Infant Attachment Linked to Later Attention Skills

In this study we investigated the relationship between parent-child attachment, measured when infants were fifteen months of age, and select cognitive functions measured nearly 40 months later. These cognitive functions consisted of so-called 'attentional' skills, which involve a number of important abilities, such as the ability to concentrate over a sustained period of time, focus on one thing to the exclusion of others, avoid becoming distracted and inhibit or control one’s behavior appropriately.

Limitations in attention skills have been linked to a host of academic and social problems. Children growing up in more at-risk environments, as well as boys, are also known to be at greater risk of having difficulties with attention. We tested the hypothesis that the impact on attention skills of being male and growing up under more difficult social circumstances would be offset if children had histories of secure attachments to their mothers.

Attachment refers to the close emotional bond between parents and their children, particularly the way children are able to use parents as a ‘secure base’ when distressed. The nature of these attachments varies between different individuals and has been linked with differences in children’s social and emotional development. Some children, referred to as ‘secure’, seek out their parents when separated from them and are quickly comforted when they return. Three non-secure patterns of attachment have also been identified which describe infants who, when distressed, either avoid their parent, become angry or helpless or show contradictory or disorganized behavior when their parent returns. These non-secure patterns are thought to reflect less effective means of gaining comfort from a parent and dealing with stress, which may place these children at somewhat higher risk for emotional or behavioral problems.

Secure attachment, by contrast, is thought to provide a degree of protection for children against a range of risks to their emotional development, which is why we anticipated they would be less prone to problems with attention than might otherwise be expected for boys or for children living in difficult social circumstances.

The paper presents an analysis of a large number of children and parents who participated in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, although childcare was not the focus of our report. 918 children were seen with their mothers for an assessment of their attachment relationship at 15 months and this was compared to their attention skills at 4.5 years of age. We found that children with secure attachments generally had better attentional skills than children with one of the three non-secure patterns, particularly under difficult social circumstances or, in some cases, when the children were boys. However, this was only evident when a computer-based test was used, rather than parents’ questionnaire responses. These results suggest that attachment may affect children’s capacities for cognitive and behavioral self-control, particularly when others risks are at play.