

The Relationship between Preschool Children's Representation of Attachment and Their Relationship to Teachers, Social Skills, and Behavior Problems

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between children's attachment representation and teacher-child relationships, a long with children's social skills and their behavior problems. The subjects were 57 children (31 boys and 26 girls) from intact middle class families aged from 3 to 5 attending preschools and/or day care centers. Four instruments were used: First, Attachment Story Completion Task for assessing children's attachment; second, Student-Teacher Relationship Scale for identifying the teachers' perception on the quality of the relationship between children and teachers; third, Social Skill Scale from Child Behavior Assessment Inventory for assessing children's social skills; and finally, Child Behavior Scale for examining children's behavior problem. Descriptive statistics were calculated and simple correlation was applied for data analysis. The research results are as follows: First, the children's attachment security was significantly related to their relationships to teachers. Children with more secure representations of attachment and less avoidant responses exhibited closer relationships with teachers than those with more insecure representations of attachment and more avoidant responses. Second, children with more secure representations of attachment and less avoidant responses showed more socially cooperative interactions and greater independence than those with more insecure representations of attachment and more avoidant responses. The former case of children showed more social competency while the latter one exhibited more ag-

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gressive and hyperactive behavior.

Keywords: *attachment, teacher-child relationships, social skills, behavior problems*

Introduction

There is a bond between humans and significant others that influences their emotions and behaviors. This can be explained as an attachment relationship which occurs in the life of all human beings with many kinds of forms. This attachment relationship affects thoughts as well as an emotion (Mercer, 2006). The emotional bond which is developed in one's infancy and childhood with their parents and especially with their mother is important for social and emotional development. According to the attachment theory, the quality of attachment which is developed in the relationship between children and parents has important effects on the social and emotional development of children (Hamilton, 2000; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Suess, Grossman & Sroufe, 1992).

The attachment is developed securely or insecurely in a relationship with the caregiver, and those children who developed the secure attachment with the caregiver understand and express their emotions (Oppenheim, Nir, Warren & Emde, 1997). On the other hand, those children who developed insecure attachment have shown fear in unfamiliar situations and would become extremely nervous, becoming depressed and withdrawn (Page & Bretherton, 2001). They also showed distrust, anger, aggressiveness, and insensibility (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999).

In fact, child-mother attachment security has been shown to be one of antecedents of children's adaptive functioning and to contribute to their social and emotional developmental outcomes. Attachment relationship of children with their parents affects their adaptability in daycares and preschools and their social skills (Bretherton, 1985; Fagot, 1997; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985). Children who have developed insecure attachment in their infancy are more impulsive and aggressive than children of secure attachment (Solomon & George, 1999). They tend not to mingle with their peers and express hostility among other behavior problems (Lyons-

Ruth, Easterbrooks & Cibelli, 1997; Shieds, Ryan & Cicchetti, 2001). Oppenheim, Emde, and Warren (1997) also found through their children's doll presentations that there is a connection between behavior problems (as reported by parents or teachers) and aggressiveness negative emotional reactions (Lee, 2004). Moreover, according to Warren, Emde and Sroufe (2000), children's attachment representation in their fifth year most likely predict the internalizing behavior problems in their sixth year (Park & Kwon, 2005). This implies that children's attachment representation can give information as to potential future behavioral problems.

The main objective of this study was to address concerns regarding the relations between children's attachment representation to parents and their social behavioral problems as well as social skills. Because this issue has arisen mostly with respect to avoidant children, especially for negative affect and social problems, avoidance is also focused as important variable in this study.

Meanwhile, because of the increasing numbers of nuclear families and the mothers who are participating in social work, children spend more time in daycare centers or all-day program, and we came to have more interest in the relationship between the teacher and the young children in the daycare center, kindergarten or preschool. For young children, a teacher or staff are meaningful others and they have an important role in the development of children, and they have diverse relationship with children as they play the role of parenting instead of their own parents (Chung, 2006). According to traditional attachment theory, children's attachment relationship with the person who has the role of main caregiver (usually a mother). Affects the development of other kinds of relationship such as those with siblings and teachers etc. (Bretherton, 1985). To support the fact that there is a continuity between parent-child attachment patterns and teacher-child relationships, Lynch and Cicchetti (1992) said that the relationship between parents and their children can develop in a similar way to that of teacher and child relationships. In addition, DeMuller, Denham, Schmidt, & Mitchell (2000) showed that teachers are becoming a secure-base for children.

Several researchers have emphasized that an important role of teacher is to help children cope with the stress and maintain organized behavior (Sroufe, 1983) to com-

pensate the negative effects from insecure attachment with the mother (Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Kim, 1997; Mitchell, 1996; Oh, 2005). Taken together, the existing evidence supports the expectation of children's relations to teachers as well as social and emotional developmental outcomes as a function of child-mother attachment relationships. The present study presents an opportunity to examine not only the relations between young children's attachment representations and social outcomes but also the child-parent attachment security and child-teacher relationships. We hypothesized that children's represented attachment security would be related to more favorable child-teacher relationship as well as more positive social skill and less behavioral problems.

There are the tools to observe attachment behavior. They include the Strange Situation by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978), Attachment Q-sort by Waters and Deane (1985) and a modified procedure of Strange Situation by Main and Cassidy (1988). Yet, limitation of the method was questioned which is measuring the attachment behavior of the children's attachment relation based on an observation (Main & Cassidy, 1988). Preschoolers present attachment quality through their language and play whereas infants show it directly through their behaviors (Solomon & George, 1999). Thus, some methods have been developed which can measure the internal working model based on the symbolic presentation of children which is proper for post-infancy development. These include the Separation Anxiety Test by Slough and Greenberg (1990) and the Attachment Story Completion Task by Bretherton and Ridgeway (1990). In this study, we used ASCT to measure the attachment representation which is valued as a proper method of measuring attachment for preschoolers (Kim, 2001; Park & Kwon, 2005; Bretherton, Ridgeway & Cassidy 1990; Page, 1998).

In this study we want to use a method 'Attachment Story Completion Task' which measures the attachment representation of young children, and we aim to prove the relationships among children's attachment representation and their relationship with teachers and staff in preschools and daycare centers, as well as their behavioral problems and social skills. The study questions are as follows: (1) What is the relationship between a child's representation of attachment security and the teacher-child

relationship? (2) What is the relationship between the child's representation of attachment security and their social skills? (3) What is the relationship between the child's representation of attachment security and their social behavior problems? These are the questions to which our analysis is directed.

Method

Subjects

The children in this study ranged in age from 3 to 5 years (mean=54.7 months). Fifty seven Korean children (31 boys and 26 girls) attending preschools or day-care programs located in the urban Daejeon area were recruited with the help of teachers and directors. Parental consent for children's participation was obtained before the beginning of the study. Thirty four (59.6%) were first-borns, 22 (38.6%) were second-borns, and only 1 (1.8%) was third-born. Most families were intact and of middle-class socioeconomic status. Many fathers and mothers were highly educated: 91.3% of fathers and 87.7% of mothers had received a B.A. degree. More than half of the mothers were housewives.

Instruments

All instruments were originally developed in English. Translation into Korean was completed by several researchers and then translated back into English. Korean research assistants and field workers including teachers reviewed all instruments to check cultural appropriateness and to confirm whether those work well.

Attachment Story Completion Task

Attachment Story Completion Task (Bretherton, Ridgeway, and Cassidy, 1990) is a story battery, composed of 5 story stems which are presented to the child using a family figures (father, mother, siblings, grandmother) and props (dinner table, rock in a park, car etc.). Each story provides a stressful conflict or problem that a child may experience. The stories are: (1) Spilled Juice (The younger child spills juice at the dinner table), (2) Hurt knee (The child hurts knee and cries), (3) Monster in the bedroom (The child goes to bed and cries out about a monster in the bedroom), (4)

Departure (The parents leave for an overnight trip), (5) Reunion (The parents return from their trip). At the end of the story stem presentation, the interviewer ask the child to "Show me and tell me what happens next." The child is expected to complete the story. All sessions were videotaped and transcribed. Attachment type was analyzed based on the coding system by Bretherton et al. (1990) and Golby, Bretherton, Winn, and Page (1995). There are 4 types; very secure, relatively secure, insecure-avoidance, and insecure-disorganized. There was an 82% correspondence between the ratings of the two judges in this study. For statistical analysis, the score of children's attachment security was earned based on Maslin, Bretherton, and Morgan (1986): very secure=4, relatively secure=3, relatively insecure-avoidance=2, and very insecure-avoidance and very insecure-disorganized=1.

Student-Teacher Relationship Scale

The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1991) was used to measure the characteristics of teacher-child relationships. The STRS includes the items that cover relational domains such as the teacher's perceptions of the child's affective responsiveness and behaviors, and how he/she feels for the child. There are three subscales: closeness (12 items), conflict (12 items), dependency (4 items). Based on our sample, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the closeness, conflict, and dependency are, respectively, .90, .95, and .71.

Measure of Children's Social Skills and Behavior Problems

The measure of children's social skill was derived from Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scale (Merrell, 1996). It consisted of items indicating social cooperation (12 items), social interaction (11 items), and social independence (11 items). The Cronbach alpha for social cooperation was .94, and for social interaction was .86, and for social independence was .90 based on our sample.

In addition, a measure of children's social behavior problems was adapted for this study from the revised Child Behavior Scale (Birsh and Ladd, 1998) developed by Ladd and Profilet (1996). The CBS yields 3 scores: aggressive-hyperactive behavior (11 items), asocial-anxious-fearful behavior (9 items), and prosocial behavior

(5 items). Internal consistency of each subscale was acceptable. Alpha coefficients for the aggressive-hyperactive behavior, asocial-anxious-fearful behavior, and prosocial behavior are .89, .80, and .82 respectively in our study.

Procedure

The Attachment Story Completion Task was conducted individually in a private, familiar room in children's preschools or daycare centers by two research assistants. They received training in the use of the ASCT and child interviewing techniques by the author. The administration of the session began with a warm-up story about a birthday party to make the child understand the procedure. The main 5 stories were started after the interviewer research assistant was confident that the child understood the procedure. The ASCT generally lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. The entire procedure was videotaped, fully transcribed, and then coded. Three scales (Student-Teacher Relationship Scale, Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scale, and Child Behavior Scale) were completed by teachers. They were told that they should fill in all the items and return to the research assistants by 1 week after visit. Descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to examine the research questions.

Results

1. Relations between Attachment Representation and Teacher-Child Relationship

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to examine the association between children's attachment representation and teacher-child relationship. Table 1 presents significant positive correlation between attachment representation score and closeness in teachers-children relationship ($r=.40$ $p<.01$). Thus children with high score of attachment representation tend to be perceived by their teachers as more close than those with low scores on this measure. This result reveals that children's attachment security to parents is connected to the teacher-child close relationship. This result is similar to previous studies indicating continuity between parent-child attachment and teacher-child relationship (Howes & Hamilton, 1992)

and influences of parent-child interaction patterns on teacher-child interaction quality (Nimetz, 1992).

In contrast, the results of the correlational analyses used to examine the relations between children's avoidance and teacher-child relationships indicate that there is a significant negative relations between children's avoidant response and teacher-child closeness ($r=-.38$, $p<.01$). This result conforms to attachment theory and studies which have found that the hallmark of avoidance is lack of affective involvement and emotional openness. Children with lower scores of avoidant are more likely than those with higher scores to be rated close in teacher-child relationships by their teachers.

Table 1. *Relations between Children's Attachment Representation and Teacher-Child Relationships*

Attachment Representation	Teachers-Children Relationship		
	Closeness	Conflict	Dependency
Attachment Security	.40**	-.21	.25
Avoidance	-.38**	.25	-.21

** $p<.01$

2. Relations between Attachment Representation and Social Skill

Children's attachment representation scores are positively related to social co-operation ($r=.36$, $p<.01$) and social interaction ($r=.43$, $p<.01$). These findings suggest that children's representation of attachment security reflected in ASCT is significantly related to their social skills. On the contrary, there are again negative correlations between children's avoidance and social skills ranging from $r=-.45$ to $r=-.30$ (Table 2). From these findings, we can see that the child's avoidance is strongly related to their social skills. Consistent with the spirit of attachment perspective, again, young children's attachment security plays an important role in children's social functioning.

Table 2. *Relations between Children's Attachment Representation and Social Skill*

Attachment Representation \ Social Skill	Social Cooperation	Social Interaction	Social Independence
Attachment Security	.36**	-.43**	.25
Avoidance	-.32*	-.45**	-.30*

*p<0.5, **p<.01

3. Relationships between Attachment Representation and Social Behavior Problems

An examination of the Table 3 reveals that children's score on attachment representation is negatively related to children's score on aggressive-hyperactive behavior ($r=-.36$, $p<.01$), but positively related to that on prosocial behavior ($r=.35$, $p<.01$). There were also significant relations between children's avoidance and their social behavior problems. Children's avoidance responses were positively related to aggressive-hyperactive behavior ($r=.27$, $p<.05$). In contrast, as expected, children's avoidance score is negatively related to prosocial behavior ($r=-.36$, $p<.01$). This pattern is similar to the other analyses in this study. That is, across all times of analyses, correlations indicate that there are systematic directions: Children's attachment security is positively related to their relationships to teachers and social functioning whereas avoidance is negatively related to these measures.

Table 3. *Relations between Children's Attachment Representation and Social Behavior Problems*

Attachment Representation \ Social Behavior Problems	Aggressive-Hyperactive Behavior	Asocial-Anxious · Fearful Behavior	Prosocial Behavior Problems
Attachment Security	-.36**	-.06	.35**
Avoidance	.27*	.06	-.36**

*p<.05, **p<.01

Discussions

The present study examined the relationships between preschool children's

attachment quality and social functioning. Here, using the method 'Attachment Story Completion Task' which measures attachment representation rather than attachment behaviors, we tried to prove the relationship between preschoolers' attachment representation and their relationship with teachers in preschools and/or daycare centers, as well as their social skills and behavior problems.

In the matter of attachment representation of children and teacher-child relationships, teachers recognized more intimate relationships with children when they had secure attachment representation whereas they perceived closer relationships with children when they had less avoidance responses. Our results support the aforementioned study which shows the continuity between the attachment pattern of child-parents and the relationship of children to their teachers (DeMuller, Denham, Schmidt, & Mitchell, 2000; Hamilton & Howe, 1992; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992). Children who developed secure attachment with their parents can use it as a basis for warm, stable attachment relationships with their teacher.

Avoidance responses and the social skill of children, and the attachment representation and social skills of children have shown a significant correlation. In other words, if children have less avoidance responses and secure attachment representation, they are socially more cooperative and interact well with others. This fact corresponded with the preceding study (Bretherton, 1985; Kim, 1995; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985; Sroufe, 1983) of that attachment relationship with parents affects on the socialization of children.

Avoidance responses and behavior problems of children show significant correlation with aggressive-hyperactive behavior and pro-social behavior. According to Von Klitzing, Kelsay, Emde, Robinson, & Schmitz (2000), avoidance is one strategy to control emotion with defensive biases, and avoidant children are aggressive more often in peer contexts (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999). This fact goes with the result of research by Cassidy and Berlin (1994) and it can be interpreted as children showing avoidance responses to protect themselves when problematic situations arise. In relation to attachment representation and behavior problems, aggressive-hyperactive behavior shows significantly negative correlation with attachment security. This fact corresponds with the preceding research that children of insecure attachment repre-

sentation are more impulsive and aggressive and show more behavior problems (Shields, Ryan & Chocchetti, 2001; Solomon & George, 1999). It also corresponded with domestic research that children who have secure attachment representation are behaving pro-socially and are not aggressive (Kim, 2001; Oh, 2005; Shin, 2004). These results suggest that it is necessary to develop the secure attachment of children with their parents to form stable relationships with teachers, to reduce behavior problems in preschool and day care centers, and to help them in their social development.

This study makes a contribution to the growing body of research on the meaning and function of preschool children's attachment representation in context of both teacher-child and peer-child context. As we look forward to future research, we envision several directions. First, the method which was used for this research depended on the laboratory environment, so the following research need to collect data based on observations in a natural environment. Second, it is requested to develop a program for improving parent-child attachment for the healthy development of children which helps interact with teachers and peers well and how to change a negative attachment into a positive attachment.

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