Adolescent–parent attachment characteristics and quality of youth sport friendship

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To examine the link between security of adolescent–parent attachment relationships and experiences of friendship quality in male team sport participants.

Design and method: Ninety six male adolescents involved in team sports completed self-report assessments of relationship security with a key parental attachment figure and of the nature of their friendship with a nominated sporting best friend. Teammates and coaches also provided ratings related to how easy they found it to get along with participants.

Results: Results provided evidence that the nature of the adolescent–parent attachment relationship was significantly related to sporting friendship experiences. More secure adolescent–parent attachment characteristics corresponded to more positive sporting friendships. Furthermore, sporting friendship dyads where *both* friends reported *more secure* attachment relations with parents were experienced more positively than dyads where both friends were less securely attached to parents or even where one friend was less securely attached.

Conclusion: There is a suggestion that adolescent attachment relations with parents are indicative of underpinning working models of attachment that may subsequently influence the manner in which youngsters negotiate friendships in sporting contexts.

Attachment theory

Bowlby's (e.g., Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980) attachment theory suggests that individuals are biologically predisposed to form selective bonds with special and proximate caring figures in their environment. It is suggested that formative discrimination of attachment figures begins in infancy, where proximity to significant others is important for the maintenance and restoration of safety. Attachment theorists (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973; Sroufe & Waters, 1977) have conceptualized attachment in terms of the different patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior that result from caregivers' sensitivity to infants' desire for proximity.

As children progress into adolescence, attachment theory posits that the experiences of care and support provided by caregivers (typically parents) help them to develop what Duchesne and Larose (2007) describe as "a feeling of security and help-seeking behaviors that function to protect them in situations of distress and to facilitate their exploration of the social world in general" (p.

1502). These systems of cognition, affect, and behavior are hypothesised to be inextricably linked to internal working models that youngsters construct based upon the attachment experiences that they encounter. These internal working models provide them with the means with which to evaluate the availability of the attachment figure as a source of comfort and security and ultimately to formulate judgements pertaining to their own self-worth and deservedness of attachment relations (Cook, 2000; Duchesne & Larose, 2007; Sroufe & Waters, 1977). When youngsters develop a *secure* working model they adopt a positive internal representation of themselves in attachment contexts, viewing attachment figures to be psychologically available and responsive and developing a positive sense of their self-worth in an attachment context. However, when they develop an *insecure* working model they adopt a negative internal representation, fearing rejection and inconsistent responses from attachment figures and adopting a negative sense of self in attachment contexts (Duchesne & Larose, 2007; Kobak & Hazan, 1991). Florian, Mikulincer, and Bucholtz (1995) have suggested that insecurely attached children, who grow up with a sense of uncertainty surrounding the availability of attachment figures (Ainsworth et al., 1978), are likely to develop a generalized belief in a "non-supportive world" (p. 666).

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It should be noted that attachment security has been conceptualized and assessed both categorically and continuously in the literature. Most famously, Ainsworth et al. (1978) forwarded a number of distinct categories of attachment that are differentially related to attachment history of infants and caregivers; the most illustrious perhaps being secure, ambivalent, and avoidant styles of attachment. *Secure attachment* is thought to result from caregivers' availability and responsiveness to infants' proximity needs. A secure attachment style is expected to result in a more trusting, social, and confident child because the child is neither concerned with, nor preoccupied with a lack of caregiver responsiveness, support, and security. *Anxious* or *ambivalent attachment* is suggested to stem from inconsistency of responsiveness to infants' needs and is expected to result in a child that is more uncertain, anxious and "clingy," due to anxiety about the caregiver's availability. Finally, *avoidant attachment* is suggested to stem from caregiver neglect and rejection, resulting in a child that is emotionally distant and less likely to express affection and emotional need. Both clinical (i.e., Adult Attachment Interview, George et al., 1984–1996; Main & Kaplan, 1985) and self-report measures of attachment, such as the Hazan–Shaver Attachment Self-Report (HS; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; Collins & Read, 1990) have been based around a typology of attachment styles. In contrast, other researchers have adopted a more continuous approach to tapping attachment security. For example, measures such as the Reciprocal Attachment Questionnaire (RAQ; West, Sheldon, & Reiffer, 1987) and the Adolescent Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; West, Rose, Spreng, Sheldon-Keller, & Adam, 1998) have paid attention to the *degree* to which individuals might be considered securely or insecurely attached, providing a continuous assessment (i.e., more/less security) of a number of conceptual indicators of attachment security forwarded by Bowlby, (1969, 1973, 1980).

Bowlby (1973) hypothesised that attachment characteristics function to marshal patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior through the lifespan. Green and Campbell (2000) outline how Bowlby compared internal working models of attachment to "cognitive maps" (p. 454) that influence the manner in which individuals are likely to negotiate their way through the maze of interpersonal-relations that they may encounter in their lives. Hence, while attachment models *are* open to reformulation as individuals develop, they tend to persist, significantly influencing the manner in which individuals formulate attachments, even when new attachment figures replace initial parental figures (Ainsworth, 1989; Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000). There has been a wealth of evidence in support of the stability of individuals' attachment characteristics (e.g., Allen & Land, 1999; Arend, Gove, & Sroufe, 1979; Sroufe, 1988) and their association with an array of outcome variables such as quality of interpersonal relations (e.g., Feeney & Noller, 1990; Florian et al., 1995; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991), coping mechanisms in situations of distress (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer, Florian, & Tomacz, 1990), self-esteem (e.g., Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), perceptions of competence (e.g., Papini & Roggman, 1992), perceived social support (e.g., Larose & Boivin, 1998), feelings of loneliness (e.g., Kerns & Stevens, 1996), adolescent adjustment (e.g., Laible et al., 2000), and coercive sexual behavior (e.g., Smallbone & Dadds, 2000).

Adolescence is an important period in the development of attachment characteristics. West, Rose, Spreng, Sheldon-Keller, and Adam (1998) have outlined how in this period of development parent-child care-giving attachments are gradually relinquished and new affectional ties to peers are formed. However, it is suggested that attachment relationships with parents maintain a high level of significance,"…despite this shift to peer relationships, most adolescents wish and need to maintain their parents as "attachment figures in reserve"…continuing to seek parental support and comfort during times of distress. As well, adolescents' success in creating new supportive relationships is critically influenced by the affectively charged pattern of attachment behaviors and beliefs about attachment carried forward from the attachment history with their parents." (West et al., 1998, p. 662).

The above quote suggests that while adolescents *are* formulating new attachment relationships outside of the familial context, the quality of the attachment bonds that they experience with parents is likely to play a significant role in influencing *how they go about* forming new attachments with peers. In essence, attachment bonds with parents are likely to reflect the "cognitive maps" identified by Bowlby, dictating the cognitive, affective, and behavioural manner in which adolescents might approach new attachment formations. Given the significance of youngsters' relationships with their peers in sport (e.g., see Smith, 2003; Weiss & Smith, 1999; Weiss, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996) it is surprising that researchers have yet to implicate attachment theory in this context.

Attachment and peer relationship quality in youth sport

Weiss and her colleagues (e.g., Weiss & Smith, 1999; Weiss et al., 1996) have recognized the need to explore the specific dimensions of friendship quality involved in youth sport participation. In a qualitative investigation of 8–16 year old children in sport, Weiss et al. (1996) identified a number of distinct dimensions that helped to explain the quality of children's friendship formation in sporting contexts. Children identified that they experienced a number of positive friendship dimensions from their involvement in sport, including companionship, self-esteem enhancement, intimacy, emotional support, and assistance in conflict resolution. Reported negative friendship dimensions included experiences of conflict, betrayal, and inaccessibility. In further research, Weiss and Smith (1999) extended earlier work (e.g., Weiss et al., 1996) and conceptualized six major dimensions of friendship quality in youth sport. Specifically, companionship, emotional support, loyalty, intimacy, things in common, conflict resolution, and experiences of conflict reflected the predominant dimensions by which youth sport friendship quality was suggested to be judged. Weiss and Smith (1999) have developed and validated the Sport Friendship Quality Scale (SFQS) to assess youngsters' perceptions of these friendship dimensions in their peer relationships within sport.

Research in developmental contexts has identified positive dimensions of children's friendship quality to be associated with a variety of important outcome variables such as increased satisfaction with peer relations, positive contextual emotional responses, peer acceptance, enhanced motivation, and enhanced achievement (e.g., Ladd, 1999; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Parker & Asher, 1993; Parker & Gottman, 1989). Negative dimensions of friendship quality have been linked to maladaptive consequences such as negative attitudes, peer rejection, and behavioral difficulties (e.g., Coie & Cillessen, 1993; Hartup, 1989). Accordingly, Weiss and Smith (1999, 2002) have recognized that dimensions of friendship quality may have important implications for motivation-related outcome variables in the context of sport. Employing the SFQS, they identified youngsters' perceptions of "ability to resolve conflict" and "companionship" with a nominated best friend in tennis to be positively associated with commitment and enjoyment of the sport. Ullrich-French and Smith (2006) have also identified that perceptions of positive dimensions of friendship quality from the SFQS were positively associated with enjoyment and levels of self-determined motivation in youth soccer.

Given that research has identified sport friendship quality to be significantly linked to important motivational outcome variables, it