

# Attachment Style and Its Influence on Aggression

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## Abstract

The relationship between a child and his/her primary caregiver (individual who reared the child) can have a positive or negative correlation with the behavior emitted. A study of 100 students from McKendree University was conducted to see if the attachment style an individual has with their primary care giver as a child influences their aggression level as an adult. The results indicated that a negative relationship existed; if a person had a secure attachment, then he/she had less aggressive behavior. This study represents a step towards predicting troublesome behavior patterns through the assessment of the types of attachment patterns in childhood.

## Attachment Style and Its Influence on Aggression

“Studies have suggested that both parental and child factors play a role in the development and maintenance of children’s externalizing behavior,” (Goodman, Bartlett, Stroh, 2013, p. 17). The interactions people have with their primary care givers have an everlasting impact upon their psychological and behavioral states. These care givers are the ones who are responsible for our safety and protection, but even the slightest form of neglect can affect an individual’s future. Whether the effects manifest into anti-social behavior, troubled relationships, or internal victimization, there exists a commonality between childhood bonds and adulthood aggression. Previous studies have concluded that, “attachment theory provides a framework for understanding emotional reactions in infants, as well as intimate interpersonal relations such as love, loneliness, anger, and grief in adults,” (Hansen, Waage, Eid, Johnsen, & Hart, 2011, p. 464).

When it comes to measuring the variable of attachment, Mary Ainsworth’s (1969) three levels were used: Secure, Ambivalent, and Avoidant. It is posited that a Secure connection is one in which the baby’s needs are continuously met by his parent; he will then develop a sense of self-respect that will transcend into adulthood. This individual creates a strong affinity with his mother, but also with future significant others. When a child with a Secure attachment is left alone with a stranger, she will show distress until the caregiver returns. When in the presence of the caregiver, the child will feel comfortable with the stranger.

An Insecure Avoidant attachment is defined as a distant relationship in which the individual’s needs are not being met by its caregiver; this type of bond will influence a child to feel unworthy and unwanted by others. An infant undergoing this treatment will not feel distress when the parent is gone and will be comfortable around strangers; essentially, the baby behaves

the same around its mother and an unknown person. Later in life, the individual will internalize the rejection and develop a low self-esteem in which she believes there is something wrong with her.

An Insecure Ambivalent attachment is defined as a relationship in which the child's needs are inconsistently met, leaving the individual confused about himself and his environment. This attitude will transcend into adulthood where the person will seek out reassurance from others while displaying possible social behavior problems such as elaborated personal stories or deflated self-confidence. Feelings of abandonment are much higher in this attachment state, which causes the individual to seek out others, even if they do not provide a positive environment. Overall, this theory posits that the connection an infant shares with her primary caregiver heavily influences her affinities and self-concept in adulthood.

One study that focused on attachment styles and its influence on future aggression was done by Goodman, Bartlett, and Stroh (2013). The 56 child participants chosen were between the ages of five to 10 and attended the same public elementary school. Some exclusions included children who were adopted after the age of six months and whose primary language was not English. The next set of participants included the mothers of the selected children who averaged 39.3 years of age, with 89.3% of them married at the time of the study. Each mother completed a series of questionnaires including the Beck Depression Inventory (Goodman et al., 2013), Child Behavior Checklist-Parent Version (Goodman et al., 2013), the Inventory of Personality Organization (Goodman et al., 2013), the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (Goodman et al., 2013), and a demographic questionnaire (Goodman et al., 2013). After completing the various surveys, the mothers were then debriefed and given any support necessary.

When it came to studying the external behavior of the child participants, they were administered two tasks: the Attachment Story-Completion Task (Goodman et al., 2013) and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Goodman et al., 2013). After all tests were completed, a multiple regression analysis was calculated on all variables. These tests proved significant at the  $p < .01$  or  $p < .001$  level. The hypothesis that the mother's borderline features, specifically identity diffusion and primitive defenses were positively correlated with their children's disorganized attachment representations (Goodman et al., 2013). This research supported the idea that the attachment style with an individual's primary care giver can influence aggression levels in adulthood.

Another study that analyzed the effects of attachment styles was conducted by Konishi and Hymel (2014). The goal of this research was to find a link between the attachment among mother, father, and child to the adolescent's level of aggression. A participant pool of 776 students from grades 8-12 were selected only if their parents and themselves gave consent to be a participant in the study. The students' age ranged from 13 to 19 years and came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The participants were given two questionnaires that assessed their demographic background and anger and parental attachment. The results indicated support for the researchers' hypothesis that dysfunctional anger correlated with an insecure attachment (Konishi & Hymel, 2014).

Parens (2012) discussed a similar topic in his research; he conducted a 40 year longitudinal study that focused upon newborns and the attachment they shared with their mothers. Parens (2012) was interested in the long-term effects of the attachment and its relation to aggression. After following, interviewing, and evaluating his participants for 40 years, he was able to support his hypothesis that insecure (one in which a child does not receive care and

attention) and ambivalent attachment styles (one in which a child is given inconsistent care and attention) have a positive correlation with aggressive behavior that is often shown through prejudice (Parens, 2012). This study supports Konishi (2014) and Hymel's (2014) research that attachment styles have an impact upon aggression throughout life, especially in adulthood.

A study conducted by Williams and Kennedy (2012) further supported the findings that parent-child attachment affects aggression levels by examining bullying behaviors and victimization. The researchers gathered a convenience sample of 144 undergraduate Introduction to Psychology students to participate in the study. The students were then given the *Experience in Close Relationships* (ECR) survey (Williams & Kennedy, 2012) as a way to measure the attachment to their primary care giver. The results indicated that females were more likely to participate in physical aggression when scoring higher on avoidant attachment with their mothers and higher attachment anxiety with their fathers (Williams & Kennedy, 2012). Even though the results mainly focused upon females, the study encompassed the idea that parent-child attachment has an effect upon male's aggression as well.

Migga, Hare, Allen, and Manning (2010) published a study that evaluated the influence insecure relationships as a child have upon aggression during a romantic partnership. One hundred eighty-seven seventh and eighth graders were interviewed annually for 10 years with the culminating study focused on 93 of the adolescents who were involved in a romantic relationship at the 10-year mark. The Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996) was administered to measure the attachment the adolescent had with their parents. After following the participants for 10 years, the researchers concluded that individuals with insecure attachments to parents are more likely to show aggression verbally and physically to romantic partners (Migga, et. al., 2010).

In a study by Kuijpers, Van Der Knaap, and Winkel (2012), attachment styles were used as a psychological tool used to measure the factors that contribute to revictimization. Even though this research does not exclusively look at the relation to aggressive behaviors, it brings up several points relating to attachment theory. First, the study gathered 74 participants from several victim support services in the Netherlands that had undergone physical, sexual, or psychological abuse. Attachment was evaluated through the ECR and anger was measured through use of the Dimensions of Anger Reaction Scale (Kuijpers, Van Der Knaap, & Winkel, 2012). The results indicated that individuals who experience an anxious attachment style are more likely to be victimized (Kuijpers, et. al., 2012). This finding is interesting to me because other studies find the same attachment style to be more physically and verbally aggressive, so this style must also attract aggression from others as well.

Another study that researched the effect of attachment, but in adulthood, was conducted by Hansen, et. al., (2011). In this example, the researchers studied the attachment during adulthood instead of childhood, but the findings tend to support my hypothesis. The participants included 92 offenders at a Norwegian prison (because of the lack of female inmates, only males were included). The *Relationship Scale Questionnaire* (RSQ) (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) was given to all subjects in order to determine adult attachment styles. The findings showed that inmates who were incarcerated for violent crimes scored higher on avoidant attachment than anxious attachment which was correlated with inmates who committed non-violent crimes (Hansen, et. al., 2011).

The idea that attachment styles can affect the level of aggression in an individual is significant because it hypothesizes a reason as to why people develop anger issues and behavioral problems. It is evident from past research that, “the nature of early attachments affects

not only the individual's emerging self-concept and view of the social world (Bowlby, 1969), but also their social capacities, sense of well-being, and subsequent relationships," (Finzi, Cohen, & Ram, 2000). The previous research on the subject of attachment styles proves to be a beneficial addition to the study of psychology because of its in-depth look at how one was reared impacts his or her development into adulthood.

After reviewing past research that was based upon personal interest, this study's hypothesis was that if a person has a positive relationship (i.e., a secure attachment style) with their primary care giver as a child, then he/she will have less aggressive behavior as an adult. Mary Ainsworth's (1969) theory of attachment styles was used to measure attachment by analyzing secure attachment separately from ambivalent and avoidant attachment. Aggression was measured by using the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A sample of 100 undergraduate students at McKendree University was randomly selected at different locations including: 1828, Piper Academic Center Lounge, and various classrooms. In order to participate, the individuals needed to read the informed consent and volunteer to fill out the survey. Of the 100 participants, 36 were male (38%) and 59 were female (62%); five of the participants did not report their gender. The subjects' ages ranged from a minimum of 18 to a maximum of 31, with a mean of 20.66. All participants were allowed to contact the author's advisor or the university's counselors if further assistance was needed. The individuals who agreed to the study were volunteers and did not receive any compensation.

## **Materials**

A survey containing 28 questions was administered to the participants with the instruction to answer truthfully and to the best of their ability. The first 16 questions utilized a likert scale with one (Extremely Uncharacteristic of Me) through seven (Extremely Characteristic of Me). Questions 17 through 27 consisted of a statement in which the subject circled either “yes” or “no”. Question 28 told the participant to circle all that applied based on their current situation. One of the questions was asked twice to verify that the subject was paying attention and answering truthfully.

## **Procedure**

Participants were selected at various locations across campus that included: 1828, Piper Academic Center Lounge, and classrooms. When asking a subject if they would like to fill out the survey, they would be given a brief description of the study. If he or she responded “yes,” then an informed consent was given that stated the participant’s rights, and asked for their initials and date. Once the informed consent was collected, the individual received the survey and given ample time to answer. After completing the survey, the participant returned it to the researcher, and was then inserted into an accordion folder in a random slot. All surveys remained in that location until it was time to analyze the material.

## **Results**

The hypothesis of this study was if a person has a positive relationship (i.e., a secure attachment style) with their primary care giver as a child, then he/she will have less aggressive behavior as an adult. When it came time to analyze the surveys in order to come to a conclusion, the first step was to enter the data into SPSS. All variables were labeled and given different levels if needed. The next step included recoding all questions that were reversed scored and

creating new variables that consisted of the total scores for attachment and aggression. To examine the hypothesis, a Pearson's Correlation test was used to find out if attachment ( $M = 50.04/SD = 7.84$ ) influences aggression ( $M = 40.00/SD = 9.16$ ). After running the test, the results came back significant at a 95% confidence interval ( $p = .006$ ). This finding supports the hypothesis that a secure attachment with the primary caregiver results in less aggressive behavior.

When further examining the data, an Independent Samples T-test was used to determine if any gender differences existed for attachment and aggression. When it came to attachment, males ( $N = 35$ ) and females ( $N = 59$ ) had no significant difference ( $M = 50.3714/M = 49.6949$ , respectively). When analyzing aggression, males ( $N = 36$ ) and females ( $N = 59$ ) were significantly different (both at a 95% confidence interval) ( $M = 44.1667/M = 37.6780$ , respectively). These results are interesting because it shows biological factors among men as another possible influence on aggression.

### **Discussion**

The hypothesis of this study was if a person has a positive relationship (i.e., a secure attachment style) with their primary care giver as a child, then he/she will have less aggressive behavior as an adult. According to the statistical testing, the hypothesis was supported. A significance level of  $p = 0.006$  indicates that a negative relationship ( $r = -.251$ ) exists among attachment and aggression at a 95% confidence interval. This finding is significant because it further supports Ainsworth's theory that the relationship an individual has with their primary care giver as a child affects their behavior as an adult. It can be applied to different life situations, whether it is used to help counsel individuals or to predict future problematic behavior.

Some possible problems with this research can include the sample; the results were sound, but it might be useful to sample a much larger population that is not limited to a college campus. Most of the students probably came from similar backgrounds, so it would be interesting to survey individuals from all walks of life. Another problem could be the questions in the survey. Three of the questions were not perfectly clear to the subjects because they could be situational. This issue could have skewed the results if the participants did not look at the question from a general standpoint, like they were explained to do.

This study did produce some interesting results, but also, more perplexing questions. In the future, the study should also take into account gender stereotypes because it is a social phenomena that influences how a certain gender should act. For instance, women are taught to be more gentle and nurturing through the use of dolls and clothes, while men are encouraged to be more aggressive through contact sports and violent play with friends and siblings. This concept could have an impact upon aggressive behaviors. Also, it would be a fascinating to look at the attachment styles to caregivers who have diagnosed mental disorders. Even if they have secure attachments with their children, are they likely to imprint aggressive behaviors on the children? Both are interesting concepts that should be researched in the future based upon the results from the present study.

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