

Attachment, Child Self Concept, and Mothers' Reports of Children's Personality Characteristics During the Preschool Years

Rebecca M. Goodvin, Sara C. Meyer, & Ross A. Thompson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln & University of California-Davis

Abstract

The ways children come to think about themselves may influence their current and future social and emotional adjustment. Among potential contributors to children's early self-concept development, close relationships are likely to be central to this process. The primary goal of this research was to explore relations between attachment security and self concept in preschool-age children. The second goal was to examine mothers' reports of children's characteristics in relation to children's attachment security. The Attachment Q-sort and Child Self-View Questionnaire were completed with 44 children. Mothers completed a questionnaire describing their child's personality characteristics. While there were no significant associations between children's self concept and attachment, mothers' reports of children's characteristics were related to children's attachment security.

Introduction

- Self concept integrates children's early emotional and relational experiences to become the core of children's developing personality.
- Recent studies indicate that even children as young as 3.5 years can describe their emotional and psychological qualities, indicating a coherent multidimensional self concept.
- Research examining global self perceptions in older children indicates that a more positive and open self concept is related to a secure attachment relationship.
- This study will focus on examining associations between attachment and more a differentiated measure of self concept in preschool children during a period in which organization of self representation is a salient developmental accomplishment.
- Mothers' views of their young children's personalities have not been clearly linked to children's attachment security.
- This study further extends attachment research by examining associations of mothers' reports of children's personality characteristics and children's observer rated attachment security.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Securely attached children will describe their characteristics differently than do insecurely attached children. Specifically, securely attached children will describe themselves as being higher in agreeableness, and lower in timidity and negative affect.

Hypothesis 2: Mother's reports of children's personality characteristics will relate to observer reports of children's attachment security. Given the exploratory nature of this research, no specific hypotheses were formulated.

Method

- **Participants** were 44 mothers and their preschool children (*M* age = 4.2 years, 3.4 to 4.6 years; 52% female; 80% white) from a Midwestern city. Participants were recruited from community child care centers and preschools.
- **Procedures.** Researchers rated attachment following 2 hour home observations. Mothers completed a measure of their perceptions of children's personality characteristics. One week later, children visited the campus lab to complete the self concept measure (25-45 minutes).
- **Measures.** See Table 1 for a description of measures.

Table 1. Measures

Construct/Measure	Dimension, # of Items	Sample Item	Reliability	Mean (SD)
Attachment Security / Attachment Q-sort ^{a,c}	90 Items	"Child uses mother as a secure base" (1-8)	$r = .71$.26 (.21)
Child Self Concept / Child Self-View Questionnaire ^{b,c,d}	Timidity, 9	"When I hear lightning and thunder, I would never run to look out the window" (0-2)	0.66	1.22 (.48)
	Agreeableness, 8	"I usually do what mommy or the teacher says" (0-2)	0.74	1.54 (.40)
	Negative Affect, 8	"I am grumpy a lot of the time" (0-2)	0.68	.61 (.48)
Maternal Perceptions of Child's Personality Characteristics ^e	Achievement, 3	"My child cares about doing a really good job on everything they do" (1-5)	0.55	3.79 (.81)
	Aggression, 5	"My child likes to tease people by saying mean things to them" (1-5)	0.67	2.74 (.72)
	Alienation, 5	"My child sometimes thinks that nobody wants to be around them" (1-5)	0.70	1.73 (.58)
	Harm Avoidance, 5	"My child doesn't like to climb up on things that are high" (1-5)	0.57	2.70 (.71)
	Social Closeness, 4	"My child is happiest when they're around other people" (1-5)	0.71	3.67 (.65)
	Social Potency, 4	"My child picks the game to play" (1-5)	0.71	3.79 (.77)
	Stress Reaction, 4	"My child gets mad a lot" (1-5)	0.50	3.06 (.60)
	Traditionalism, 4	"My child usually does what I say" (1-5)	0.58	2.98 (.60)
	Well Being, 5	"My child really likes him or herself" (1-5)	0.66	4.24 (.56)

^a Observer report ^b Child report ^c Waters (1985) ^d Eder (1990) ^e Factors based on Brown et al. (2004)

Results

Hypothesis 1: No significant associations were found between observer rated attachment security and children's self concept reports. See Table 2.

Hypothesis 2: Significant associations were found between observer rated attachment security and mothers reports of children's personality characteristics. Specifically, children's attachment security was positively correlated with mothers' reports of children's social potency and traditionalism. See Table 3.

Table 2. Correlations of Attachment and Child Self Concept

Variable	1	2	3	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Attachment	--			0.26	0.21
2. Child timidity	-0.15	--		1.22	0.48
3. Child agreeableness	0.08	-0.21	--	1.54	0.40
4. Child negative affect	0.07	-0.45**	-0.15	0.61	0.48

** $p < .01$

Table 3. Correlations of Attachment and Maternal Report of Child Personality Characteristics

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Attachment	--									0.26	0.21
2. Achievement ^a	0.02	--								3.48	0.61
3. Aggression ^a	-0.07	-0.04	--							2.78	0.72
4. Alienation ^a	0.02	-0.09	0.25*	--						1.73	0.57
5. Harm Avoidance ^a	0.21	-0.03	-0.32*	-0.03	--					2.71	0.64
6. Social Closeness ^a	0.05	-0.17	0.12	-0.11	-0.16	--				3.74	0.60
7. Social Potency ^a	0.38*	-0.01	0.03	0.10	0.07	0.09	--			3.79	0.64
8. Stress Reaction ^a	-0.05	-0.10	0.02	0.17	0.21	0.23	-0.06	--		3.02	0.58
9. Traditionalism ^a	0.32*	0.29*	0.30*	-0.18	0.45**	-0.12	0.17	-0.14	--	2.79	0.53
10. Well Being ^a	0.12	0.11	-0.17	0.47**	0.00	-0.05	-0.35**	-0.41**	0.23	4.24	0.50

^a Maternal report * $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 was not supported. There were no associations between children's attachment security and self concept. Several possible explanations for this finding exist:

- It is possible that self reports of children's characteristics were not reflective of a coherent psychological self concept. However, this interpretation is unlikely given the internal consistency of children's reports, and previous research supporting the internal consistency and multidimensionality of young children's psychological self concepts.
- At this age, it is possible that children's self-concepts may simply not relate to attachment security. These associations may be evidenced with changes in the consolidation of children's self concepts.
- Finally, it is possible that for children during this developmental period, attachment security is only one of many interacting variables influencing the developing self-concept, and may not independently relate to children's self representations.

Discussion, Continued

Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. Examination of child attachment security and mothers' reports of children's personality characteristics revealed some associations.

- Children with higher attachment security were reported by their mothers to be more comfortable influencing or entertaining others (high social potency), and to be more compliant with adults (high traditionalism).
- These findings are consistent with attachment theory, in that behavioral patterns fostering a secure attachment also influence children's agency in relationships due to expectations of the positive responsiveness of social partners, and with reports that secure attachment predicts children's compliance and harmonious parent-child interaction.

Conclusions

- Continuing to explore both the age and content boundaries of attachment's influence on children's self concept will be an important endeavor for future research.
- Longitudinal studies examining the relations of attachment and children's self concept at different points in development are needed to elucidate potential developmental change in the consolidation of self concept.
- Influences on children's self concepts are complex, and relational influences in addition to attachment should be examined to provide a more complete picture of this developmental phenomenon.
- Promising findings regarding associations of attachment security and mothers' reports of children's personality characteristics warrant further exploration.

References

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