

# The Role of Attachment on Adult Attitudes Toward Interacting With Children

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of the present study was to explore whether attachment security is related to individual differences in young adults' attitudes toward interacting with children. Seventy-one participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.41$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) completed the Mother and Father versions of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment and an attitude measure created for this study to assess general feelings toward interacting with children. Correlational analyses revealed that young adults' self-reported qualities of attachment to their mothers and fathers were associated with their attitudes toward interacting with children,  $p < .001$  and  $p = .015$ , respectively. Specifically, greater perceived maternal and paternal attachment security predicted more positive attitudes toward interacting with children. However, a multiple regression analysis,  $p = .001$ , showed that, when considering attachment to both parents together, only attachment to the mother significantly predicted attitudes toward interacting with children,  $p = .006$ , and not attachment to the father,  $p = .365$ . The findings are discussed in terms of their implications for attachment theory and adults' professional interactions with children in the context of education.

Adults regularly encounter children every day in various settings, whether they see them at a store or interact with them as a part of their career (e.g., teaching). Some adults find these interactions to be pleasant and highly positive, some are indifferent to these interactions, and others experience extreme discomfort, dislike, or anxiety in these interactions. Although many young adults may aspire to a career working with children, others may find such professional aspirations to be unappealing, and even daunting. It is unclear what factors influence the differences in adults' attitudes toward interacting with children. The present study examined one possible factor: young adults' self-reported quality of attachment to their mothers and fathers.

## Attachment Theory

John Bowlby, the founder of modern attachment theory, identified that infants form attachments, or enduring emotional bonds, with their caregivers (Bowlby, 1982). Bowlby proposed that infants

are innately predisposed to keep and maintain proximity to their caregivers so as to ensure their protection and survival (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Infants rely on caregivers in times of distress, and caregivers reciprocally respond or do not respond to the needs of the infant (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). However, the type of attachment an infant forms can vary. When an attachment figure (primary caregiver) is "sensitive, responsive, and dependable" (Karen, 1994, p. 6), a secure attachment is formed because infants have the security of knowing their needs will be met (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). When this attachment figure is consistently responsive and attentive to the infant's needs, a secure base is established, allowing the child to feel a sense of trust in the world (Levy, 2013). Alternatively, insecure attachments form when children are inconsistently responded to or rejected in times of distress (ambivalent and avoidant, respectively; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006). In turn,

secure children are generally happier, less demanding of their parents, and more socially competent than their insecure counterparts (Bowlby, 1988; Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999).

Based on their interactions with a caregiver, children form mental representations, known as internal working models, of themselves, their parents, and of their environment (Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). These internal working models act as mechanisms for predicting the behavior of others and setting expectations for social interactions (Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Although internal working models influence the way in which individuals interact with others and shape their expectations of human nature (Rholes & Simpson, 1998), the internal working models of securely and insecurely attached individuals contain different types of information and guide behavior differently. Securely attached individuals tend to feel that they can trust and depend on others, but insecurely attached individuals find others to be untrustworthy and do not see relationships as being worthwhile, nor do they see themselves as being worthy of positive attention (Rothbard & Shaver, 1994; Weinfield et al., 1999). Bowlby (1982, 1988) noted that, although these internal working models are constantly receiving and integrating feedback, they are also persistent, not easy to drastically change (e.g., from secure to insecure), and can operate throughout the lifespan (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

From its foundation, attachment theory has often emphasized the importance of the mother's role as a primary caregiver in establishing a secure attachment (Bowlby, 1982). However, others (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010; Ricks, 1985) have stressed that the father's role in child development requires more examination because it may affect different developmental outcomes. For example, although researchers have often found attachment to mothers to be more influential on children's socialization and social competence than attachment to fathers (Suess, Grossman, & Sroufe, 1992), others have found that an insecure attachment to the father, but not the mother, was associated with adolescents' lower social competence with peers (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2009). Research has also shown that father-child relationships, more so than mother-child relationships, are particularly important in the development of a child's openness to the world (Paquette, 2004). Part of the reason that there may be different sequelae of mother and father attachment is because of the different types

of interactions mothers and fathers have with their children. Mothers tend to take on a larger share of caretaking and nurturing, and fathers tend to engage in more play behaviors (Parke, 1995). Because of the importance of examining attachment to the mother and father separately due to the potential of each to influence different outcomes, the current study considered both to investigate their relative contributions. Further, because parenting roles have shifted in recent generations, and fathers are now more likely to be involved in caregiving responsibilities (Bretherton, Lambert, & Goldby, 2005), we put forth that it is critical to examine their influence in the current study.

### Attachment and Relating to Children

A large body of research has demonstrated that attachment is related to social competence. For example, a longitudinal study found that securely attached individuals were more likely to be accepted by their peers, had closer relationships with and positive affection toward peers, were less likely to be bullied or victimized, and demonstrated greater leadership characteristics (Sroufe, 2005). A recent meta-analysis of 80 samples discovered that securely attached individuals displayed better social competence with peers (Groh et al., 2014). Conversely, insecurity is considered a risk factor for social incompetence and experiencing difficulty in interpersonal skills (Belsky, 1988). Another study found patterns of either social coldness or over-nurturing tendencies as associated with an insecure attachment, and a secure attachment was associated with greater openness and trust within interpersonal interactions (Wilhelmsson Göstas, Wiberg, Engström, & Kjellin, 2012). Additional research showed that insecure attachments fostered irrational ideas toward relationships significantly more than secure attachments (Stackert & Bursik, 2002). Furthermore, adults with an insecure attachment, who had irrational negative beliefs about their relationships (e.g., believing that a single disagreement will lead to the relationship failing), reported less satisfaction in their actual relationships, and adults with secure attachments reported much higher satisfaction (Stackert & Bursik, 2002). Social incompetence, irrational negative beliefs about relationships, and lower relationship satisfaction may be underlying factors that contribute to adults with insecure attachments having more negative attitudes toward social interactions including interactions with children.

Attachment styles not only influence how

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individuals interact with peers, but can also influence how individuals interact with and parent their own children. For example, because adults with an insecure-avoidant attachment tend to prefer emotionally distant relationships to others because they have been rejected in the past, they often reject their children in times of distress (Weinfield et al., 1999). Additionally, Rholes, Simpson, and Blakely (1995) found that these adults felt a lack of closeness to their children and reported their interactions as being more negative and not as supportive. The authors suggested that individuals with this insecure attachment style have a lack of confidence in their aptitude for relating to the emotions of children, which “may reflect real limits on their capacity to develop warm, supportive relationships with them” (Rholes et al., 1995, p. 49). Other research has found that insecurely attached individuals who have negative expectations of relationships with their children are reportedly more likely to misinterpret their children’s needs and become irritated by their children (Nathanson & Manohar, 2012). Rholes et al. (2006) summarized parents with insecure-avoidant attachment in the following:

Avoidant adults do provide care to others, including their children, at times, but they often do so to meet social obligations or to receive favors and benefits rather than due to feelings of love or concern, and the help they provide is often given from a safe emotional distance. (p. 282)

Some research has also demonstrated that attachment can influence perceptions of potential interactions with future children. The internal working models of individuals with an insecure attachment often lead them to believe that they will be incompetent parents, and will have more negative experiences having children (Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, & Allen, 1997). As compared to individuals with a secure attachment, who have positive models of becoming parents, individuals with an insecure attachment report expectations of being irritated by their future children and expect to be unable to relate to their children (Rholes et al., 1997). Although research has discovered that attachment impacts interactions with children and expectations for relationships with future children, it is unknown if these patterns of findings extend to children who are not related.

### The Current Study

Previous research has demonstrated that attachment

influences social competence within an individual’s interactions with peers and even interactions with one’s own children (Sroufe, 2005; Weinfield et al., 1999), yet no known research has examined whether attachment is related to attitudes toward interacting with children in general. Based on the research regarding the relationship between attachment and expectations of parenting (Rholes et al., 1997) and attachment and interpersonal relationships (Rholes et al., 2006; Weinfield et al., 1995), the current study examined the relationship between attachment and attitudes of young adults toward interacting with children. Because adults with insecure attachments tend to be less socially competent and confident (Belsky, 1988; Sroufe, 2005) and have more negative interactions with their own children and negative views of themselves as parents (Nathanson & Manohar, 2012; Rholes et al., 1995), we expected that this trend would carry into their interactions with other, nonrelated children. Because of this, we hypothesized that greater attachment security, as measured by respondents having more positive perceptions of parents as sources of security, would predict more positive attitudes toward interacting with children, whereas less attachment security would predict less positive attitudes.

The current research also examined whether attachment to mothers and attachment to fathers were differently associated with attitudes toward children. Previous research on the different outcomes of maternal and paternal attachment has been mixed (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2009; Suess et al., 1992). Based on the main tenets of attachment theory, we expected that those with more secure attachments to mother and father would have more positive attitudes toward children. However, because mothers tend to still be the primary attachment figure (Bretherton et al., 2005) and tend to have a greater influence on social and emotional development, we predicted that attachment to the mother would be a stronger predictor of attitudes toward children than attachment to the father.

## Method

### Participants

The sample of this study ( $N = 71$ ) represented 48 women and 22 men (one participant did not identify sex) in a small mid-Atlantic town. These women and men were between the ages of 18 and 22 years old ( $M = 19.41$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) and represented students from a college that is mostly White American. The ratio of women (~70%) to men (~30%) included

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only slightly more women than the college's overall population (women ~60%, men ~40%). Signup sheets that included a brief study description were posted in the college's psychology department to recruit participants. Most participants were enrolled in a General Psychology class; each of them received one experimental credit for their class in exchange for their participation. The few participants who were not enrolled in General Psychology classes volunteered to participate in the study, receiving no course credit or other compensation.

### Measures

**Parent and peer attachment.** Participants completed the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Arnsden & Greenberg, 1987) excluding the Peer attachment version. The IPPA is theoretically grounded in attachment theory, and was developed to measure young adults' perceptions of their parents and peers as sources of security (Arnsden & Greenberg, 1987). The Mother and Father versions of the IPPA include a total of 50 items (25 for the mother and 25 for the father) for which participants responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*almost never true or never true*) to 5 (*almost always true or always true*). An example of an item is "My mother/father respects my feelings." Three participants did not complete the Father version, though we do not have information regarding the cause of their omissions. The IPPA is a measure of perceived levels of mutual trust, quality of communication, and extent of anger and alienation. In line with the authors' recommendations, scores for the Mother and Father attachment versions were created by reverse coding appropriate items and then computing an average of all of the mother items ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and an average of all of the father items ( $\alpha = .96$ ) separately. The resulting scores for the Mother and Father versions of the IPPA indicate a continuum of perceived attachment security, with a higher score representing the perception of a more secure attachment to one's parents and a lower score representing a less secure attachment. The IPPA has previously been shown to display convergent (Arnsden & Greenberg, 1987) and predictive validity (Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004).

**Attitude.** Participants also completed an attitude measure that was designed for use in the current study to measure general feelings toward interacting with children (see Appendix). This measure includes 35 items on which participants responded using a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1

(*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). An example of an item is "I feel at ease when interacting with children." A higher score on this measure indicates more positive attitudes toward interacting with children. For this measure, 12 items were reverse coded including statements such as "It is difficult to understand what a child is thinking or feeling." The test for reliability produced a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .94, which illustrates a high level of internal consistency for this measure. Data has not yet been collected to confirm the validity of this attitude measure.

### Procedure

Prior to conducting the study, we received approval from the Washington College's institutional review board (F13-059). A signup sheet that included a description of the study was posted outside of a psychology classroom. Multiple experimental sessions were available to participants over the course of 5 days, with three 30-min sessions available on each day. No more than 10 participants were permitted to attend each session. Upon arrival to the experiment, participants were given an informed consent form, which they signed and returned to the experimenter. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine possible influences on everyday adult-child interactions. Surveys, which included (in order) a demographic survey consisting of 6 questions, the 35-item attitude measure, the 25-item Mother version of the IPPA (Arnsden & Greenberg, 1987), and the 25-item Father version of the IPPA (Arnsden & Greenberg, 1987), were distributed to each participant to complete. The order of measures within the survey was fixed for all participants. When finished, participants were given debriefing forms that revealed the nature of the study. Participants were asked to keep the true purpose confidential so they would not bias future participants. Participation in the study took approximately 15 min.

### Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for attachment to mothers, attachment to fathers, and adult attitudes toward interacting with children (see Table 1). Independent-samples *t* tests examining participant sex differences revealed that there were no significant differences between men and women for attachment to the mother, nor for attachment to the father (see Table 1). Regarding attitudes toward interacting with children, there was a marginally significant difference between the male and female participants, indicating that

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TABLE 1

## Descriptive Statistics

	Overall		Women		Men		Sex Differences
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Attitudes toward children	5.09	1.14	5.25	1.23	4.78	0.82	$t(55) = -1.87, p = .067,$ $d = -.45$
IPPA – Mother version	4.10	0.68	4.17	0.66	4.03	0.65	$t(68) = -.15, p = .394,$ $d = -.22$
IPPA – Father version	3.59	1.01	3.58	1.05	3.67	0.93	$t(65) = .09, p = .733,$ $d = .09$

Note. Possible scores for the attitudes toward children measure range from 1–7, and possible scores for both IPPA versions range from 1–5.

women reported slightly more positive attitudes toward interacting with children than did men.

Correlations were conducted to test associations between attachments to the mother and to the father with attitudes toward children. Consistent with the hypothesis, there was a significant positive correlation between maternal attachment and attitudes toward interacting with children,  $r(69) = .43, p < .001$ , and between paternal attachment and attitudes toward interacting with children,  $r(66) = .29, p = .015$ . Specifically, more positive attitudes toward interacting with children were associated with more secure maternal and paternal attachment. Finally, maternal and paternal attachment were positively correlated,  $r(66) = .48, p < .001$ .

A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the relative influence of maternal and paternal attachment as predictors of attitudes toward children. The model was significant,  $F(2, 65) = 7.53, p = .001, R^2 = .19$ . Attachment to the mother significantly predicted attitudes toward children,  $t(68) = 2.86, p = .006, \beta = .37$ , but attachment to the father did not,  $t(68) = .91, p = .365, \beta = .12$ .<sup>1</sup>

## Discussion

The current research was based on the hypothesis that young adults who were more securely attached to their parents (i.e., they perceive their parents to be sources of security) would report more positive attitudes toward interacting with children than young adults who were less securely attached to their parents. The hypothesis of this study was supported by a significant association between maternal and paternal attachment and attitudes toward interacting with children, such that more secure attachments to mothers and fathers were related to more positive attitudes, and less secure attachments were related to less positive attitudes. These findings were consistent with other research,

illustrating that a secure attachment is related to higher levels of social competence and confidence in social interactions, as well as increased closeness to one's own children (Rholes & Simpson, 1998; Rholes et al., 1995; Weinfield et al., 1999). The current research added to the existing literature by demonstrating that young adults' greater attachment security is related to their more positive attitudes toward interacting with children in general, not merely their own kin (Sroufe, 2005; Weinfield et al., 1999). The findings also illustrated the potentially harmful impact that having an insecure attachment can have on an adult's social interactions, as exemplified by the less secure young adults who had less positive attitudes toward interacting with children. These findings were similar to what Belsky (1988) suggested regarding the negative influence of an insecure attachment on interpersonal relationships and socioemotional functioning in general.

Research on the different influences of maternal and paternal attachment regarding social competence has been mixed (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2009; Suess et al., 1992), but the current findings demonstrated that attachment to the mother was a stronger predictor than attachment to the father for attitudes toward interacting with children. In fact, when we examined paternal attachment, greater maternal attachment still made an independent contribution in predicting more positive attitudes toward children. Yet when we examined maternal attachment, the association that paternal attachment had with attitudes toward children became nonexistent. These results highlighted the greater influence of attachment to the mother in terms of attitudes toward children. The current findings were consistent with other research that has found maternal attachment to be associated with having a positive view of others, higher social skills, and greater peer competence (Abraham & Kerns, 2013). Such characteristics, stemming out of maternal attachment, likely contributed to more secure individuals having more positive attitudes toward children, as found in the current study. It is important to note that the results did not indicate that relationships with fathers do not matter for children's development after considering relationships with mothers. Instead, relationships with fathers may be more influential in other domains.

<sup>1</sup> A similar hierarchical multiple regression model was conducted with sex on the first step and maternal and paternal attachment on the second step to control for possible sex effects. Sex was not a significant predictor, nor did the pattern of results change.

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Other analyses revealed a trend for a difference between sexes on attitudes toward children, with women having a slightly more positive attitude than men. It is possible that women might have reported more positive attitudes toward children than men because of the societal expectations that women face about being nurturing and becoming mothers and caretakers (Gustafson, 2005; Russo, 1979). Also, the nature of the items on the attitude measure might have unintentionally been slightly gender biased toward women, and could be missing key factors of adult-child interactions that are more characteristic of men. For example, a majority of items on the attitude measure regard the propensity for emotional connection to children, infant care, and feelings around children. Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2005) found that, although women tend to engage in calm play and enhancement of social development with children, men tend to emphasize physical development and active play; far fewer items on the attitude measure were related to the latter type of interaction.

#### Limitations and Future Directions

The present study was conducted with a relatively small sample of participants of a limited age range, most of whom were first-year college students, and few were men. Therefore, the relatively homogeneous and possibly nonrepresentative sample presented a potential limitation. Future researchers should consider using a larger and more representative random sample that could be better generalized to the population. Furthermore, specific demographic information was not collected for this sample, so future researchers may also consider collecting this data to examine potential cultural differences or influences in these results. As is the case in any study where self-report is the method for data collection, there is the potential for response bias. Future research could try to integrate multiple reports or observations of an individual's interactions with children. A notable limitation in the present study was the use of an attitude measure with unknown psychometric properties. Additional research should examine the validity of this measure so that it can be confirmed for use in further studies. It is also important to note that the causal nature and the direction of effects between attachment and attitudes toward children are not possible to determine with the current design. A future study could implement a longitudinal design and assess attachment and attitudes at multiple time points in attempts to

determine directionality.

The current research question could be explored more in depth by examining specific differences in attitudes toward interacting with children across the different types of attachment styles, rather than on a continuum of more secure and less secure, as measured by the IPPA. Given the nature of differences between social competence for individuals with insecure-avoidant attachments and insecure-ambivalent attachments, it is likely that attitudes toward interacting with children will differ among these groups. More specifically, individuals with an insecure-avoidant attachment typically maintain emotional distance and are rejecting of others, and those with an insecure-ambivalent attachment tend to be overly clingy and anxious (Bowlby, 1988; Weinfield et al., 1999). Although the current study found a link between insecure attachment and less positive attitudes, we would expect future research to find differences in the nature of these attitudes between the types of insecure attachments. For example, individuals with an insecure-avoidant attachment might report the least positive attitudes toward interacting with children, and may prefer avoiding these interacting altogether. Alternatively, individuals with insecure-ambivalent attachments may report slightly more neutral attitudes toward interacting with children, but may be highly anxious and nervous about these interactions due to a lack of confidence in their abilities to interact successfully. The current study provided an initial insight into this type of research, yet further research could provide a more comprehensive and full picture of the relationship between types of attachment and attitudes toward interacting with children.

#### Implications

The present research emphasized the importance of parents fostering secure attachment relationships with their children. These findings provided the initial attempt to better understanding the connection between attachment security and adults' relationships to and interactions with nonrelated children. Although prior research has highlighted the importance of adult attachment security in interacting with one's own children, there has been a gap in research that examines relationships outside of the family. Developmental psychologists should be aware of this finding to promote more sensitive parenting to shape more secure attachment in their children. In turn, having a more secure attachment as an adult would lead

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individuals to have greater social competence in general including with nonrelated children. These findings further indicated the impact of early development on relationships later in life.

The present research can provide further insight into the attachment caregiving system. Bowlby (1982) proposed that adults have a caregiving system, where in the face of their child's distress, caregivers are motivated to respond to the distress and prevent future distress (Karen, 1998). Caregivers also have working models that reflect their representations of the relationships they have with their children (George & Solomon, 1989). For example, caregivers with positive, secure models feel able and willing to respond to their distressed child, and act accordingly (George & Solomon, 1989). The findings of the present study implied that young adults with secure attachment representations may have positive caregiving models, even if they do not yet have children. Such positive models will guide their behaviors as parents, but they may also lead them to desire and enjoy interactions with other, nonrelated children as well.

Additionally, these findings may be helpful in terms of better understanding individuals who choose a career in which they work with children regularly such as teaching. Educators and school administrators may want to test whether the current attitude survey is related to adults' interactions with children in a school setting in order to be more aware of the ways in which certain individuals may differ in their interactions with students. Teacher education programs may also use this research in order to have greater awareness of the qualities of future teaching candidates who may be more successful in having positive interactions with children. By understanding an individual's attachment history, educators of teachers may be able to better understand one reason why certain individuals have a strong desire to interact with children regularly, through their work, when others do not.

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This research was completed to fulfill the requirements of a senior thesis project for the Washington College Department of Psychology.

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## APPENDIX

### Attitude Measure for Interacting With Children

1. I feel at ease when interacting with children.
2. I would enjoy a profession that involves working with children regularly.
3. If an infant was crying, I would feel capable of comforting him/her.
4. Adults and children are too different to interact like friends.
5. It is difficult to understand what a child is thinking or feeling.
6. I would ask a child what was wrong if I could tell he/she was upset.
7. I am comfortable speaking with children who I have never met before.
8. The thought of becoming a parent is exciting.
9. Being nearby an infant makes me feel nervous or anxious.
10. Children often frustrate or irritate me.
11. I have a lot of patience for young children and infants.
12. I view children positively.
13. I am uncomfortable talking to children and often don't know what to say to them.
14. I tend to have a negative view of children.
15. I enjoy spending time with children.
16. Being around children or infants makes me feel happy.
17. Children see me as being trustworthy.
18. Caring for an infant makes me feel nervous or anxious.
19. I find it difficult to connect to children on an emotional level.
20. I often laugh when talking to children.
21. I avoid spending time with children.
22. I avoid attending events if I know young children will be present.
23. I plan to become a parent someday.
24. I would say yes if a couple asked me to babysit their child.
25. I feel awkward around children and infants.
26. I would be happy to spend an extended period of time with a child.
27. I get along well with many children.
28. I would feel uncomfortable if left alone with a child or infant.
29. If I saw a child crying in a store, I would smile at him/her to cheer that child up.
30. I prefer to spend time with children in small doses.
31. Children have a positive view of me.
32. I choose to play with the children at family gatherings.
33. I am comfortable understanding the needs of a baby.
34. I seek out activities where I can spend time with children (babysitting, tutoring, contacting family, etc.).
35. I find it enjoyable to play games with children.