

AGGRESSION AND ATTACHMENT SECURITY

Bibi Zahra Talebi, PhD¹
Prem Verma, PhD²

¹ Payame Noor University,
Mashad, Iran

² Panjab University, India

Corresponding Author:

Bibi Zahra Talebi,
General Psychologist
Payame Noor University (PNU)
No.2, 7th Kosar Shomaly,
Mashad, Iran.
Email: Bibizahra20@yahoo.co.uk

Objective: The aim of the present study is to examine the factors related to aggression in Iranian and Indian school children.

Method: Attachment security (dependency, availability, and total) was considered as the variable. The KSS questionnaire was administered for 600 students in the 5th grade; 300 were Iranian and 300 were Indian (each consisted of 150 boys and 150 girls).

Results: Attachment security demonstrated significant negative correlations with aggression in the boys, girls and the total Iranian sample. The girls' dependency on mothers was the only case with insignificant correlation.

In the Indian sample, attachment security was also found to be significantly negatively correlated with aggression. The only exception was the correlation between mother's availability and aggression in girls, which was not significant.

Conclusion: It is important that parents treat their children in a tender, loving manner so that a secure attachment develop between them.

Key Words:

Aggression, Attachment, India, Iran, Parent-child relation

Iran J Psychiatry 2006; 2: 72-77

The quality of attachment in early childhood has implications in children's future personality. Early social interactions with attachment figures shape children's cognitive and social development, sense of self and their future attitudes and behavior. In addition, it will affect their peer relationships in many respects. Few researchers have reported that securely attached children are less aggressive and more popular (1). This area, however, has not been much researched. More to the point, most of the researchers have taken the attachment of the children with mothers.

Aggression

Seeking a definition for aggression raises some problems. One may think that people would certainly agree on defining something so important and pervasive, but such is not the case. The term "aggression" is applied to a wide array of behaviors that often appear to be highly related, but on close analysis prove to be quite different from one another. Perhaps most people, including psychologists, would agree in general with the definition of aggression given by Buss: "a response that delivers noxious stimuli to another organism" (2). Undoubtedly, what we ordinarily call aggression, does involve noxious stimulation of one person by another. For instance, in the form of a bullet in the body, a shattering bomb blast, a physical blow, or a more subtle stimulus such as an insult or verbal harangue.

One construct that most people would probably consider necessary in aggression is intent to harm another person. The notion of intentionality is explicit in the definition of aggression given by one influential group of psychologists: "Aggression is an act whose goal-response is injury to an organism" (3). Use of the term "goal-response" implies motivation and striving, so that aggression is regarded as the end result of motivated series of acts. He concludes, therefore, that the infliction of noxious stimuli must be intentional:

"One person may injure another by sheer accident. Such acts are not aggression, because they are not goal-responses". The idea of intent has been considered unnecessary by some who follow a behavioral approach to aggression on the grounds that it is a mentalistic concept that defies rigorous analysis (2).

Attachment Security

The development of attachment relationships between children and parents constitutes one of the most important aspects of development. Attachment is an active, reciprocal relationship which is exclusive between two individuals, and distinguished from all other persons. It is the quality of relationships which lasts a lifetime. The nature of attachments may be transformed as children develop, but the attachment can endure. The development of attachment is the special bond between the infant and the caregiver, usually the mother. Attachment refers to the early emotional relationship between a baby and a caregiver

(usually one or both parents).

Attachment is an ongoing condition of an individual through which he or she seeks proximity to and contact with another person. Ainsworth states, "An attachment is an affectionate tie that one person forms to another specific person, binding them together in space and enduring over time" (4).

According to Bowlby, children who form an attachment to an adult—that is, an enduring social-emotional relationship, are more likely to survive (5). This person is usually the mother, but need not be; the key is a strong emotional relationship with a responsive, caring person—so attachment can also form with fathers. Although most infants become attached to both parents, mothers and fathers typically have distinctive roles in their children's development.

In particular, security of attachment in the family has been identified as having important implications for later close relationships (6,7). Although attachment security is relatively well-understood in infancy and early childhood (8,9), research in middle childhood and adolescence has lagged behind (7, 10, 11).

Child development experts have always given importance to the process of attachment and it has been shown by the researchers that a secure relationship between a baby and one or two special people in the environment is essential to the growing child's development. Classic research studies have shown that infants, though physically well cared for, can sicken or even die due to lack of an emotional bond with a caretaker devoted to their particular well being.

Attachment Security and Aggression

Attachment is the result of the bonding process that occurs between a child and a caregiver during the first 2 years of the child's life; the first year of life is the year of needs and to express them, babies cry. The infants' primary needs are touch, eye contact, movement, smile and nourishment; ideally, the caretaker is able to recognize and satisfy these needs. Through this interaction, which occurs hundreds of thousands of times in a year, infants learn that the world is a safe place and their sense of trust develops. In addition, emotional connection is formed, infants feel empowered in their environment, and develop a secure base from which they could confidently and effectively explore the world. Attachment is reciprocal, the baby and caregiver create this deep, nurturing connection together: It takes two to connect. Attachment is imperative for optimal brain development and emotional health, and its effects are felt physiologically, emotionally, cognitively and socially. When this initial attachment is not present, children lack the ability to form and maintain loving, intimate relationships. They grow up not trusting the world as a safe place and believe that others will not care for them. Without this sense of trust, children believe that they must be hyper vigilant about their own safety. Unfortunately, their idea about safety prevents them to allow others to care for them in a loving, nurturing

manner .

Bowlby's attachment theory is an important framework for conceptualizing the parent-child relationship (5). The basic premise of this theory is that the quality of attachment relationships stems from interaction between infants and their caregivers, especially the degree to which they can rely on attachment figures as sources of security and support. Caregivers who are sensitive and consistently responsive to their infants' needs are likely to foster secure attachment to their children. Thus, secure children are thought to develop a working model of themselves as lovable or worthy and of others as responsive to their needs. On the other hand, inconsistent or insensitive caregivers are likely to foster insecure attachment in their children (8). Thus, insecure children are likely to develop a working model of themselves as unworthy or incompetent and of others as rejecting or unresponsive to their needs. Bowlby conceptualized attachment as a life span construct, with children maintaining attachment bonds to their parents across childhood and into adulthood (12). It is only within the last decade, however, that researchers have begun to explore parent-child attachment in elementary school children (7), high school students (10), and college student (13-15).

Recently, new theories concerning developmental changes of attachment in older children and adolescents have been formulated. During early adolescence, autonomy from parents has been viewed as an important developmental task, while at the same time, the establishment of intimate friendships becomes salient (16). Earlier models of family functioning emphasized detachment as the developmental course of parent-child relationships in adolescence (17). However, newer models based on Bowlby's life span view, emphasize the importance of attachment or more connections to parental figures during the adolescent years despite decreases in shared activities and interaction (17-19). Kerns et al. have suggested that in middle childhood and adolescence, children continue to rely on attachment figures as a secure base from which to explore and as a source of comfort in time of stress (i.e., children may seek out the attachment figure when they are sad or ill) (7). Although the maintenance of physical proximity is clearly less essential in older children due to increased physical and mental capacities (e.g., more sophisticated coping mechanisms), maintaining the availability of the attachment figure (e.g., belief that the attachment figure is open to communication and is responsive if help needed) is hypothesized to remain the set goal of the attachment system (20). Thus, although the frequency and intensity of attachment behaviors is acknowledged to decline with age, the quality of the attachment bond is postulated to remain stable, particularly from early adolescence onward (20) .

Children without proper care in the first few years of life have unusual high-level stress hormones, which effect the development of crucial aspects of their brain

and body. In addition, conscience development depends upon brain development and follows attachment. Thus, insecure attachment leads to aggressive- disruptive and antisocial behavior, morality and lack of prosocial values.

Hypotheses

1. Attachment security of children (dependency, availability, and total) to mothers was negatively correlated with aggression, in the both cultures.
2. Attachment security of children (dependency, availability, and total) to fathers was negatively correlated with aggression, in the both cultures.

Materials and Methods

Sample

The sample of the present study consisted of 600 school children in the 5th grade; 300 were Iranian children and 300 were Indian (each consisted of 150 boys and 150 girls). The sample was randomly selected from various schools. In this study, subjects were chosen from two-parent families who lived with their parents. The present research was restricted to private or model (English medium) schools in Chandigarh and Panchkula cities in India and private (Persian medium) schools in the city of Mashhad in Iran.

Tools

The following tools were used in the present study:

I. aggression index

This is a guess who technique in which every child in a class rates everybody else on selected series of 10 aggression items. The subjects are asked to write the names of their classmates who act in the way described by the particular question (21, 22). The subjects can give as many names as they desire. The scale was translated in Persian for the Iranian sample; and study was conducted on 300 students in the 5th grade.

For the Iranian sample, item analysis was performed on all the items. Item total correlations for the selected items ranged from 0.25 to 0.66. The K-R reliability of the scale was found to be 0.81.

For the Indian sample (English medium) pilot study was also performed. Item total correlations for the selected items ranged from 0.57 to 0.82. The K-R reliability of the scale was found to be 0.91.

II. Kerns Attachment Security Scale (KSS)

Children's Attachment Security was assessed separately for each parent using the Kerns Security Scale (KSS). This scale is a 15-item, forced choice, self-report measure, with higher scores indicating more secure attachment. The scale had two subscales: the first nine items included dependency and the other items included availability of parents (7).

For the Iranian sample, the scale was translated in Persian and pilot study was conducted. Item total correlations for mother's form of 5th and 13th items

were less than 0.2. Therefore, these 2 items were excluded. For father's item total correlation of 13th item was less than 0.2, and this item was also excluded from the father's form. The item total correlations of other items ranged from 0.28 to 0.58 for mothers' form and 0.21 to 0.56 for fathers' form. K-R reliabilities for mother's and father's forms were found to be 0.73 and 0.76 respectively for 5th grade children.

On the Indian sample, item total correlations were found to be ranging from 0.25 to 0.62 for mothers and from 0.27 to 0.70 for fathers. The Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the mothers and fathers were found to be 0.69 and 0.74 respectively (23).

Procedure

Peer-rating measure of Aggression was administered on the subjects by the investigator. Every child was given a booklet containing one page for each question. The subjects were instructed to write down the names of their classmates who acted in the way described by the particular question on that page. Each question was read aloud by the investigator and the subjects were told that they could write any number of names the desired. Before proceeding to the next question, it was assured that all the subjects had finished the previous question.

After a few days, the Kerns Security Scale (KSS) for mothers and fathers was presented to the subjects. Before administration, the following instructions were given to the subjects:

Children have different viewpoints about their relationship with their parents. "In the following test, different types of children are described. Each statement is divided into 2 portions-one on the left and the other on the right. First, you should decide to which type of a child you are mostly similar to-the one described on the left or the right. Once having made this decision, you are required to decide whether the description on that side is "Quite true" or "Very much true" for you. You are required to tick mark the description which is the most applicable to you. If faced with a point that was not understandable to you, raise your hand and clear your doubts."

Each question was read aloud by the investigator. Before moving to the next question, it was assured that all subjects had finished the previous question.

Scoring

In scoring of the Peer-rating Measure of Aggression, children's aggression rate was computed by adding up the number of times each child was named by his/her peers and then it was divided by the total number of students in the class.

In scoring of the Attachment Security Scale (KSS), the scores consisted of the mean item scores. The number of items in the Iranian version and the Indian version were different given the fact that 2 items (one each of dependency and availability) had to be deleted in the Iranian version due to low item validity.

Results

Attachment Security (Mother) in Iranian Sample

When the correlations were computed with two subscales of attachment security (dependency and availability) for the girls, the aggression score showed correlation was found to be insignificant (Table 1).

In the boys' sample, aggression showed negative correlation with availability, dependency, and total attachment security (Table1).

In the total Iranian sample, aggression also had negative correlations with dependency, availability and total attachment security (Table1).

Attachment Security (Mother) in Indian Sample

In the girls' sample (Table 1), aggression yielded negative correlation with dependency and total attachment security. The values of correlation moved to 0.05 level of significance. The correlation was insignificant for availability (Table1).

In the boys' sample, aggression had negative correlations with dependency, availability and total attachment security (Table1).

In the total Indian sample aggression also showed negative correlations with dependency, availability, and total attachment security (Table1).

Attachment Security (Father) in Iranian Sample

In the girls' sample, aggression was found to be negatively correlated with dependency, availability and total attachment security (Table1).

negative correlations with dependency, availability, and total attachment security (Table1).

In the boys' sample, aggression had negative correlations with dependency, availability and total attachment security (Table1).

In the total Indian sample (aggression also showed negative correlations with dependency, availability and total attachment security (Table1).

In the boys' sample, aggression also showed negative correlations with availability, dependency and total attachment security (Table1).

In the total Iranian sample, aggression also yielded negative correlations with dependency, availability, and total attachment security (Table1).

Attachment Security (Father) in Indian Sample

In the girls' sample, aggression was found to have negative correlations with dependency, availability, and total attachment security (Table1).

In the boys' sample, aggression had negative correlations with dependency, availability and total attachment security (Table1).

In the total Indian sample (aggression also showed negative correlations with dependency, availability and total attachment security (Table1).

Discussion

Attachment security demonstrated significant negative correlations with aggression in the boys, girls and the total Iranian sample. The girls' dependency on mothers (Table 1) was the only case with insignificant

correlation.

In the Indian sample, attachment security was also found to be significantly correlated (negatively) with aggression. The only exception was the correlation between mother's availability and aggression in girls, which was not significant (Table 1).

The third hypothesis which states "attachment security of children (dependency, availability, and total) for

Table1. Correlation among aggression and different subscales of attachment security

Variable	IRAN			INDIA		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
Att-DP-M [†]	-.146	-.385*	-.258**	-.154 +	-.188*	-.197**
Att-AV-M [‡]	-.218**	-.177*	-.201**	-.097	-.215**	-.209**
Att-T-M [§]	-.204*	-.328**	-.261**	-.154 +	-.238**	-.245**
Att-DP-F [¶]	-.160*	-.216**	-.184**	-.189*	-.251**	-.237**
Att-AV-F [‡]	-.267*	-.181*	-.229**	-.263**	-.297**	-.291**
Att-T-F [‡]	-.232**	-.242**	-.237**	-.269**	-.316**	-.310**

[†] Att-DP-M: Attachment security-dependency-mother

[‡] Att-AV-M: Attachment security-availability-mother

[§] Att-T-M: Attachment security-total-mother

[¶] Att-DP-F: Attachment security-dependency-father

[‡] Att-AV-F: Attachment security-availability-father

[‡] Att-T-F: Attachment security-total-father

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, + Approaching significance,

mother will be negatively correlated with aggression, in the both cultures" was supported for Iranian as well as Indian sample except in Iranian girls sample in the case of mother's attachment (dependency) and Indian girls in the case of mother's attachment (availability).

As demonstrated in Table 1, for father's attachment, security aggression had negative significant correlations with father's attachment security (dependency, availability and total) in the Iranian and Indian samples (girls, boys and total).

The fourth hypothesis which states "attachment security of children (dependency, availability, and total) for father will be negatively correlated with aggression, in the both cultures" was also supported for Iranian as well as Indian sample (girls, boys and total).

Based on observations in nursery schools and day care centers (24, 25), several studies have found that preschoolers with secure attachment histories show positive interactions with peers. Sroufe found that, compared to children with anxious attachment histories, children who had been securely attached in infancy were more effectively positive toward others (26). They were ranked higher on social competence, number of friends, and popularity with peers, compliance, and empathy. He also found different

types of sub-clinical behavior problems associated with the two major categories of anxious attachment.

Sroufe also noted that avoidant attachment in infancy has been associated with emotional insulation, lack of empathy, and hostile or antisocial behavior in preschool years (27, 28).

It has also been reported that teachers rated the securely attached children as higher in self-esteem, empathy, and positive affect and lower on negative affect. Especially, securely attached infants, more commonly initiated, responded to, and sustained interaction with others using positive affect. Similarly, these children whined less, were less aggressive, and displayed fewer negative reactions to initiations. Teachers rated the secure children as more socially competent, socially skilled, and higher in "number of friends". The securely attached children were rated by peers as more popular than their insecurely attached classmates (29, 30).

A securely attached child feels that he/she can depend on his/her parents and that the parents are available whenever required by him/her in various situations; such a child will develop trust to others. In addition, the aforementioned characteristics including self-esteem, empathy, and positive affect, which will make the child less aggressive or hostile to others will also develop. On the other hand, a child with low attachment security will not be able to develop the mentioned positive characteristics (empathy, friendliness, etc). Most importantly he/she can not trust others and this may lead to the development of negative behaviors: namely, aggression. Bullying, saying mean things, and other forms of aggressive behavior may merely be attention getting behaviors. Since they do not get the proper importance at home, they may try to get the same by negative behaviors (bullying, etc.) in the peer group. There is a great possibility that securely attached children will have more of positive interactions with the parents; conversely, the insecurely attached children may face more negative interactions at home and their aggressive behavior may be a reflection of such interactions.

It is also possible that insecurely attached children are not accepted or are rejected by their parents or it is likely that their parents may have used coercive child rearing practices like punishment against them. The relationship between rejection, coercive child rearing and aggression is well documented (29-34).

Still another view, as put forth by Hetherington and Parke could be that a child who is high on attachment security is more likely to be concerned about maintaining parental affection and approval through adopting socialized behavior than is a child who is low on attachment security (1).

Implication

It is important that parents treat their children in a tender, loving manner so that a secure attachment develop between them. Children need to be assured that parents find pleasure in meeting their dependency

needs. Furthermore, parents should make themselves accessible to children so that they could develop the confidence that their parents will be available whenever they are in need. This feeling of security is very essential; otherwise, the child may be at a loss to understand various problematic situations and may react aggressively.

References

1. Hetherington EM, Parke RD, Locke VO. *Child psychology: a contemporary viewpoint*. New York: McGraw-Hill; 1986.
2. Buss AH. *The psychology of aggression*. New York: Wiley; 1961.
3. Dollard J, Doob LW, Miller NE, Mowrer OH, Sears RR. *Frustrations and Aggression*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 1939.
4. Ainsworth MDS. The development of infant-mother attachment. In: Caldwell BM, Ricciuti HN, eds. *Review of child development research (vol.3)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1973. p. 1-94.
5. Bowlby J. *Attachment and loss*. London: Hogarth Press; 1969.
6. Elicker J, Englund M, Sroufe LA. Predicting peer competence and peer relationships in childhood from early parent-child relationships. In: Parke RD, Ladd GW eds. *Family-peer Relationships: Modes of Linkage*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; 1992. p. 77-106.
7. Kerns KA, Klepac L, Cole AK. Peer relationships and preadolescents' perceptions of security in the mother-child relationship. *Dev Psychol* 1996; 32: 457-466.
8. Ainsworth MDS. *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1978.
9. Main M, Kaplan N, Cassidy J. Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: a move to the level of representation. In: Bretherton I, Waters E, eds. *Growing Points of Attachment Theory and Research. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1985. p. 66-104.
10. Armsden GC, Greenberg MT. The inventory of parent and peer attachment: Individual differences and their relationship to psychological well-being in adolescence. *J Youth Adolesc* 1987; 16: 427-454.
11. Rudolph KD, Hammen C, Burge D. Cognitive representations of self, family, and peers in school-age children: links with social competence and sociometric status. *Child Dev* 1995; 66: 1385-1402.
12. Bowlby J. *Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. Tavistock, London: Routledge; 1979.
13. Bartholomew K, Horowitz LM. Attachment styles among young adults: a test of a four-category model. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 1991; 61: 226-244.
14. Kerns KA, Stevens AC. Parent-child attachment in late adolescence: Links to social

- relations and personality. *J Youth Adolesc* 1996; 25: 323-342.
15. McCormick CB, Kennedy JH. Parent-child attachment working models and self-esteem in adolescence. *J Youth Adolesc* 1994; 23: 1-18.
 16. Havighurst RJ. *Human development and education*: New York: Longmans, Green; 1953.
 17. Blos P. The second individuation process of adolescence. *Psychoanal Study Child* 1967; 22: 162-186.
 18. Larson RW, Richards MH, Moneta G, Holmbeck G, Duckett E. Changes in adolescents' daily interactions with their families from age 10 to 18: disengagement and transformation. *Dev Psychol* 1996; 32: 744-754.
 19. Steinberg L. Autonomy, conflict, and harmony in the family relationship. In: Feldman SS, Elliott GR, eds. *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1991. p. 255-276.
 20. Bowlby J. *Attachment and Loss*. New York: Basic Books; 1975.
 21. Eron LD, Banta TJ, Walder LO, Laulicht JH. Comparison of data obtained from mothers and fathers on child-rearing practices and their relation to child aggression. *Child Dev* 1961; 32: 457-472.
 22. Lefkowitz MM, Eron LD, Walder LO, Huesmann LR. *Growing Upto be Violent*. New York: Pergamon Press; 1977.
 23. Mehta S. *A study of child psychopathology in related to attachment security and parental marital adjustment* [M. Phil Thesis]. Chandigarh: Panjab University; 2002.
 24. Arend R, Gove FL, Sroufe LA. Continuity of individual adaptation from infancy to kindergarten: a predictive study of ego-resiliency and curiosity in preschoolers. *Child Dev* 1979; 50: 950-959.
 25. Waters E, Wippman J, Sroufe LA. Attachment, positive affect, and competence in the peer group: two studies in construct validation. *Child Dev* 1979; 50: 821-829.
 26. Sroufe LA. Infant-Caregiver Attachment and Patterns of Adaptation In Preschool: The Roots of Maladaptation and Competence. In: Perlmutter M, ed. *Minnesota Symposium on Child psychology*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1983. p. 41-81.
 27. Sroufe LA. A Developmental Perspective on Day Care. *Early Child Res Q* 1988; 3: 283-291.
 28. Sroufe LA. The role of infant-caregiver attachment in development. In: Belsky J, Nezworski T, eds. *Clinical implications of attachment*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1988. p. 18-38.
 29. Erickson M, Sroufe LA, Egeland B. The relationship between quality of attachment and behavior problems in preschool in a high-risk sample. In: Bretherton I, Waters E, eds. *Growing points of attachment theory and research. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*; 1985. p. 147-167.
 30. Suess GL. *[Consequences of early attachment experiences on competence in preschool]* [PhD thesis]. Germany: University of Regensburg; 1987.
 31. Amberson SR. *Child Development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 1978.
 32. Kohn ML. *Class and conformity: a study in values, with a reassessment (2nd Ed)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1977.
 33. Laosa LM. Maternal behavior: Socio-cultural diversity in modes of family interaction. In: Henderson RW, ed. *Parent-child interaction. Theory, research and prospects*. New York: Academic Press; 1981. p. 125-167.
 34. Lesser GS. *Maternal attitudes and practices and the aggressive behavior of children* [PhD thesis]. New Haven: Yale University; 1952.