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From Infant Attachment Security to Mother-Child Emotion Dialogues: Understanding Emotion Communication in the Early Years

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INTRODUCTION

➤ Researchers have become increasingly interested in understanding **the developmental trajectory of attachment security from the preverbal infancy period to later verbal stages.**

➤ One approach that has received much theoretical and empirical support is to examine the capacity of children and their mothers to work together in **co-constructing narratives** around **personal and emotional events** (Bretherton, 1990; Oppenheim, Koren-Karie & Sagi-Schwartz, 2007).

➤It has been suggested (Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2009) that open communication between a **secure dyad** during infancy, involving primarily non-verbal signals, provides the basis for an **open and fluid communication** style in the preschool years. The secure child feels confident in exploring and sharing his thoughts and feelings with his mother because their earlier joint experiences have assured him that she will be **emotionally available, supportive and accepting**.

PRESENT STUDY

➤ The current study sought to examine whether **attachment security at 12 months** is associated with emotionally open and organized **mother-child emotion dialogues at 3.5 years**.

➤The focus on 3.5 year olds is of particular interest as these children are becoming more involved in the co-construction of the dialogue with their mother. However, these young preschoolers are still dependent on the adult to provide much of the coherence and structure of the conversation. This age period thus allows us to examine how the child uses the mother as a **secure base to report on and explore different emotional experiences**, and at the same time, how the mother acts as a **safe haven when the child requires help** in the structuring, organization, and interpretation of these past emotional events.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

➤ Fifty mothers and their first-born child (26 girls, 24 boys) from middle class, average income families participated in the current study.

PROCEDURE

➤ **12 months:** Assessment of infant attachment security.
➤ **3.5 years:** Observations of mother-child emotion discussions and assessment of mother and child linguistic skills.

MEASURES

➤ ***Strange Situation Procedure (SSP: Ainsworth et al., 1978).*** Standard laboratory assessment of attachment security.

➤ ***Autobiographical Emotional Events Dialogue (AEED; Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, & Etzion-Carasso, 2000).***

➤ During the emotion discussion task, mothers and children recalled an event when the child felt happy, scared, sad, and mad. They were asked to jointly describe the event and to talk about what the child felt, thought, and did. The AEED coding scheme was applied to the narratives in order to assess whether mothers and their children worked together in constructing an emotionally open and coherent account of the child's past experiences.

➤ Working with the developer of the AEED coding scheme, adjustments were made to the coding scheme in order to better reflect the cognitive and linguistic capacities of the younger children in the current sample.

➤ Based on the scales, each dialogue is classified into an **emotionally matched (EM)** or **non-emotionally matched (Non-EM)** category. In EM dialogues, the discussion occurs within an open, mutually accepting and organized atmosphere. Dyads create stories that are emotionally integrated and coherent, and the stories constructed are products of a collaborative effort. In Non-EM dyads, the interaction is either emotionally restricted and lacking in involvement or excessive and overwhelming. The product is narratives that are incoherent, poorly organized and emotionally dysfluent.

➤ ***Mother and Child Vocabulary***: The National Adult Reading Test (NART-R; Blair & Spreen, 1989) and Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT; Williams, 1997) were used to assess mother and child linguistic capacities, respectively. These were then used as control variables in later analyses.

RESULTS

➤ **Association Between Attachment in Infancy and Emotion Dialogue Classification at 3.5 years:**

➤ Preliminary analyses of 20 dyads using a **logistic regression** revealed that **attachment security at 12 months was a significant predictor of 3.5 year mother-child emotion dialogue classification**

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of Attachment in Infancy and AEED Classifications at 3.5

Attachment Classifications	AEED	
	EM	Non-EM
Secure	6 (3.6)	3 (5.4)
Non-Secure	2 (4.4)	9 (6.6)

Note. AEED = Autobiographical Emotional Events Dialogue; EM = Emotionally Matched; non-EM = non-Emotionally matched.
Numbers in parentheses represent expected values.
$\chi 2 = 4.848$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$

➤ Children who were in **secure attachment relationships** at 12 months tended to engage in emotion dialogues with their mothers at 3.5 years that were **emotionally matched** (EM). Whereas children in **non-secure attachment relationships** at 12 months engaged in emotion discussions with their mothers at 3.5 years that were **non-emotionally matched** (Non-EM).

Table 2. Results of Logistic Regression Predicting Mother-Child Emotion Dialogue Classifications at 3.5 Years From Attachment Classifications at 12 months

	Wald $\chi 2$	B	SE	Odds Ratio	Confidence interval
Attachment Security at 12 months	4.35*	.19	1.05	9.00	1.14 - 71.04

Model $\chi 2_{(1)} = 5.03$, $p < .05$

* $p < .05$

➤ Children in secure attachment relationships at 12 months were **9-times more likely** than those in non-secure relationships to engage in emotionally matched dialogues with their mothers at 3.5 years.

RESULTS Cont'd

➤ **Maternal and child verbal competence**

➤ In consideration of the possibility that mother and child linguistic capacities may contribute to the association observed, we conducted a second logistic regression analysis with the control variables of maternal and child language scores entered as a first block, followed by attachment classifications as a second block.

➤ **Neither mother nor child vocabulary was significantly associated with mother-child dialogues** (*Wald $\chi 2$ = .03, β = -.77, SE = 4.28, Odds ratio = .46, ns*; *Wald $\chi 2$ = .03, β = .01, SE = .04, Odds ratio = 1.01, ns, respectively*). **Attachment security was found to be a marginally significant predictor of mother-child emotion dialogues** (*Wald $\chi 2$ = 3.61, β = 2.09 SE = 1.09, Odds ratio = 8.06, p = .06*).

➤It is possible that this marginal significance is a result of the relatively small sample size used in our analyses.

CONCLUSIONS

➤ Results of the study corroborate John Bowlby's theorizing that **communication and secure base patterns extend well beyond infancy and into the verbal stages of development**.

➤ Our findings show that attachment security undergoes a significant transformation from early mother-infant non-verbal interactions to later verbal emotional communications. Children as young as 3.5 years of age engaged in discussions about past experiences, and that **the manner in which these events are discussed, organized, and interpreted is a function of their earlier socio-emotional relationship**.

➤ The study demonstrates that the secure base provided by the mother and experienced by her child in infancy, as seen with children in secure attachment relationships, extends into the domain of open mother-child conversation and joint affective meaning-making during the years to follow.

A copy of this poster may be found at: **http://works.bepress.com/gregmoran/**