

Forecasting friendship: How marital quality, maternal mood, and attachment security are linked to children's peer relationships[☆]

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Abstract

Mothers' perceptions of marital quality and depressed mood and children's attachment security and friendship quality were assessed in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. One month after their birth and again when the children were 3 and 4 years old and in first and third grades, mothers rated the quality of their marital relationship; when the children were 2 years old, the Attachment Q-Set was used to assess the mother–child attachment relationship; the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale was used to measure the mother's depressed mood when the child was 2 years old and in third grade; and when children were in fourth grade, they were observed interacting with their best friend to assess friendship quality. Using a series of regression and path analyses, we determined whether and how marital quality, maternal mood, and attachment security predicted friendship quality. Better quality friendship interactions in fourth grade were significantly associated with better marital quality and greater attachment security. The association between marital quality and friendship quality was partially mediated by attachment security. Friendship quality was not related to maternal mood. Published by Elsevier Inc.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in determining what leads children to develop positive relationships with their peers. Having good friendships is important for children's well-being. Without friends, children feel lonely and unlikable, do poorly in school, and are likely to experience psychological and behavior problems in later life (Asher & Hopmeyer, 1997; Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003). But what determines children's ability to form close friendships with their peers?

The first arena children have for learning about relationships is, of course, the family; it is here that they first observe and form emotional ties. An important question, therefore, is to what extent family relationships and dynamics

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influence children's abilities to develop relationships with peers. Bryant and DeMorris (1992) specified three ways in which families may influence children's functioning with peers: direct influences of the child's relationships with other family members (e.g., the mother–child relationship affects the child's ability to form peer relationships); indirect influences of the child's relationships with other family members (e.g., the parents' marital relationship affects parent–child functioning, which in turn affects the child's relationships with peers); and participant or bystander observations of interactions among other family members (e.g., the child observes interactions between the parents and learns strategies for interacting with peers). This framework suggests that two key ingredients in the family that are likely to provide a foundation for children's development of later peer relationships are (a) the child's attachment to parents, and (b) the parents' marital relationship, both as an influence on parent–child relationships and as a model of social interaction. Complementing this framework, recent theorists have argued that parental mental health may also be linked to children's peer relationships either directly or indirectly through its mediation of links with marital and attachment relationships (Cummings, Goerke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004; Hammen, 2002; Lyons-Ruth, Lyubchik, Wolfe, & Bronfman, 2002). It was the goal of the present study to probe the links between children's attachment relationships, parents' marital relationships, mothers' depressive symptoms, and the quality of children's friendships.

Although researchers have begun to address the possibility that the nature of children's interactions with peers has its origins within the family (Parke et al., 2001), questions remain about the relative contributions of family factors and the links between them. In separate studies, researchers have compiled evidence that peer relationships are related to the security of the child–parent attachment, the nature of the parents' marital relationship, and the parents' mental health, and that these family factors are themselves related. However, little or no attention has been paid to whether one of these factors is more significant than the others and whether they operate independently or interactively. The assumption in much of the current literature on social development is that the attachment relationship is the critical foundation for the formation of children's later relationships, and if the marital relationship is important, it is because its influence is mediated by the attachment relationship. In this study, we evaluated this assumption by determining whether attachment was the primary predictor of friendship quality and a mediator of marital relations or whether there was a direct association between marital quality and children's friendships. Similarly, we examined whether maternal depression was related to children's interactions with a friend directly or indirectly via marital quality and/or attachment security.

1.1. Attachment security and friendship quality

The belief that children's peer relationships are influenced by the parent–child relationship is deeply embedded in attachment theory. Bowlby (1969/1982) suggested that the mother–child bond has implications for later love relations, and this suggestion was extended by other attachment theorists to the more specific hypothesis that the mother–child bond serves as a prototype or template for later close relationships, including friendships (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). These theorists suggested that in developing an attachment to the mother children form an internal working model of a relationship that is carried forward, affecting how the children perceive and interpret social signals and interact with other people. Children with working models formed in the context of a secure attachment learn that people are accessible and responsive to their signals; they develop positive expectations of social partners, which provide the motivational base for peer relationships. They also learn to regulate their emotions and develop socially competent interaction styles in the secure dyad, which provides an emotional base for peer relationships (Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999). In contrast, children whose models are formed in the context of an insecure attachment are less capable of trusting others and find it difficult to form solid relationships (Berlin, Cassidy, & Belsky, 1995), because their working models focus on evidence that confirms that relationships are not positive or supportive (Kerns, 1996).

A substantial number of empirical studies document associations between peer relationships and attachment that confirm this theoretical link. In the Minnesota Longitudinal Study, for example, children who were securely attached to their mothers in the first year and a half were judged to be more competent with peers in the preschool and elementary school years; they were better liked by their classmates, less socially withdrawn, more active in the peer group, less aggressive, and had more cooperative friendships (Sroufe et al., 1999). Schneider, Atkinson, and Tardif (2001) conducted a meta-analysis based on 63 studies that reported correlations between child–parent attachment and children's peer relationships at ages from preschool to preadolescence. Overall effect sizes were small to moderate: the mean effect size for studies assessing the association between attachment and peer relationships, in general, was .14; the average effect size for studies assessing the association between attachment and friendship quality was .24. Thus,

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