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Attachment quality of children with ID and its link to maternal sensitivity and structuring

Rinat Feniger-Schaal^{a,*}, Tirtsa Joels^b^a University of Haifa, The Center for the Study of Child Development, Graduate School of Creative Arts Therapies, University of Haifa, 199 Aba Khoushy Av., Haifa, 3498838, Israel^b University of Haifa, The Center for the Study of Child Development, University of Haifa, 199 Aba Khoushy Av., Haifa, 3498838, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Background: Attachment theory produced a fertile field of research and clinical application. Although the topic of attachment of children with intellectual disability (ID) has received increasing research attention over the past 15 years, the empirical evidence is still limited.

Aims: We applied theoretical and empirical knowledge of parenting typically developing children to examine the mother-child relationship in the ID population. The aim was to examine maternal sensitivity and structuring and its association with children's attachment classification and their disability.

Methods: Forty preschool children (mean age 47.25, range 26–75 months) with non-specific ID and their mothers participated in the study. The mean developmental age was 25.92 months ($SD = 10.89$), The DQ mean score was 55.45 ($SD = 17.28$). We assessed children's quality of attachment using the SSP and maternal interactive behavior using the Emotional Availability Scales.

Outcomes: Forty percent of children showed secure attachment, and 32.5% showed disorganized attachment. Attachment classifications correlated significantly with maternal sensitivity and maternal structuring but not with the child's cognitive disability.

Conclusions: The results point to the importance of maternal interactive behavior for children with ID. Clinical implication may consider interventions aiming to enhance maternal sensitivity and structuring to improve children's quality of attachment.

What this paper adds

There are few studies on children with ID from an attachment perspective, emphasizing their socio-emotional development. The association between maternal sensitivity and security of attachment in children with ID has been examined in only three studies: two examined children with Down syndrome (one of which did not use the Strange Situation Procedure), and one study that used a very small sample. None of these studies examined maternal structuring. This is the first study that examined the attachment quality of children with non-specific ID, and its association with maternal sensitivity and structuring.

1. Introduction

Attachment theory is a fertile field of research and clinical application, with a broad spectrum of populations. But although the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Rinatfen@gmail.com (R. Feniger-Schaal).

topic of attachment of children with intellectual disability (ID) has received increasing research attention over the past 15 years, the empirical evidence is still limited. Thus, the present study aimed to contribute to the knowledge on attachment and children with ID.

The high prevalence of challenging behavior and mental health problems among children with ID (Dykens, 2000; Schuengel & Janssen, 2006) attests to the importance of adopting a socio-emotional perspective in examining children with ID. The large number of studies that were spawned by attachment theory, provided the understanding that mental health and social functioning are shaped in many ways by early experiences of parent-child relationships (Schuengel, Schipper, Sterkenburg, & Kef, 2013).

By adopting a socio-emotional perspective, we join Zigler's call for greater attention of this type to people with ID (Došen, 2005; Zigler, 2001). Issues like affect regulation, social competences, and sense of autonomy may all be of significant importance to the adjustment of people with ID to the everyday world (Sigman et al., 1999; Schuengel & Janssen, 2006), and may matter even more for children with ID than for typically developing children (Baker, Fenning, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2007; Bebko et al., 1998). Empirical studies support the understanding that the parent-child relationship is the primary context in which these constructs develop (Schuengel et al., 2013). Groh et al. (2017) showed in their meta-analysis that early secure attachment is associated with children's socio-emotional adjustment, social competence and externalizing problems. Moreover, the findings underscored the across-the-board significance of all insecure attachment patterns for social competence. Therefore, it seems especially important to further examine early parent-child relationships and attachment quality among children with ID.

One of the tenets of attachment theory is that the formation of the parent-child relationship involves the processes of building cognitive representation of past experience with this parent (Bowlby, 1982). Children with ID, by definition, have cognitive deficits, and therefore it is not taken for granted that these children are able to form an attachment representation (Bretherton, 1990; Carlson & Egeland, 2004). This is another reason to study attachment specifically among children with significant cognitive impairment and to examine the role of the (ID) in attachment quality.

Intellectual disability as defined by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), refers to disability that arises before the age of 18, with significant limitation in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior (Schalock et al., 2000). Under the term "intellectual disability" there is a broad spectrum of etiologies, but still for the majority of people with mild to moderate ID the etiology is unknown (APA, 2000; Murphy, Boyle, Schendel, Decoufle, & Yeargin-Allsopp, 1998; Ropers, 2008; Walters & Kaufman Blane, 2000), and this is the target population of the present study. Although this group of non-specific ID is not clearly defined because of its heterogenic characteristics, we join a large number of other studies that show interest in this group (e.g., Beck, Daley, Hastings, & Stevenson, 2004; Jervis & Baker, 2004; Kaufman, Ayub, & Vincent, 2010), probably owing to its high prevalence. Many clinicians thus meet children and their parents that are under this definition, and this is another main incentive to study this group and to make contribution to the clinical field. Therefore, this study will focus on attachment quality and parent-child relationship among children with non-specific ID.

Attachment theory produced extensive research that provided well established assessment tools to study parent-child relationship. The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP;) is considered to be one of the main instruments to assess individual differences in attachment quality (Lamb, Thompson, Gardner, Charnov, & Estes, 1984). It has been used to assess attachment patterns in a large number of studies in a range of cultures (Van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988; Van Ijzendoorn and Sagi, 2008), and within a variety of clinical populations (e.g., Ganiban, Barnett, & Cicchetti, 2000). The SSP involves a structured observation of infants and their mothers as well as an unfamiliar female in a laboratory playroom. Based on the children's behavior during the SSP, they are classified into one of four attachment patterns that reflect individual differences in the security of the child's attachment to the caregiver (A): secure (B), insecure-avoidant (A), insecure-ambivalent (C), and insecure-disorganized (D). Children in the secure group use their mothers as a secure base from which to explore; in her absence, they reduce their exploration and might be distressed, but greet her positively upon her return and soon resume exploring. This pattern is shown by 65%–70% of infants in non-clinical, typically developing (TD) children. The insecure-avoidant infants, explore with minimal reference to the mother, and minimally distressed by her departure, ignoring or avoiding her on return. In TD non-clinical sample, this pattern characterizes between 20%–25% of infants. The insecure-ambivalent/resistant infants explore minimally, showing high distress during separations and difficulty settling upon reunion and express high level of resistance to the mother. In normative samples, approximately 10% of infants show this pattern (Van Ijzendoorn, Goldberg, Kroonenberg, & Frenkel, 1992).

The insecure-disorganized attachment classification was conceptualized in a later stage than the previous ones, and therefore it is not found in all attachment studies (Granqvist et al., 2017). Infants whose attachment pattern is insecure-disorganized (D) on reunion with their caregiver display various conflicted, disoriented, or fearful behavior. In contrast to the previous three patterns, which are characterized by a coherent strategy for managing arousal in the strange situation, the salient feature of this group is the breakdown of the child's strategy for dealing with the separations from the mother during the SSP. In a non-clinical sample of TD, 10–15% fit the group D criteria (van Ijzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999). When using the disorganized classification with children with ID there might be some confusion between attachment behavior and neurological impairments. Therefore Pipp-Siegel and colleagues (Pipp-Siegel, Siegel, & Dean, 1999) defined consideration need to be taken when using the disorganized classification with children with neurological condition, and in the present study we followed their guidelines.

Extensive research has shown that the SSP is highly informative and that the classifications based on this procedure are associated with the history of the interactions between the infant and the caregiver (Lamb et al., 1984). These classifications were found to predict children's socio-emotional development during childhood and along the lifespan (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005; Thompson, 1999), and to show significant associations with development in various domains (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Groh et al., 2017; Stams, Juffer, & van Ijzendoorn, 2002).

Attachment theory and the SSP were first consolidated for TD children, followed by a small number of studies sought to examine

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