



# A survey of adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with nonparental caregivers in group home settings: An attachment perspective



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the attachment patterns and perceptions of relationships with staff members of youth living in group homes. Seventeen youth completed a survey containing standardized measures of attachment and open-ended questions regarding their perceived relationships with staff members. Even though 67% of the youth were found to have an insecure attachment pattern, positive relationships with staff members were found. Youth emphasized that their most positive relationships were developed through continual interactions, open communication and trust with staff members who made them laugh and shared similar interests.

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## 1. Introduction

It has been reported that the majority of youth who have lived in care often experience greater hardships later in life compared to those youth in the normative population (Schmid, Goldbeck, Nuetzel, & Fegert, 2008). Resiliency promoting factors such as long-term positive relationships with nonparental caregivers have shown to protect some youth in care from future adversities (Masten, 2006). Exploring these positive relationships with nonparental caregivers can give researchers a better understanding about how youth who have experienced threats to their attachment systems think of, create and manage current relationships. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to investigate adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with staff members working in their group home.

### 1.1. Background information

Internal working models are cognitive maps that allow humans to store, process and manipulate information relevant to their environment. Bowlby's concept of internal working model of relationships

concerns the basic mental representations of individuals regarding the availability of and treatment by others in past experiences/relationships (Bowlby, 1980). When accessed, these mental representations of the self and others (positive or negative) influence an individual's present ability to think of, create and manage relationships (Atwool, 2006). A child's internal working model of relationships is initially developed in response to the relationships and attachment he or she has with the primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1980). The type of relationships and attachment with the primary caregiver (and therefore internal working model) that a child develops has implications for future psychosocial development. Those children and youth who are reared in stable and supportive environments often develop secure attachments/working models of relationships. These children and youth often have more positive views of the self and others, and present themselves as confident, outgoing and self-reliant (Allen & Land, 1999; Bowlby, 1973). Securely attached children and youth subsequently have stronger and healthier relationships in adolescence and adulthood compared to those who are insecurely attached (Atwool, 2006; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996). Children and youth who are reared in unstable and unreliable environments often develop insecure attachments/working models of relationships. These children and youth often have more negative views of the self and others, and present themselves as anxious, withdrawn or emotionally reactive (Atwool, 2006). Insecurely attached children and youth often have a more difficult time forming and managing relationships (Atwool, 2006; Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996) than children with a secure attachment pattern.

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Due to the combination of growing up in a challenging environment that often includes abuse and/or neglect and being separated from a primary caregiver, the attachment representations and consequently internal working models of relationships of children in the care of child welfare agencies are predominantly insecure (Zegers, Schuengel, van IJzendoorn, & Janssens, 2008). This insecure attachment developed from negative past experiences in close relationships can affect how a child growing up in care thinks of, creates and manages positive relationships in the present.

Despite serious threats to development, some children and adolescents who have grown up in care have been classified as resilient since they have become well-adjusted adults (Flynn & Biro, 1998; Flynn, Ghazal, Legault, Vandermeulen, & Petrick, 2004). When exploring resiliency-promoting factors within the environments of those children and youth in care who are classified as resilient, it has often been found that a positive relationship with a supportive adult is the strongest predictor of positive adaptation and resilience in children in care (Griffin, Scheier, Botvin, Diaz, & Miller, 1999; Legault, Anawati, & Flynn, 2006; Lynskey & Fergusson, 1997; Masten & Powell, 2003). These findings have encouraged researchers and practitioners to further explore the supportive relationships that youth in care have with nonparental caregivers in order to better understand the positive impacts they can have.

Studies of resiliency and attachment of children and youth in care are prevalent in the literature. It has been noted, however, that the *current perspectives* of children and adolescents in care, specifically those who live in group home settings, are largely absent (Chambers, Zielewski, & Malm, 2008; Freundlich & Avery, 2005; Hyde & Kammerer, 2008; Kools, 1997; Spencer, 2007). To help mitigate this gap within the child welfare literature, the purpose of this study was to explore how adolescents currently living in group home settings perceive their relationships with the child and youth workers that work in their group home (staff member). Exploring the differences in the relationships that those youth with secure/positive views of the self and others have with staff members compared to those youth with insecure/negative views of the self and others have with staff members can facilitate a better understanding of the influence of attachment influences on current relationships. Advancing the understanding of positive and negative experiences that youth who are living in group home settings have in their relationships with staff members may inform best practices in the child welfare system. This information can provide child and youth workers with useful tactics to build and manage positive relationships with those children and youth served by child welfare agencies.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from a privately owned and operated residential treatment program for children and youth with emotional, behavioral, mental health and developmental needs in Southern Ontario. To participate in the project, adolescents needed to be between the ages of thirteen and eighteen years old during the interview and were currently living in a group home setting for more than three months. It was assumed that youth who had been separated from primary caregivers and who had been living in group homes for more than three months would be able to provide crucial insight into how youth in care perceive relationships with nonparental caregivers. Adolescents were expected to verbally articulate their experiences with staff members to the interviewer; therefore adolescents who had been diagnosed with severe developmental delays were not eligible to participate in the study. This information was obtained from the Team Supervisor of each group home and confirmed by the adolescent's social worker, as they were most familiar with the adolescents' developmental needs. Participants received a \$10.00 gift card to a local establishment for their participation. Agency approval was obtained from the Director of the agency as well as the Team Supervisor of each group home. Ethics clearance

was obtained from the University of Guelph's Research Ethics board. Verbal and written consent was obtained from the youth to confirm they wanted to participate in the study. Verbal or written consent for the youth to participate in the study was obtained from his or her legal guardian.

### 2.2. Measures

The attachment pattern of the youth was measured with the *Adolescent Relationship Scales Questionnaire* (A-RSQ; Scharfe, 2002). The A-RSQ is the revised version of the RSQ (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). The RSQ was constructed using Bartholomew's (1990) two-dimensional model of attachment and is used to assess underlying attachment dimensions in close relationships. This model incorporates Bowlby's view that during interactions with attachment figures, an individual develops a view of the self and others in relationships (Bowlby, 1969). The combination of the Self-Model and the Other Model represents general expectations of the worthiness of the self and availability of others (Bartholomew, 1990). The A-RSQ was used to measure the *degree* of the four attachment patterns (secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful) as well as two attachment dimensions (Self-Model and Other-Model) in each participant. The A-RSQ is a continuous scale and is not recommended to be used to categorize participants into attachment prototypes. Participants were asked a series of seventeen questions regarding their relationships. Participants rated how closely the statements described their personal thoughts and behaviors on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all like me, 7 = very much like me).

The measure *Adolescent-Relationship Questionnaire* (A-RQ, Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995) which uses the same underlying dimensions of the A-RSQ was used to categorize participants into one of four prototypical attachment patterns. Each participant was read four short paragraphs that described feelings and behaviors associated with each of the prototypical attachment patterns. The participant was first asked to select the paragraph that best described his or her thoughts and behaviors in relationships. The participant was then asked to rate how closely each paragraph corresponded to their thoughts and behaviors in relationships on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all like me, 7 = very much like me). It is important to note that these two measures were not used as a clinical assessment of the attachment patterns of the participants. Attachment scores and ratings were only used to *loosely place* participants into two groups based on their perceptions of relationships/attachment with others. Those youth who displayed more positive thoughts about themselves and others in relationships were seen as being more "securely" attached than those youth who displayed more negative thoughts about themselves and others in relationships, who were seen as more "insecurely" attached.

Youth were also asked to rate how satisfied with their current placement and relationships, and how important they believed having a positive relationship with staff members was. The youth were asked to rate these perceptions on a 5-point Likert scale (with 1 being not satisfied/not important and 5 being very satisfied/very important). Open-ended questions were used to learn more about the relationships that adolescents had with current and past staff members working in their group homes. To understand the relational experiences of the adolescents, interview questions focused on four relational processes related to attachment: proximity, security, communication and trust.

### 2.3. Procedure

All participants were recruited from one agency that operates eight residential programs for children and youth in the Kitchener/Waterloo region. Youth living in these residential programs have been removed from their homes and placed in the care of local Children's Aid Societies to assure that they receive adequate care for their individual needs and/or protection. Each group home is licensed and supervised by the

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