Multiple Attachment Relationships: More Caregivers May Mean More Confidence to Behave Prosocially

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I. Introduction

Most of the research on attachment relationships has focused on mothers as the primary attachment figure, although as a society we are seeing an increase of intergenerational caregiving for children. Mothers and Fathers are increasingly seeking their parents’ help to care for their children. Further, fathers are taking a larger role in the primary care of their children. As a result, ongoing questions about the quality of attachment relationships with multiple caregivers are beginning to rise to the top of our list of understanding attachment in general.

What role might multiple caregivers have in the positive development of children? We chose to investigate their role in the performance of prosocial behavior. The major research question in this study was to discern whether there was a relationship between feelings of security between the child, his or her caregivers (including fathers, grandparents, aunts, or other adults) and feelings of confidence for behaving in a prosocial way.

II. Methods

We approached 108 pre-adolescent sixth-grade children coming from a variety of socioeconomic back-grounds and racial demographics in the Toledo, Ohio area. The sample was drawn from four schools and five classrooms – one inner city, one urban, and two suburban.

We asked the children how they viewed their quality of attachment relationships using both the Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) and the Security Scale for mother and father separately. The SAT is a scripted interview that was originally designed for use with 11 to 17 year old youth and later revised for 8 to 12 year old children.

The Security Scale is comprised of 12 questions each for the mother-child and father-child relationships based on Susan Harter’s “some kids, other kids” format.

We asked the children how confident they felt that they could perform prosocial acts. Feelings of self-efficacy were measured using a Likert scale.

Additionally, the Prosocial Behavior Effectiveness Scale (PBES) was administered, which covers 11 of the most common prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behavior was also assessed via peer nominations, teacher ratings, and the children’s own self-reports.

III. Results

Preliminary results suggest that there is some evidence to support a specific relationship between secondary caregivers and feeling confident for performing prosocial behaviors. A reanalysis of the data under a revised model indicates that the secondary caregiver (75% fathers) is more complicated.

Figure 1 – Preliminary Model

III. Results (continued)

We were specifically interested in the security scale data as our outcome measure. We tested both mothers and fathers in an ordinal regression model. All four assumptions were met; however, the results of the test proved the null hypothesis.

IV. Conclusions

The results indicate that multiple attachment relationships are important factors in feelings of self-confidence and prosocial behavior. It is determined that a more sensitive model must be developed to determine which relationships are more salient. That analysis is underway.