Attachment in the School Years

The period from 5-7 years of age to puberty has a unique function in the development of attachment relationships. Between 5 and 7 years of age, children in all cultures move from parent-directed development to spending large portions of their days in non-familial settings that include other children and community-approved caregivers. Even when children have been in preschool childcare during the day, the school years mark a shift in authority from parents to teachers and other school authorities and in interpersonal relationships from a near exclusive focus on parent-child relationships to inclusion of child-sibling and child-peer relationships.

In addition, school-aged children use concrete logic to think about the causes of events in their lives. Concrete logic is (a) specific to each situation (and not generalized across situations), (b) unitary in that children are not able to conceptualize multiple contributing causes or intermediary processes between cause and effect, and (c) explicit in the sense that children to not take account of causes that they cannot see. The sum of these is that children can reason explicitly in a way that preschool-aged children cannot, but they simplify causal relations because they cannot understand complex processes or processes that are not visible to them. These errors of thought can lead to misunderstanding of causation.

In terms of information processing, school-aged children become able to think concretely about relationships, particularly problems in relationships. This enables them to gather a repertoire of problem-solving skills (Crittenden, 2008).

New and more complex protective strategies. School-aged children learn to use deception. For children who are threatened in deceptive ways, use of deception in a punitive-seductive coercive strategy can make them safer. The C5 strategy is 'obsessed with revenge' whereas the C6 strategy is 'obsessed with rescue.'

Relationships with parents. School-aged children are able to be away from their parents for full days and even some overnights. Nevertheless, although school-aged children are far more independent of their parents than younger children, they still seek parental protection and support when they feel threatened. This is especially true regarding their development of a self-concept. Unlike younger children, school-aged children both believe what others say about them and also begin to draw their own conclusions based on their experiences. Thus, when children – or parents - call them names, they are likely to consider these as accurate. If they are diagnosed with a disorder, they usually believe that they have a disorder; that is, they cannot evaluate the conclusion or the evaluating adult effectively. Further, when they are repeatedly rejected, they may draw the conclusion that they are hated. Parents are needed to counter the absolute quality of school-aged children's beliefs about themselves.

School-age children also turn to their parents when they are physically hurt. This is true even if the harm was the outcome of the parent's behaviour, abuse, or excessive punishment. In such cases, the children often blame themselves for eliciting the punishment that they say (using the parents' words) they deserved.

Finally, school-aged children are attentive to the state of their parents' romantic relationships. When there are problems in these, the children tend to take sides, very often favoring the more present and injured parent over the less present and apparently stronger parent. That is, children often take their mothers' side without being aware of the complexity of their parents' relationships. When such relationships break down, children are usually able to accommodate, unless the parents themselves are unable to do so. Parental separation is, thus, more difficult for children to manage than parental divorce and leads to higher risk of psychiatric and behavioural difficulties (Crittenden, Kozlowska, & Landini, 2010). A similar principle applies to children in placement: uncertainty of placement is more difficult for children to cope with than a poor placement (around which they can organize a self-protective strategy.)

Teachers and school. Teachers take on the attachment functions of protecting and comforting children during the school day. In doing so, they reflect the values and accepted ways of behaving of the larger cultural community.

As non-familial substitute attachment figures, teachers elicit strong feelings in the children in their classroom. These feelings increase the potency of the teacher as an interpersonal role model. Beyond that, most children find at least one teacher who has a special understanding of them such that they form a special relationship with that teacher. In many cases, this relationship is transforming, opening whole areas of development for the favored child. Conversely, however, occasionally the mix of teacher and child strategies produces such a clash that the child reacts by feeling inadequate and worthless, conforming compulsively, or becoming angry and defiant. When children come from at risk homes, finding an especially attuned teacher can reduce their risk, turning school into an opportunity to grow beyond the limitations of their family. When the teachers are less understanding or too overworked to be available, school can increase troubled children's risk (Zionts, 2005).

Strikingly, teachers and their guidelines remain in children's minds outside of school, such that, even at home, children refer to what their teacher said. Thus, for the first time, children are both exposed to an alternate representation of experience and also actively compare that representation to their parents' representation. Mild discrepancies give children an opportunity to expand their understanding of how to relate to other people (as did forming separate relationships with each parent in the early years of life.) However, when the representations are highly discrepant, children can experience substantial problems. Because their minds are not yet sufficiently mature to resolve the discrepancies and because they cannot yet leave home (nor envision leaving home), incompatible representations can lead to psychological or behavioural problems. When children and

their parents are in conflict with school authorities, consideration should be given to whether the home and school reflect different understanding of what is safe and dangerous and what one should do when faced with danger. Making the different perspectives explicit can make resolving the discrepancies possible and reduce the risk of lack of respect between teachers and parents.

Siblings. School-aged children begin to form meaningful relationships with their brothers and sisters. Depending upon the difference in siblings' ages, these relationships are peer-like or more similar to a parent-child relationship. Being a parental child to a younger sibling is a powerful and normative opportunity to begin preparing to be a parent oneself. Of course, it is essential that the duties be suited to the child's skills. When too much is asked of the parental child, the parental child may become anxious and distressed and the younger child may be inadequately protected and comforted. Such sibling attachments occur more frequently under conditions of abuse or neglect in which the parent does not properly fulfill their role; these attachments become very powerful and their disruption can be as upsetting to the children as separation from their parents (Jacobvitz, Riggs & Johnson, 1999; Marvin, 2003). When sibling groups are placed in care, older siblings often feel responsible to care for younger siblings and for keeping the sibling unit together. When foster parents 'usurp' the parental child's role (assuming, as parents do, that they should fulfill that role), the displaced child may feel threatened and exert very substantial effort to claim caregiving responsibilities for younger siblings.

Siblings serve another function for each other during the school years and into adolescence. As a self-substitute, each sibling enables the others to watch, without being an active participant, what happens between their parents and their siblings. That is, using the concrete intelligence of the childhood mind, they are able to observe their parents and think about what they would do in situations if they were the focal child. Again, there are advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, children observe and can consider new ways of solving problems. Alternatively, they can be made fearful by observing consequences for their siblings.

Siblings each have unique protective attachment strategies with each of their parents. When the parents use a secure (B) strategy, most family members do as well. But when the parents use a Type A or C strategy, then the family patterning becomes complex. Notably, first-born children often use a strategy that is opposite in bias regarding display of affect to the mother's strategy (Crittenden, Partridge, & Claussen, 1991; Hautamäki, 2010; Shah, Fonagy, & Strathearn, 2010). That is, if the mother uses an A or C strategy, the first-born child will often use the opposite A or c strategy. Second-born children usually use a strategy that is opposite to the first-born child's (Kozlowska & Elliott, 2016), with the exception that in very endangered families, almost everyone uses a high-numbered A strategy (Farnfield, 2017).

Peers. School-aged children form best friend relationships, usually with a same-sexed peer. Unlike parent-child or sibling attachments, best friend attachments are between

equals in power/authority and skills. As with the parent-child attachment, each turns to the other for assistance and affection; unlike the parent-child relationship neither thinks of themselves as providing protection and comfort to the other. (This, of course, changes in the direction of increased reciprocity over the course of the school years,) Crucially, parents are still the primary attachment figure when the child feels threatened or needs comfort. These characteristics lead to the relatively brief duration of many best friend relationships. Best friend attachments are one step in the process of preparing for an adult per attachment that will initiate a new family and provide for the development of one's own children. Children who do not form best friend relationships are at greater risk than other children for bullying in the school years and for relationship problems in adolescence and adulthood (Booth-LaForce, et al, 2005).

At the same time, children affiliate with a peer group. Coordinating the demands for exclusivity and intimacy of the best friend with those for conformity and loyalty of the peer group can be very challenging. When they are not resolved, children can become isolated from the larger group of children or, conversely, the peer group can become like an aggregate 'best friend.' Gangs have the latter structure.

The advantages of the broadened range of school-aged children's attachments (to teachers, siblings and peers) are that children (a) gain experience in several different relationships, thus having the opportunity to practice new relationship skills and self-protective strategies, (b) learn to resolve problems with a peer (who cannot rely on authority to impose resolution on the child, and (c) learn to juggle the demands of several different attachment relationships at one time. These skills will be needed to select an adult life partner with whom to raise one's children.

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