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Children's memory and suggestibility about a distressing event: The role of children's and parents' attachment



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ABSTRACT

Our goal was to identify individual difference predictors of children's memory and suggestibility for distressing personally experienced events. Specifically, we examined children's and parents' attachment orientations and children's observable levels of distress, as well as other individual difference factors, as predictors of children's memory and suggestibility. Children ($N = 91$) aged 3 to 6 years were interviewed about inoculations received at medical clinics. For children whose parents scored as more avoidant, higher distress levels during the inoculations predicted less accuracy, whereas for children whose parents scored as less avoidant, higher distress levels predicted greater accuracy. Children with more rather than less positive representations of parents and older rather than younger children answered memory questions more accurately. Two children provided false reports of child sexual abuse. Implications for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

Attachment theory, originally formulated to explain the importance of caregiver–child relationships for personality development and emotion regulation (Bowlby, 1980), has recently been expanded to encompass children's memory and suggestibility for distressing experiences (Chae, Goodman, & Edelstein, 2011; Chae, Ogle, & Goodman, 2009; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). Researchers have proposed individual differences in children's and parents' attachment as significant influences on the extent to which distressing information is attended, elaborated, and recounted (e.g., Alexander, Quas, & Goodman, 2002). As one example, avoidant children whose past bids for care have been rejected or belittled are theorized to develop a nonconscious emotion regulation strategy, defensive exclusion, that limits processing of and memory for such information, with the goal of preventing the negative affect associated with reminders of attachment-related grievances or extended separations (Bowlby, 1980; Chae et al., 2009; Chae et al., 2011; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011).

Attachment orientations have also been related to children's suggestibility. According to a review by Bruck and Melnyk (2004), attachment is one of the few individual difference variables that shows promise of being consistently related to suggestibility. For example, children whose parents are insecurely attached are more suggestible when asked about painful medical procedures (e.g., Alexander et al., 2002; Goodman, Quas, Batterman-Faunce, Riddlesberger, & Kuhn, 1997). In addition, more securely attached children are better able to resist an interviewer's suggestive questions about nondistressing activities (Clarke-Stewart, Malloy, & Allhusen, 2004). Nevertheless, little research exists on the potentially vital role of children's own attachment orientations in understanding children's suggestibility for distressing life experiences.

The overall aim of our research was to further a scientific understanding of connections between attachment orientations and children's memory and suggestibility. In particular, we examined whether parents' attachment orientations and children's representations of attachment relationships predict children's memory for a personally experienced distressing event. This topic is particularly significant in view of evidence that abused children, who are often questioned about distressing incidents in forensic settings, are likely to have high rates of insecure attachment and negative mental representations of their parents and themselves (e.g., Barnett, Ganiban, & Cicchetti, 1999; Toth, Cicchetti, Macfie, Maughan, & VanMeenen, 2000). In our study, therefore, we examined several issues of concern in child forensic interviews, specifically, children's responses to abuse-related questions and human figure drawings, given their possible use in child abuse investigations.

Attachment and memory/suggestibility for distressing events

Considerable controversy exists about the accuracy of memory for distressing experiences. Findings to date have been contradictory, with some researchers reporting that memory is particularly accurate and suggestibility particularly low for highly distressing, personally experienced events that are relevant to survival (e.g., Goodman, Rudy, Bottoms, & Aman, 1990) and other researchers reporting that memory performance is particularly poor for highly distressing or negative incidents (e.g., Deffenbacher, Bornstein, Penrod, & McGorty, 2004). One reason for the discrepancies concerns the various ways in which distress is indexed across studies, with the indexes often being uncorrelated (e.g., self-report, physiological measures, observer ratings; Brigham, Maass, Martinez, & Whittenberger, 1983; Eisen, Goodman, Qin, Davis, & Crayton, 2007; Quas, Yim, Edelstein, Cahill, & Rush, 2011; Smeets, 2011; Schwabe, Joëls, Roozendaal, Wolf, & Oitzl, 2012).

Another reason for the discrepancies, of particular interest here, concerns individual differences. Distressing events such as physical attacks may be particularly well retained in memory for survival reasons; individuals' abilities to remember such experiences can help in avoiding future dangerous situations, thereby increasing the chances of survival (Chae et al., 2011). However, defensive processes may dampen such tendencies. Specifically, if avoidant attachment is associated with defensive exclusion, as Bowlby (1980) proposed, individuals with avoidant tendencies may defend against processing of distressing experiences (e.g., not talk about them, try not to think about them), which may adversely affect their memory performance (Chae et al., 2009; Chae et al., 2011; Dykas & Cassidy,

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