



Foster children's attachment security in the first year after placement: A longitudinal study of predictors



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ABSTRACT

The current study focuses on foster children's attachment formation and its factors of influence during the first year in foster placement. The sample consists of 55 children (1–6 years) and their primary foster caregiver. Analyses revealed a significant increase in foster children's attachment security. Multiple placement changes and mental illness of biological parents lowered attachment security in the beginning, while the professional background of foster parents fostered early attachment formation. Authoritative parenting was the main predictor for an increase in attachment security during the first year in placement with highly introverted children being specifically susceptible to the influence of parenting. Data point at the need of improved training and selection of foster parents.

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1. Introduction

As most foster children have been exposed to early adversity in their biological families, foster children are a highly vulnerable group of children suffering from multiple problems. Despite all risk, the majority of children seem to be able to succeed in forming secure attachment bonds to their new caregivers (Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates, 2001; van den Dries, Juffer, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009). Attachment security in the context of adversity can be seen as a protective factor (Werner, 1993), longitudinally contributing to positive developmental outcomes (Sroufe, 2005) and diminishing the negative impact of the risk factors to which foster children are exposed (Belsky and Fearon, 2002). In contrast, insecure and especially disorganized attachment has been associated with poor overall adjustment (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Oosterman and Schuengel, 2008).

In Germany, growing numbers of children are annually placed in foster care. Usually all options of outpatient intervention are

exhausted before children enter out-of-home care. This leads to high burden in foster children and low rates of reunification (Thrum, 2007). Caregivers receive few days of pre-service and no standardized in-service training. Until a long-term placement is found, children are usually placed with an emergency foster family. Thus, German foster placements are mostly long-lasting and foster parents in Germany are usually not only a complementary but rather an alternate family for the foster child (Bovenschen and Spangler, 2008). Thus, forming secure attachments to surrogate caregivers is a highly valuable goal for foster children. This study focuses on the process of attachment formation to foster caregivers and identifies specific factors of influence in a German foster care sample.

1.1. Formation of attachment bonds to caregivers

According to attachment theory, attachment relationships are formed in the first year of life (Bowlby, 1969). While a biological predisposition to develop attachment bonds to caregivers is assumed (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969), the quality of those relationships depends on the experiences children have with their caregivers (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Secure attachment can be described in terms of a smooth balance between exploration and attachment and the ability to use the caregiver as a “secure base” from which to explore as well as a “secure

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haven” when in distress (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Secure children are easily comforted when upset and seek contact with their attachment figure whenever necessary. Insecurely attached children avoid the caregiver’s proximity, hide their distress and focus on exploration (insecure–avoidant), or tend to be resistant, distressed and difficult to comfort in attachment-relevant situations (insecure–ambivalent) (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Parents’ sensitivity, i.e. their ability to perceive and interpret the infant’s signals and to respond to them promptly and appropriately, is an important factor generating attachment security (Ainsworth et al., 1978; de Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997). High-risk environments as well as both unresponsive and contradictory or unpredictable caregiver behaviors are shown to result in insecure or even disorganized attachments (Cyr, Euser, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2010). Among samples of maltreated and neglected children, less than 20% of children show secure attachments. Particularly, the negative influence increases when abusive parenting is more severe and long-lasting (Cyr et al., 2010; Stronach et al., 2011). Parental psychopathology, often associated with inadequate caregiving, has also been associated with more insecure attachments in offspring (Lyons-Ruth, Connell, Grunebaum, & Botein, 1990).

As internal working models based on early experiences with the primary caregivers shape the expectations and beliefs children have about caregivers (Ainsworth et al., 1978), the development of subsequent attachment relationships – for example with foster parents – can be harmed by early negative experiences (Baer and Martinez, 2006; Bowlby, 1969; Chisholm, 1998; Cyr et al., 2010; Dozier et al., 2001; Stovall-McClough and Dozier, 2004; Stronach et al., 2011). Even after experiencing a new, positive environment, adverse experiences with biological parents are found to impair the attachment relationship to foster parents (Milan and Pinderhughes, 2000). Moreover, multiple placement changes in care increase foster children’s attachment problems (McWey, 2004). In addition, some studies find that foster children who have less contact with their biological parents have higher attachment security (Leathers, 2003; Ponciano, 2010).

1.2. Attachment security in foster children

Despite these factors potentially hindering attachment formation, a meta-analysis by van den Dries et al. (2009) revealed no significant differences between normative samples and foster children in attachment security, apart from a significantly higher rate of attachment disorganization ($d=0.41$). Yet, the studies that were borne in mind were cross-sectional and consisted of children who had already spent longer time in foster care. Although there are findings that hint at early attachment behaviors among foster infants and toddlers to predict later attachment security and organization (Bernier, Ackerman, & Stovall-McClough, 2004; Stovall-McClough and Dozier, 2004), the process of attachment formation to surrogate caregivers – when the age of normative attachment formation is exceeded – is still unknown (Bernier et al., 2004). A longitudinal study with children adopted from Romanian Orphanages (Chisholm, 1998) found attachment security of 17–76 month old children to significantly increase within a 20-month period from one year after adoption to approximately three years later. At the second wave, security scores were comparable to that of normative samples. In contrast, a study with 11–16 month old children adopted from Chinese foster care found no changes in attachment security from 2 to 6 months post-adoption (van den Dries, Juffer, van Ijzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Alink, 2012). Another study with two-year-old foster children who already spent at least one year in care found stability in attachment patterns from 2 to 3 years of age, with approximately 68% of

children being securely attached at both waves (Jacobsen, Ivarsson, Wentzel-Larsen, Smith, & Moe, 2013).

1.3. Predictors of attachment security in foster care

To date, little is known about factors that influence this process of attachment formation in foster children, especially as scarce existing studies only focused on single predictor variables and neglected their interplay. Foster children’s younger age and female gender are hypothesized to be advantageous factors in attachment formation. Young children are found to succeed in showing coherent attachment behaviors within the first months of placement (Bernier et al., 2004; Dozier et al., 2001; Stovall-McClough and Dozier, 2004). Older foster children in contrast, appear to have more insecure attachment patterns and have problems behaving in ways that evoke foster parents’ nurturing behavior (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson, & Guthrie, 2010; Stovall-McClough and Dozier, 2004; van den Dries et al., 2009). Male foster children are often less securely attached to surrogate caregivers than females (McLaughlin, Zeanah, Fox, & Nelson, 2012; Smyke et al., 2010). The higher vulnerability and susceptibility to psychosocial hazards in the early years among boys (Werner, 1993) might be an explanation for their greater difficulties in attachment formation.

The environment in foster care is assumed to further influence foster children’s adjustment. Foster parents who have had previous foster children or received specialized training have been found to be more successful in foster parenting, have more positive attitudes, and show higher competence in dealing with the foster care system or foster children’s challenging behavior than untrained parents (Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009). Additionally, adequately trained foster parents or those with a professional background might find it easier to correctly interpret foster children’s conflicting signals and are rather able to provide nurturance even when the child does not elicit it (Dozier et al., 2009). Due to potential jealousy and rivalry, the presence of other children in the foster family has been assumed to impact foster children’s development negatively (Ponciano, 2010). Furthermore, when replacement of grown-up children becomes a stronger motivation to foster and when caregivers’ age increases, foster children are less likely to be securely attached (Cole, 2005; Lindhiem & Dozier, 2007).

1.4. Parenting behavior and attachment security

Whereas foster parents’ overall parenting behavior is still scarcely researched, there is striking evidence for the parenting facet of sensitivity, which is found to generate higher attachment security (Gabler et al., 2014; Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008; Ponciano, 2010). Most foster children exceed the period of toddlerhood and have a growing need for autonomy and independence. This implies that sensitive parenting for these children might not only comprise warm engagement, but also parenting that encourages children’s autonomy while providing age-appropriate monitoring and limit-setting (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003). This type of parenting is widely described as an *authoritative parenting style* (Baumrind, 1991), combining high affection and high behavioral control. Extensive literature documents the positive effects of authoritative parenting dimensions on children’s psychosocial competence, well-being, and development (Baumrind, 1991; Karavasilis et al., 2003; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). In contrast, uninvolved parenting (low levels of behavioral control and affection) is associated with the poorest outcomes while authoritarian parenting (low levels of affection, high levels of behavioral control) and indulgent parenting (high affection, low behavioral control) have revealed intermediate outcomes (Karavasilis et al., 2003; Lamborn et al., 1991).

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