MIDDLE CHILDHOOD ATTACHMENT AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

[1]AYSE BELGIN AKSOY, [2]HURSIDE KUBRA OZKAN

[1, 2]Early Childhood Education Department Gazi University Turkey
Email:[1]aksoya@gazi.edu.tr, [2]hursidekubra@gmail.com

Abstract— The present study investigated the association between the level of middle-age children's attachments to their parents and their family relationship. In addition, this study also examined whether the level of children's attachment to their parents varied by gender. The study design is quantitative acquiring relational patterns. In line with the purpose of this study, the sample group consisted of 208 students (103 girls, 105 boys) in fifth grade attending middle school in the district of Kartepe in İzmit province, Turkey. In this study, "Kerns' Security Scale (KSS)" and "The Family Relationships Scale for Children" were used for data collection. During the analysis of data collected, t-test and Pearson' correlation coefficient were used for unrelated measurements. The results of the study concluded that the association of the level of children's attachment to their parents was moderate and negative with discouraging family relationships and was moderate and positive with supportive family relationships.

Keywords— Attachment, Middle Childhood, Parent–Child Relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

The attachment theory is a widely accepted belief that regards the emotional bond created between an infant and parent or a caregiver as a survival reaction [1]. Reference [2] shows that the tendency of forming strong emotional bonds towards specific people is part of the nature and infants are born with this instinctive behavior. The key point in early bond created between an infant and a caregiver is to find the opportunity to develop mutual attachment behaviors and to be in harmony during this interaction [3]. The first relationship developed between an infant and a caregiver not only shapes a child's emotions and behaviors, but also affects a child's future relationships later in life [4]- [5]-[6]. Researchers developed various measurement techniques and tools in order to determine individual differences on children's attachment behaviors. In a structured environment, these researchers observed infants' reactions to their caregivers and determined that there were four attachment patterns. These attachment patterns include secure attachment, resistant attachment, anxious/avoidant attachment, and disorganized/disoriented attachment [1] - [7].

Middle Childhood Attachment

Children with secure attachment to their parents in early childhood display generally positive emotions during the separaion and reunion procedure in middle childhood and sustain interest in their mother. Children with secure attachment resolve any distress caused by separation and use the mother as a secure base to explore the environment [8]. This image of secure base acts as an internal working model. This model consists of the accessibility of people to whom a child is attached, probability of providing support to a child when in distress, and a child's expectation from the interaction with these people. Internal working models play a guiding role in children's all future close relationships and become a vital part of their personality [1]. Children displaying insecure attachment behaviors in middle childhood avoid their mother's physical and affective contact during separation and reunion procedure [9]. The child's being fearlessly close to their parents when needed is regarded as the most distinct behavioral impression of secure attachment in children. Constant criticizing, interfering, discouraging, and behavior correction make it hard for a child to establish a true bond with their parents. Therefore, the most fundamental requirement for secure attachment is displaying supportive, sensitive, unconditional caring behaviors towards children, which encourage them to establish a connection [10].

Reference [2] shows that children with secure attachment who expect an adequate response from their parent are able to deal with their emotions, behaviors, and thoughts in a flexible manner. Studies using secure and insecure representational measures of middle childhood attachment demonstrate that secure children show greater emotional openness and come up with more coherent solutions in narrative tasks than insecure children [11]. They are also more likely to depict their parent as trustworthy in their narratives [8]-[12]-[13].

Family Relationships in Middle Childhood

Mother-child discourse is a collaborative process during which the mother guides and supports the child in exploring affects and thoughts. Therefore, it should assist in the organization of child's emotional experiences in a coherent and secure manner [8]. Reference [14] shows thatshared conversations between mother and child act as a mediator in the relation between secure attachment behaviors and representations. Researches have shown that differences in children's attachment patterns between

preschool and school age are related to changes in the quality of mother-child interactions [8]. Reference [15] shows thatmother-child communicative difficulties contributes to the development of child's insecure attachment. Compared with previous developmental periods, middle childhood years are marked by the development of more sophisticated language and cognitive abilities in children, including increased capacity of abstraction and integration of information. During middle childhood years, children are more accustomed to daily separations from the parent and to spend more time in school [8]. Parents continue to have an important place in children's lives, even they spend less time with their parent in middle childhood [7]. During this period, children cannot show their emotions as openly as they used to. In the meantime, although children are able to take the responsibility of protecting themselves, they still want to know that their parents will be there for them when needed [3].

Since the frequency and intensity of children's attachment behaviors show decrease during middle childhood years, it may be overlooked the fact that children still feel strong attachment to their parent [3]. In a relevant literature, studies conducted on middle childhood attachments usually centered on peer and friend relationships [16]-[17]-[18]-[19]-[20]-[21] and very few studies focused on the family relationships. Ongoing family relationships have a profound impact on mutual attachment behaviors between parent and a child. Therefore, this current study aims to investigate the association between middle childhood attachment levels and parent-child relationships. In line with this objective, answers will be sought for the following subgoals:

1- What is the level of children's attachment to their parents?

2-What is the level of children's perception of family relationships?

3- Do the level of children's attachment to their parents vary by gender?

II. METHODS

This part provides details on the study design, the study group providing data, data collection tools, and data analyses.

2.1. Design of the Study

Given that the aim was to examine the link between the levels of children's attachment and parent-child relationships and whether children's attachment levels show a significant difference by gender, quantitative study design with relational patterns were used in the study [22].

2.2. Participants

The study group included a total of 208 children (103 girls, 105 boys) in fifth grade attending middle school in 2015-2016 school year in the district of Kartepe, Izmit province, Turkey. The rates of girls and boys were 49.5% (n=103) and 50.5% (n=105), respectively. The study group was assigned using convenience sampling as a purposive sampling method [22].

2.3. Instruments

Within the scope of this study, data from the study group were collected using "Kerns' Security Scale (KSS)" and "the Family Relationships Scale for Children".

2.3.1. Kerns' Security Scale

In the present study, a 15-item Kerns' Security Scale developed by Kerns, Klepac and Cole and validity and reliability studies were conducted on a Turkish sample by Sumer and Sendag in order to determine middle school children's attachment levels [19]-[23]. The scale's internal consistency coefficient in mother and father forms were estimated as 0.84 and 0.88, respectively. During the validity study of the scale, factor analysis was performed separately on each response related to mother and father forms. Both forms were found to have a single structured nature. It was determined that items in mother and father forms explain 34% and 40% of the variation, respectively [23]. In the present study, both mother and father forms were used and children were asked to evaluate their mother and father separately. Cronbach Alfa reliability coefficient of the children's responses was 0.75 for the mother form and 0.78 for the father form.

2.3.2. The Family Relationship Scale for Children

Based on the characteristics of a health family, The Family Relationship Scale for Children developed by Demirtaş and Korkut was applied to determine children's perception of the family functions [24]. The scale includes two subscales as a discouraging family relationship and supportive family relationship. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the responses in the first dimension of a 10-item scale of discouraging family relationships was 0.82 and in the second dimension of a 10-item scale of supportive family relationship scale was 0.76 [24]. In this study, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of children's responses to the items related to discouraging and supportive family relationships were estimated as 0.81 and 0.74, respectively.

2.4. Procedure

Permissions for scales applied in the study were obtained by the researcher from those adapting the scales for Turkish sampling and those performing validity and reliability studies. The schools of children in the study group were pre-visited and researchers introduced themselves to the children. Children, as separate from the group, filled Kerns' Security Scale and The Family Relationship Scale for Children. Each child was given approximately 10-15

minutes. Before applying the scales, children were provided with the necessary details about the study. Children were asked their permission to ensure a voluntary participation in the study.

2.5. Analyses

First, descriptive analyses of the collected data were carried out. Then, data analysis was performed in accordance with the problems of the study. In the analysis of data, t test and Pearson's correlation coefficient were used for unrelated measurements [22].

III. RESULTS

This part presents the findings obtained as a result of the statistical analysis of data collected during the study.

Table 1. Descriptive Analyses on the Levels of Children's Attachments to Their Parents

Kerns' Security Scale	n	$\bar{X}$	SS
Mother form	208	46.97	7.16
Father form	208	46.31	7.64

When examining data shown in Table 1, we found that children's scores on the mother form ranged between 24.00 and 60.00. The mean level of children's attachment to their mother was found as 46.97. On the other hand, children's scores on the father form varied between 22.00 and 60.00 and the mean level of attachment to their father was 46.31. It was detected that the children displayed secure attachment to their parents in general.

Table 2. Descriptive Analyses on Children's Relationship with Their Family

TheFamilyRelationshipScaleforChildren	n	$\bar{X}$	SS
DiscouragingFamilyRelationship	208	14.99	4.04
SupportiveFamilyRelationship	208	26.07	3.23

Data presented in Table 2 showed that children's scores on family relationship ranged between 10.00 and 25.00 and the mean score of discouraging family relationships was found 14.99. Estimated mean value demonstrated that children's discouraging family relationship was generally at a moderate level. As shown in Table 2, children's supportive family relationship scores varied between 17.00 and 30.00 and the mean score of supportive family relationship was 26.07. It was observed that the level of children's supportive family relationship was higher.

Table 3. A Correlation Analysis on the Level of Children's Attachment to Their Parents and Family Relationships

Variables		1	2	3	4
1. Level of attachment tomother	n	208	208	208	208
	r		.635**	-.613**	.598**
	p		.000	.000	.000
2. Level of attachment To father	n	208	208	208	208
	r	.635**		-.526**	.546**
	p	,000		,000	,000
3. Discouragingfamily relationships	n	208	208	208	208
	r	-.613**	-.526**		-.636**
	p	.000	.000		.000
4. Supportivefamily relationships	n	208	208	208	208
	r	.598**	.546**	-.636**	
	p	.000	.000	.000	

p<0.01; p*<0.05**

Data given Table 3 showed that the association of children's attachments to their parents with discouraging family relationships was negative and moderate, and with supportive family relationships was positive and moderate ($p<0.01$). Also, there was a positive and moderate association between children's attachment to their mother and to their father ($r:0.635$; $p<0.01$). Finally, data in Table 3 showed that there was a negative and moderate association between children's discouraging family relationships and supportive family relationships ($r:-0.636$; $p<0.01$).

Table 4. Unrelated t Test Results on the Level of Children's Attachment to Their Parents by Gender

	Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	SS	sd	t	p
Mother's attachment	Female	103	48.89	7.09	206	3.98	0.00*
	Male	105	45.08	6.73			
Father's attachment	Female	103	47.67	7.82	206	2.58	0.01*
	Male	105	44.97	7.25			

*p<0.05

Data presented in Table 4 showed that the level of children's attachment to their mother varied significantly by gender ($t(206)=3.98$; $p<0.05$). When the mean scores were examined, it was detected that girls ($=48.89\pm7.09$) attached to their mothers more securely than boys ($=45.08\pm6.73$). On the other hand, when children's attachment to their father was examined by gender, a significant difference was found ($t(206)=2.58$; $p<0.05$). The mean scores showed that girls ($=47.67\pm7.82$) were attached more securely to their father compared to boys ($=44.97\pm7.25$).

CONCLUSIONS

This part discusses the objective of the present study along with the data on the subgoals related to this objective and presents final results and recommendations. When the level of children's attachment to their parents and discouraging family relationships were assessed, it was observed that there was a negative and moderate association. On the other side, when the level of children's attachment to their parents and supportive family relationships were evaluated, a positive and moderate association was observed. In view of these findings, as children's secure attachment level rises, discouraging family relationship level decreases, but supportive family relationship level increases.

Relevant studies reveal that when children perceive their parent as sensitive and democratic, they feel free to express their needs and talk about all their emotional experiences without recourse to defensive processes [15]. They also suggest that securely attached children engage in conversations more easily with their mothers, share their emotional experiences enabling them to receive support when needed [25]-[26], and that children raised by a supportive family respecting the child's individuality are more securely attached to both parents [27]. Likewise, reference [28] shows that investigating middle childhood attachment and parental behaviors demonstrated that insecure attachment patterns, such as anxiety and avoidance were linked to parental behaviors that were rejective, interfering, and causing guilt. Furthermore, the study underscored that family dynamics, such as domestic conflicts, marital maladjustment, and low level of education are contributing risk factors to children's attachment patterns, emotional problems, and academic competence. The interaction of children with their parent is the first and the deepest relationship that children build. This interaction shapes children's emotions and behaviors. Parents' behaviors and attachment are mutually interacted with each other [10].

The evaluation of children's attachment behaviors by gender revealed that girls were more securely attached to their parents. Studies examining this result suggest that avoidant-insecure attachment was seen less in girls [29] and girls were more securely attached compared to boys [12]-[30]. As can be seen above, studies conducted in our country and abroad obtained similar results regarding the association between attachment and gender.

Parents may have to deal with new problems as children start to have a growing independence in middle childhood. However, compared with the previous years, raising a child becomes more easier for parents. Factors such as increased intelligence capacity, having respect for parent's knowledge provide school age children with more efficient logical thinking. When parents communicate clearly with their children and enabling them to participate in decision making processes as much as possible, children are more likely to consider from their parent's perspectives when facing a difficult and a crucial situation. On the other hand, even general differences occur in gender appropriate behaviors in middle childhood, gender identity of girls and boys develop in different ways. These differences reflect the composition of cognitive and social powers [1]. In our country, described as a passing society, differences in the relationship among family members also affect the traditional education and raising of a child. These differences are highly diverse [31]. It is believed that this diversity, within cultural and social context, results from parents' values and expectations on raising a child, which in return influence their attitudes and behaviors, and are interpreted differently by their children. As a result, although children cannot express their emotions openly to their parent, they are still strongly attached to them. Children's attachment behaviors are associated with the nature of family relationships as supportive or discouraging. Studies conducted on children's attachment provide a growing evidence on the significance of a father's role. Yet, in our country, there is limited number of studies inquiring into the impact of a father-child attachment on child's development. Therefore, further studies on this subject will make a contribution to the literature.

REFERENCES

[1] L. E. Berk, "Child development", 9th Edition, Boston: Pearson Education, 2013.

[2] J. Bowlby, "Attachment and loss", 3th Edition, New York: Basic Books, 1980.

[3] H. L. Bee, and D. Boyd, "The developing child", Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2004.

[4] K. A. Kerns, P. L. Tomich, J. E. Aspelmeier, and J. M. "Contreras, Attachment-based assessments of parent-child relationships in middle childhood", Development Psychology, vol.36, pp.614-626, 2000.

[5] K. A Kerns, J. E. Aspelmeier, A. L. Gentzler, and C. M. Grabill, "Parent-child attachment and monitoring in middle childhood", Journal of Family Psychology, vol.15, no.1, pp.69-81, 2001.

[6] A. Seibert, and K. A., "Kerns, Attachment figures in middle childhood", International Journal of Behavioral Development, vol.33, no.4, pp.347-355, 2009.

[7] J. W. Santrock, "Child development", Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

[8] K. Dubois-Comtois, C. Cyr, and E. Moss, "Attachment behavior and mother-child conversations as predictors of attachment representations in middle childhood: A longitudinal study", Attachment & Human Development, vol.13, no.4, pp.335-357, 2011.

[9] J. F., Bureau, and E. Moss, "Behavioural precursors of attachment representations in middle childhood and links with child social adaptation", British Journal of Developmental Psychology, vol.28, pp.657–677, 2010.

[10] N. Sumer, "Ana BabalikveBaglanma". In M. Sayil, & B. Yagmurlu (Eds.), Ana babalıkkuramveArastirma (pp. 169-189). İstanbul: Koc University, 2012.

[11] K. A. Kerns, L. E. Brumariu, and A. Seibert, "Multi-method assessment of mother–child attachment: Links to parenting and child depressive symptoms in middle childhood", Attachment & Human Development, vol.13 no.4, pp.315–333, 2011.

[12] D. Granot, and O. Mayseless, "Attachment security and adjustment to school in middle childhood", International Journal of Behavioral Development, vol.25, pp.530–541, 2001.
[13] D. Laible, "Mother–child discourse in two contexts: Links with child temperament, attachment security, and socioemotional competence", Developmental Psychology, vol.40, pp.979–992, 2004.
[14] R. A. Thompson, D. J. Laible, and L. L. Ontai, "Early understandings of emotion, morality, and self: Developing a working model", Advances in Child Development and Behavior, vol.31, pp.137–171, 2003.
[15] I. Bretherton, "Updating the internal working model construct: Some reflections", Attachment & Human Development, vol.1, pp.343–357, 1999.
[16] C. Booth-LaForce, W. Oh, A. H. Kim, K. H. Rubin, L. Rose-Krasnor, and K.B. Burgess, "Attachment, selfworth, and peer-group functioning in middle childhood", Attachment and Human Development, vol.8, no.4, pp.309-325, 2006.
[17] P. K. Coleman, "Perceptions of parent-child attachment, social self-efficacy, and peer relationships in middle childhood", Infant and Child Development, vol.12, pp.351-368, 2003.
[18] M. K., Freitag, and J. Belsky, "Continuity in Parent-Child Relationships from infancy to middle childhood and relations with friendship competence", Child Development, vol.67, no.4, pp.1437-1454, 1996.
[19] K. A. Kerns, L. Klepac, and A. Cole, "Peer relationships and preadolescents' perceptions of security in the childmother relationship", Developmental Psychology, vol.32, pp.457-466, 1996.
[20] E. Moss, J. Bureau, M. Beliveau, M. Zdebik, and S. Lepine, "Links between children's attachment behavior at early school-age, their attachment-related representations, and behavior problems in middle childhood", International Journal of Behavioral Development, vol.33, no.2, pp.155-66, 2009.
[21] K. C. Priscilla, "Perceptions of parent-child attachment, social self-efficacy, and peer relationships in middle childhood", Infant & Child Development, vol.12, no.4, pp.351, 2003.
[22] S. Buyukozturk, E. K. Cakmak, O. E. Akgun, S. Karadeniz, and F. Demirel, "Scientific research method", Ankara: Pegem Publications, 2013.
[23] N. Sumer, and M. A. Sendag, "Attachment to parents during middle childhood, self-perceptions, and anxiety", Turkish Journal of Psychology, vol.24, no.63, pp.86-103, 2009.
[24] S. Demirtas - Zorbaz, and F. Korkut-Owen, "Developing family relationship scale for children", Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Journal, vol.4, no.39, pp.58-67, March 2013.
[25] C. Cyr, K. Dubois-Comtois, and E. Moss, "Mother–child conversations and attachment of children in the preschool period", Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, vol.40, pp.140–152, 2008.
[26] K. Dubois-Comtois, and E. Moss, "Beyond the dyad: Do family interactions influence children's attachment representations in middle childhood", Attachment & Human Development, vol.10, no.4, pp.415-431, 2008.
[27] P. A. Heer, "The relationship between college students' retrospective accounts of parenting styles and self-reported adult attachment styles", Dissertation Abstracts International, vol.69, 2008.
[28] N. Sumer, M. Sayil, S. Kazak-Berument, B., Dogruyol, G., Gunaydın, M., Harma, A. Ozturk, S. Salman, and E. Selcuk, "Çocuğungelişimdebağlanma, ilgi-bakımveailedinamiklerininetkisi", Project Report, Projects no: TUBİTAK-105K102, 2009.
[29] F. Kirimer, E. Akca, and N. Sumer, "Anxious and avoidant attachment to mother in middle childhood: the adaptation of experiences in close relationships-r– middle childhood into Turkish", Turkish Psychological Articles, vol.17, no.33, pp.45-57, June 2014.
[30] M. Del Giudice, "Sex-biased ratio of avoidant/ambivalent attachment in middle childhood", British Journal of Developmental Psychology, vol.26, pp.369-379, 2008.
[31] M. Tezcan, "Child sociology", Ankara: Kök Education, 2005.

★★★