



FI Research Summary: Fathers and Attachment

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Babies and young children develop ‘attachments’ to the people with whom they interact regularly. This has nothing to do with the child being physically ‘attached’ to a caregiver. Attachments are interpersonal connections at relationship level.

Not all ‘attachments’ are comfortable for the child. A baby or child who feels confident that his/her needs will be understood and met by a caregiver develops what is called a ‘secure’ attachment to that caregiver. When the infant or child does not feel confident in the caregiver’s support, the attachment is insecure and this causes distress to the child. Such a child may reject the caregiver or detach from them, or may become very ‘clingy’ and anxious.

For a long time, people have believed that only one ‘attachment relationship’ counts: that between the child and a ‘primary’ caretaker. But research now finds that babies and young children develop a spread of attachment relationships simultaneously with the adults (and children) with whom they interact regularly - including their fathers (Bretherton, 2010; Easterbrooks and Goldberg, 1990).

And all significant ‘attachment’ relationships impact on the baby or child simultaneously: secure attachments generate joy; insecure attachments generate distress. For example:

- Disengaged and remote father-child interactions as early as the third month of life have been found to predict behaviour problems in children when they are older (Ramchandani et al., 2013).

The amount of time spent with the caregiver and the quality of the caregiver’s parenting behaviour are all significant in the development of secure or insecure attachments:

- When a father engages in low quality parenting behaviour, the more time he spends with his infant, the less secure their attachment is likely to be (Brown et al, 2007). The same is true of mothers, of course.
- When a father engages in high quality parenting behaviour, a secure attachment may develop even when the father spends relatively little time with the child (Brown et al, 2007).

- Across a wide range of cultural contexts, around one third of mother-child attachments and one third of father-child attachments are rated 'insecure' when their child is 15 months old (Ahnert et al, 2006), even though at this stage most mothers will have spent far more time caring for the child.

The tendency of couples to mate with people like themselves, plus opportunities to model caregiving to each other, would predict similarity in attachment security between infants and each of their parents. In fact:

- A meta-analysis of eleven studies found only weak concordance (Fox et al, 1991)
- More recently, Umemura et al (2012) found that only 57% of two-year-olds had the same attachment security-classifications with both parents.

This means that where security classifications differ between parents, as they so often do, the secure attachment is not necessarily with the person who spends most time with the child (usually the mother). It will often be between the father and the child.

One substantial secure attachment can 'buffer' the child against the ill effects of insecure attachments with other important caregivers. For example, where a mother is depressed, a substantial secure attachment to the father can ameliorate poor outcomes for the child (Mezulis et al, 2004).

Since experiencing a secure attachment with at least one parent provides children with enduring benefits, having a close relationship with both mother and father right from the beginning increases children's odds of developing at least one secure attachment (Warshak, 2014).

A growing body of research suggests that 'more is better' – more than one secure attachment is helpful at all ages:

- Young children with secure attachments to both parents exhibited less over-control (Easterbrooks and Goldberg, 1990).
- In the same sample, 5-6 year olds who had been securely attached to both parents early on, expressed less negative emotion (Easterbrooks and Goldberg, 1990).
- Where mother-child and day-care-teacher-child attachments were measured, young children who were securely attached to both adults were more socially competent (Howes et al, 1988).
- Children in middle school who are securely attached to both parents are perceived by teachers to be more competent than children who are securely attached to just one parent (Diener et al, 2007).
- Among children in middle school, secure attachments to more than one caregiver (mainly their fathers) were associated with pro-social behaviour and feelings of self-confidence (Carter and Almarez, 2014).
- Ten year olds who enjoy secure attachments to both parents feel more competent than those who are securely attached only to one parent (Booth-LaForce et al, 2006).
- Among 9-14 year olds, security of attachments to both parents is associated with various indicators of positive friendship qualities (Lieberman et al, 1999).

- A secure attachment to both parents provides children with additional protections during the teenage years (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2013; Al-Yagon, 2011).
- Conversely, among adolescents, insecure attachments with both parents predict depressive symptoms (Kamkar et al, 2012).
- Also in adolescence, there is a clear association between delinquent behaviour and an insecure attachment to the same-sex parent (Hoeve et al, 2012).

Attachment relationships, like all human behaviour, occur not in isolation but within a network of influences operating on many levels (Egeland and Erickson, 1999).

- Greater father involvement in infant care and other household tasks is linked with lower parenting stress and depression in mothers (for review, see Fisher et al, 2006) and is therefore likely to enhance mother-infant attachment security.
- Relationship satisfaction and postpartum support (mainly provided by fathers) are two of four predictors of secure mother-child attachment and positive parenting by mothers of pre-term infants (Evans et al, 2012).
- By contrast, mother-child attachment is less secure when the mother experiences domestic violence (Levendosky et al, 2011) or when her baby's father is a heavy drinker (Eiden and Leonard, 1996).
- Under such negative circumstances, father-infant attachments are less secure too (Eiden et al, 2002). Therefore in order to support secure attachments between mother-and-child and father-and-child, the needs, experiences and behaviour of both parents must be addressed.
- Because environmental continuity is a predictor of secure parent-infant attachment, the presence of the same male in the household over several years was found to correlate with security of mother-infant attachment (Easterbrooks and Goldberg, 1990).

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