Attaching Through Adoption: A Closer Look at Attachment in Adolescence

Vanessa Cuevas

California State University, Chico

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify whether it is easier to develop a secure attachment to adoptive parents in early childhood or adolescence. Three questionnaires are given to sixty children qualitatively every other year for 5 years. Participant’s ages ranged from 48 months to 16 years of age (32 girls and 28 boys) at the time of the first meeting. A T-test for Independent Samples (Between Groups) is used to compare the score of attachment insecurity with the age of the adopted children (early childhood or adolescence). Previous research indicates that children in adolescence have a harder time attaching to parents due to their biology. The implications of this study are that children born in adolescence have a more difficult time attaching with their adoptive parents.

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Due to infertile couples who want to get married, women’s successfulness, and unplanned pregnancies, adoption has become a salvation for those who can’t conceive and those who are pregnant and are looking for other alternatives (Brozinsky, 1993). According to the Child Welfare League of America (1999) approximately 44% of adopted children are adopted in early childhood while approximately 15% of adopted children are adopted during adolescence. Ainsworth (as cited in Bretherton, 1992) classified securely attached children as children whose caregiver is sensitive to their signals, and responds appropriately to their needs. Children who get adopted in adolescence struggle with attaching to adoptive parents because at that stage of their life they are focusing less on being a receiver of care and more on caring for someone else (Allen & Land, 1999). This study focuses on the age of adoption and its correlation with a higher score in attachment security. The purpose of this study is recognizing whether it is easier to attach to adoptive parents in early childhood than in adolescence.

There has been some debate on whether adoption is more harmful than it is beneficial for children. Allen, Moore, Kuperminc and Bell (as cited in Allen et al., 2003) see attachment in adolescence as a positive security that leads to great outcomes such as a high self-esteem and popularity among classmates. Meanwhile, Brodzinsky, Radice, Huffman, and Merkler, (as cited in Brodzinsky, 1993) found that adopted children were seen as having a lack of social skills and greater behavior problems than their non-adopted counterparts. For example, Ternay, Wilborn and Day (1985) concluded that adopted children had poorer school adjustment in fourth through eighth grade which was roughly around the time when children reached adolescence. Different stages in life such as early childhood and adolescence require different attachments to form and develop which is one reason adoption can have positive or negative outcomes.

Attachment in adolescence is seen as a transitional period where adolescents are evolving from receiving care from their parents to being a possible caregiver to somebody else (Allen & Land, 1999). Allen and Land (1999) concluded that there was a big focus on developing autonomy in adolescence. In their study, the level of attachment produced by the child and their parents played a role in the child developing autonomy. The emergence of autonomy in adolescence makes attaching to adoptive parents difficult. At this stage in an adolescent’s life, the primary focus isn’t to attach to their parents, but rather to attach to their peers who will become important sources of intimacy, feedback, social influences and information, and lifelong partners. Therefore, building and establishing secure support from adoptive parents leads to developing secure attachments with peers.

Maternal support is an important step in establishing attachment security from infancy to adolescence and in developing peer relationships in adolescence. Homann (as cited in Allen and Land, 1999) revealed that adolescent depression has been related to maternal attachment insecurity. Beijersbergen, Juffer, Baskersman-Kranenburg and van iJzendoorn (2012) found that more than half of their adolescent participants had developed an insecure attachment. Thirty-nine percent of adolescences with secure attachment had significantly more sensitive support from their mothers. Beijersbergen et al., (2012) found that high levels of maternal sensitive support in early childhood and adolescence correlated with a continuation of secure attachment. It can also be concluded that a higher amount of maternal sensitivity in early childhood throughout adolescence can alter children’s attachment from insecure in early childhood to secure attachment in adolescence. When a mother understands her adolescents’ self-perception she is able to handle disagreements with her child with a greater tact and sensitivity (Allen et al., 2003). During the early years in children’s lives, maternal support plays a big role in children’s attachment security. In adolescence a secure attachment is estimated by the relationships the child develop with their peers.

By late adolescence relationships begin to form between children and their peers. Peer relationships develop to fill the void of intimacy and supportiveness left by parents. These relationships can take the form of romantic relationships as well as close friendships. Adolescents with secure attachments were socially accepted by their peers, while adolescents with insecure attachments were dismissing of their peers often pushing away their friends. Past attachment experiences with parents help adolescents shape their thoughts and feelings of developing romantic relationships. Later on in life, securely attached children are likely to choose quality sexual relationships over quantity, which is the opposite of a child with a dismissing or insecure attachment. Peers and parents aren’t the only factors that determine secure attachments; age of adoption also plays an important role in developing secure attachments (Allen & Land, 1999).

It has been disputed that the older the child is when adoption occurs, the higher chance of adjustment difficulties post placement (Bohman, as cited in Brodzinsky, 1993). Barone and Lionetti (2011) focused on late-adopted preschoolers and their parents; they found that children who were coming into a new adoptive family showed a frequency of attachment insecurity with disorganization (the disruption of an order or system). Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Steele, Hillman and Asquith (as cited in Barone & Lionetti , 2011) found that disorganization was less likely in children who had at least one adoptive parent with secure attachment from prior relationships. Adopted teenagers were more likely to be referred to mental health services, even when dealing with minor problems (Brodzinsky, 1993).

Leve, Neiderhiser, Shaw, Ganiban, Natsuaki, and Reiss (2012) conducted a study of 561 adopted children and both set of parents (adoptive parents and birth parents). It was concluded that characteristics carried down by genetics in a child influenced the way that their adopted parents interacted and behaved with them. The Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS) used by Leve et al., (2012) is a design that provided a unique look into detecting genotype- environment (GE) interaction.  It was found that families’ environmental variables were correlated with children’s adjustment outcomes. Overall satisfaction and acceptance with adoptive parenthood, together with a warm accepting approach toward the child had a positive correlation with adoption adjustment (Brodzinsky, 1993). Brodzinsky (1993) found that parents who created a rearing environment where their differences were talked about with honesty and openness were better able to ease into a positive social and emotional adjustment with their adoptive children.

The purpose of this study was to examine the attachment relationship of adoptive children and their adoptive parents. The goal of this research was to understand the connection between the age of adoption (early childhood and adolescence) and attachment security in adopted children. This study also addresses the relationship between adolescent children and their peers. Understanding adolescent attachment with their parents and peers will narrow the search in finding a solution to the difficulties that arise from getting adopted during adolescence. This study has a quasi-experimental design, researchers sampled children who were adopted in early childhood and children who were adopted in adolescence. Participants were monitored quantitatively over a period of five years. The hypothesis for this study is that children who get adopted during early childhood score higher in attachment security than children who get adopted during adolescence.

**Method**

**Overview**

The purpose of this quasi experimental study is to gather information on attachment relationships in different parts of children’s lives. A quasi experimental study was implemented because participants can’t be manipulated. The focus of this research is on secure attachment and whether it is easier to develop a secure attachment with parents during early childhood or whether it is easier to securely attach during adolescence. Researchers will also focus their attention on the children’s relationships with peers. The relationship between age of adoption and the strength of attachment security will be analyzed through a questionnaire. Variable 1 will be the independent variable (the age of adoption) and variable 2 will be the dependent variable (score in attachment security). Age of adoption will be measured by a nominal scale and attachment security will be measured by an interval scale.

**Participants**

Adopted participants were acquired through adoption agencies in a suburban area of Southern California. There were 60 children involved in this study. Of these 60 children, 30 were adopted during early childhood (18 girls and 12 boys), and another 30 were adopted during adolescence (14 girls and 16 boys). Children adopted in early childhood were 48 months to 6 years of age at time of meeting. Children adopted in adolescence were 14 to 16 years of age at time of first meeting. The participants were primarily Caucasian (55%), African American (30%), Asian American (10%) and Hispanic (5%). The majority of the participant’s families were of middle to high income families (92%).

Informed consent was received from both sets of adopted children and their parents prior to the first assessment. Informed consent was also acquire from the participants’ school district, principal and teacher prior to the first assessment. The participants are participating in a non-probability convenience sampling because participants are not chosen at random. These participants will take three questionnaires on attachment. This is to ensure that substantial data is gathered.

**Measures**

Each child’s attachment is to be assessed through Armsden and Greenberg’s (2009) Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA). The attachment questionnaires ask about the child’s relationships with their mother, father and peers. The questionnaire measures the strength of the relationship. The answers on the questionnaire have a fixed format. Each questionnaire includes 25 questions and are ranked on Likert scale of 1 point to 5 points. The answers range in which almost never or never true = 1, not very often true = 2, sometimes true = 3, often true = 4 and almost always or always true = 5. Questions varied from, “My father respects my feelings” to “I feel my friends are good friends” and “I wish I had another mom”. Younger children (6 years and under) are given the questionnaire in a simplified text. This data is measured qualitatively every other year for 5 years. A high score in the IPPA results in a high score in attachment security; a low score in the IPPA results in low score in attachment security.

Attachment security was analyzed by trained researchers. Researchers attended an all-day training where they were taught the scoring rubric for the IPPA. The IPPA’s scoring rubric includes six subscales (parent trust, parent communication, parent alienation, peer trust, peer communication and peer alienation). Each subscale is computed by summing up the questionnaire responses to obtain a total score. Responses to questions about alienation and questions that are worded negatively are reverse-scored (questions 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18, and 23 in parent questionnaires and questions 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 18, 22, and 23 in the peer questionnaire).

The reliability was tested in previous work by Armden and Greenberg (2006). Their study found that internal reliabilities for a sample of 27 18- to 20-year-olds were .87 for attachment with mother, .89 for father attachment and .92 for peer attachment. Convergent validity was acquired in Armden and Greenberg’s (2006) research because the IPPA measure relates to other measures measuring parental attachment. It was found that adolescent’s parental attachment scores were significantly related to Family and Social Self scores and to most subscales on the Family Environment Scale.

**Procedure**

IRB approval from California State University Chico was obtained prior to beginning this study. The participants were recruited through adoption agencies in the Southern California region. The study was then conducted in various preschools, elementary schools and high schools in the Southern California region. Permission was obtained first from the superintendent of the school district, then the principals of each school, and the participants’ primary teacher.

Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents, superintendent, principal and teacher a month prior to the distribution of the first questionnaire. Participants and their parents were contacted by the adoption agencies on behalf of the researchers. If participants and their parents decided to participate in the study researchers then conducted a home visit where information about the purpose of the study, risks, benefits, confidentially and debriefing were given orally. Researchers obtained signed consent from both the parents and the participant (form was read aloud to participant in language they could understand) at the time of the home visit. After establishing informed consent from participants researchers sent written forms with information about the purpose of the study, risks, benefits, confidentially and debriefing to the superintendent, principal and teacher of all participants. A consent form was attached to the written forms and the superintendent, principal and teacher were given a week to read over the information and to sign the consent form. To protect the participants confidentiality researchers went to retrieve information from the schools themselves. Researchers put all forms (participant’s consent forms and school consent forms) in a sealed envelope and placed it in a locked briefcase (only researchers know the code to the briefcases). The briefcase was to be with the researcher at all times before turning it into the primary researcher. No incentives were provided for any of the parties involved.

Data was collected quantitatively through 5 years. Every other year participants were greeted by researchers through a webcam in their primary classroom. The webcam was accessed by the researchers at the time of the assessment. A form was given to participants and their parents, superintendent, principal and teacher disclosing information about the webcam and providing information about confidentiality. The webcam was only to be used at the assigned date and time every other year. No researcher was going to penetrate the webcam at any other time. Participants were handed three questionnaires by their primary teacher before school and asked to answer each statement truthfully. The questionnaires took approximately half an hour. Researchers were on standby in case a participants had questions.

**Statistical Analysis Plan**

The hypothesis of this study is that children who get adopted during early childhood develop a more secure attachment security to their adoptive parents than children who get adopted in adolescence. A t-test is going to be given to analyze and compare the age of adoption of the child and the attachment they have with their parents. An interval scale is the rationale used for this statistical test because scale values are equal in the questionnaire.

Alpha lets researchers know what level you must reach in order to reject the null hypothesis. Significant results would be gathered if alpha is less than .05 level. The results obtained from this study conclude that at the current state *p*=.04. These findings reject the null hypothesis. At the *p*=.04 level, there is a positive significant statistical relationship between the age a child is adopted and a higher score in attachment security.

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Demographics Questionnaire

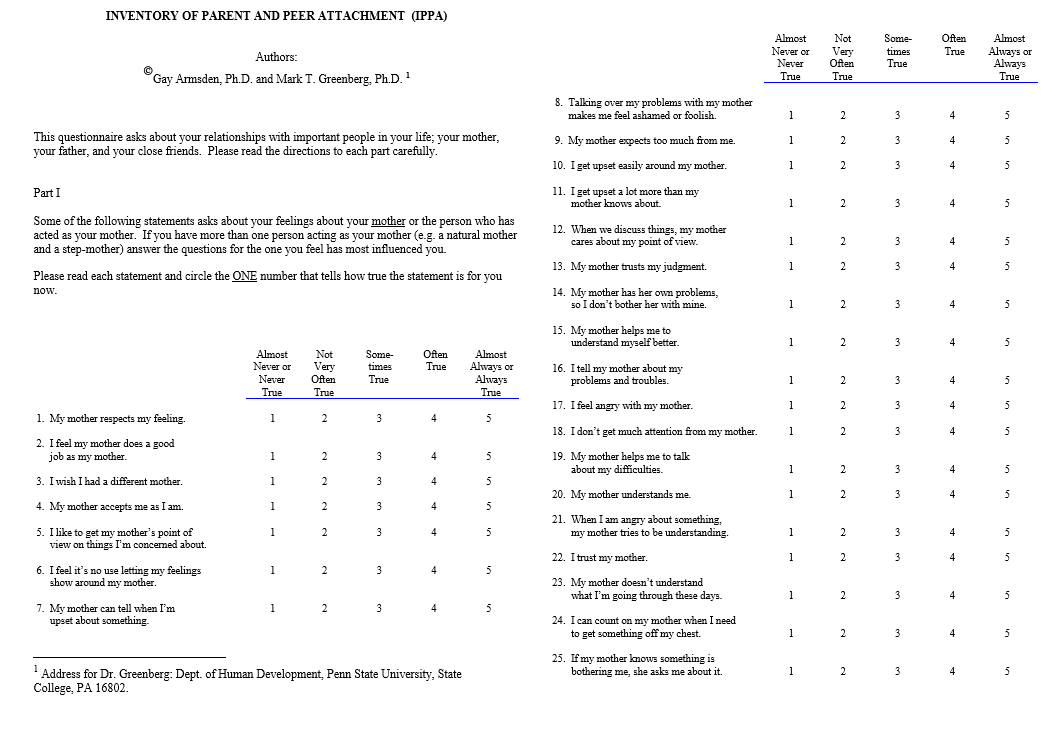
Please circle the appropriate answer for each area.

1. Current Age
   1. 48 months to 6 years
   2. 7 years to 9 years
   3. 10 years to 12 years
   4. 13 years to 15 years
   5. 16 years to 19 years
2. Age of Adoption
   1. 1 month to 36 months
   2. 37 months to 5 years
   3. 6 years to 9 years
   4. 10 years to 13 years
3. Gender
   1. Male
   2. Female
4. Ethnicity
   1. Caucasian
   2. African American
   3. Asian American
   4. Latino American
   5. Other (Specify)

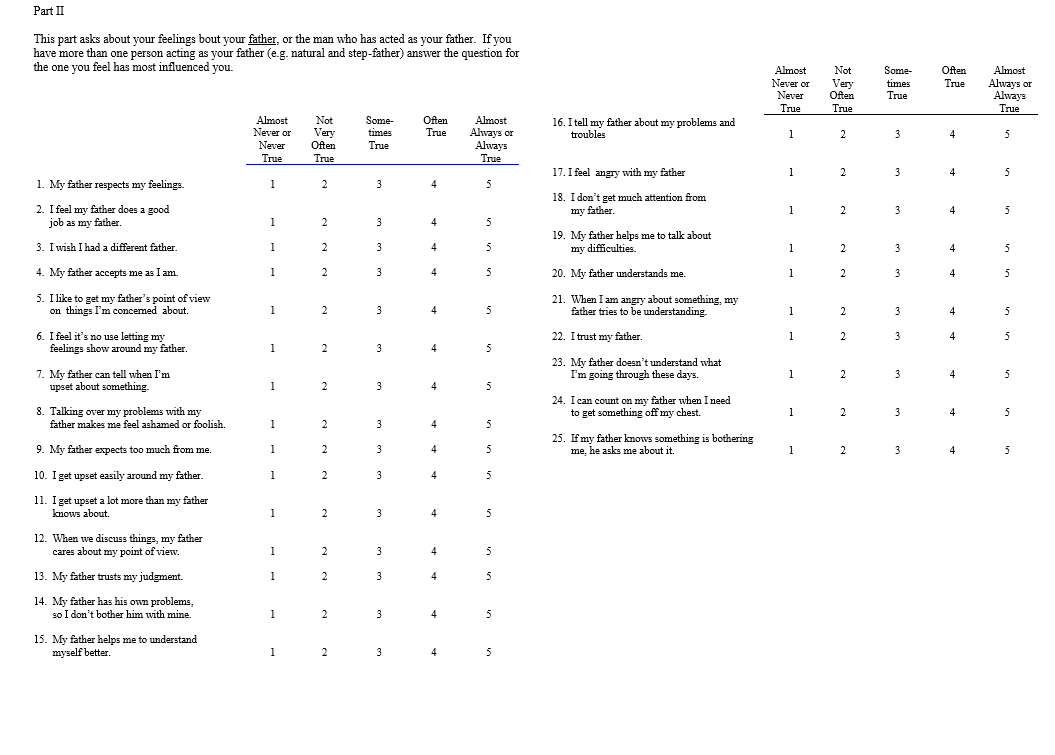
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1. Income
   1. $0-$25,000
   2. $30,000-$55,000
   3. $60,000-$85,000
   4. $90,000-$115,000
2. Parent Marital Status
   1. Married
   2. Divorced
   3. Widowed
   4. Single

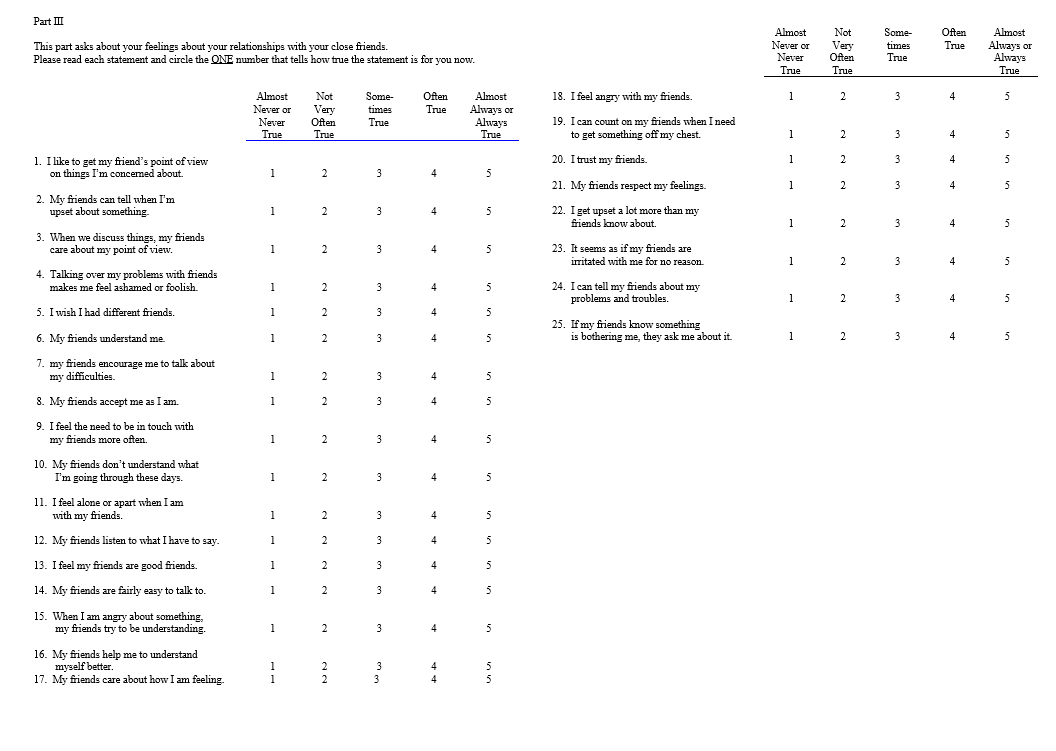
Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment: Part I



Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment: Part II



Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment: Part III



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