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Effects of Parents' Avoidant and Anxious Attachment on Children

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Avoidant and anxious attachment styles are both negative ways of dealing with the need for connection or bonding. One reason these attachment styles develop is in “the absence of a secure bond with an available and responsive ‘other,’ rigid, repetitive internal and interpersonal coping patterns or attachment strategies develop” (Brubacher, 2017, p. 52–53). These coping patterns are made manifest in either avoidant or anxious attachment behaviors and are mainly expressed in relation to spouses and children.

Those who experience avoidant attachment are typically uncomfortable being close to and depending on others (Bouthillier et al., 2002). Avoidant attachment behaviors include being dismissive of others' words or actions, distancing oneself from one's partners, and trying to run from the situation (Whiffen et al., 2005). These individuals “rely mostly on cognitive information” and are not as attuned to emotions (Bouthillier et al., 2002, p. 293). As a result, they “show difficulties accessing emotional episodic memories of attachment experiences” (Bouthillier et al., 2002, p. 293). The inability to access these memories has the danger of influencing these individuals

to further detach themselves from the situation and others connected to the situation.

On the other end of the scale, anxious attachment behaviors are associated with individuals who are vigilant, have the potential to be hyperactivated, and try too hard to connect with others (Bouthillier et al., 2002). Anxiously attached individuals also struggle to differentiate threatening situations from non-threatening situations. For example, “they will often remain constantly aroused and hypervigilant regarding the accessibility of attachment figures” (Bouthillier et al., 2002, p. 293). This hypervigilant reaction typically pushes the avoidant individual away, which will most likely cause the anxious individual to pursue with even more effort.

The type of attachment that parents express within marriage and parenthood can impact children in various ways (Doyle et al., 2000; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Whiffen et al., 2005). Interactions between a mother and father greatly impact their children, and many of the negative interactions parents have with each other are due to avoidant attachment or anxious attachment styles. Sirvanli-Ozen (2004) details key parental factors that influence children's

day-to-day physiological functioning and overall physiological adjustment. Some of these key factors include parental adjustment problems, marital relations, and parenting practices. Some of the most prominent ways in which the avoidant and anxious attachment behaviors of parents can affect children are in the way that children are raised by their parents, children's social skills, and children's emotionality and coping skills (Doyle et al., 2000; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Whiffen et al., 2005).

Effects on How Children are Parented

Research shows that husbands' and wives' attachment behaviors influence how mothers and fathers parent their children and how competent they feel in their parenting (Volling et al., 1998; Zvara et al., 2020). Feelings of competence are likely related to parental emotional well-being, which has also been associated with adult attachment (Adam et al., 2004). Additionally, the insecurity of mothers' attachment makes it more difficult for them to establish interactions with their children that are warm and responsive (Whiffen et al., 2005). Similarly, other findings report that mothers who show signs of marital withdrawal (avoidant behavior) are predicted to have "less sensitive, less responsive parenting behaviors" and provide less help and support to their children (Cummings et al., 2003, p. 1918; Doyle et al., 2000).

It was also noted by Cummings et al. (2003) that men were predicted to manifest similar parenting behaviors when anger and marital with-

drawal were combined. Another study found that avoidant behavior (specifically withdrawal) during marital discussion was likely to result in the parents being more intrusive and emotionally disengaged with their infant. This behavior also influenced the infant's mood (Trumbell et al., 2018).

Additionally, parents who demonstrated both anxious- and avoidant-like attachment behaviors were found to use discipline methods that were more power assertive (Katz & Woodin, 2002). These parents were more likely to be ineffective in working with their partner to co-parent their child (Katz & Woodin, 2002). Research shows that it is especially difficult to co-parent after anxiously or avoidantly attached parents have engaged in an argument (Katz & Woodin, 2002). These insecure attachment behaviors between parents likely startle the children as research shows more emotional distance during couple-child interactions as well as underlying feelings of anger and frustration (Katz & Woodin, 2002). These negative patterns displayed in parenting can harm children and negatively impact children's own attachment development, which will have a lasting impact throughout their lives (Whiffen et al., 2005).

Effects on Children's Social Life

In addition to parenting being affected by avoidant and anxious attachment behaviors, children have been observed to be affected socially by these behaviors. When parents are engaging in both avoidant and anxious attachment behaviors through their communication, "they tend to have

children who display negative affect and noncompliance with peers" (Katz & Woodin, 2002, p. 647). For example, when parents get unnecessarily angry when their partner refuses to answer a bid for connection, this may result in their child throwing a fit when their peers don't give them the attention they are asking for.

Cummings et al. (2004) found that children had a higher probability of showing signs of aggression when they were exposed to factors such as "destructive conflict tactics and negative parental emotionality" (p. 199) or when "conflict topics [addressed by the parents were] presumed to be threatening to the child" (p. 191). Destructive tactics can be based on attachment styles of avoidance and anxiety and include aggression, threats, pursuit, personal insults, verbal and non-verbal hostility, defensiveness, and withdrawal (Cummings et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2004).

The social interactions between children and their mothers are also influenced by insecure attachment: children tended to be less responsive to their mothers with insecure attachment during problem-solving interactions than children with mothers who were securely attached (Doyle et al., 2000). When either or both spouses were portraying anxious attachment behaviors through hostility and intrusiveness, the children were seen as mildly antisocial with low levels of social competencies (Katz & Gottman, 1993; Zvara et al., 2020). Evidence also suggests that the children developed insecure

attachment patterns when parents expressed anxious attachment behaviors (Zvara et al., 2020).

Children with fathers who expressed avoidant behaviors when resolving marital conflict were seen by their teachers as having signs of social withdrawal and anxiety (Katz & Gottman, 1993). This act of social withdrawal could be a result of seeing their father withdraw within the home by choosing to work long hours or retire to his room rather than spend time with family, for instance. There was no significant impact on negative interactions of children with peers after testing for parents who both expressed avoidant behaviors, although it is likely that the children will develop insecure attachment styles as adults (Katz & Woodin, 2002; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004; Zvara et al., 2020).

Effects on Children's Emotionality and Coping Abilities

Children's emotionality and coping abilities are also greatly impacted by their parents' attachment styles. Some of the ways children are affected can be seen in their personal attachment security and self-concept (Doyle et al., 2000). Among parents who mainly expressed anxious attachment behavior in marital conflict, their children were predicted to have emotional and behavioral problems such as low self-regulation and an increased risk for adjustment difficulties (Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Zvara et al., 2020). The children also exhibited behaviors of an insecure attachment to parents when the mother had an anxious attachment (Doyle et al., 2000).

Although avoidant attachment behaviors such as nonverbal expressions of anger, marital withdrawal, and lack of support may not seem as severe as the hostility of anxious behaviors, children displayed signs of distress and negative behaviors including impulsivity (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Doyle et al., 2000; MacGregor et al., 2014; Whiffen et al., 2005). Avoidant attachment styles in parents have also been shown to be associated with major depressive disorder and predictors of suicide attempts in their children (MacGregor et al., 2014).

Even though both anxious and avoidant styles of attachment have been found to cause such problems in children, the combination of avoidant and anxious behaviors within marriage relationships is the “most destructive form of marital conflict” and is related to “maladjustment throughout many levels of the family system” (Katz & Woodin, 2002, p. 647). Family systems have an impact on every member within the system, but they especially impact children. Such maladjustment can be found in studies reporting that negative emotionality and various aspects of avoidant and anxious attachment behaviors within parents are related to children’s insecure behavioral responses, behavior problems, and higher probability of aggression (Cummings et al., 2004; Cummings et al., 2002; Katz & Woodin, 2002). These behaviors within parents are additionally related to more negative emotions in children and a decrease in positive emotionality and insecure emotional responses in children (Cum-

mings et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2002). One common expression within both avoidant and anxious attachment behaviors is fear. When both parents expressed fear, it was linked with children developing a higher insecurity about marital conflicts (Cummings et al., 2002). Similarly, fear within the child was related to avoidant and anxious attachment behavior within the mother (Cummings et al., 2002).

Discussion

Interpretations and Implications

The studies cited above provide evidence that parental attachment styles do indeed have an effect on children in various aspects of their growth and development. Anxious and avoidant attachment styles in parents result in lower-quality parenting, which could indicate a need for the government, schools, and communities to provide associated resources to parents, so that their children can have more successful lives (Cummings et al., 2003; Doyle et al., 2000; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Trumbell et al., 2018; Whiffen et al., 2005). As parents are guided to more secure attachment styles, they will be more likely to feel competent in their parenting, avoid being over-assertive in disciplining, and be more sensitive in rearing their children (Cummings et al., 2003; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Volling et al., 1998; Zvara et al., 2020). These positive changes in parenting and attachment styles will also have a positive influence on children’s interactions with their peers and will help them to be less prone to

social anxiety (Katz & Gottman, 1993; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Zvara et al., 2020). Additionally, children will be more likely to show signs of secure attachment styles as they grow because they will be watching their parents express secure attachment behaviors (Doyle et al., 2000).

The fact that children's emotionality and coping skills are greatly affected by their parents' attachment styles could be because attachment styles are a result of how one handles emotions and copes with the need for security (Cummings et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2004; Cummings et al., 2002; Katz & Woodin, 2002). This further explains why negative emotionality often comes with anxious or avoidant attachment and why the issue of attachment in parents needs to be addressed. By addressing these needs, children can have more positive experiences within the home and emotional growth. Helping parents improve their attachment behaviors has the potential to decrease child behavior problems, maladjustment, insecurity, emotional negativity, aggression, and fear related to parents' avoidant and anxious attachment (Cummings et al., 2004; Cummings et al., 2002; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Zvara et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

Although many studies show how the attachment styles of husbands and wives affect their children, there are still details missing in some respects when comparing the effects of avoidant and anxious attachment styles of parents on children. For exam-

ple, many of the studies done focused on how marital conflict affects children and therefore indirectly showed how attachment styles of the parents had an impact (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Cummings et al., 2004; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Katz & Woodin, 2003). More studies should be done to analyze the attachment styles of parents and the effect they have on children. It would also be helpful to know the different effects of these two attachment styles because it would assist parents in understanding how to address these issues individually. As attachment styles and their effects are better understood and addressed, parents will know what they can do to change and how those specific changes will benefit their children.

Needs of children can be met on an even more individual basis as research determines how infants, young children, and teenagers are affected differently by parents' attachment styles because children interpret and internalize events differently based on age. Although some of the studies above mentioned research done separately on teens or infants, a comprehensive study done on how all three categories of children are affected would be even more influential. With that information, advice given to insecurely attached parents could be catered toward the specific needs of their child.

Despite the many studies showing the outcomes of both parents' attachment styles, some studies only discuss the results of the mothers' attachment style (Doyle et al., 2000; Whiffen et al.,

2005). More research needs to be done on fathers' attachment styles and their effects on children to convey accurate information. Data that shows the separate effects of the mother's and the father's attachment will help us to understand if fathers and mothers need to make different changes in behavior for the welfare of their children. Further research could be done to discover whether parents who are divorced and not living with their children have the same influence as they did prior to separation from their previous spouse.

Additional research is needed on how attachment styles are manifest in daily interactions between parents and how those interactions influence children. These daily interactions could include how a husband and wife greet each other after not seeing one another all day, how often they spend time together, and how they discuss family matters. Research could examine the different expressions of avoidant and anxious attachment styles within these engagements and explore how children's social, emotional, and mental development and parenting styles are influenced. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to learn how these seemingly minor interactions influence children. If there is a significant relationship found between parents' minute interactions and their effects on children, then parents can be educated on how to improve so that their children will develop more secure adult attachment styles as they grow.

Conclusion

The discussed literature shows that the attachment styles of husbands and wives do have an influence on children's emotions, their social life, their ability to cope, and how they are parented (Adam et al., 2004; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Cummings et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2004; Cummings et al., 2002; Doyle et al., 2000; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Katz & Woodin, 2002; MacGregor et al., 2014; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004; Volling et al., 1998; Whiffen et al., 2005; Zvara et al., 2020). Avoidant and anxious attachment styles generally have a negative effect not only on these aspects of child development but also on their progression into adulthood (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004). Some of these negative effects include the development of insecure attachment styles, behavior problems, social anxiety, less responsive or over-assertive parenting styles, emotional negativity, maladjustment, and social anxiety (Anhalt & Morris, 2008; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2004). This information can be useful in motivating parents to seek counseling or therapy if they express behaviors of avoidant or anxious attachment. As parents put in the effort to improve their attachment styles, they are more likely to see positive changes within their children. Further research needs to be done to determine details on the varying effects parental avoidant and anxious attachment styles have on children. Additionally, it would be beneficial to know whether the attachment styles of fathers, mothers, and divorced par-

ents each have a different effect on children. As parents become more aware of how their anxious and avoidant actions and behaviors influence their children, they will more likely be able to make necessary changes within themselves to improve the lives and well-being of their children.

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