment, especially anxious attachment, is children's contribution to their own welfare, as a way to wrest more protection and security from parents.

Crittenden's dynamic maturational model (DMM) highlights many self-protective strategies. Type B infants integrate predictive cognition and negative affect. Type A infants emphasize

predictive cognition and avoidance of negative affect. Type C infants do the opposite, concentrating on negative affect and unpredictability.

The Type B infant strategy is to signal what one wants and to show how one feels, and these infants function best when conditions are safe with comforting parents. The Type A infant strategy is to do what parents want and to inhibit negative affect, and these infants function best when the danger is predictable. The Type C infant strategy is different, in that they do not know what they want, and they have mixed feelings of anger, fear, and desire for comfort. Maturation enables children to adapt more precisely to their specific environments. Specifically, the end of the second year of life facilitates walking, talking, and three aspects of affect: a) onset of coy behavior that infants do not have to communicate, b) regulation of the display of feelings, and c) exaggeration and alternation of mixed feelings.

Two new patterns, a Compulsive A pattern and an Excessive C pattern, have been added to the model for the preschool years. The Type B preschooler is able to accurately tell what she or he wants and feels using language. Type B preschoolers function best when conditions are safe and parents are available, comforting, and communicative. If the parent does not make that shift from nonverbal communication to verbal communication, the child may not stay in Type B.

The Type A preschooler has compulsive care giving and compulsive compliance, learning to take care of the parent or obey the parent, to inhibit negative affect, and display false positive affect. Type A preschoolers function best when parents do not like negative affect and when children are punished for bad behavior. The Type C preschooler has a more complex pattern, exaggerating and splitting the display of negative affect to get attention, and then reversing the display to elicit the parental behavior that she or he wants.

The effects of these strategies in the preschool years are that Type B creates a balance between closeness and exploration, improves verbal communication, and has the opportunity for self-actualization. Type Bs are the most varied and unique of individuals. Type A creates good behavior and good language with anxiety, agitation and a false adult-pleasing self. These children display positive affect, inhibit negative affect, and do what they are told. Type C is its opposite, with attention-getting bad behavior, provocation, and risk taking, too much or too little exploration, nonverbal communication, a self-focus, and anxiety. All of the strategies maximize safety and comfort given the danger in context, parental level of predictability, and parental response to negative affect

Abusive and neglectful parents intend to protect their children, but the intentions are not the same as the effects. For example, parents spank children to teach them to act safely, but the outcome of spanking is sometimes injury. Communication is not effective if one talks to parents about the effects and the parent is thinking about intentions. Some ways of knowing are not consciously verbal, and inappropriate behavior is usually motivated out of implicit nonverbal knowledge, while explained out of explicit knowledge. In school, children act out the strategies they learned at home. Interventions must use descriptive rather than blaming language with parents. Good intentions need to be assumed while seeking new ways to help parents implement those intentions. Types A and C are psychological opposites that may require opposite interventions. Type A children and parents need to focus on and express their negative feelings,

and to feel less responsible for the bad things they do or say. Type C children and parents need to minimize and inhibit the display of negative feelings and take more responsibility. The wrong intervention can exacerbate the problem.

The crucial aspects of an intervention are to address the Type A cognitive bias or the Type C affective bias and to fit the implicit, explicit, or integrative process to the parent's competence resulting in a gradient of interventions: a) parent education for those adults who are integrated and only need information, b) short-term counseling for adults who are integrative but in need of new solutions, c) parent-child intervention when the functioning is explicit and verbal but not highly reflective, and d) adult psychotherapy when functioning is primarily implicit, nonverbal, and maladaptive.

Assessment should include an examination of information processing patterns, what information is used, how it is transformed, how it is biased, and the self-protective strategies used by the adults and children. Age-specific attachment assessments can address these issues. Children's accomplishments in organizing these difficult, anxious strategies and the threats that both parents and children respond to can promote the healthy development of children and the competence of their parents.

Bureau: Preschool attachment and the prediction of cognitive and academic functioning in the school years were presented. First a model was described for understanding the different manifestations of attachment in the preschool period, which is somewhat different from Crittenden's system. Then empirical results were examined, and some implications of the model for intervention in preschool were discussed.

Several examples were given of disorganized attachment in preschool-age children. In comparison to infants, preschool attachment behaviors are more likely to be manifested in verbal exchanges with the caregiver, rather than being restricted to nonverbal proximity-seeking behaviors. Preschool children are increasingly able to share the parent's perspective and play a greater role in regulating the emotional content of the relationship. The major difference with Crittenden's coding system is the emphasis on role reversal patterns observed in disorganized parental dyads. In this model, patterns are labeled as controlling punitive or controlling care giving. This model also puts more emphasis on the continuity and attachment behavior from infancy to school years, while Crittenden's system is more complex and focuses on qualitative changes over development.

Disorganized infants are characterized by their apparent failure to show coherent behavioral strategies for separation and reunions with the caregiver. These infants display disorganized sequences of behaviors that seemingly lack a goal. Follow-up studies of 6-year-old children who have earlier been classified as disorganized reveal that they often attempt to control parental behavior. Children who were classified as controlling punitive use directive behavior with the caregiver that may include harsh comments, verbal threats, and occasional physical aggression.

Children classified as controlling care direct the parent's activity and compositional exchanges in an emotionally-positive manner and by helpfully structuring, in an attempt to protect themselves from the parent by being excessively cheery, polite or helpful. Some children classified insecure

“other” combine two insecure patterns, or resemble disorganized infants by displaying confused behavior, or a new coherent strategy for seeking proximity. Manifestation of certain disorganized behavior can change with age. Since the classification of disorganization was initially developed with infants in mind, it is important to make an appropriate developmental adjustment for the coding of disorganization in preschool.

How does this parent-child attachment relationship relate to academic functioning? Successful adaptation in the school environment involves social-emotional maturity. Acceptance or rejection in the peer group and performance in the school setting are related to motivational, self-regulatory, and behavioral patterns, which in part stem from family processes. Thus, an increasing number of studies examine links between attachment relationships and school adjustment.

For infants and toddlers, security of attachment is directly associated with higher mastery motivation, greater task persistence, and more appropriate use of adult resources to complete difficult tasks. Prospective longitudinal studies have also shown that infant attachment and security and quality of early care giving are powerful predictors of better academic functioning during elementary and high school years. Moreover, decreased mental developmental scores and lower problem solving competence have been observed in disorganized infants and toddlers. Studies conducted in the preschool and early school age period indicated that secure children showed better attention with academic skills and are also significantly more likely to engage in collaborative regulation of joint problem solving activities and reading activities as compared to their insecure peers.

In terms of general academic performance for school-age children, gender, IQ, and socioeconomic status (SES) are significant predictors of general academic performance. However, the addition of controlling punitive attachment accounts for unique variance in the model. These results indicate that girls perform better than boys at school, and also children with lower IQ, lower SES, and/or controlling punitive attachment generally perform lower in school than other children.

Teachers were also asked to rate performance in math. Results indicate that performance motivation and secure attachment significantly contribute to the model, even after child gender, IQ and SES are taken into account. It is possible that insecurity or disorganization of attachment interferes with learning and exploration, which are crucial for cognitive development. If cognitive resources and attention are necessary to cope with the caregiver and induces anxiety and fear, that should considerably restrict the amount of resources available for learning and exploration. The second hypothesis is that parents of insecure children may not teach them necessary functions important for academic achievement. Additionally, disorganized children also will have impaired emotional self-regulatory skills.

Key elements of attachment-based intervention programs exist for the preschool period. First, parental state of mind with regard to attachment has been shown in the literature to be the strongest predictor of attachment classification. State of mind refers to the way adults process attachment-related thought, feelings, and memories. Parents who are unresolved with regard to a loss or trauma experience will show a lapse of reasoning when they discuss the trauma or loss.

Those parents tend to have children with disorganized attachment. Parents should recognize their own issues that may interfere with their sensitivity to the child's distress, but they should also be able to provide nurturing when those issues are unresolved. It is crucial to assist parents' psychological state of mind when doing social and emotional intakes and followup.

Crnic: The emergence of emotion regulation in young children is a critical developmental process that is poorly understood despite more attention to this construct over the past decade. Regardless, emotion family processes and especially the quality of early parent-child relationships is key to understanding children's developing abilities to modulate their emotional responses to challenging contexts. Less clear, however, is the role that child risk may play in the nature of the relations among parent-child interactions and the emergence of regulatory competence during the early preschool period. This study addresses the complex relations among risk, emotion processes in parenting, and the quality of parent-child relationships as they influence the emergence of children's emotion regulation across the preschool period.

For this study, data are drawn from an ongoing longitudinal investigation of the interrelations of developmental status, family processes, and emergence of regulatory competence in children aged 3 to 9 years. Participants include 80 families of children with developmental delays shown by a Bayley MDI score of 75 or below, and 122 families of typically developing children with Bayley MDI scores of 85 or above. Observational data from naturalistic home observations and lab-based structured situations were coded to address the major constructs of interest: affective processes in parenting, the quality of dyadic parent-child interactions, and children's emotional regulation (ER).

Across both naturalistic and structured interactions between parents and young children, a rich array of interaction is characterized by coherent emotional processes. Results of correlational and path analyses indicated that these affective aspects of parenting as well as parent-child dyadic pleasure and conflict predicted children's regulatory competencies at 3 years of age. In turn, ER functioning at this age predicted emotional competencies, as well as degree of dysregulation and behavior problems one year later. Risk was a key factor in determining the nature of the associations among the major factors of interest, as predictive relations differed as a function of whether children had been identified as having early developmental delays. In general, relations were stronger for children when risk was apparent, but at times associations between parenting and regulatory functioning were inversely related between the groups.

Children's abilities to address their emotional experiences appear to be facilitated by specific parental and dyadic processes. Emotional co-regulation, or the shared regulatory experiences of the parent in interaction with their children during times of emotional challenge appears to be key aspects of children's abilities to regulate their emotion and behavior when the parent is not present. Under conditions of risk, particularly those risks that involve cognitive and social delays, transactional processes that address self-righting tendencies in families operate to magnify the influences of parenting and parent-child relationships in the development of emotion regulatory capacities across the critical preschool period when these skills first emerge.

Downer: The importance of the relationships that children have with teachers in a preschool or Head Start setting was discussed. Data that predict how teachers are interacting with children in the classroom was presented.

Children develop a working model of their social world as a function of early experiences in relationships with parents and other primary caregivers. When faced with new demands of a classroom setting, relationships with teachers, built on interactions in the classroom, serve as a resource to facilitate adjustment and adaptation. The conceptual model used is that child outcomes, such as literacy, language, social, and emotional functioning, are predicted from classroom and teacher characteristics such as adult/child ratio, teacher training and credentials, mood, and attachment history, mediated by teacher-child interactions. Important aspects of teacher-child interactions include emotional support such as positive or negative classroom climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives. Instructional support includes concept development, evaluative feedback, and language modeling.

There is a great deal of variability in classrooms around both of these types of supports. For children in classrooms with high emotional and structural supportive aspects, there is a heavy value-added effect above and beyond other aspects of children's experiences in the home with their parents and families, and above and beyond effects of teachers' credentials. Children at risk for problems benefit most from high-quality interactions with their teachers.

What can be done to support classrooms and teachers in ways that promote high levels of emotional and structural support? Some researchers have focused on teacher credentials, their background experience, and characteristics of the classroom such as the percentage of children from high-poverty backgrounds or the percentage of children with limited English proficiency. So far, in most of the studies, only 10 to 20 percent of the variance is accounted for; therefore, much remains unknown about what is involved in these classroom interactions.

In particular, few studies address teachers as human beings and study teacher perceptions of their own attachment histories. There are several implications to these issues. One implication is the potential intergenerational transmission of attachment from adult to child, and whether that transmission may cut across roles to a teacher's relationship with the children. Another implication is whether one's attachment history gets expressed only during certain types of classroom experiences and activities. What does that suggest about ways to support teachers in their interactions? A research question might be to what extent are teachers' perceived attachment histories and their beliefs about children uniquely predictive of these interactions? And then, does that pattern look different when they are in the midst of an activity that is language- and literacy-focused versus when they are engaged in an activity with a more social-emotional component?

Downer's study asked teachers to videotape themselves doing a 30-minute activity, focused on language, literacy, and promotion of alternative thinking strategies, particularly identification of feelings, and expressing and negotiating fears. These videos were supplemented with the Relationships Scale Questionnaire, which asks teachers to reflect on their relationship with their own parents while growing up. Key findings were that teachers who recall an overly close relationship with their parent were observed providing less emotional support to children, but

only during socioemotional activities. Also, child-centered beliefs were consistently associated with positive emotional support, regardless of the activity.

What can be drawn from these results is that personal histories of teachers should be considered when studying teacher-child interaction and relationships. These issues should be addressed when thinking about supporting teacher interactions with children. Classroom context also seems to matter. The activity itself may in some way activate teachers' attachment history. Having teachers learn about attachment and reflect on their interactions with children may benefit the quality of the interactions.

Hawver: This presentation focused on Hawver's personal experience as one of the Wave 1 national research sites for Early Head Start. At her site, they used an infant mental health model with special fatherhood programming. She commented that each program has its own "climate," unique elements, and unique staffing patterns. This "program lenses" needs to be considered when applying research strategies to a particular program. In reflecting on the presentations, she mentioned that anxious attachment may be good for endangered children because undesired behavior in the classroom may be adaptive behavior in the home. It may be that the danger needs to be changed, not the child's behavior.

In terms of program application, staff must be educated in key mental health concepts such as attachment. Investment in the mental health of parents is important if children are to succeed. Children need to experience a predictable world and responsive, contingent, interpersonal environments. For a child, interactions with teachers serve as a resource to facilitate adjustment and adaptation. Programs need emotionally healthy teachers, teachers satisfied with their jobs, and teachers with a healthy "working model" of their social world so that they will provide assistance to children adjusting to the world around them. How are schools and centers providing this model? How is the program affected by frequent staff turnover? Programs need to help parents build professional and natural support networks in their communities rather than provide only supportive relationships within the program.

Children at risk benefit most from high-quality interactions with teachers, with implications for supervisory staff. If supervisory staff does not provide needed nurturing coupled with clear directives, teachers will not consistently provide high quality interactions with children. If teachers do not feel supported in what they are doing, they are less likely to provide quality support to children. A comprehensive employee assistance program is important. There are teachers who need assistance as they encounter various classroom problems; peer supports are often useful. They also need to have some counseling options available to them. On the other hand, some people providing services to children and programs should not be in those roles. Solid hiring and screening practices should be in place.