



Relationship building between toddlers and new caregivers in out-of-home childcare: Attachment security and caregiver sensitivity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 June 2016

Received in revised form 24 July 2017

Accepted 9 October 2017

Keywords:

Childcare

Transition

Quality

Attachment relationship

Caregiver sensitivity

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to identify factors that help toddlers form attachment relationships with their caregivers during the transition from sole home care to out-of-home childcare.

We investigated relationship building between toddlers and their new caregivers during the first four months in childcare. In a sample of 104 toddlers (aged 10–33 months) in 71 Viennese childcare centres, we assessed attachment security (using the Attachment Q-Sort) at three time points. We also assessed children's experiences with their new care providers at each time point, focusing on dyadic caregiver sensitivity (a) during one-to-one interactions with the individual target child, and (b) during interactions with all children in the group. We investigated whether attachment security in the early months of childcare differs between girls and boys, to see if gender, in combination with caregiver interaction, has a role in predicting differences between toddlers' attachment security. Higher attachment security was found in girls, and in those children with caregivers scoring higher on the group-related measure of sensitivity. Dyadic sensitivity did not predict toddlers' attachment security. Findings support the development of attachment/relationship theory, in the context of childcare for young children, that takes account of children's experiences in groups rather than only in one-to-one interactions.

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1. Introduction

Starting childcare and adapting to a new care arrangement can be an unsettling time for young children. Some studies have found that, on entry into childcare, children's levels of behavioural distress increase (Ahnert, Gunnar, Lamb, & Barthel, 2004; Cryer et al., 2005), their levels of stress hormones (cortisol) rise (Ahnert et al., 2004), and their behaviour is inhibited (Datler, Ereky, & Strobel, 2001; Datler, Datler, & Funder, 2010; Datler, Ereky-Stevens, Hover-Reisner, & Malmberg, 2012; Fein, Gariboldi, & Boni, 1993).

The role of caregivers as a source of support is seen to be particularly significant in helping children with the settling-in process. From an attachment theory position, it is argued that young children in childcare need a close adult as a secure base from

which to explore their new environment and build relationships with others, including their peers (Elfer & Dearnley, 2010; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992; Recchia, 2012). Within this framework, young children in childcare are seen to develop 'secondary' attachment relationships to their new caregivers (Bowlby, 2007; Elfer 2006). Importantly, their level of security within these new attachment relationships can be different from that within their relationships with their primary caregivers (Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006; Goosen & Van IJzendoorn, 1990). It is a cause for concern that insecure attachments to care providers have been found to be more common in the context of childcare than in parent-child relationships (Ahnert et al., 2006; Ainslie, 1990; Goosen & Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Sagi et al., 1985) or in home-based care (Ahnert et al., 2006).

The level of attachment security children develop with their caregivers in childcare has been shown to be related to the child's gender, with girls developing more secure attachment relationships than boys (Ahnert et al., 2004, 2006; De Schipper, Tavecchio, & Van IJzendoorn, 2008). Little is known about the mechanisms driving this difference. Boys have also been found to have less optimal outcomes based on other behavioural measures, within the childcare setting (De Schipper, Tavecchio, Van IJzendoorn, & Van Zeijl, 2004). Gender has been explored as a moderator in some

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studies, with findings suggesting that childcare quality is more strongly related to social and behavioural outcomes in boys than in girls (Broekhuizen, Van Aken, Dubas, Mulder, & Leseman, 2015; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreño, Li-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2010). In the context of gender difference in attachment security within childcare, the role of the quality of caregiving still needs clarification. It is particularly relevant to explore these dynamics when children first enter a new care environment and are in the process of developing attachment relationships with their new caregivers.

The process of forming attachment relationships in childcare settings is seen as similar to the development of infant-mother attachment (Howes, 1999), in which the role of close communication, and the attachment behaviour of the adult directed towards the child, are key; sensitive responsiveness (Schaffer & Emerson, 1964) is at the heart of secure attachments. While this puts the importance of children's individual experiences in one-to-one interactions with their caregivers at the forefront, it is within group situations in childcare that children also come to experience and observe interactions between caregivers and (a) other children and (b) the group as a whole. All of those experiences may impact children's developing relationships with their caregivers. With attachment theory as the guiding framework for early years practice, peer and group interactions are an underexamined aspect of a child's experience in childcare (Datler, Hover-Reisner, & Datler, 2015; Elfer 2006; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012; Viernickel, 2000). Importantly, Ahnert et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis showed that the group-oriented sensitivity of care providers, rather than the sensitivity of their responses to individual children, was predictive of caregiver-child attachment security.

In this study, we investigated the relative effects of the quality of caregiver-*individual child* interactions and caregiver-*group* interactions on the development of toddlers' attachment security. In doing so, we expand previous research by: 1) including a measure of caregiver sensitivity both during one-to-one interactions with the target child and in group settings; 2) taking those measurements at several time points over the course of children's first four months in childcare, thus focusing specifically on the process of relationship building; and 3) investigating differences between girls' and boys' development of attachment security in childcare and exploring the possible mechanisms that drive those differences.

1.1. Relationship building with care providers in childcare

Research suggests that the quality of attachment to caregivers in childcare can play an important role in children's development, and may have similar functions to attachment relationships with primary caregivers (Goosen & Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Howes, 1999; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Van IJzendoorn, Sagi, & Lambermoon, 1992). Secure relationships with childcare providers promote children's socio-emotional competence in preschool: securely attached children have been found to have more positive and gregarious peer relationships (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes, Hamilton et al., 1994), they show more advanced types of play with peers (Howes, Hamilton et al., 1994; Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994; Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo, & Myers, 1988), they are less withdrawn (Howes, Hamilton et al., 1994), they have a higher level of competent play with adult caregivers (Howes et al., 1988), and (as measured by their play with objects) they show higher cognitive activity in childcare (Howes & Smith, 1995a).

Despite these findings on the importance of secure relationships in childcare, research that explores relationship-building processes in this context is scarce, and little knowledge exists about how secure attachment relationships are established in the early months of childcare. In the context of infants and their *primary* caregivers, attachment formation is usually said to happen over the course

of a baby's first year, with infants developing a special preference for a single attachment figure over time, increasingly looking for their primary caregiver for security, comfort and protection, and showing fear of strangers and unhappiness when separated from their special person (Schaffer & Emerson, 1964). The process of forming attachment relationships in childcare settings has been described as similar to the development of infant-mother attachment (Howes, 1999). It has been shown that when children enter new care environments, they direct attachment behaviours to their new caregivers (Barnas & Cummings, 1994; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Howes & Smith, 1995), and—over time—can form warm and secure relationships with their caregivers in childcare (Ahnert & Lamb, 2000; Ahnert, Lamb, & Seltenheim, 2000; Howes & Smith, 1995a; Howes, Galinsky, & Kontos, 1998; Lamb & Ahnert, 2006).

In their meta-analysis, Ahnert et al. (2006) found that, among children with continuous care histories, secure child-caregiver attachments were more likely for those children assessed longer after enrolment into childcare ($r = .28$, $p = 0.001$). Therefore, relationship building needs time—infants and caregivers need opportunities to get to know each other. Some researchers have identified that it takes around seven to eight weeks after entry into childcare for changes in infant-caregiver relationships to show (Lee, 2006; Recchia, Sekino, & Brady-Smith, 2000; Sekino, Chen, & Recchia, 2001). Others argue that at least nine months of continuity are needed for a secure relationship to develop (Raikes, 1993).

The level of attachment security children develop with their caregivers in childcare has been found to relate to the child's characteristics. Ahnert et al.'s meta-analysis (2006), a study by Howes and Smith (1995b), and a Dutch study by De Schipper et al. (2008) all found that childcare provider attachment security varied significantly between girls and boys, with girls developing more secure attachments in childcare. Ahnert et al. (2006) speculated that girls might form secure attachments to caregivers in childcare more readily because most care providers are female and their 'gender-biased behaviours might lead them to interact more in line with girls' expectations of adequate interactions' (Ahnert et al., 2006, p. 665). Despite a small sample size ($n = 48$), De Schipper et al.'s study (2008) tested this hypothesis and found neither gender differences in the quality of caregiving, nor interaction effects of caregiving and gender on attachment security.

The finding that boys show less attachment security with caregivers than girls do in childcare adds to existing research, which has shown that, if gender differences are identified in children's reactions to childcare, negative effects exist only for boys (Broekhuizen et al., 2015; Crockenberg, 2003; De Schipper et al., 2004). Such findings suggest that, in the context of group care, boys may be more vulnerable than girls (Crockenberg, 2003). Cortisol reactivity has been studied to assess mechanisms that might drive such gender differences in childcare. It has been found that, in boys (but not girls), an increase in cortisol levels relates to more internalising behaviour (Tout, De Haan, Campbell, & Gunnar, 1998). Because internalising behaviours are characterised by social withdrawal and lack of interaction, this result might indicate that stress experienced during transition into childcare might affect boys (more than girls) in terms of how they relate and respond to others including their caregivers. How caregivers are approached by a child will affect the ways in which they in turn respond to and interact with each child. Thus, boys' response to stress and the impact it can have on relationships to caregivers, can offer an explanation for gender differences in child-caregiver attachment.

1.2. Attachment theory in the context of group care for toddlers

Caregivers in group settings have to distribute their attention amongst a number of children. As a result, individual children experience only limited time in one-to-one interactions with their

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