

The Influence of Parent-Child Attachment on Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

The present study examined the significance of parent and child relationships and how the parenting styles used and parent-child attachment related to future reports of romantic relationship anxiety. Participants were young adults ranging from ages 18-30 recruited from various university psychology courses. The participants were given an online questionnaire measuring quantitative data. This questionnaire asked about the participants feelings of respect from their parents toward them, the expectations perceived from parents toward the participant, fear of losing a romantic partner's love, and comfort with closeness in romantic relationships, among other related items.

Introduction

The development of romantic relationships has long been associated with the relationship between parents and their children and the manner in which these children were raised. Although most people begin to form intimate romantic relationships in their early adulthood, much research suggests that the development of romantic intimacy traits and qualities begins in early childhood. The quality and type of attachment children have with their mothers and fathers has been found to strongly suggest the future quality of attachment in romantic relationships that child experiences as an adult (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer, 2004).

Examples of how parent-child relationships can influence the future quality of romantic relationships can be found when examining the parenting style used on a child. Parenting which uses an authoritative parenting style (e.g., high quality relationship between parent and child with equal amounts of warmth and demandingness; Seigler, et al., 2006) has been related to healthy romantic relationships for young adults due to the presence of qualities such as trust and closeness (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife 2008; Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Klessinger 2001).

It is important to understand the relationship between parent-child attachment and its influence on romantic relationships because this shows there is much parents can do to influence the well being of their children in future relationships. Parents can become aware of the magnitude of influence their relationship with their children has and how it affects their children. Consequently, they could make a proactive effort to improve the quality of their relationship, so in the future, their children can partake in healthy relationships.

It is also important to understand the influence of parent-child attachment and relationships in order to apply the knowledge to settings such as counseling. Counselors can speak to their client about their relationships with their parents when they were children and help them figure out if their current situations with their romantic relationships perhaps stem from their childhood.

Parenting Styles and Parent-Child Attachment

Parenting styles are defined as parenting behaviors and attitudes that set the emotional climate of parent-child interactions (Seigler, Deloache, & Eisenberg, 2006). According to a study done by Diana Baumrind (1973), there are three parenting styles, which include, authoritarian parenting, authoritative parenting, and permissive parenting. These styles of parenting are determined by two specific measures: first, the degree of parental warmth, support, and acceptance a parent gives their child; and secondly, the degree of parenting control and demandingness toward the child (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). It has been found that authoritative parents tend to have a high quality relationship with their child with equal amounts of warmth and demandingness, while authoritarian parents do not.

Authoritarian parents tend to have lower amounts of warmth and higher amounts of demandingness, and permissive parents tend to have high amounts of warmth with little to no amounts of demandingness (Seigler, et al., 2006). Previous research has found strong positive correlations between authoritative parenting for both mothers and fathers and a secure parent/child attachment (Heer, 2008). Characteristics displayed from authoritative parents such as parental availability, demandingness, limit-setting, and discipline remain important for a child's development from early childhood up through adolescence and have been shown to have a positive influence on secure parent/child attachment. Other factors displayed by authoritative parents, such as allowing children autonomy with age-appropriate monitoring, have also been found to influence a secure parent/child attachment (Karavasilis, Doyle, Markiewicz, 2003).

Relationship Anxiety and Avoidance and Parent/Child Attachment

It was proposed by John Bowlby (1973) that the relationship between a young child and their parent serves as a "working model" for future close relationships. This relationship between the young child and their parent helps establish a set of "rules" and helps to develop prototypes for relationships such as friendships, and more significantly romantic relationships. These prototypes are based on patterns of caregiver response and responsive attachment figures in childhood (Griffith, 2004).

Previous research has shown that children who experience a secure relationship with their parents will develop a "mold" for future close relationships that includes sensitive and responsive attachment. Children who experience an insecure relationship with their parents will develop an anxious attachment due to inconsistent responsiveness or an avoidant attachment due to a complete lack of caregiver response (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine if there were any relationships between perceived parenting styles, parent-child attachment, and the presence of attachment anxiety in current or most recent romantic relationships of the participants. The main guiding research question for this study was to find out what factors contributed to a healthy romantic relationship.

In order to test for these relationships, the following research questions were developed. 1.) Which parenting styles are predictive of an absence of attachment anxiety? 2.) Is the nature of the bond between parents and their children predictive of future presence of attachment anxiety? Based off of correlative relationships found between parenting styles, parent-child attachment, and attachment anxiety, it was hypothesized that a healthy parenting style and a secure parent-child attachment would be predictive of an absence of attachment anxiety.

The proposed study relates to previous research in the area of romantic relationships by examining variables that have previously been found to be influential in the development of romantic intimacy. The proposed study intends to measure levels of secure attachment between parents and their children and how these may be related to the parenting style used by parents when raising their children and by the amount of relationship anxiety and avoidance experienced by young adults. This study differs from other work in the area by examining a retrospective account given by the students, rather than providing input from parents, as well. While this method may not necessarily build upon previous research, it will offer a differing perspective by examining the reports given by the participants of events they remember rather than by examining combined reports from the participants and their parents.

Method

Participants

The sample of participants who completed this study consisted of 711 (456 female, 255 male) undergraduate college students. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 ($M = 19.82$, $SD = 2.82$). Four hundred and ninety-eight participants were in their freshman year of undergraduate study, 128 were sophomores, 53 were juniors, and 26 were seniors. Participants' racial backgrounds included White/Caucasian (83.4%, $n = 593$), Hispanic (8.3%, $n = 59$), Asian/Pacific Islander (3.8%, $n = 27$), Black/African American (1.3%, $n = 9$), Native American Indian (0.8%, $n = 6$), Arabic/Middle Easterner (0.3%, $n = 2$), and other or non-specified ethnic identities (2.1%, $n = 15$).

Procedure

All participants were college students enrolled at a public university in Boise, Idaho. The results of this study were obtained from a questionnaire created for this study. Participants were given information about the questionnaire and chose to participate by accessing the questionnaire via a website link provided to them. After giving consent, participants completed demographic information followed by various scales used to measure (a) parent-child attachment, (b) romantic relationship anxiety, and (c) romantic relationship avoidance. The questionnaire took an average of 35 minutes to complete.

Measures

Parental authority. The students' perceived parenting style was assessed using the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991). The PAQ was developed to measure Baumrind's (1971) three parenting prototypes with 10 questions each, and it consists of 30 items per parent for a total of 60 items. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*), where higher scores reflect greater amounts of parenting style. The PAQ produces authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative scores for each parent. Alpha levels for the three subscales include: authoritarian parenting for mother, $\alpha = 0.622$, authoritarian parenting for father, $\alpha = 0.596$, authoritative parenting for mother, $\alpha = 0.665$, authoritative parenting for father, $\alpha = 0.634$, permissive parenting for mother, $\alpha = 0.606$, and permissive parenting for father, $\alpha = 0.657$. A sample question regarding authoritarian parenting includes, "My mother felt that wise parents should teach their children early just who is boss in the family." A sample question for authoritative parenting includes, "As I was growing up my mother gave me clear direction for my behaviors and activities, but she was also understanding when I disagreed with her." A sample question for permissive parenting includes, "As I was growing up, my mother seldom gave me expectations and guidelines for my behavior."

Experiences in Close Relationships. Relationship anxiety and avoidance was assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Fraley, Waller, and Brennan, 2000). The ECR was developed to measure levels of relationship anxiety and/or avoidance experienced by individuals. The ECR consists of 36 items which measure the attachment (anxious or avoidant) between the individual and their romantic partner. The ECR produces a score for attachment anxiety and a score for attachment avoidance. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*), where higher scores reflect a higher prevalence of attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance. Alpha levels for the two subscales include: global attachment anxiety, $\alpha = 0.85$, and attachment avoidance, $\alpha = 0.88$. A sample question measuring attachment anxiety includes, "I am afraid that I will lose my partner's love." A sample question measuring attachment avoidance includes, "I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners."

Parent-Child Attachment. Attachment between the participants and their parents were measured using Armsden and Greenberg's Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The IPPA was developed to measure how secure the attachment level was between parents and their children. It includes a total of 28 items and these items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*), where higher scores reflect a more secure level of attachment. Alpha levels for this measure are, $\alpha = 0.91$. A sample question from the IPPA includes, "My parents sense when I am upset about something," and "Talking over my problems with my parents makes me feel ashamed or foolish."

Results

Table 1 represents the results found between the three parenting styles, parent-child attachment and their significance when predicting attachment anxiety.

Table 1. Predictors of Attachment Anxiety in Romantic Relationships

	R	R ²	B	t	Sig.
(Constant)			3.93	26.06	.000
Model 2	.40	.16			
Parent-Child Attachment Avg. Score			-.49	-10.12	.000
Parental Authority Questionnaire Summed Score			.01	2.56	.011

Note: The combination of Parent-Child Attachment and Parenting Style of both mother and father significantly predicted Attachment Anxiety $F(2, 668) = 65.31, p < .001$.

Question-by-Question Analysis

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict the presence of attachment anxiety in romantic relationships from parenting styles and parent-child attachment. The results of this analysis indicated that authoritative parenting styles and a secure parent-child attachment accounted for an absence of attachment anxiety, $R^2 = .16, F(2, 668) = 65.31, p < .001$, indicating that participants who reported a secure romantic relationship (absence of attachment anxiety) tended to have been raised by parents who used an authoritative parenting style and also experienced a secure parent-child attachment growing up.

Discussion

Prior research on how parent-child relationships affected the future romantic relationships of the child had not specifically focused solely on the retrospective account of the child as a young adult. It had also not addressed the specific combination of parenting style and parent-child attachment found in the relationship between parent and child. The purpose of the present study was to see whether parenting styles and security of parent-child attachment were predictive of the presence of attachment anxiety in the participants current or most recent romantic relationships. In the present study, we found that the use of authoritative parenting and having a secure parent-child attachment were both predictive of an absence of attachment anxiety.

Surprisingly, it was not only found that the absence of attachment anxiety was associated with authoritative parenting, but we also found a very strong positive relationship between having an authoritative father and having an authoritative mother. This is intriguing for future studies, which may want to further analyze why parents of the same child reported having similar parenting styles.

The aforementioned findings suggest that when children have a healthy relationship with their parents, they are more likely to have healthy romantic relationship patterns in future romantic relationships. This is especially useful for settings such as counseling in which counselors and therapists can integrate these findings into therapy and counseling sessions. It is also helpful to provide general information to parents so that they may know how their relationship with their children affects the future romantic relationships of their children.

A few limitations to our study include the variability of our participants. Our participant pool was not as varied culturally. Previous studies show that culture plays a significant role in how adults view romantic relationships. Attachment can vary within these cultures, for instance, the Chinese ethnicity traditionally uses a masculine management style, therefore inhibiting romantic closeness and security (Marshall, 2005). If there was more cultural variation, we would be able to have results that could apply to a more general population, rather than the select population that was represented by the present study.

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