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Adolescents' interactions with a best friend: Associations with attachment style

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Abstract

This study tested whether adolescents' attachment style is related to friendship interactions and perceptions of friendship quality. Attachment pairings were contrasted to examine whether dyad members' security of attachment or their models of others was more related to friendship. A total of 44 pairs of same-sex adolescent friends were videotaped as they engaged in an intimate conversation. Participants also completed self-report measures of attachment style and friendship quality. Compared with dyads with at least one insecure partner, dyads with two secure members interacted in ways that promoted a sense of connection with each other. In addition, they did not use as many clarification statements, suggesting a smooth conversational style between the friends. When friend pairs were examined based on positive or negative models of others (i.e., dismissing and fearful vs secure and preoccupied), there were no differences. The findings suggest that security of attachment, rather than type of insecurity, is most related to intimacy in friendship.

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Introduction

An important developmental task during adolescence is the formation of close mutual friendships (Berndt, 1982). Adolescents who report more positive experiences with friends (e.g., greater intimacy) also report higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Buhrmester, 1990; Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin, 1988; O'Donnel, 1976; Oldenburg & Kerns, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987; Townsend, McCracken, & Wilton, 1988), suggesting that friendships may enhance adjustment. Thus, it is important to understand what might explain individual differences in adolescents' interactions and relationships with friends. The goal of the current research was to examine whether adolescent attachment style is related to the quality of adolescents' interactions with friends.

Attachment theory offers a framework in which to examine differences in friendship quality (Bowlby, 1973; Park & Waters, 1989; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). A link between attachment and friendship may be explained, in part, by a child's "working models" or beliefs about the self and others (Bowlby, 1973). Working models are thought to develop initially based on the child's experiences in relationships with attachment figures. Working models provide the child with a general expectation of what relationships are like and guide the child's affect and behavior in other close relationships (e.g., friendships). For example, a child who has experiences with people who are responsive and accepting comes to have positive views of others (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990; Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). Another explanation for a link between attachment and friendship is that children may come to exhibit a particular interaction style with others based on their interactions with caregivers (Youngblade & Belsky, 1992); thus, a child whose mother is rejecting may come to act in a rejecting way toward friends. A third explanation for possible associations between attachment and friendship is that emotion regulation may act as a mediator between the two (Contreras & Kerns, 2000; Contreras, Kerns, Weimer, Gentzler, & Tomich, 2000). Children may internalize the patterns of emotion regulation developed in their early relationships and then later exhibit these same patterns when interacting with friends (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). For example, an avoidant child may adopt a distancing strategy with a caregiver when he or she is upset (Cassidy, 1994) and may subsequently seek less intimacy and social support from friends as well. Consistent with these hypotheses, prior studies have shown that attachment security and friendship quality are related during early and middle childhood (Freitag, Belsky, Grossmann, Grossmann, & Scheuerer-Engelisch, 1996; Kerns, 1994; Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996; Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999; Park & Waters, 1989; Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001; Shulman, Elicker, & Sroufe, 1994; Youngblade, Park, & Belsky, 1993).

There are three studies that have examined concurrent associations between attachment and friendship in high school-age adolescents. In one study of high school girls, dyads in which both girls were high in security with parents were rated higher on positive peer interactions than were dyads in which at least one girl was low in security with parents (Black & McCartney, 1997). In a second study of 15- to 16-year-olds, participants with a dismissing attachment to fathers reported more

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