Review of the Effect of Early Attachment and Teacher-child Relationship on Children Behavior Problems

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Abstract. Recent research has made a significant progress in understanding teacher-child relationships through attachment theory and developmental system theory. This review of literature provided a look at the effect of early attachment and teacher-child relationship on children behavior problems.

Introduction

Bowlby’s attachment theory has had a profound influence on the conceptualization of processes involved in the socio-emotional development of individuals across the lifespan. Bowlby (1969) proposed that major disruptions in the mother-child relationships are precursors of children’s later psychopathology. Secure attachment to parents provides an optimal context for the development of cognitive and social skills, positive emotion, good interpersonal relationships, and school adjustment. Children who receive sensitive and responsive caregiving develop secure attachments, which children who receive inconsistent, insensitive, or rejecting caregiving may develop insecure attachments [1]. Insecure-ambivalent infants have experienced care that is inconsistent and insensitive, while insecure-avoidant infants have experienced care that is rejecting in nature. Later, Main and Solomon (1990) identified a fourth category of insecure-disorganized attachment in which the child has experienced frightened or frightening caregiving. [2] Bowlby introduced the construct of “internal working models” to explain the mechanism of the effect of attachment on child development. Children developmental blueprints or templates of their relationships with their primary caregivers, and these mental representations in turn, influence their peer relationships and relationships with other adults. Many studies have provided evidence that the quality of attachment can predict a child’s behavior problems, but the effect size has been small to moderate [3]. This is not surprising as there are other factors influencing the relationships between early mother-child attachment and later behavior problems.

Teacher-child relationships may also influence the developmental trajectories of behavior problems. Attachment theorists have proposed that teacher-child relationships are the extension of parent-child attachment through the mechanism of mental representation. There have been two generations in the research on teacher-child relationships. The first generation focused on the supportive teacher-child relationships which buffer children who are at risk for behavior problems, while the second generation of research highlighted the understanding of these relationships and their effect on children’s school adjustment. Researchers may wish to adopt a broader view on teacher-child relationships and integrate multiple theories, such as attachment theory and development theory to examine the effect of teacher-child relationships on children’s behavior adjustment [4].

Early Attachment and Behavior Problems

There is an abundance of research regarding the long-term impact of early attachment. Some researchers have found that parent-child attachments are associated with cognitive and social skills, positive emotion, interpersonal relationships and achievement. Secure attachment is linked to positive results, while insecure attachment is linked to negative results.
Studies have investigated whether insecure attachment is related to children’s behavior problems. For example, Greenberg, Speltz, and DeKlyen (1993) offered a four-factor model of an early starter pattern of disruptive behavior problems [5]. Quality of the attachment relationship between the child and primary caregivers is the most important factor; and it is argued that secure attachment may buffer against the negative impact of other risk factors. Insecure attachment alone is not likely to be sufficient to predict behavior problems, but when combined with other risk factors, insecurity may contribute to the development of behavior problems [6]. The Minnesota Parent-Child Project found that high-risk children were more likely to develop an insecure attachment and other negative outcomes, such as aggression [7].

Studies have also focused on the association between different patterns of insecure attachment and behavior problems. For example, children with avoidant attachment have been found to be more likely to have higher levels of externalizing problems [8]. The association between avoidant attachment and behavior problems varied according to the environment. In a low risk environment, avoidant attachment did not predict aggression, while in a high risk environment; avoidant attachment was associated with increased aggression. Insecure-ambivalent attachment was found to be associated with the development of externalizing problems [9].

Disorganized attachment has been found to be related to the poorest outcomes. Children with disorganized attachment often view others as threatening and, thus, respond with aggressive behavior. Children classified as disorganized /controlling exhibit more behavior problems than other children, such as aggressive behaviors. The NICHD study of early childcare found disorganized attachment predicted higher levels of externalizing problems in primary school [8]. Disrupted maternal behavior means that caregiver’s intrusive thoughts and emotions that repeatedly cause infant’s fear may prevent caregiver from having good ability to monitor and respond to the infant’s affective state, and disrupt the caregiver’s ability to engage in effective affective communication with the infant” [10]. Meta-analytic findings showed disorganized attachment had a larger effect on the development of behavior problems than other attachment classifications [11]. The NICHD study of early childcare also found insecure/other attachment at 36 months predicted externalizing and internalizing behaviors at Grade 5 in primary school [12].

There have also been some inconsistent results regarding the association between early attachment and behavior problems. For example, Bates et al (1985), in their longitudinal study found no association between attachment at 12 months and behavior problems at age 3 [13]. However, the researchers used different instruments, and different behavior domains. For example, the researchers assessed attachment at different ages. In the Minnesota longitudinal study, Erickson, Sroufe and Egeland (1985) removed data if the attachment classifications were unstable between 12 and 18 months, while Bates et al. (1985) assessed attachment data at 12 months only. Other studies have assessed attachment at 2 or 3 years. Having overlap of classifications at different points in time could lead to better construct validity. Methodological factors also included the participants, the sample size, and the period of follow-up. For example, some researchers collected data from middle-class families, while others collected data from a low SES sample, which may have contributed to inconsistent findings.

Attachment and behavior problems have been found to be significantly related when the family environment is considered to be high-risk [14]. Risk factors include: family environment, such as parent education, parenting styles, parent employment, marital conflict, children’s factors, such as childhood history, temperament, early behavior problems, and some larger contexts, such as the neighborhood culture.

Multiple Theoretical Perspectives on Teacher-child Relationships

Teacher-child relationships are likely the result of multiple and interactive influences, and thus, adopting a broader and integrative view which includes attachment theory and developmental systems theory to examine the development and role of teacher-child relationships is more complex and is thus likely to provide a better conceptual model for understanding relationships [15]. According to attachment theory, the teacher-child relationship, as an extension of the parent-child
relationship, is a reflection of the emotional bond between teacher and child, and these relationships play an important role in shaping a child’s experiences and adjustment in school. It is thought that children bring their relational schemas, or internal working models, which is the representation about self and others, into the teacher-child relationships. This model may influence a child’s understanding and response in the teacher-child relationship [16]. Attachment theory explains how teacher-child relationships develop and what dimensions can be used as indicators of relationship quality. Attachment theorists suggested that there are three dimensions of teacher-child relationships: closeness, conflict and dependency [17]. Low levels of conflict and high levels of closeness and support are defined as a good relationship. Researchers stress the importance of the emotional quality of adult interactions with children, as well as their responsiveness to children’s needs. Recent study shows that there are three trajectories for closeness: high-stable (normative), very high-decreasing, and moderate-increasing. For conflict, low-stable (normative), low-increasing, and high-decreasing trajectories were found[18].

Some studies have provided evidence that infant-parent attachment is linked to teacher-child relationships. For example, Booth et al. (2003) used the Attachment Q-Set to assess toddlers’ mother-child and caregiver-child attachment. The results revealed that mother-child attachment was associated with caregiver-child attachment [19]. Compared to children with secure attachment, those with avoidant attachment had more negative and less close teacher relationships; while children with bizarre-ambivalent representations had somewhat less intimate teacher relationships [20]. Using data from the longitudinal NICHD, O’Connor & McCartney (2006), found that, compared with securely attached children, insecure children had lower quality relationships with teacher at all three time points [21].

Interestingly, it has been found that teacher-child relationships may alter existing representation models, and the child may reorganize and revise the relationship model. Whether teacher-child relationships can compensate for risk factors, such as insecure attachment experience, peer relationships, or developmental risks (behavior problems), is an important area of future study. The moderately significant relation between parent-child and teacher-child relationships suggests that other factors may influence, attenuate, or strengthen this association [21]. Buyse et al. (2011) provided evidence for this perspective. They found that teacher sensitivity acted as a protective or exacerbating role linking maternal-child attachment and teacher-child relationships. Teacher sensitivity was a moderator between parent-child attachment and teacher-child relationships. When teacher sensitivity was high, less securely attached children were no longer at risk for developing negative relationships with teachers [16].

In sum, consistent with attachment theory, attachment quality is the product of the interaction history within a given dyad, and early parent-child attachment has been found to be moderately related to teacher-child relationships. Teachers and children each have a reciprocal role in teacher-child relationships. For example, teacher sensitivity can act as a buffering role against poor attachment histories. Children may construct more differentiated relational models as they develop [15]. As children develop and accumulate relational experiences, infant-parent attachment has less direct effect on teacher-child relationships.

Developmental systems theory posits that human development is a relational phenomenon, and the development of the child is a dynamic process embedded in multilevel interactions. Pianta (1999) suggested that the components of the relationships between teacher and child include (a) external influences on the systems, (b) features of the individuals, and (c) interactive exchanges between relational partners [17]. Bronfenbrenner (1986) suggested that the transitions and linkages between the family and other major settings influence development; for example, day care, peer groups, school, social networks, the work of parents, neighborhoods and communities and public policies [22]. Neighborhoods have been found to influence child development. For example, Silk, Sessa, sheffield, Steinberg and Avenevoli (2004) found that positive neighborhood involvement—and cohesion buffered the relationship between hostile parenting and externalizing problems thus forming a protective factor [23].
Teacher–Child Relationship and Behavior Problems

The Direct Association between the Teacher–Child Relationship and Behavior Problems

Many studies have examined the direct effect of teacher-child relationships on student behavior problems. Children with higher quality teacher-child relationships are more likely to have higher levels of social and cognitive skills. Teacher-child relationships play an important role in a child’s later behavior problems. Pianta and Stulhman (2004) found that close teacher-child relationships in preschool predicted a child’s internalizing problems in first grade [24]. Specifically, less close teacher-child relationships predicted higher levels of internalizing problems; while teacher-child relationships high in conflict in preschool predicted children’s externalizing problems. Teacher-child dependence relationships refer to child’s clinging to the adult in an immature or fearful way. The findings of another longitudinal study also showed that high level of teacher-child dependence predicted the child’s aggression behavior at age 4, while high teacher–child dependence in preschool predicted a child’s withdrawal behaviors[25]. Teacher-child relationships high in conflict during the school transition were related to externalizing behavior.

Children’s behavior problems can be important factors that influence teacher-child relationships. Child behavior problems are strongly associated with teacher-child conflict. Teachers are more likely to have negative relationships with children who display high levels of behavior problems. For instance, Birch and Ladd (1998) found that children with higher levels of antisocial behaviors in kindergarten are more likely to have lower closeness, high conflict, and highly dependent relationships with teachers during first grade [26]. Greater externalizing behavior was associated with higher levels of conflict at kindergarten[27]. Moreover, Hamre et al. (2008) examined the effect of student, teacher and classroom factors on teacher-child conflict. They found that children’s behavior problems explained 50% of the variance - predicting teacher student conflict [28].

The evidence on the effects of teacher-child relationships on behavior problems and the effects of behavior problems on teacher-child relationships suggests that teacher-child relationships and behavior problems influence each other. However, there are several questions regarding the influence of teacher-child relationships on child behavior problems. For example, many studies used teacher-reports for both teacher-child relationships and behavior problems.

The Role of Teacher–Child Relationship in the Effect of Early Attachment on Later Behavior Problems

Some theorists have proposed that teacher-child relationships might be a potential factor in changing a child’s representational models, and thus, their development. In addition to parent-child attachment, teacher-child relationships are also thought to influence a child’s social development [26]. Teacher-child relationships may even serve a compensatory role for high-risk children, such as those who experience negative family life [29]. Positive teacher-child relationships may also buffer the effects of insecure attachment against high levels of behavior problems, for example, children with insecure attachment in the early years are still able to form positive relationships with teachers; and this positive relationship promotes positive development. Hughes et al. (1999) found that positive teacher-child relationships can influence the level of aggression in children whose mothers have rejecting parenting histories[29].

The Role of Teacher–child Relationship in the Effect of Prior Behavior Problems on Later Behavior Problems

Myers and Pianta (2008) posited that understanding the factors influencing early behavior problems is very important, as it has the potential to form the basis of a child’s school adjustment as well as for the implementation of interventions for behavior problems in the school years [30]. When children who have behavior problems in the early years experience a high-risk environment, such as poor teacher-child relationships, their behavior problems may become more serious.

The investigation of whether positive teacher-child relationships can ameliorate the differences between at-risk children and their low-risk peers is important for interrupting the vulnerability that behavior problems bring. Findings show that positive teacher-child relationships can buffer children
from the negative outcomes associated with risk factors[31]. For children at high-risk, such as those with early behavior problems, having close and accepting teacher-child relationships may alter children’s behavior problems. On the other hand, teacher-child relationships that are characterized by conflict and controlling behaviors may increase the child’s risk of developing behavior problems. Ladd and Burgess (2001) found an association between high-conflict teacher-child relationships and children’s behavioral misconduct, such that teacher-child relationships moderated the relationship between early childhood aggression and behavioral adjustment [31]. Meehan et al., (2003) found that children with high levels of behavior problems, but who had positive teacher-child relationships formed adaptive behaviors and decreased aggressive behaviors between second and third grade in African American and Hispanic samples in an elementary school [32]. Classroom experience may also influence a child’s positive adaptation. Children at risk who received instructional and emotional support were found to have the same scores of achievement as low-risk peers, while children at risk with less supportive teacher-child relationships were found to have lower achievement and more conflict. Children’s aggressive behavior led to increase in teacher–child conflict, which in turn led to an increase of aggressive behavior [33]. Conflictual teacher–child relationships exacerbated the effects of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in early childhood; children with conflictual teacher–child relationships had higher levels of behavior problems in middle childhood relative to children with low conflictual teacher–child relationships[34].

Summary

This review of literature provided a look at the effect of early attachment and teacher-child relationship on children problem behavior. Children with a secure attachment have a positive view of the self and others, view themselves as worthy and trust others, seek proximity to the attachment figure, and have positive attributions of others, while children with insecure attachments may view themselves unworthy and have difficulty trusting others. The review also showed there was an association between parent-child attachment and child development, especially emotion regulation, peer relation and behavior problems. Secure attachment is linked to positive results, while insecure attachment is linked to negative results.

Recent research has made a significant progress in understanding teacher-child relationships through attachment theory and developmental system theory. Attachment theorists have proposed that teacher-child relationships are the extension of parent-child attachment through the mechanism of mental representation. Teacher-child relationships may alter existing representation models, and the child may reorganize and revise the relationship model. Developmental system theory views teacher-child relationships from a relational perspective.

Teacher-child relationships may also influence the developmental trajectories of behavior problems. Specifically, less close teacher-child relationships predicted higher levels of internalizing problems; while teacher-child relationships high in conflict in preschool predicted children’s externalizing problems. Teacher-child relationships may even serve a compensatory role for high-risk children; positive teacher-child relationships may buffer the effects of insecure attachment against high levels of behavior problems. For children at high-risk, such as those with early behavior problems, having close and accepting teacher-child relationships may alter children’s behavior problems.

References


