



Exploring Attachment Styles In Children with Developmental Disorders

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Abstract: This review paper explored and examined the attachment styles of children with developmental disorders. Attachment concept suggests that steady or a secure attachment between children and their caregivers is critical for wholesome socio-emotional improvement (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Children with developmental disorders are at a better hazard of growing insecure attachment due to difficulties in conversations and social interaction. The purpose of this paper was to have a look at the literature and existing research on attachment patterns in children with developmental disorders, which includes autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, intellectual disorders amongst others and recognize the forms of attachment styles which such children possess, develop, and adapt with time. The paper also recognized similar patterns in attachment styles and the impact of various attachment styles on the improvement of those kids. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of understanding the unique requirements of children with developmental disorders to promote healthful, positive, and secure attachment relationships in conjunction with understanding the impact of parental interactions on attachment patterns. The paper summarized key findings and recognized gaps in the literature, suggesting scope for future research. Overall, the paper highlighted the significance of comprehending attachment styles in children with developmental issues and exploring interventions aimed toward promoting healthful socio-emotional development on this population.

Keywords: Attachment, Developmental Disorders, Children, Relationships, Parents, Development, Interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Attachment is described as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194) and can also be called “affectional bond”. It is primarily a long-lasting emotional connection between two people, where each seeks closeness or familiarity. Bowlby (1969) conducted a research which validated the role of a secure attachment in fostering healthy, cognitive as well as emotional development in children. Children dealing with developmental disorders like Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Conduct Disorder (CD) or Intellectual Disabilities (ID) usually experience insecurity or ambivalence in their attachments styles in place of having a secure attachment fashion. This may have a negative effect on their biopsychosocial improvement (Coutinho et al., 2020). Developing appropriate interventions requires an understanding of these attachment styles to address the root causes of behavioural issues and parental relationships and promote secure attachments that are critical in the healthy development of children with developmental disorders.

Attachment styles describe a person's distinctive interpersonal interactions (McLeod, 2023). They are primarily the patterns of behaviours influenced by attachment and relations during early childhood (Ainsworth et al., 1978). John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth proposed the concept of attachment theory in order to explore the various kinds of attachment styles that people acquire through time as a result of their experiences as well as their capacity to regulate their emotions. Attachment theory suggests that secure attachment between children and their caregivers is critical for healthy socio-emotional development (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized attachment types are included in the classic taxonomy of attachment styles (Main & Solomon, 1990). Securely attached children are characterised by trust and being happy and are secure to develop relations with others. An avoidant attachment style child is characterised by being emotionally distant and prefer independence. Ambivalently attached children tend to have anxiety and insecurity along with seeking attention. Such type of attachment style is prevalent in children with developmental disorders since they are not fully exposed to the external stimuli, they tend to feel stressed and easily overwhelmed and cling on to their caregivers as well. A child with a disorganized attachment style tends to struggle with managing their emotions and express anger often (Bobpassaro, 2021). Stress is believed to play a role in some of the higher rates of disorganised relationship style observed in children with disabilities. They struggle with daily duties and have trouble evaluating and handling everyday circumstances due to physical and cognitive limitations. Due to these demanding situations, it is common for children with disabilities to experience as even though they have little control over their own lives and precise situations, that can reason emotions of failure and helplessness (Colbypearce, 2019).

Multiple researches in addition to evaluation papers through the years on the said topic have given an perception into the distinctive reasons in the back of the improvement of such attachment patterns for kids with ADHD or ASD (Mullen et al., 2011). This is in addition to have given a knowledge and insight of the impact of these attachment patterns in the developmental outcomes of the child. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, a family's, and a child's overall functioning shifts during times of risk or stress, which may then have an impact on how connections are formed, stressing the biological purpose of close emotional connections. This is especially important in the case of chronic illness because behavioural connections are more sensitive (Bowlby, 1982). Due to the insecure attachment styles developed by children with developmental disorders, they have poor social skills, cognitive skills as well as difficulty in regulating their emotions and controlling certain behaviours. If the attachment styles of children with ADHD is considered, such children tend to have insecure and avoidant attachment styles as they are marked by impulsivity and inattention and also frequent expression of anger and immaturity (De Pauw et al., 2011). Similarly, ASD in children is marked by difficulty in regulating emotions, poor social skills, restricted behaviours (Berkovits et al., 2017) which associated with disorganized type of attachment style as children with ASD tend to have a negative view of themselves. With respect to intellectual disorders, these children generally to have a varied attachment style as they can be securely attached or ambivalently attached to their caregivers depending on the way they have been nurtured (Moss et al., 2017). Children with conduct disorder tend to express aggressive behaviour, hostile or violent behaviours and usually have a disorganized attachment style due to their insecurities, disruptive and aggressive behaviour towards their caregivers (McMahon et al., 2013). Cases with down syndrome on the other hand, express secure attachment style where the caregivers develop a sense of trust in the children as well as feel safe and comfortable and have a positive attachment (Colbypearce, 2019).

This review paper seeks to offer a thorough overview of a variety of literature and researches on attachment styles in children with developmental disorders. Attachment and developmental disorders also have an interconnectedness as it helps to understand the attachment styles which they will associate with in the future and regarding the longevity of their relationships. Exploring their relationship will also help in order to understand the severity and the prognosis of the developmental disorders as well as get an insight into the development of their socioemotional behaviours. Along with the mentioned points, their review paper will help to get a better understanding of the specific challenges they encounter in developing secure relationships. Additionally, this review intends to draw attention to potential features that may help kids with developmental disorders acquire certain attachment types. This will also help in developing certain interventions in aiding the children better adjust to the external world.

DISCUSSION

Attachment and Attention-Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

In a study conducted by Clarke et al. (2002), they studied the association of attachment insecurity with ADHD children where they studied 19 boys with ADHD by using different tests and their results found that clinical ADHD and unstable or disorganised attachment are associated with one another and ADHD children's responses indicated more insecure connection, especially of the ambivalent or disorganised type while they also expressed more hostile behaviour. This study, although comprehensive, failed to explain the attachment insecurities of girls with ADHD as well as understanding different associated behavioural problems experienced such as language difficulties, intellectual disabilities, etc. This study was recently reproduced by Sempio et al. (2016) where they found that children with ADHD had more insecure attachments along with experiencing feelings of sadness, separation anxiety and expressed high levels of avoidance as well and displayed avoidance style of attachment with their caregivers. This study gave much more insight into the attachment styles of girls and boys combined as well as provided an in-depth understanding of parental roles in shaping the attachment styles although, this study was limited to explaining the children up to 7 years of age and did not focus on the comorbidities present.

Storebø et al. (2017) highlighted a relationship between ADHD and insecure attachment in children where they included multiple studies and found that there was a clear association between ADHD and insecure attachment primarily avoidant type as the children's behaviours were associated with having poor social skills along with impaired language abilities due their lack of parental association and interaction and a negative perception of their own selves. This study helped to get an insight into the causes of such attachment styles as well as understand the connection between attachment, social skills, and ADHD (Coutinho et al., 2020). Al-Yagon et al., (2017) also studied the executive functions and attachment relationships in children with ADHD where they conducted a qualitative study on children with ADHD and associated with typical development where they found that parental attachments and attachment styles play a role in understanding socioemotional and behavioural adjustment in children with ADHD. They also found that in comparison to the typical development, the children with ADHD have a decreased sense of trust and closeness to the mother as well as a much larger prevalence of insecure attachment to the father are present along with having a general ambivalent style of attachment. This study played an important role in highlighting the relationship between ADHD and attachment as they focused on parents as two separate entities and highlighting the attachment of the children with each of them as well as compare children with ADHD with the typically developed children. Overall, all the studies done on the relationship between ADHD and attachment styles touch upon the prevalence of disorganized and avoidant attachment styles along with a few studies displaying secure attachment style prevalence where the children experienced enhanced performance in attention-related tasks along with improved attention span (Franke and Kissgen, 2016).

Attachment and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

In older times, it was presumed that youngsters with autism spectrum disease (ASD) could not develop sturdy and strong attachment connections with their parents, siblings, or different caregivers (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). In a research carried out by Rutgers et al. (2004), they assessed the distinction between the attachment styles of children with and without ASD with their caregivers alongside doing a scientific evaluation wherein they observed that children with ASD displayed more avoidant and disorganized style of attachment and explained their sources as well. This paper also gave an insight into understanding the communication difficulties and difficulty in comprehending social cues. This research gave a completely comprehensive expertise of the variables; but it failed to give a reason behind a larger sample size as well as did not consider the comorbidities. In 2007, Van Ijzendoorn performed a research to understand the attachment in children with autism spectrum problems wherein the study consisted of 95 families with children aged 2-7 years and the results and findings were quite significant as they found that the

children with autism found it rather hard to construct secure and strong attachments with their parents in comparison to other children. As compared to children in the other diagnostic groups, children with ASD exhibited lower rates of secure attachment with their caregivers and peers. Specifically, children with ASD were more likely to display disorganized attachment behaviours (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2007). Although this research helped to gain a large insight into the attachment styles, this paper failed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the attachment patterns and also focused mainly on the western population.

In a study conducted by Berkovits et al. (2017), they studied the emotion regulation in children with autism spectrum disorder where they assessed 108 children with ASD and the results found that the children with poor emotional regulation had reduced social skills and reduced behavioural functioning and increased expression of anger. This can be associated with disorganized attachment style amongst such children; however, Berkovits et al. failed to explain the attachment styles as well as an in-depth understanding of parental relations in such children. Rey-Conde et al. (2021) examined various literature on the attachment styles and ASD where they found evidence that children and adolescents with ASD have a predominance of inappropriate attachment patterns, including greater rates of insecure attachment, notably of the avoidant and disorganised types. The authors also emphasised how social cognition and communication issues might affect attachment patterns and behaviours (Rey-Conde, 2021). The authors also examined the effectiveness of multiple interventions such as caregiver-mediated interventions and social skills training which helped to get a more comprehensive understanding. Majority of the literature on ASD and attachment has targeted at the perception that kids with ASD are related to having a disorganized or an avoidant form of attachment style with their caregivers or their social mates. However, in a study carried out by Capps et al. (2008), they discovered that as compared to youngsters who had been subclassified as being insecurely connected, children who have been classified as being securely connected engaged in social engagement with their mothers greater frequently and expressed their emotions more suitably. This can be attributed to increased cohesiveness with their parents and feeling of trust.

Attachment and Intellectual Disability (ID)

Intellectual Disability is another developmental disorder which has an association with the attachment style which an individual possesses based on their parental and peer relationship as well as a perception of their own self. Hodapp and Dykens highlight in their chapter in the research journal titled "Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities: Research Reviews. Volume 12", that individuals with intellectual disabilities are more capable of forming secure attachments with their caregivers and peers along with experiencing minor challenges along the way such as communication difficulties, lack of social skills, etc. They also highlighted and discussed how support programs as well as interventions such as developing social skills help individuals with ID in forming better attachments (Hodapp and Dykens, 2006). In a study conducted by Moss et al. (2017), they studied attachment and social networks in intellectual disability and the results were slightly different than the extensive research on this topic where they found that different attachment types, such as secure, anxious, and avoidant attachments, were displayed by individuals who have intellectual disabilities. The study's findings revealed a correlation between participants' relationship satisfaction and higher levels of social support. This was mainly connected to a secure attachment style among the participants which they developed over time. This study was limited as it did not explore the attachment styles according to Ainsworth and Bowlby and also focused more on the social aspect of attachment. Marvin et al. (2018) carried out a study where they studied attachment across the early life span of children with intellectual disabilities where they selected a sample of children with intellectual disabilities and attachment assessments were used. The study provided comprehensive results as they revealed that children with intellectual disabilities display secure as well as insecure type of attachments over the course of their early life span depending upon their parental cohesiveness and perception of own self. The study also helped to get an insight into the attachment patterns of children at different ages in their life as well as understand attachment styles across different theoretical frameworks.

In more recent studies, Vandesande et al. (2019) conducted qualitative research with an aim to understand the parental perspective on parent-child attachment in young children. This research stated that the children tend to view their parents as stress regulators and want them when they need them along with acting as a secure base and comfort zone. Such type of attachment is associated with disorganized type of attachment which the research failed to touch up on. Although, they gave a understanding of the need of clinical practice to improve the attachment from disorganized to a more secure attachment type. Vanwalleghem et al. (2021) examined that attachment representations among school children with intellectual disabilities where they studied 54 children. The results reported that in children with ID, there is a correlation between the level of adaptive functioning and attachment disorganisation, and this vulnerability persists throughout late childhood. Compared to children who were typically developing, school-age children with ID were more susceptible to insecure and disorganized attachment. This research was limited to measuring the attachment of children with non-specific ID and also while the paper included a sample of down syndrome, they failed to give a more comprehensive understanding of their attachment styles. There are limited number of studies with respect to the interventions given to children with intellectual disabilities to help them develop more secured attachments. One such study was conducted where they examined the effectiveness of Circle of Security-Reflections (COS-R) intervention to promote secure attachment amongst children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities. The authors collected qualitative data via interviews and the findings of the study reported positive effects of COS-R on improving the attachment style and emotional regulation of children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities and the participants of the study too, were able to recognize and regulate their emotions in a better manner (Kozłowska et al. 2019).

Attachment and Conduct Disorders (CD)

Conduct disorders are associated with feelings and behaviour of being hostile, aggressiveness as well as engaging socially inappropriate behaviour. These individuals can express multiple attachment styles depending upon their behaviour; however, the predominant attachment style is disorganized attachment style (Shen et al., 2019). Similarly, Colvert et al. (2020) conducted a study on clinically diagnosed adolescents with conduct disorders where their reactive and proactive aggression was assessed. The research findings suggested that children with conduct disorders exhibit disorganized attachment styles while the reactive aggression was associated with higher levels of emotional and behavioural problems and as a result, associated with disorganized attachment style. The study proved to gain a great amount of insight into the association between the type of aggression and attachment styles.

Attachment and Developmental Disorders

Naber et al. (2006) conducted a research study where they assessed the attachment styles of toddlers with various developmental disorders by using Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) where they found that clinically diagnosed children associated more with disorganized attachment style while down syndrome and autism also related with disorganized attachment style. The paper helped to get a good insight into the attachment style of toddlers; however, the research focused more on disorganized attachment style rather than all the different types of attachment styles. Lopez (2013) carried out one of the prime researches on understanding the Attachment Relationships of parents with their children who have disabilities where she found that fathers of children with disabilities tend to struggle more in forming a secure attachment with their child as they find it rather difficult to understand their child and lack of paternal sensitivity whereas in the case of mothers, it was found that irrespective of the presence or absence of a disability, mothers develop a secure attachment with their child and also tend to be positive and responsive to the child's needs. The research significantly gave a distinction between maternal and paternal attitudes however, failed to give a clear distinction of the disability discussed as well as explain the cause of paternal detachment from their children in a concrete manner.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this review paper helped to gain a comprehensive insight into the attachment styles of children with different developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Intellectual Disability along with Conduct Disorders, Down Syndrome by exploring multiple literature over the last 20 years. The analysis of the literature can help to establish the notion that attachment does play an important role in shaping the personalities of the children with developmental disorders and how their socioeconomic development can also be fostered. This paper also explored the different interventions and strategies which can be implemented in order to promote a more secure attachment amongst parents and their children with developmental disorders.

The literature presented also helped understand the prevalent attachment types in children with developmental disorders such as the dominance of disorganized type of attachment in children with ADHD while discussing the balance between secure and insecure type of attachment in children with Intellectual disabilities where the insecure attachment patterns frequently reflect the challenges these children have developing and keeping dependable relationships with their primary carers. This review paper also helped to understand some of the factors associated with development of certain attachment styles as well as understanding the differences between maternal and paternal attachments amongst such children. As much as it is important to highlight the pros and highs of the paper, there is a need to acknowledge the limitations and lows of the review paper as well. This review paper failed to understand about the factors and cause of the attachment styles in the children with developmental disorders due to lack of relevant literature. It also limited in understanding the various theoretical frameworks related to attachment and focused only on one theoretical framework.

Overall, this review paper has helped to increase the understanding of attachment patterns in children with developmental disorders along with highlighting the need for greater research on this topic to benefit a more in-depth analysis and understanding of the reasons of such attachment patterns. This review paper will also assist in designing appropriate interventions for such children so as to enhance the biopsychosocial behaviours and as an entire, improve their best of life and make it well worth.

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