



Early attachment and maternal insightfulness predict educational placement of children with autism



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ABSTRACT

We examined whether mothers' insightfulness – their capacity to “see things from the child's point of view” – and children's attachment, both assessed during the preschool years, are associated with the educational placement of children with ASD in middle childhood and early adolescence beyond the prediction offered by children's IQ and interactive competence. 39 boys with autism and their mothers participated. We assessed mothers' insightfulness, and children's attachment to their mothers, their intelligence and their interactional competencies. The results supported our hypothesis. The emotional quality of the relationship between the children and their mothers during the preschool age, as reflected in the mothers' insightfulness and the children's attachment security, predicted children's educational placement in inclusive programs 4.5 and 8.5 years later, over and above the prediction offered by children's IQ and their interactive competence.

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1. Introduction

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are first introduced to a school environment during their preschool years and by the age of 6 or 7, similarly to typically developing children, they begin elementary school. Under Israel's Special Education Law (Ministry of Education, 1988), children with ASD are mainly placed in one of three educational settings: mainstream classrooms in a mainstream school, special education classrooms within a mainstream school, and special educational classrooms within a special education school. The three settings can be seen as a continuum of inclusion, from the least to the most restrictive setting with the first two placements representing different levels of inclusion-based programs, and the third placement representing a segregated educational program.

Educational placement decisions are viewed as very important by professionals and parents alike because such placements are perceived as a major contributing and predicting factor to the child's future (Laws & Millward, 2001). However, only few researchers examined the factors that contribute to the educational placement of children with ASD. Most of these studies focused on children's IQ as a predictor of their later educational placement (e.g. Eaves & Ho, 1997; Harris & Handleman, 2000), and none have examined the possible contribution of children's early relationships.

Among typically developing children early relationships are conceptualized as highly significant contexts that influence children's development across multiple domains (Sroufe, 2005). Early relationships are also significant developmental

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contexts for children with ASD, notwithstanding the major contribution of genetic and neurological deficits which are the core contributors to their disorder. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to elucidate the role and contribution of children's secure attachment to their mothers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and of mothers' insightfulness with regard to their children (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Dolev, Sher, & Etzion-Carasso, 2002; Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2009; Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, & Sagi, 2001) assessed when the children were preschoolers, to their later educational placement. We hypothesized that secure mother–child relationships and maternal insightfulness will increase the likelihood that children will be placed in inclusion educational programs in middle childhood and early adolescence.

1.1. Inclusion and educational placement in ASDs

Inclusion programs include both children with special needs and typically developing children in the same classroom, thereby viewing each child as an equal member of the educational setting community (Eldar, Talmor, & Wolf-Zukerman, 2010). In the last two decades inclusion programs for children with special needs, including those with ASD have become more and more prevalent. International educational policies advocate inclusion of children with special needs in inclusion programs (UNESCO, 1994). Researchers supported the benefits of inclusion by revealing that children with special needs who were placed in inclusion programs benefited more, or at least equally to children with special needs placed in segregated programs (Harris, Handleman, Gordon, Kristoff, & Felica, 1991; Harrower, 1999; Hundert, Mahoney, Mundy, & Vernon, 1998; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, & Curtis, 1994). Other researchers found positive academic (i.e., Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995) and social outcomes for children with ASDs in inclusion settings, especially when given social support (Eldar et al., 2010; Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Pierce & Schreibman, 1995). Examples of children's gains from inclusion placement include: higher levels of engagement, assimilation and sociability, as well as broader social networks.

Since placement in an inclusion program appears to be associated with developmental benefits, researchers asked which factors may contribute to the child's placement in an inclusion program. As mentioned earlier, researchers have focused on children's cognitive functioning – specifically, their IQ. This was a logical first step, because children with ASD have a wide range of intellectual abilities which are likely to influence their ability to integrate into any mainstream educational setting. As might be expected, studies of children with ASD as well as other populations of children with special needs have shown that children with higher IQ scores were more likely to be placed in inclusion programs, while children with lower IQ scores were more likely to be placed in segregated classrooms (Eaves & Ho, 1997; Harris & Handleman, 2000; Hendrickson, Smith, Frank, & Merical, 1998). In a recent study which examined intellectual abilities in children with ASDs, Charman et al. (2011) found that 55% of children with ASD had an intellectual disability ($IQ < 70$), 14% had an IQ between 70 and 85, 28% of the children had average intelligence ($85 < IQ < 115$), and 3% had above average intelligence ($IQ > 115$). Since there is significant variability in the intellectual abilities of children with ASD, IQ was the first variable that we examined in predicting children's later educational placement.

Our second predictor of children's educational placement was the degree of interactive competence that they revealed as preschoolers. Inclusion placements, particularly in the case of children with ASD, may also be influenced by children's ability to engage in interpersonal interactions. Children with ASDs exhibit many interactive challenges that include impairments in forming and responding to joint attention bids, seeking help from others, and initiating interaction and play with others (Schietecatte, Roeyers, & Warreyn, 2012; Sigman & Capps, 1997; Wetherby, Watt, Morgan, & Shumway, 2007; Williams, 2003). Furthermore, they may demonstrate difficulties in responding to parents' bids, involving parents in their play, forming eye contact with parents, and using social referencing (Brim, Townsend, DeQuinzio, & Poulson, 2009; Clifford & Dissanayake, 2009; Gray & Tonge, 2001). These interactive impairments may hinder their ability to form relationships with their peers and to cooperate and be part of group work, all of which are part of many daily activities in all classrooms. Therefore, children with higher interactive competence may experience less difficulties in inclusive placements, and this may increase the likelihood that they be placed in less restrictive settings.

As mentioned above, the goal of the study was to examine the hypothesis that an optimal child–parent relationship would promote children's inclusive educational placement beyond the contribution of children's IQ and interactive competence. We review next the background for this hypothesis, and particularly the research on attachment interactive abilities in children with autism.

In the last three decades researchers have shown that children with ASDs form attachment relationships with their mothers and around 50% of these relationships are characterized as secure (e.g. Rutgers et al., 2007; Rutgers, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2004). These rates of attachment security in the ASD population are still lower than the 70% attachment security rate in non-risk typically developing children samples from Western countries (van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). Still, while children with ASD clearly experience significant social difficulties they nonetheless appear to form strong emotional bonds with their mothers and, in the case of securely attached children, seek their comfort in times of distress and use them as a secure base for exploration (Rutgers et al., 2007). Furthermore, the security of these attachment relationships was found to be related to the sensitivity of the mothers in reading the children's signals (Capps, Sigman, & Mundy, 1994; Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Dolev, & Yirmiya, 2009; although see van IJzendoorn et al., 2007 who did not find this association).

If children with ASD form attachments to their mothers in ways that are in essence similar to those of typically developing children, would the outcomes associated with early secure attachment also be similar? A basic tenet of attachment theory is that secure attachments and sensitive parenting provide the foundation for optimal developmental outcomes (Sroufe, 2005),

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