



Foster children's views of their birth parents: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

Several bodies of research, theory, and practice document that even maltreated children develop and maintain attachment relationships with their parents. While this attachment can confound clinicians, it can be understood from an evolutionary perspective: Attachments – even with abusive parents – increase the survival of the species by ensuring that dependent infants and children in danger will seek proximity and comfort from a caregiving adult. Despite the phenomenon being well documented, a missing piece from the literature is whether children – who have alternative caregiving options – will still express attachment to their maltreating parent. To address this question, 27 studies in which children currently in foster care were interviewed were coded for presence/absence of three expressions of attachment: (1) Yearning for the birth parents (2) fear and anxiety due to separation from the birth parents and (3) minimization of the maltreatment perpetrated against them by the birth family. We also asked whether, despite the presence of attachment, maltreated children would express relief upon removal from the home of the birth parent. Most of the studies reported that at least some children expressed these four related beliefs, providing important insight for clinicians working with maltreated children.

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1. Introduction

Children do not choose their parents. Regardless of the quality of the parent-child relationship, children are biologically hard-wired to form and maintain an attachment relationship with their caregivers (e.g., Bowlby, 1969). That attachment bond serves to protect the child from predators and other dangers and generally works to ensure the survival of the species. This attachment mechanism is so fundamental to the human condition that it exists regardless of the quality of the specific parent-child relationship. Even abused and neglected children form and maintain attachment relationships with their abusive caregivers (Bowlby, 1969), although the quality of that attachment varies in important ways.

There are several bodies of theory, clinical observation, and research that support this contention. The first is a program of research conducted by Dr. Harry Harlow on the permutations of infant-mother attachment in Rhesus monkeys (e.g., 1958). Over a series of studies, Harlow demonstrated that it is so fundamental to the primate experience to develop an attachment relationship with an available adult of the species, that infants will develop affectional bonds with mechanical surrogates. In the absence of a living breathing parent, baby monkeys will develop attachment relationships with metal and wire versions of caregivers. They will seek proximity to the surrogate when upset or afraid, will cling to the surrogate, and in every way behave towards the surrogate

as a baby would towards its caregiver. So hard-wired is the attachment system that the baby monkeys will seek proximity and comfort from the mechanical surrogate even when it is the surrogate who is instilling fear in the baby through extreme rejecting behaviors, such as ejecting the baby from its body and other similar aversive actions.

The second relevant body of work is attachment theory with respect to human infants. Bowlby articulated this theory in order to understand the foundation and vicissitudes of human infants' relationships with their caregivers. Drawing on evolutionary psychology and cognitive information processing, as well as psychoanalytic thinking, Bowlby proposed that there are species-characteristic patterns of behavior that have evolved because they function to promote the survival of the species. The propensity to develop these behaviors is transmitted genetically and evoked by specific and expectable internal and environmental triggers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Walters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1980). According to Bowlby, the infant is born with a hard-wired propensity to form an affectional bond with a caretaking adult who is likely to protect the infant. When confronted with a biologically determined signal of danger (such as separations, unfamiliar environments, darkness, being alone, and being sick) the infant will predictably exhibit proximity-eliciting behaviors (such as crying and searching) in order to enlist the necessary protection likely to be afforded by the attachment figure.

Because of this genetically determined propensity, the vast majority of infants will form an attachment relationship with a caregiver (as long as there is a caregiver available), regardless of the specific nature of the parent-infant relationship. Thus, they will have a behavioral and/or emotional response to being separated from the attachment figure

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and will seek to maintain the relationship when it is threatened. That is not to say that maltreated children behave identically to non-maltreated children. What varies is the *type* of attachment relationship, not whether there is an attachment relationship at all.

There now exists a body of empirical studies examining attachment patterns in maltreatment samples. For example, Cyr, Euser, Bakersmans-Kranenburg, and Van Ijzendoorn (2010) found in a meta-analysis of 10 studies that maltreated children were much more likely to form an insecure or disorganized attachment relationship with their abusive parent than non-abused infants. Thus, while the *quality* of the attachment might be impaired (insecure and disorganized are non-optimal patterns), the child was nonetheless bonded to the parent.

Clinical observations also contribute to our understanding of the nature of attachments in abused children. For example, psychoanalytic writer Fairbairn (1952) observed famously that for children, “it is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil” (p. 66–67), by which he meant that children will strenuously work to preserve the attachment with a caregiver even if it involves assuming negative assumptions about the self (i.e., “I was bad and deserved to be hit, therefore my parent is a rational and loving parent”). Likewise, trauma specialist John Briere (1992) identified what he referred to as the abuse dilemma, which occurred when abused children attempt to integrate and understand abusive acts performed by attachment caregivers. In his work with trauma victims, Briere found that abused children will readily blame themselves because doing so allows them to maintain the experience of attachment to the caregiver. Blizzard and Bluhm (1994) likewise described the “special set of problems” faced by children whose primary caregiver is also an abuser and conclude that “the child may have to go to great lengths to create defenses that will allow the preservation of the attachment to the object” (p. 384). They described the abused child’s persistent attachment to an abusive parent as “one of the greatest conundrums for therapists treating abuse survivors” (p. 383).

Sullivan’s work with abused rat pups also sheds some light on this phenomenon. According to Sullivan (2010), some of the unique functions of the infant brain help to explain why a child will bond with whatever caregiver is available. She found that in rats there was a decrease of dopamine in the amygdala when a pup was in pain while in the presence of its mother, essentially blocking the pup from associating the fear with its mother, “The fear, avoidance, and even memories associated with pain are extinguished—explaining why an abused child, even while trying to escape pain, will later seek contact with the abuser” (p. 7).

In a recent analysis of qualitative data (i.e., 45 memoirs written by adult victims of childhood maltreatment who remained in the care of that parent during their childhood), Baker and Schneiderman (2015) reported that all of the authors expressed a desire for proximity and nurturance from the abusive/neglectful parent. The prevailing desire expressed in the narratives was to understand why the maltreating caregiver hurt them and to repair the relationship with that parent rather than to escape or replace the maltreating attachment figure with a non-abusive one.

The constant theme found throughout these various data sources (clinical observations, the rhesus monkey studies, the rat study, the attachment studies, and the memoirs) is that the maltreated child will form and maintain an attachment relationship even with an abusive caregiver. What is missing from the literature, however, is insight into how foster children who have been abused experience their maltreating parent when they have an alternative. What remains unexamined is whether children in substitute care – removed from the maltreating caretaker – will still exhibit a desire to remain in proximity to the maltreating caregiver. To be clear, the work on adoptive children (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011; Quinton & Selwyn, 2006) is instructive but not duplicative because those children represent a small fraction of the children in out-of-home and not those who are likely to be reunified with the abused caregiver.

The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to take an initial look at the attachment behaviors (as reflected in statements) of maltreated children once they have been removed from the maltreating home environment and placed into substitute care. In doing so, we focused on attachment theory as specifically defined by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978), with the intention of avoiding some of the confusion regarding the term attachment as applied more broadly in child welfare research (McLean, Riggs, Kettler, & Delfabbro, 2013).

Attachment is understood as the organization of the child’s behaviors around a secure base (i.e., the caregiver) from which the child can obtain protection and reassurance in times of danger and from which the child’s need to explore and master the physical and social environment will be supported and promoted. Based on the ongoing daily interactions between the child and the caregiver, the child’s behavior will eventually become mediated by internal working models of relationships, which are a set of expectations about parental responsiveness in the face of the child’s bids and needs for attention, affection, and protection. Over the course of the child’s first year of life, he or she will develop an attachment relationship with the primary caregiver – even children who have been abused by their primary caregiver – which will vary with respect to the quality of that relationship (secure attachment versus insecure attachment). A child who has an attachment relationship will express it as (1) a desire for proximity (2) fear and anxiety while separated, and (3) cognitions that support the relationship (i.e., that the parent is a good parent and inflicts only minor harm or only reacts to problematic behavior of the child).

The current study aimed to explore the extent to which children in foster care would express attachment to their abusive caregivers from whom they have been removed. To do that, we examined the statements made by and about children in out-of-home care about their birth families. Specifically, we asked the following four questions about these children: (1) Would the children express an attachment relationship with the caregiver as reflected in a stated desire to be in that parent’s proximity and have contact with that parent? (2) Would the children express separation anxiety from the caregiver (anxiety and/or fear while separated from that caregiver)? (3) Would the children exhibit maladaptive cognitions in service of the attachment relationship by minimizing the harm caused to them by their abusive caregiver and/or expressing self-blame for their removal from their home? And (4) Despite having their attachment relationship disrupted and the subsequent desire for proximity and anxiety about the separation, would the children nonetheless experience relief and/or gratitude at having been removed from an abusive environment? This fourth question we felt was important to provide a more balanced view of the experiences of children in foster care. We expected that it was possible that some children – once removed from an abusive caregiver – would feel relief and/or gratitude at improved circumstances.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Identification of studies

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken using PsychInfo Ovid to identify a set of studies in which children currently in out-of-home placements reflected on their feelings about their birth parents. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) the article was published in the English language (2) the sample was at least in part comprised of children currently in foster care (3) the data collection methodology included individual interviews with children (4) some of the data presented were qualitative (although some of the studies also presented quantitative data). Thus, articles were eliminated if the foster youth were surveyed rather than interviewed (e.g., Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004; Colton, 1989; Morgan, 2010; Shaw, 1998; Wilson & Conroy, 1999), or if the participants were former as opposed to current foster care youth (e.g., Gaskell, 2010; Reimer, 2010; Ward, Skuse, & Munro, 2005). Thirty-three studies were identified. Each was read and a

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