

Insecure Attachment & Aggression in High-Risk Adolescent Girls and Boys

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Gender & Aggression Project

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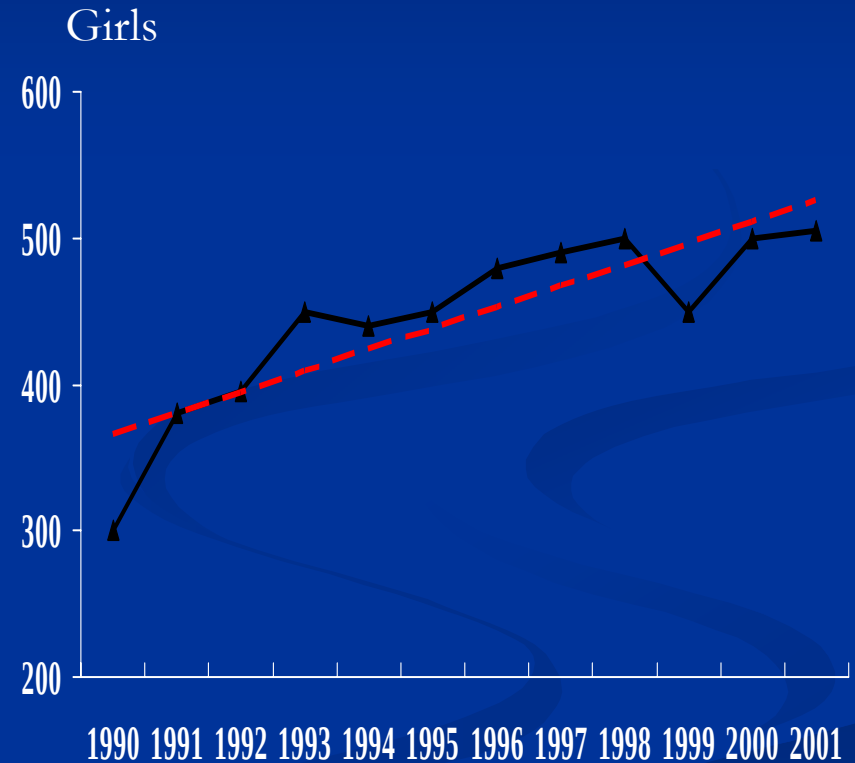
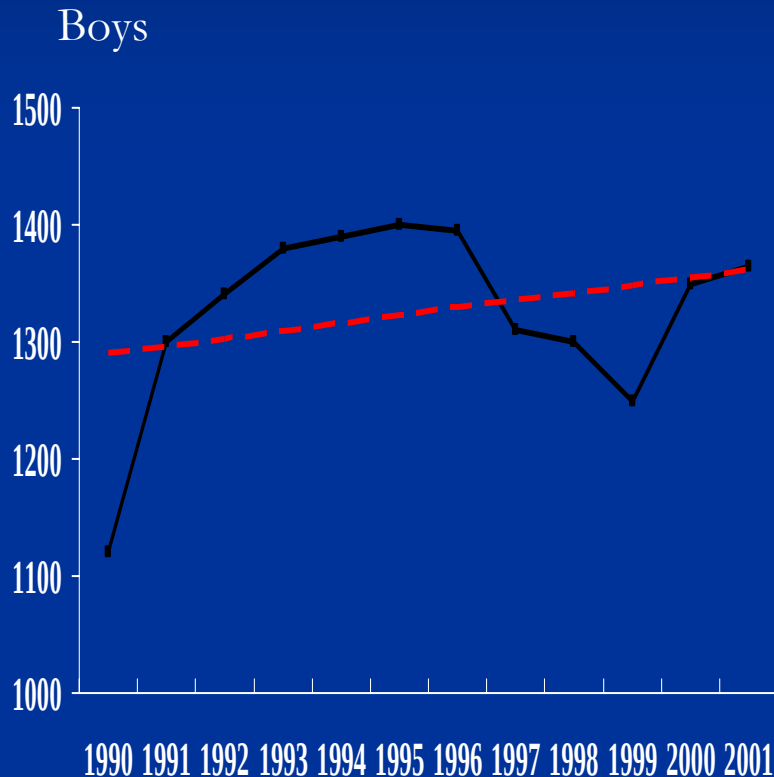
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Rate per 100,000 Boys & Girls Aged 12-17 Years Charged with Violent Offenses Canada 1990-2001, Statistics Canada



*includes homicide, attempted murder, sexual assault, assault, abduction, robbery

U.S. Department of Justice

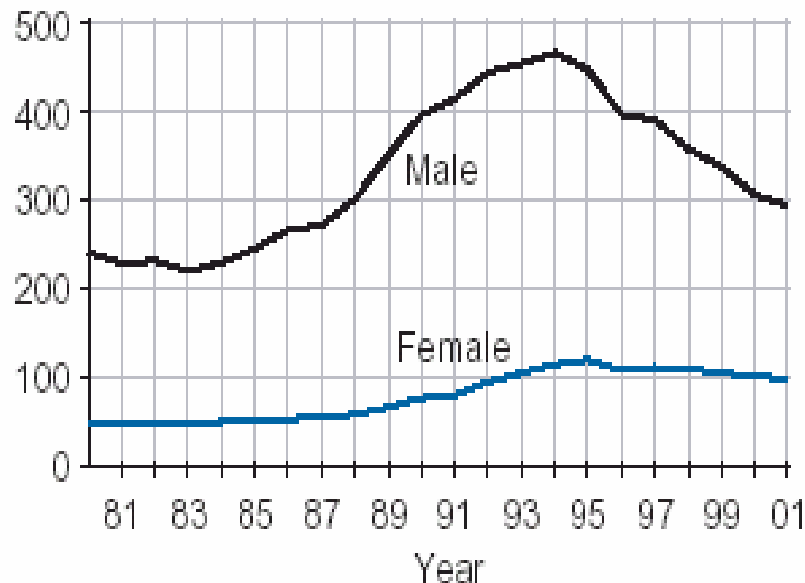
Office of Justice Programs

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

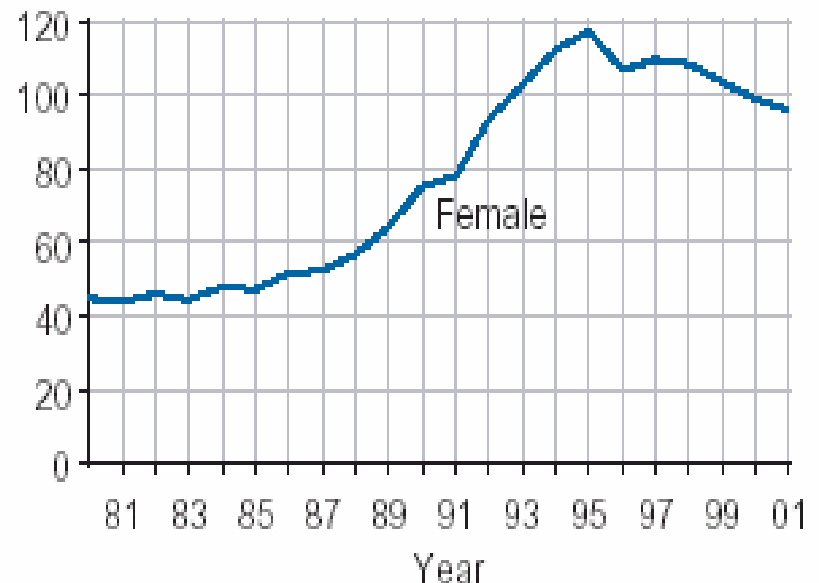
Between 1980 and 2001, juvenile arrest rates increased proportionately more for females than for males, especially for violent crimes

Aggravated assault

Arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10–17

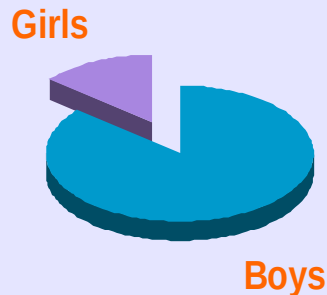


Arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10–17

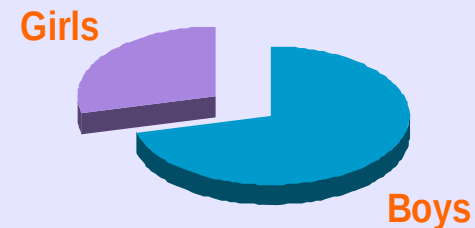


Gender Ratio in Self-Reported Serious Violent Behavior in 1983 versus 1998

Gender Ratio 1983
(1 Girl to 7.4 Boys)



Gender Ratio 1998
(1 Girl to 3.5 Boys)



Source: Johnston, 2000; Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2001
Violent incident rate reflects the number of assaults with injury and robberies with a weapon reported per 1,000 high school seniors.

What is the Function of Aggression?

- CLASSIC VIEW: 'Impersonal' acts that are carried out in the pursuit of instrumental goals by individuals who do not consider the rights and welfare of others
- RELATIONAL VIEW: Aggression may be used strategically to coerce others into relationships or prevent them from disengaging

Aggression from an Attachment Perspective

- Bowlby (1973): Anger – at appropriate times and in appropriate amounts – is *functional*.
- Anger is an effective signal to attachment figures of distress, and need for proximity.
- Extreme anger, aggression and violence is not functional as it ultimately undermines the attachment relationship.

Attachment & Aggression

- Bowlby (1973): “the most violently angry and dysfunctional responses of all, it seems probable, are elicited in children and adolescents who not only experience repeated separations but are constantly subjected to the threat of being abandoned” (p. 288).

Fundamentals of Attachment Theory

Bowlby (1973): two key features of “internal working models” of attachment:

1. Whether or not the attachment figure is the sort of person who in general responds to calls for support and protection
2. Whether or not the self is judged to be the sort of person toward whom anyone, and the attachment figure in particular, is likely to respond in a helpful way” (p. 204).

Four Category Model of Attachment (Bartholomew)

SECURE

Model of self: positive
Model of other: positive

Comfortable with intimacy
& autonomy

PREOCCUPIED

Model of self: negative
Model of other: positive

Preoccupied
with relationships

DISMISSING

Model of self: positive
Model of other: negative

Dismissing of intimacy;
Counter-dependent

FEARFUL

Model of self: negative
Model of other: negative

Fearful of intimacy
Socially avoidant

PREDICTIONS I: ATTACHMENT & AGGRESSION

- Preoccupied – Aggression interpersonally focused; coercive strategy to ‘capture’ and prevent disengagement of others.
- Fearful – Aggression not directed to attachment figure for fear of further rejection, but deflected away to other targets, including the self.
- Dismissing – Aggression is not interpersonally focused or self-focused, but others may be aggressed upon in the course of pursuing instrumental goals.

PREDICTIONS II: ATTACHMENT & GENDER

- Girls are encouraged to attend to others emotional expression, to conform to others expectations, to judge their success or failure in terms of acceptance by others (Cross & Madson, 1997).
- Boys are encouraged toward independence from the opinions of others; identity is less tied to intimate relationships (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997).

PREDICTIONS:

- **PREOCCUPIED: GIRLS > BOYS**
- **DISMISSING: BOYS>GIRLS**

METHODOLOGY - GENERAL

- Attachment Interview - Family Attachment Interview (FAI; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), a semi-structured interview modeled after the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main et al.)
 - Reliability & validity of interview with adolescents is established (Scharfe, 2002)
- Sample – clinical sample drawn from provincial centre for severe conduct disorder
- Study I – Aggression toward Self vs. Others
- Study II – Overt vs. Relational aggression

Study I - Attachment & Aggression

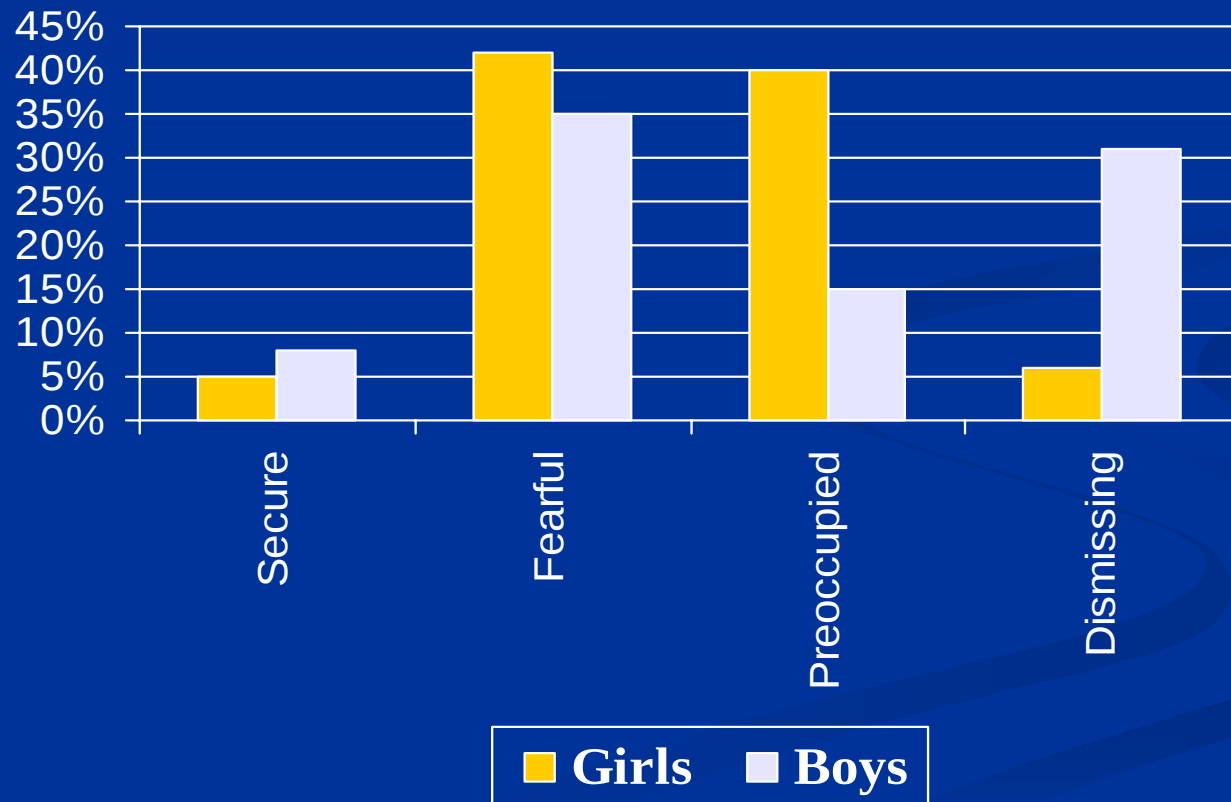
Participants:

- 105 boys and 65 girls
- Mean age was 14.3 years ($SD = 1.47$).

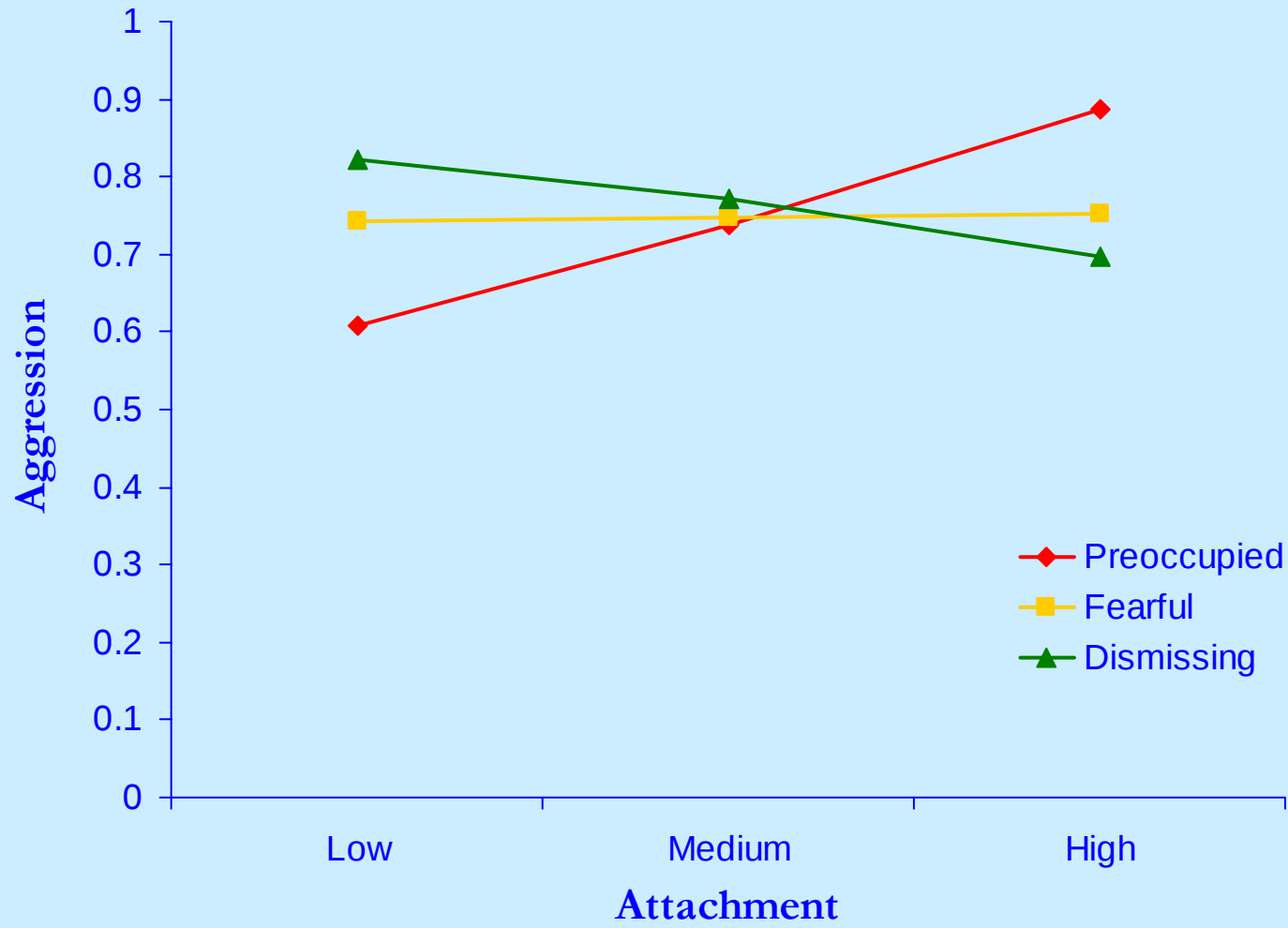
AGGRESSION ITEMS:

- Extracted from Youth Self Report (YSR) and Beck Depression Inventory:
- Aggression toward Others: e.g., I get in many fights; I physically attack people.
- Aggression toward Self: e.g., I deliberately try to hurt or kill myself.

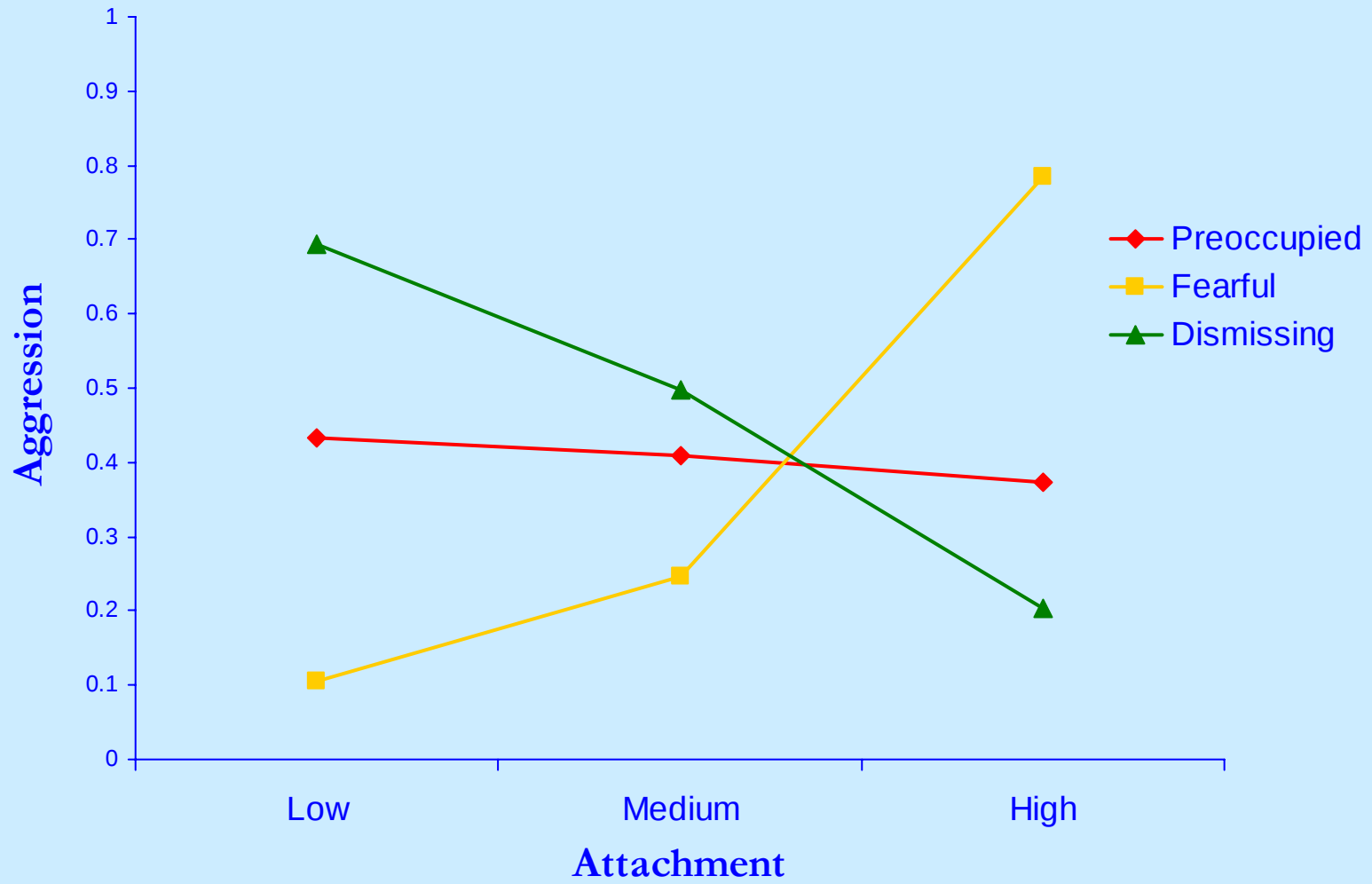
Distribution of Attachment Patterns in High Risk Adolescents – Study I



Insecure Attachment & Aggression toward Others



Insecure Attachment & Aggression toward Self



Study II - Attachment & Aggression

Participants:

- 18 boys and 24 girls
- Mean age was 14.6 years ($SD = 1.36$).

Attachment Interview:

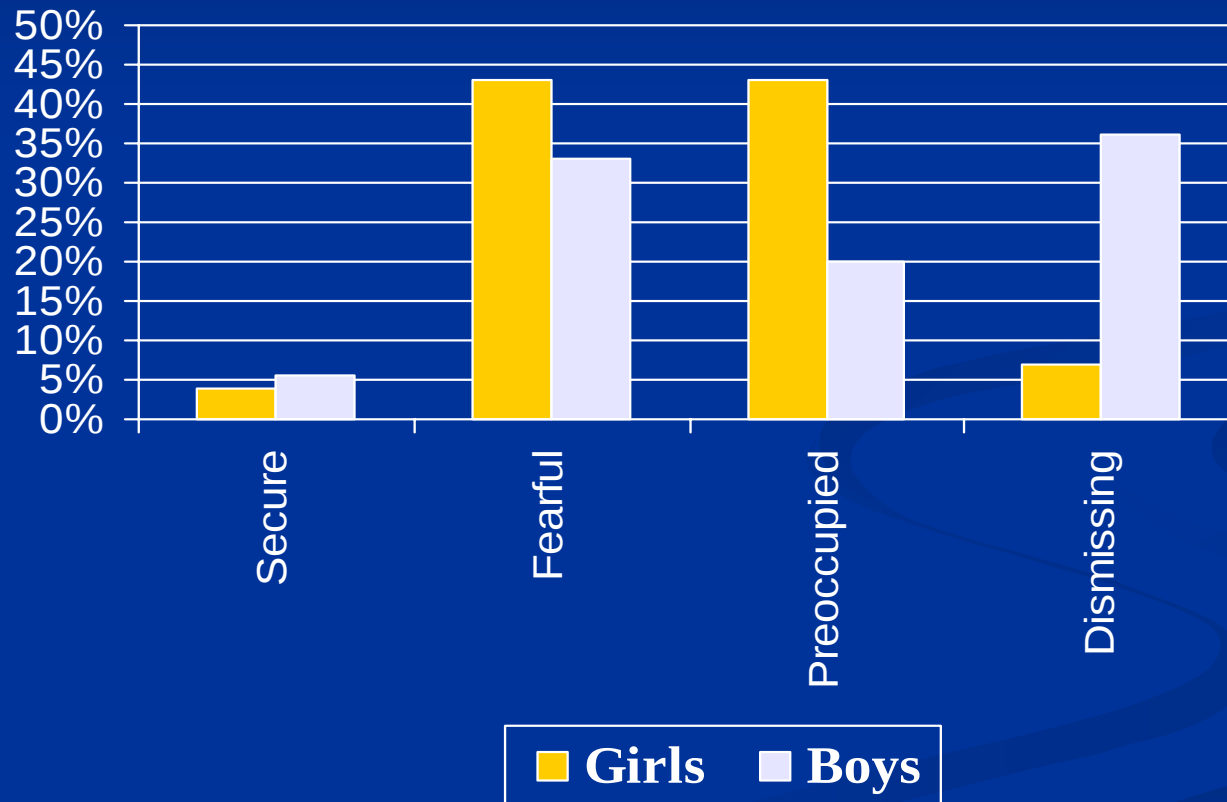
- Due to small sample analyses used dimensional ratings of attachment

Aggression Scales:

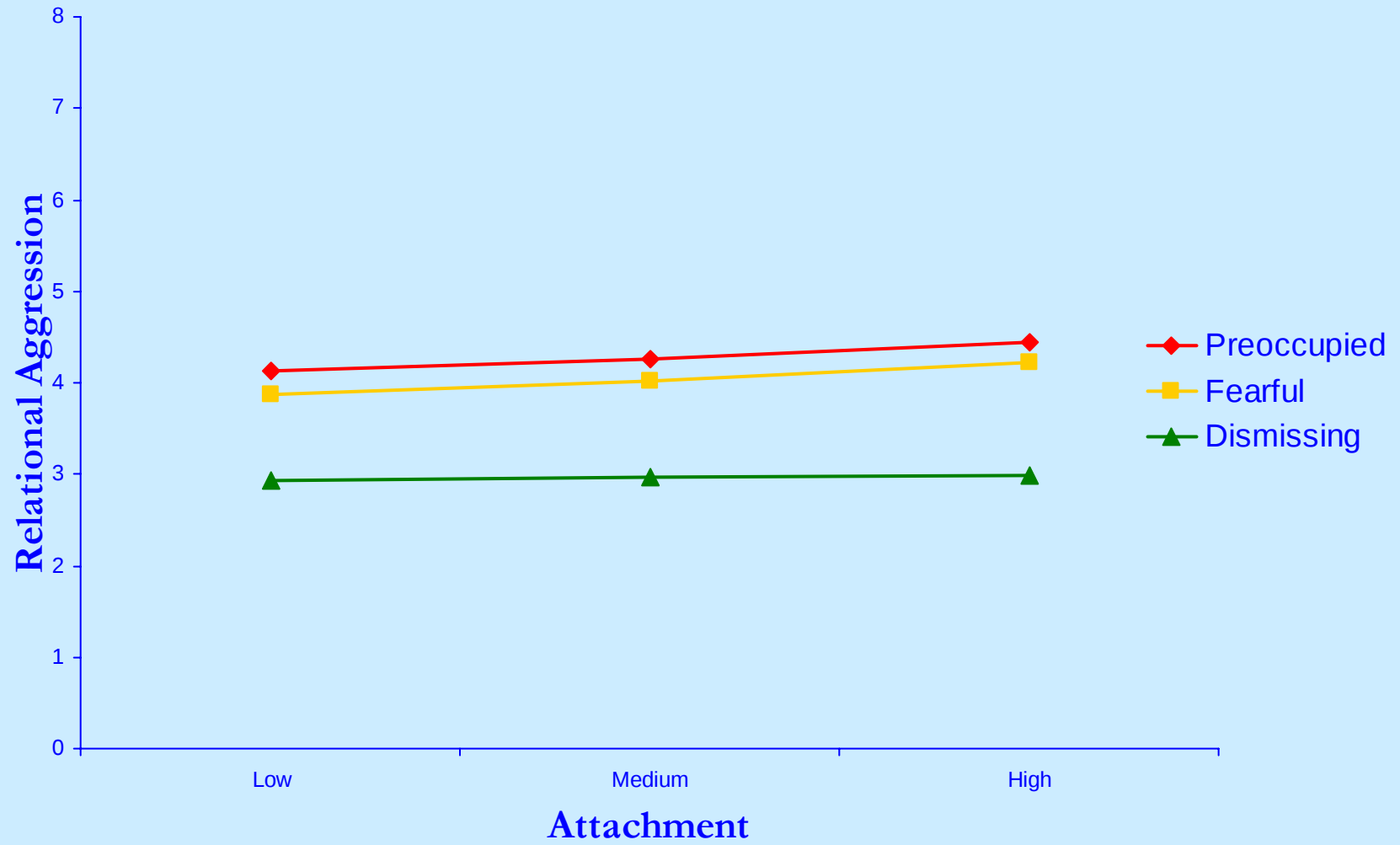
Integrated framework of aggression (Little et al., 2003)

- Overt Aggression: e.g., I am the kind of person who hits, kicks or punches others.
- Relational Aggression: e.g., I am the kind of person who tells my friends to stop liking someone.

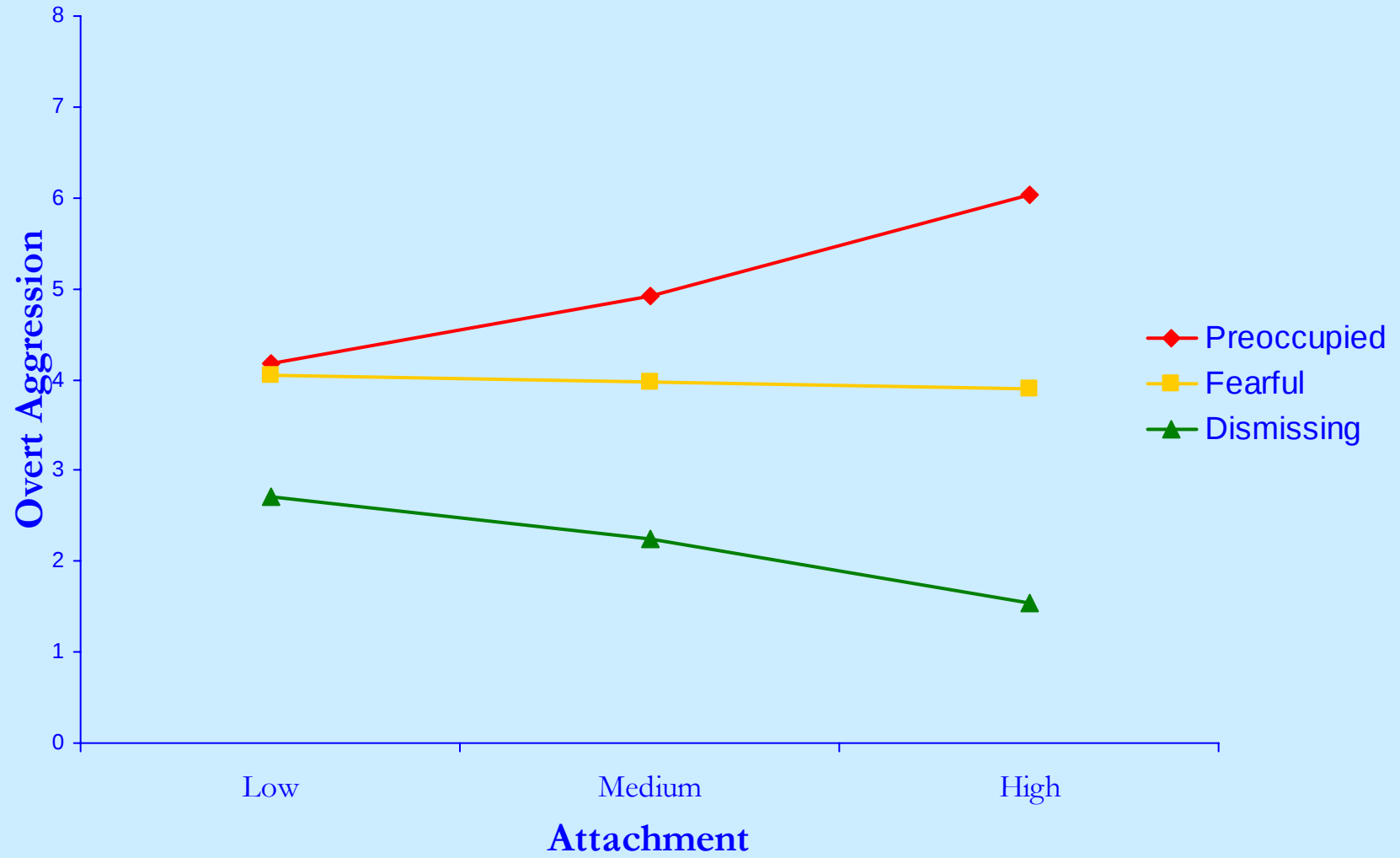
Distribution of Attachment Patterns in High Risk Adolescents – Study II



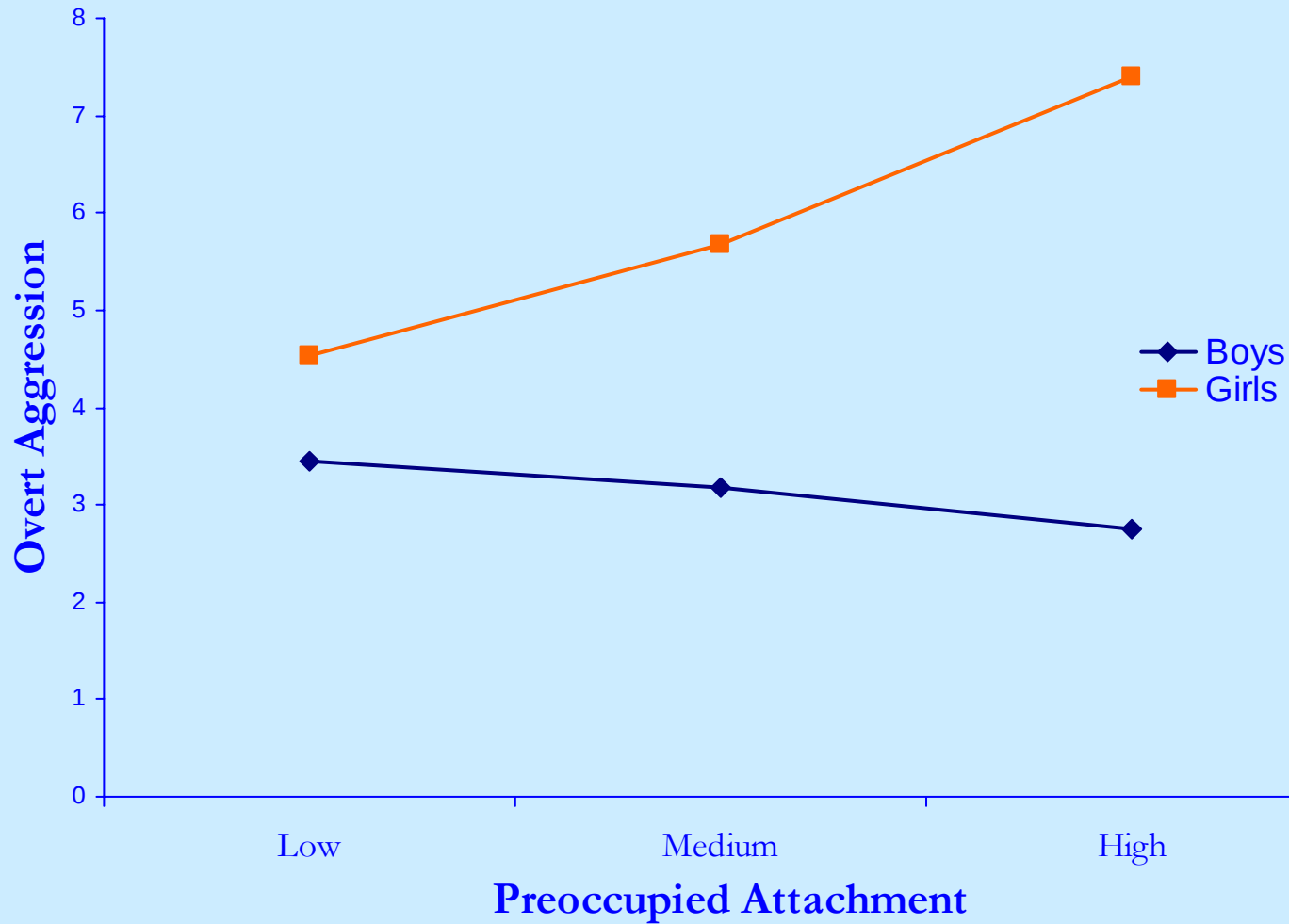
Insecure Attachment & Relational Aggression



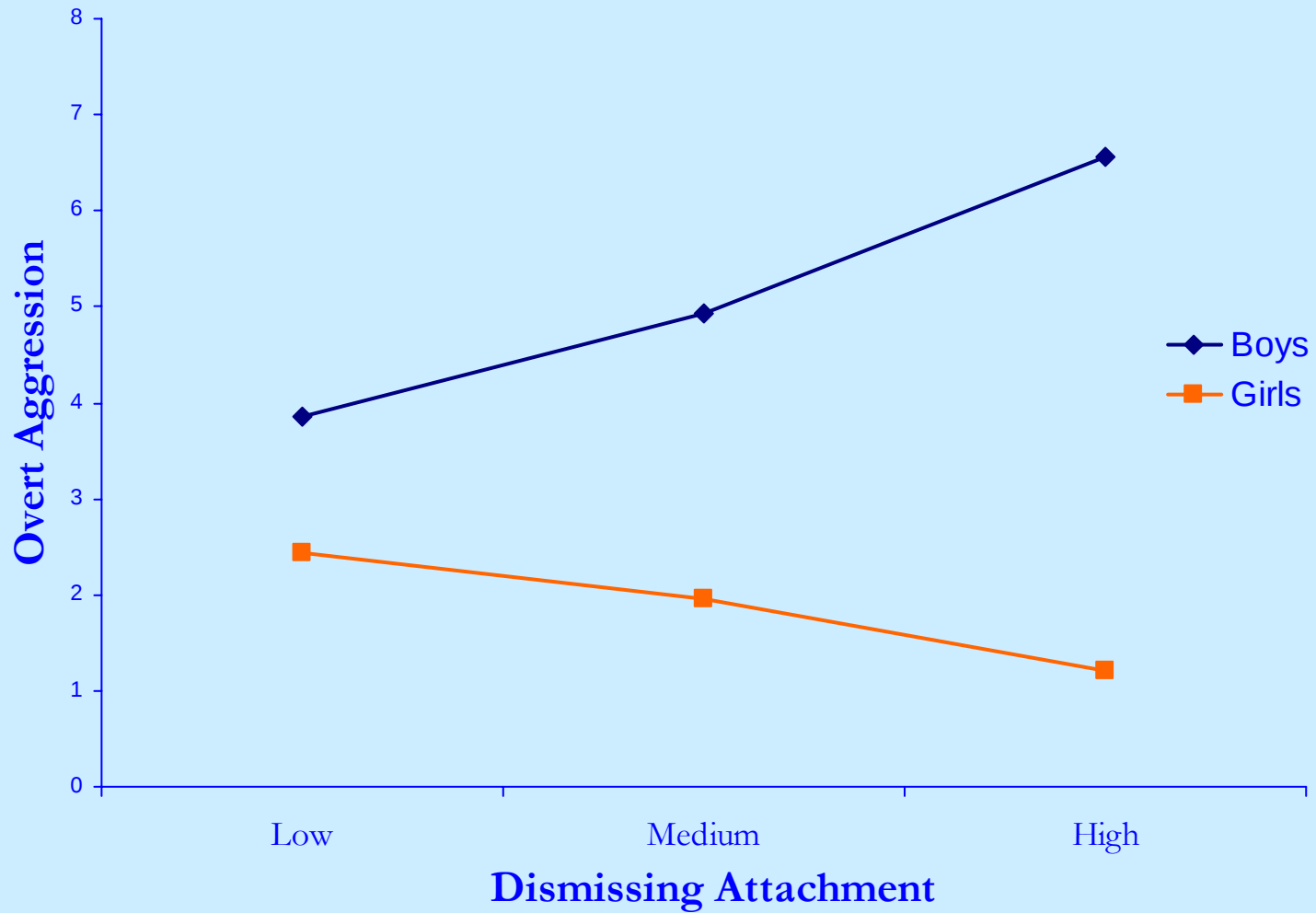
Insecure Attachment & Overt Aggression



Preoccupied Attachment & Overt Aggression



Dismissing Attachment & Overt Aggression



Study I & II - Summary of Findings

- Preoccupied attachment is related to interpersonally targeted overt aggression.
- Fearful attachment is related to self-harming behaviours in both girls and boys but appears to be unrelated to other types of aggression assessed.
- While Study 1 suggested no gender differences, preliminary analyses of Study 2 using a dimensional rating of attachment suggests:
 - Preoccupied – aggression link may be prototypically female
 - Dismissing – aggression link may be prototypically male

Implications

- Need to go beyond the simple view that ‘insecure attachment’ or ‘weak bond’ is related to aggression
- Attachment analysis provides insight into the function of aggression – the function depends on the specific attachment pattern
- Understanding the function of aggression in relation to attachment provides an empirical base for specificity in intervention.

Limitations & Future Directions

- Small sample size – coding of attachment interviews is ongoing
- Selected clinical sample – generalizability - need for further studies with normative as well as clinical populations
- Need for longitudinal studies

Gender and Aggression NET

➤ *For more information
see:*



➤ <http://www.sfu.ca/gap/>

