

An Examination of Complex Interactions Between Parenting and Attachment In the Prediction of Adolescent Externalizing Behavior*

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Introduction

Despite a general consensus that parenting is an important predictor of both attachment security and adolescent mental health, relatively little research has examined interactions between dimensions of youth attachment and parenting style in relation to psychopathology (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003; Marsh, McFarland, Allen, McElhaney, & Land, 2003).

Recent research, however, suggests that further study of such parenting-attachment interactions is warranted. For example, Karavasilis et al. (2003) have reported unique relationships between adolescent attachment style and dimensions of maternal parenting. Doyle and Markiewicz (2005) provide preliminary evidence that attachment Avoidance and Anxiety both mediate Warmth in the prediction of adolescent externalizing symptoms and self-esteem.

The goal of the current study is to expand on previous research by investigating potential conditional moderation relationships between dimensions of maternal parenting style (warmth, behavioral control, psychological control) and adolescent attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) in the prediction of externalizing symptoms among at-risk youth.

Method

Participants

Participants were 186 adolescents (101 males, 85 females) attending a local assessment and treatment center for youth with behavioral difficulties. Their ages ranged between 11 and 17 years, with a slightly higher mean age for females (mean = 14.4, s.d. = 1.3) than males (mean = 14.0, s.d. = 1.5). The majority identified themselves as Caucasian (69%), 25% as Aboriginal and 6% as other.

Measures

Parenting was assessed via youth reports of maternal parenting behaviors on the Children's Report of Parenting Behaviors Inventory (CRPBI; Schaefer, 1965a), a 60-item self-report questionnaire consisting of three multi-item sub-scales: (1) Acceptance/Rejection, (2) Behavioral Control, and (3) Psychological Control.

Attachment was assessed via youth self-report on the Comprehensive Adolescent-Parent Attachment Inventory (CAPAI; Moretti, McKay, & Holland, 2000, adapted from the ECR, Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), a 36-item self-report measure consisting of two major sub-scales: (1) Anxiety and (2) Avoidance.

Psychopathology was assessed via the Youth Self-Report (YSR, Achenbach, 1991, for 11 to 18-year olds), a 118-item self-report inventory designed to assess a range of psychological symptoms. The current study uses the Externalizing scale, which consists of two sub-scales measuring Aggression and Delinquency.

Results

Conditional moderation was tested using hierarchical multiple linear regression, following the procedure outlined by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2004). A significant three-way interaction was observed between anxiety, avoidance, and parental acceptance ($\beta = -.217, p < .05$):

Regression Model Predicting Externalizing Symptoms				
		Coefficients		
Step	Predictor	ΔR^2	β^a	s_e^2
1	Gender	.019	.094	.01
	Age		.020	.00
2	Avoidance ^c	.068**	.025	.00
	Anxiety ^c		.102	.01
	Acceptance ^c		-.129	.01
3	Avoidance $\times$ Acceptance ¹	.029	-.098	.01
	Anxiety $\times$ Acceptance ¹		.009	.00
	Avoidance $\times$ Anxiety ¹		-.224*	.02
4	Avoidance $\times$ Anxiety $\times$ Acceptance ¹	.022*	-.217*	.02

*Standardized Beta on last step; ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$; ¹Centered predictor; ²Cross-product of centered predictors

Table 1. Results of the multiple linear regression analysis of the three-way interaction predicting externalizing symptoms.

Simple slopes of the regression, computed at conditional values of the moderating variables, revealed that when anxiety and avoidance were both high (consistent with a Fearful attachment style), parental acceptance predicted lower externalizing problems ($\beta = -.461, p < .05$):

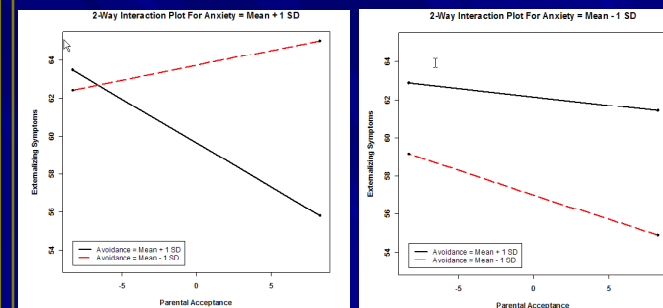


Figure 1. Graphical representations of simple slopes predicting externalizing symptoms from maternal acceptance at conditional values of anxiety and avoidance.

Sample size prohibited analyses of potential sex differences; however, overall trends suggested similar patterns of results for males and females, and for more specific predictions of Aggression and Delinquency.

Discussion

These findings suggest that, when youth attachment anxiety and avoidance are considered simultaneously, the level of externalizing symptoms among adolescents varies as a function of maternal acceptance. More specifically, when attachment anxiety and avoidance are both high, maternal acceptance is related to lower externalizing symptoms.

This finding agrees with current theory of authors such as Fuhrman and Holmbeck (1995) and Lamborn and Steinberg (1993) who suggest that adjustment in childhood reflects the degree of "fit" between characteristics of the child and the child's developmental context.

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