

Assessing the Relationship Between Aggression Tendencies and the Secure Parental Attachment of Children Going Through Early Adolescence

¹Serdal Seven, ²Hülya Gülay and ³Mustafa Damar

¹Muş Alparslan University, Faculty of Education, Department of Preschool Education, Muş-Turkey

²Pamukkale University, Faculty of Education, Department of Preschool Education, Denizli-Turkey

³The Ministry of National Education, Muş-Turkey

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to assess the relationship between aggression tendencies and the sense of security arising from parental relationships of children going through early adolescence. 167 normally developed sixth and seventh grade students participated in the study. In the study, the Intent Attribution Questionnaire and the Parent as a Secure Base Scale were used to gather data. Results of the study illustrated a significantly positive relationship between the children's level of parental attachment and their level of aggression tendencies. Another outcome from the study was that the level of secure parental attachment had a significant predictive effect on the level of aggression tendencies. While a secure attachment bond with the mother portrayed a significant predictive effect on the level of aggression tendencies, a secure attachment bond with the father alone portrayed no predictive effect on the level of aggression tendencies.

Key words: Secure attachment • Parental attachment • Tendency towards aggression • Early adolescence

INTRODUCTION

In general, aggression is defined as behaviour intended to cause harm to other individuals or objects [1-4]. Harming can be physical (hitting, pushing, kicking, etc.) as well as psychological (gossip, destroying relationships). Any behaviour aimed to harm someone or something, even if the source aimed at is not directly harmed, is considered to be aggression. Aggressive behaviour is a special form of anti-social behaviour [5]. Even though aggression is not a new concept, it has become an issue discussed more frequently in recent years. The increasing rate of aggression displayed by children has caused an increase in the number of studies carried out to assess aggression.

It is a known fact that aggression is affected by various variables. One of these variables is interaction with parents. It has been determined that children who form a close bond with their parents are more successful in establishing social relations with their peers and display less aggressive behaviour. The lack of maternal love and support, aggressive and violent adult behaviours also increase aggression. Another known fact is that aggressive and bullying behaviours are related to parental attitude that is authoritative, harsh,

inconsistent and based on physical punishment and home environments that lack love, support and attention and are stressful and unsettled [6-10]. One of the fundamental elements that determine the interaction between mother and child and father and child, is attachment. Attachment patterns play a major role in shaping social relations during infancy, childhood and adulthood [11]. According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, during infancy babies develop representational models perceived from the behaviour and approach they receive from the parent, who is their identified attachment figure. In the event that the adult who is the attachment figure responds to the infant with love and sensitivity, the models developed by the infant will be based on elements such as love and being precious. These models take on the role of a guide for emotions, perceptions and behaviours in human relations [12]. Children securely attached to their parents are able to be sensitive and attentive to their peers and their needs in future years [13, 14]. In a study conducted by Van IJzendoorn (1997), he stated that adolescents securely attached to their parents were more successful at skills such as empathising and expressing their feelings in interpersonal relations in comparison to adolescents experiencing insecure attachment [15]. All the positive properties that secure attachment provides protect

adolescents from displaying adverse behaviours such as aggression. Secure parental attachment primarily effects the interaction between the child and their parents and then peer relations. In Turkey, the number of studies that investigates the effects attachment patterns, established during infancy, have on later stages such as early adolescence, are extremely inadequate. In recent years, the number of aggression-based incidences experienced in schools has increased; which has become essential to investigate the source of the issue in terms of other variables. As a result, numerous studies to eliminate the tendency towards aggression, by establishing the form of these tendencies in early adolescence, will be carried out in the short-term.

Taking this as the starting point, the aim of this study is to assess the relationship between secure parental attachment and the tendency towards aggression in children during early adolescence. In this context, we asked the questions stated below.

Is there a relationship between the level of secure parental attachment and the level of aggression tendencies in young adolescents?

Is there a relationship between the secure attachment bond with the father and the level of aggression tendencies in young adolescents?

Method: A relational survey method was used for this study.

Participants: 67 (88 girls and 79 boys) normally developed sixth and seventh grade students, with an average age of 12.12 (SD, .59), from 4 elementary schools in the region of Muş, Turkey participated in this study. The children were determined at random from 12 classrooms of 4 elementary schools.

Instruments

The Intent Attribution Questionnaire: The Intent Attribute Questionnaire was developed by Cassidy, Kirsh, Scolton and Parke (1996) to establish the positive, antagonistic, or unknown mental representations portrayed by children in middle childhood towards their peers in certain situations [12]. There are six stories available on the questionnaire; three relating to known peers and three relating to unfamiliar peers. For every story there are three types of intent; positive-prosocial intent, negative-antagonistic peer intent and neutral peer intent. Answers that are positive-the peer intent to help others score 1, answers that are neutral score 2 and answers that are negative-antagonistic peer intent score

3. Total scores range from positive to antagonistic between 6 and 18. The children with high scores had negative and antagonistic mental representations regarding their peers [16]. Seven (2010) conducted reliability-validity studies on the questionnaire for the Turkish version. The Cronbach Alpha was .76 and the Spearman Brown split-half correlation was .70. In line with these analyses, the questionnaire was deemed valid and reliable [16].

Parent as a Secure Base Scale: This 13-item questionnaire was used to assess how adolescents' interpreted their parent's ability to provide a secure base. This questionnaire originally included 16 items, as the mother as a secure base and the father as a secure base. However, after conducting principal axis factor analyses, 3 items were dropped from both versions of this questionnaire as they had low factor loadings [17]. Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (definitely true), adolescents rated the degree to which they viewed their parent as caring about them and the extent to which their parent were available, sensitive and responsive to them in times of need and/or distress (e.g. "my mother /father is someone I can count on when I need help." and "my mother/father does not understand me very well") Adolescents completed separate versions of this questionnaire for their mother and father. Summary scores reflecting the mother as a secure base and the father as a secure base were calculated separately for the two versions of this questionnaire by adding the items within each questionnaire; possible scores for each version ranged from 13 to 65. Data on the validity of this scale have shown that perceptions of the parents as providing a secure base are associated with attachment and other aspects of parenting, such as warmth and understanding [17, 18]. Feeney and Cassidy (2003) reported that these measures had substantial constructive validity and good internal consistency [19]. Cronbach Alpha was .91 for the mother version and .91 for the father version [17]. This measure was adapted to Turkish for this study. To evaluate the factor structure of this new measure, these thirteen items were submitted to a principle axis factor analysis. This method, rather than a principle components analysis, was used, as the latter may spuriously inflate factor loadings if used for less than 30 items [20, 21]. After the first analysis 3 items were dropped from both versions of this questionnaire as they had low factor loadings. All ten items loaded on a single factor, with factor loadings ranging from .68 to .88. for the mother version and from .75 to .91 for the father version.

The explained variance of one factor was 61.4 % for the mother version and 69 % for the father version. The score difference of all items for the lower and upper 27% group was significant in both version. Item total correlations scores ranged from .93 to .94 for the mother and from .95 to .96 for the father version. With regards to the reliability of the scale, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was .94 for the mother version and .96 for the father version.

Procedure: In the study, the Intent Attribution Questionnaire was applied to the children individually by the researcher. The Parent as a Secure Base Scale was completed by the children under the supervision of the teachers and the researcher.

Data Analysis: Multiple regression analysis was carried out to analyse the predictive effect secure parental attachment had on the level of aggression tendency in young adolescents.

RESULTS

Table 1 illustrates that the arithmetic mean and the median of the scales used in the study are close to each other, the skewness and kurtosis coefficients are within a ± 1.00 range; this proves that the scores do not deviate excessively from the normal distribution. As a result, the scores for the Secure Base Mother/ Father scales were accepted as having a distribution very close to normal.

Those participating in the study were categorised in three groups according to their IAQ scores; positive, neutral and hostile. Accordingly, those with an average below the standard deviation or a lower score ($IAQ \leq 9$) were categorised as positive attribution, those with an average above the standard deviation or a higher score ($IAQ \geq 13$) were categorised as hostile attribution and those that fell between the ± 1.00 standard deviation range ($IAQ 10-12$), were categorised as neutral attribution.

As illustrated, the correlation coefficients among measures ranged from $r = .88$ to $r = -.46$. More precisely, intent attribution was negatively correlated to the secure attachment bond with the father and the mother and the secure attachment bond with the mother was positively correlated with the secure attachment bond with the father scores. Similarly, IAQ familiar peer scores were positively correlated with IAQ unfamiliar peer scores. Moreover, both IAQ familiar and unfamiliar peers were negatively correlated with the secure attachment scores with the mother and the father.

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the effects secure attachment bonds with the mother and the father had on the adolescents' intent attribution. Table 3 illustrates that the scores for secure attachment with mother and the father have a significant effect on the adolescents' intent attribution and explains 23 % of intent attribution variance [$p < .001$; $F = 24.50$]. Results illustrate that intent attribution could be explained by secure attachment to the mother [$p < .001$; $t = -5.43$] but not with the secure attachment to the father [$p > .05$; $t = 1.08$].

Table 1: Standard Deviations, the Ranges for Adolescent Attachment and the Intent Attribution Scores

Variable	Mean	Median	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Range
Parent As Secure Base						
Mother Version	43.59	44	5.97	-.99	.24	22
Father Version	42.35	44	6.51	-.95	.32	26
Intent Attribution Questionnaire						
IAQ	10.92	11	2.35	.66	-.04	11
Familiar Peers	5.19	5	1.38	.72	.21	6
Unfamiliar Peers	5.51	5	1.38	.49	-.08	6

Note: N= 167

Table 2: Correlations among Adolescents' Intent Attribution, Attachment Security Scores

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. IAQ	--	.82**	.88**	-.46**	-.27**
2. IAQ (Familiar Peer)	.82**	--	.64**	-.49**	-.30**
3. IAQ (Unfamiliar Peer)	.88**	.64**	--	-.45**	-.28**
4. Parent as Secure Base Mother	-.47**	-.46**	-.47**	--	.74**
5. Parent as Secure Base Father	-.30**	-.33**	-.31**	.74**	--

** $p < .01$

Table 3: Explanation of Intent Attribution by Attachment Security Mother and Father

Model	R ²	ΔR ²	F	β	Variables	t	p
Independent variables; attachment							
security mother, attachment security father	.230	.22	24.50				.000
				-.56	Attachment security mother	-5.43*	.000
Dependent variable: Intent Attribution							
				.11	Attachment security father	1.08	.281

*p < .001

DISCUSSION

Research results illustrate that there is a significant positive relationship between secure parental attachment and the level of tendency towards aggression. It was also proven that both secure attachment to the mother and the father has a predictive effect on the level of tendency towards aggression. When analysed separately, we discovered that secure attachment to the mother had a significant predictive effect on the level of tendency towards aggression, whereas secure attachment to the father had no predictive effect on the level of tendency towards aggression.

The fact that the mother alone has a predictive effect on the aggressiveness of the child is a result that is parallel to the child raising manner in Turkey. In Turkish Culture, in comparison to the father, the mother spends more time with the child and takes on the primary responsibility of meeting the child's needs, desires and care after the delivery. As a result, the interaction between child and mother is very different to the interaction between the child and the father. This difference has an effect on the attachment pattern and how this attachment pattern affects the child's behaviour. Additionally, studies carried out related to the attachment theory have studied how the relationship between the mother and the child and the quality of trust affects the child's ability to correctly interpret peer reactions and respond accordingly. Children that are insecurely attached to their mother have displayed aggressive behaviours or have encountered violence from their peers. A child can reflect the initial interaction they experience with their mother in peer relation in later years. In comparison to other children, those that form secure attachments pay more attention to their peers, display a positive attitude, are inclined to cooperate, can empathise, develop the capability to resolve issues, blend into their peer groups quicker, are more compatible and establish more expressive relationships [3, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28].

Woodhouse, Dykas and Cassidy (2009) conducted a study on 118 17-year old adolescents; they determined that adolescents securely attached to their parents portrayed less introvert and extrovert behavioural issues [29]. Zimmermann, Mohr and Spangler (2009) conducted a study on 91 12-year old adolescents and analysed how maternal attachment patterns affected their aggression and regulation of autonomy [30]. Research results illustrated that there was a negative correlation between secure attachment and aggression and a positive correlation between secure attachment and coming to an agreement. The results obtained from this study are parallel to those obtained in previous studies. Young adolescents securely attached to their parents approach their peers from a more accepting, compromising and sensitive point of view; ultimately restraining behavioural issues such as aggression from arising. However, children insecurely attached to their parents are more reactive and domineering towards their peers.

This study had some limitations. In line with these limitations, a broader sample group should be used for future studies. Different techniques such as observation and sociometry can be used to prove children's tendency towards aggression. Studies can be carried out for other variables that may affect the tendency towards aggression; this will enable us to compare the effects of parental attachment on other variables. Longitudinal studies, where long-term data is collected can be carried out in future studies. Studies can be carried out to illustrate the structure of the interaction and/or the relationship between father and child. Studies can be conducted on how training the parents affect the child's behaviour. Studies can be planned to investigate the various effects other variables have on the tendency towards aggression and attachment. Studies should be conducted that compare the effects parental attachment has on children's behaviour in the Turkish culture to other cultures.

REFERENCES

1. Brook, J.S., L. Zheng, M. Whiteman and A.W. Brook, 2001. Aggression in toddlers: Associations with parenting and marital relations. *The J. Genetic Psychol.*, 162(2): 228-241.
2. Cole, M., S.R. Cole and C. Lightfoot, 2001. *The Development of Children*. New York: Worth Publishers.
3. Feldman, P.S., 2005. *Development Across the Life Span*. (3th edition). USA: Pearson Education Ltd. Prentice Hall.
4. Ostrov, J.M., D.A. Gentile and N.R. Crick, 2006. Media exposure, aggression and prosocial behavior during early childhood: A longitudinal study. *Social Development*, 15(4): 612-627.
5. Kempes, M., W. Matthys, H. Vries and H.V. Engeland, 2005. Reactive and proactive aggression in children. A review of theory, findings and relevance for child and adolescent psychiatry. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 14: 11-19.
6. Kimonis, E.R., P.J. Frick, N.W. Boris, A.T. Smyke, C.H. Zearak, A.H. Cornell and J.M. Farrell, 2006. Callous-unemotional features, behavioral inhibition and parenting: Independent predictors of aggression in a high-risk preschool sample. *J. Child Family Studies*, 15: 745-756.
7. Marcus, R.F. and C. Kramer, 2001. Reactive and proactive aggression: Attachment and social competence predictors. *The J. Genetic Psychol.*, 162(3): 260-275.
8. Öğretir, A.D., 2009. How television affects preschool children: A study regarding the amount of time spent watching TV and the family evaluation scale. *E-Journal of New Sciences Academy*, 4(3): 881-890.
9. Papalia, D.E., S.W. Olds, R.D. Feldman and D. Gross, 2003. *Human Development*. USA: McGraw Hill.
10. Taner Derman, M., 2009. Aggressive behaviours observed in class for preschool students between the ages of 5 and 6 and teacher-related reasons. *E-Journal of New World Sciences Academy*, 4(3): 892-907.
11. Gülay, H., 2010. *Peer Relationships in Preschool Period*. Ankara: Pegem-A Publishing.
12. Cassidy, J., S. Kirsh, K. Scolton and R.D. Parke, 1996. Attachment and representations of peer relationships. *Developmental Psychology*, 32: 892-904.
13. DeWolff, M.S. and M.H. van IJzendoorn, 1997. Sensitivity and attachment: A meta-analysis on parental antecedents of infant attachment. *Child Development*, 68: 571-591.
14. Pederson, D.R., K.E. Gleason, G. Moran and S. Bento, 1998. Maternal attachment representations, maternal sensitivity and the infant-mother attachment relationship. *Developmental Psychology*, 34: 925-933.
15. Van IJzendoorn, M., 1997. Attachment, Emergent Morality and Aggression: Toward a Developmental Socioemotional Model of Antisocial Behaviour. *Intl. J. Behavioral Development*, 21(4): 703-727.
16. Seven, S., 2010. Adaptation of intent attribution questionnaire to Turkish children. *J. Social Sci. Res.*, 1: 75-84.
17. Cassidy, J., Y. Ziv, M. Rodenberg and S.S. Woodhouse, 2003. Adolescent perceptions of parents: Associations with adolescent attachment (AAI) and interactions with parents. In R. Kobak (chair.), *Assessing attachment in middle childhood and adolescence: Toward a multi-method approach*. Symposium conducted at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Tampa, FL.
18. Dykas, M.J., S.S. Woodhouse, J. Cassidy and H.S. Waters, 2006. Narrative assessment of attachment representations: Links between secure base scripts and adolescent attachment. *Attachment and Human Development*, 8: 221-240.
19. Feeney, B.C. and J. Cassidy, 2003. Reconstructive memory related to adolescent-parent conflict interactions: The influence of attachment-related representations on immediate perceptions and changes in perceptions over time. *J. Personality and Social Psychol.*, 85: 945-955.
20. Gorsuch, R.L., 1983. *Factor Analysis*. USA: Earlbaum Associates.
21. Snook, S.C. and R.L. Gorsuch, 1989. Component analysis versus common factor analysis: A Monte Carlo study. *Psychological Bulletin*, 106(1): 148-154.
22. Adamson, L., 1990. *The relation between attachment and social competence in peer relations in early childhood*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Boston University, USA.
23. Berk, L., 1994. *Child Development*. USA: Allyn and Bacon.

24. Eisenberg, N., Q. Zhou, T.L. Spinrad, C. Valiente, R.A. Fabes and J. Liew, 2005. Relations among positive parenting, children's effortful control and externalizing problems: A Three-wave longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 76(5): 1055-1071.
25. Flanagan, C., 1999. *Early Socialization*. New York: Routledge.
26. Grusec, J.E. and H. Lytton, 1988. *Social Development: History, Theory and Research*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
27. Önder, A., 2005. Peer relations at preschool. Eds. A. Oktay and Ö.P. Unutkan, *Current Issues of Preschool*. Istanbul: Morpa Culture Publishing, pp: 249-265.
28. Rodkin, P.C. and E.V.E. Hodges, 2003. Bullies and victims in the peer ecology: Four questions for psychologists and school professionals. *School Psychol. Rev.*, 32(3): 384-400.
29. Woodhouse, S.S., M.J. Dykas and J. Cassidy, 2009. Perceptions of secure base provision within the family. *Attachment and Human Development*, 11(1): 47-67.
30. Zimmermann, P., C. Mohr and G. Spangler, 2009. Genetic and attachment influences on adolescents' regulation of autonomy and aggressiveness. *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry*, 50(1): 1339-1347.