5. Security of attachment relationships with parents and the course of peer victimization in four- to five-year-olds

Mariëlle Bonnet, Frits A. Goossens, and Carlo Schuengel
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Abstract

This study examined the role of concurrent attachment security on the course of peer victimization in young children. Furthermore, the validity was examined of a new procedure that would allow the assessment of attachment security through the Attachment Q-sort and the separation/reunion procedure in a semi-structured setting for preschool-aged children. Seventy children (4- and 5 year olds) identified as victims of peer aggression in the Fall semester and one of their parents were recruited from 46 classrooms in 18 schools in the Netherlands. All children were followed-up twice during one school year in order to determine for whom victimization was stable. Observation sessions were organized in the form of children’s parties, in which a separation/reunion procedure was conducted. Based on video observations of the whole party, except for the observations during the separation/reunion procedure, the 90 items of the AQS-set were sorted. Findings suggested that concurrent quality of the attachment relationship with parents was not predictive of the course of peer victimization. Furthermore, results revealed a relatively strong association between security-insecurity on the AQS and separation/reunion. These findings suggest that a children’s party, as a semi-structured laboratory setting for the preschool period, is a promising methodological innovation which allows the possibility to conduct the two attachment measures in one session.
Introduction

Indirect parental influences refer to behaviors and relationship patterns that children learn within the family system and transfer to the peer domain. Ladd and Pettit (2002) refer to attachment security as an indirect parental influence, because attachment relationships with parents are an important foundation for social competence with peers, and function as a source of support when children face stressful situations such as peer victimization.

Most research on social competence in preschool guided by attachment theory was based on the notion that internal working models of attachment relationships with parents would influence patterns of peer interactions as well. La Freniere and Sroufe (1985) found in their study on 40 preschoolers that insecurely attached children received fewer positive sociometric nominations from their peers than securely attached children. Wood, Emmerson and Cowan (2004) found a significant association between lower attachment security of the relationship with mother and higher peer rejection scores and lower peer acceptance scores in their sample of 37 preschoolers. In a study of 94 preschool-age children, boys who were more securely attached to their mothers scored higher on sociometric ratings of peer popularity than did boys with less secure attachment scores. This association was not significant for girls; however, the correlation for the smaller sample of girls was in the expected direction (DeMulder, Denham, Schmidt & Mitchell, 2000). In one study of 38 preschoolers, Troy and Sroufe (1987) found that children with a history of insecure attachment with their caregivers tended to be victimized by peers in a dyadic play context. In contrast, securely attached children tended to fill neither the role of victimizer nor victim, regardless of the attachment history of their play partner. A contradictory finding was reported by Monks, Smith and Swettenham (2005) who related attachment profiles based on the Separation Anxiety Test of 75 children (4-6 years) to roles taken in victimization. Using a cartoon methodology, they found that 22.1% of the children were assigned the role of victim and that most victims (66.7 %) were securely attached. In conclusion, the extant research supports the idea that attachment relationships within the family may influence children’s involvement in bullying and victimization with peers, but the findings vary by study.

Attachment security may not only be important for social development because the working models of attachment relationships may generalize to other social relationships, but also because the possibility to use attachment figures as a secure base and as a safe haven is important across development in order to function socially in an adequate way. Victimization presents a stressor for which preschool age children may generally lack the ability to cope with adaptively on their own. In this case, the attachment relationship with parents may function as a source of support. Securely attached children may be more
capable of effectively communicating their feelings of distress to a parent at home than their insecurely attached age mates, which increases the possibility for an effective intervention by the parents.

The first aim of the present study was to investigate the role of concurrent attachment security on the course of peer victimization. We hypothesized that higher levels of attachment security are related to decreasing levels of victimization during the school year. Furthermore, lower levels of attachment security were expected to be related to continuation or at least stabilization of victimization during the school year.

In prior research, attachment security was assessed with the Attachment Q Sort (DeMulder et al., 2000; Wood et al., 2004), the Strange Situation procedure (La Freniere & Sroufe, 1985; Troy & Sroufe, 1987), or the Separation Anxiety Test (Monks et al, 2005). Each method appears to operationalize related but distinct aspects of the security of attachment relationships. The validity of the AQS was tested in a meta-analysis on 139 studies with 13,835 children (Van IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004). Results showed a moderate degree of convergent validity with the Strange Situation ($r = .31$), as well as construct validity based on an association with parental sensitivity to an extent that is comparable to the Strange Situation ($r = .31$ for AQS-sensitivity versus $r = .24$ for SS-sensitivity). Few studies have yet looked at convergent validity of the AQS against attachment classifications based on (adapted) Strange Situations or separation-reunion procedures coding relationships in the preschool period (Cassidy & Marvin, 1992).

Originally, AQS data have to be collected through three home observations for 3 hours (Waters & Deane, 1985). Because this procedure is time consuming, data-collection procedures were sometimes adapted by structuring parts of the home observation in order to observe children’s use of the parent as a secure base. Van IJzendoorn et al. (2004) state that structuring might even better allow the observation of behavioural differences in children under similar conditions, especially when structuring involves inducing mild stress. However, more studies with variation in duration and structuring are needed to provide meta-analytic evidence.

A second aim of the current study was therefore to examine the validity of a new procedure that allows the assessment of attachment security through the AQS in a semi-structured setting for children in preschool-age. We expected to find a strong association between the AQS and preschool attachment classifications based on a separation-reunion procedure.
Method

Participants
The sample included 70 children who according to their teachers experienced the most victimization compared to other children in their class (17 girls, 53 boys; mean age = 5.02 years, SD = .61 at the start of the school year) and one of their parents (54 mothers, 16 fathers). For a more detailed description of the sample we refer to Chapter 4.

Procedure
Study families were recruited on the basis of a two-step screening procedure. In the first step, 2,003 preschool children were assessed with respect to exposure to victimization on the basis of teacher reported victimization during the fall period. In the second step, parents of the 295 children who scored the highest on exposure to victimization (at least compared to their classmates) were asked informed consent for participation in the study. All participating children were followed up twice during one school year (in the winter and spring period) to determine for whom victimization was stable. For a more detailed description of the two-step screening procedure we refer to the separate chapters and to Chapter 3 specifically.

Data on attachment were collected through laboratory sessions in the form of children’s parties, which were organised during the winter term. Each party consisted of the following parts: a welcome to the party with coffee and tea, a separation/reunion procedure, free play after the separation/reunion procedure, snack time, four tasks allowing the observation of parenting style and the ending of the party. The duration of the sessions was 2.5 hours and each session was videotaped by nine cameras. Children as well as their parent were invited (six children and one of their parents per session).

In order to assess the quality of the parent-child attachment relationship we included the Attachment Q-set (Waters, 1995). Based on video observations of the whole party, except for the observations during the separation/reunion procedure, an independent certified observer sorted the 90 items of the AQS-set. To allow assessment of convergent validity a separation/reunion procedure based on the protocol of Cassidy and Marvin (1992) was conducted. This procedure was designed to be able to assess secure base behaviour in a situation of mild stress. Because the sample consisted of children in preschool age, separations may be more routine and less upsetting than for infants. Therefore, the procedure was conducted right after the start of the party before the children had become familiar with the location. In an unfamiliar setting, with unfamiliar people, the children were separated from their parent for 40 minutes to bake cookies. After 40 minutes each child was brought separately to another room by an unknown adult. The child could make a drawing for 5 minutes, while the unknown adult was reading
a magazine. After 5 minutes the parent entered the room for reunion. About one minute after the reunion, the stranger left the room. The reunion behaviour of the child was coded afterwards by a certified coder using the McArthur Preschool Attachment Classification.

**Measures**

*Peer victimization.* Teachers completed a 16-item measure of children’s peer victimization. This measure consisted of the three physical and two relational peer victimization items developed by Crick, Casas, and Ku (1999). Eleven additional items were included, assessing verbal, object related (i.e., damaging property), and indirect relational (i.e., rumor spreading) victimization, in order to sample the various forms of victimization. Items were answered using a 4-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (never true), 2 (almost never/rarely), 3 (regularly) to 4 (often/very often). Victimization scores were computed by taking the sumscore of the 16 items for each child. Reliability was high (Coefficient alpha .87, .90, and .92 at T1, T2 and T3 respectively; item-total correlations >.44). For a more detailed description of the construction and validation of this measure we refer to Chapter 3.

*Attachment security.* The Attachment Q-Set (AQS), Version 3 (Waters, 1995), consists of 90 descriptions of secure base behaviour in various forms and various situations supplemented with so-called filler items. Based on observations of parent-child interactions during the children’s party, a trained observer sorted the 90 items in piles ranging from “characteristic” to “uncharacteristic”. The observer was blind to the scores on the separation-reunion and parenting style. Individual sorts are correlated with a criterion sort describing a hypothetical “ideally secure” child (based on expert scores). This correlation indicates the similarity of the observed child to an ideally securely attached child and is considered as an index of the quality of attachment behaviour. Security scores range from -1.00 for the most insecure child to +1.00 for the most secure child.

*Attachment classification.* Reunion behaviour was classified according to the system developed by Cassidy and Marvin (1992). Therefore, the first author attended the McArthur preschool attachment training from W. Whelan. In order to receive an acceptable level of agreement with the McArthur group tapes, 40 practice tapes were viewed and classified afterwards with intensive instruction/feedback from the trainer. Than, a reliability set of 20 videotapes was viewed and classified. After establishing an 80% level of agreement with the McArthur group, all 70 video-observations of the separation-reunion procedure were analysed with this coding system. The observer was blind to the scores on the AQS and parenting style.

The coding system uses three main patterns of reunion behaviour: secure behaviour (B), insecure-avoidant behaviour (A) and insecure-ambivalent/dependent behaviour (C). Secure behaviour is characterized by smooth, relaxed and comfortable interaction
between parent and child throughout the reunion. There is little or no avoidance, resistance or controlling behaviour by the child. Conversation is fluid and confident. The insecure-avoidant pattern is characterized by the child’s maintenance of emotional neutrality towards the parent. Neither positive, nor negative behaviour is expressed and physical or verbal contact is minimized. The insecure-ambivalent/dependent pattern is characterized by exaggerated intimacy and dependency with the parent through cute, babyish behaviour. In addition to the immature behaviour, the child shows moderate avoidance and anger while seeking proximity. All three patterns can be considered as organized.

The coding system also uses three patterns of disorganization: controlling-caregiving (Ccare), controlling-punitive (Cpun), and insecure-other (IO). Controlling-caregiving behaviour is manifested when the child focuses on helpfully guiding, orienting, or cheering up the parent. Controlling-punitive behaviour is characterized by hostile, directive behaviour with the caregiver such as verbal threats and harsh commands. The insecure-other pattern refers to children who are unable to use the caregiver as a secure base, but do not clearly show the A or C pattern.

Results

Validity of attachment security
Based on the preschool attachment classifications, 71% (37 boys and 13 girls) of our sample were classified as secure in their attachment relationship with their parent, 22% (12 boys and 3 girls) as avoidant, and 7% (4 boys and 1 girl) as ambivalent/dependent. No children were classified as disorganized or insecure-other. Because the numbers of children in the insecure groups were small, we classified the victimized children as either secure or insecure (insecure=1 or secure=2).

A Pearson correlation was computed to examine convergent validity of the AQS. The association between security-insecurity on the AQS and separation/reunion was $r=.45$ ($p<.001$), which revealed higher convergent validity than was found in a meta-analysis on the AQS ($r=.31$; Van IJzendoorn et al., 2004).

In order to create one score on attachment security the scores on the AQS and separation-reunion were multiplied.

Preliminary analyses

Pearson correlations were computed between all variables. There were no effects of gender of the child, age of the child or educational level of the parent on any of the dependent or independent variables ($p>.05$). Therefore, these variables were not included as covariates in further analyses. The mean attachment security score was .72 ($SD=.35$). The means of peer victimization scores at T1, T2 and T3 were respectively 26.13 ($SD=6.18$),
25.02 (SD=6.05), and 23.83 (SD=6.05). As shown in Table 1, measurements of peer victimization during the school year were moderately to strongly interrelated.

### Table 1. Correlations among attachment and peer victimization (N=70)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attachment security</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer victimization T1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer victimization T2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer victimization T3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p<.01

### Predicting the Course of Peer Victimization

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to identify the hypothesized association between attachment security and change in peer victimization. To assess change at T3 relative to earlier peer victimization at Time 1, we included peer victimization at Time 1 in the first step. In this way, effects of the following predictors represented effects on change in peer victimization over time. The combined attachment security measure was entered in the second step. As shown in Table 2, attachment security was not significantly related to the course of peer victimization during the school year (T1-T3), $R^2$ change = .01, $F(1, 67) = .44, p > .05$.

### Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses for the Effect of Attachment Security on the Course of Peer Victimization (T1-T3, N=70)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Victimization T1</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Victimization T2</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Security</td>
<td>-1.24</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $R^2=.21$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2=.01$ for Step 2 ($p>.05$). *p<.001

Separate regression analyses with attachment security as predictor of the course of peer victimization for the first (starting at T1 and ending at T2) and second semester (starting at T2 and ending at T3) of the school year yielded no significant associations ($R^2$ change=.02, $F(1,67)=1.48, p>.05$ and $R^2$ change=.004, $F(1,67)=.27, p>.05$ respectively).

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$^2$ Similar results were obtained with separate analyses on the AQS scores and the separation/reunion scores.
Discussion

This study examined the association between attachment security and the course of peer victimization in young children. The results suggested that concurrent quality of the attachment relationship with one of the parents was not predictive of resolving victimization problems at school. The study provided evidence for convergent validity of the AQS based on observations in a structured setting.

A possible explanation for the finding that attachment security was not predictive of the course of peer victimization may be sought in the issue of cross-context influence. Irrespective of the attachment relationship with their parents, children this young may not yet be verbally capable of translating their hurt feelings in one context (school) to a clear signal for help in another context (family). Repetti (1996) found that even older children (10-13 years) were not always competent enough to find emotional support from their parents in case of peer problems at school. Signals of children were sometimes too indirect or escalated into demanding or disruptive behaviour that could not be connected by parents to the experiences their children had at school.

However, the possibility that attachment security influenced victimization problems in a more indirect way cannot be ruled out. It may be that the security of the parent-child attachment relationship supported more effective regulation of emotion and behavior in response to victimization experiences. In order to manage the negative emotions, securely attached children may restore their self-confidence by seeking attention and reassurance from their parent. This restored self-confidence might prevent them from developing adjustment problems in school, in contrast to their insecurely attached peers. In order to find support for this argument, future research should expand on the present findings by examining attachment security as moderator of emotional consequences of victimization.

Another interesting finding of this study is that 71% of the victimized children were securely attached. This is in line with the study of Monks et al. (2005) who found that 66.1% of the victims in their sample of preschool children were securely attached. Troy and Sroufe (1987), however, found in their sample of 38 preschool children that no securely attached child filled the role of neither victim nor victimizer. Several explanations for this mixed evidence should be considered. First, different measures for attachment security were used. Second, in our sample we only selected children who were actually being victimized by peers. The same was true for the study of Monks et al. Troy and Sroufe, however, sought for victimization experiences after selecting the sample. Third, we studied victimization from a group dynamic perspective in contrast to Troy and Sroufe who studied victimization from a dyadic perspective. This seems to be an important difference, because it has been proposed that in this age group victims of peer aggression are relatively randomly chosen by their aggressive class mates. In this way the aggressors
learn who can be bullied in order to limit their attacks to only the most ‘rewarding’ children (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Perry, Perry, & Boldizar, 1990). Thus, it is possible that many children are exposed to victimization experiences at the beginning of preschool, regardless of their attachment history (Monks et al, 2005). Future research should expand on this issue in order to clarify the contradictory findings.

Probably the most important outcome of this study is the new procedure that we developed in order to assess attachment security in preschool-age children. This procedure seems promising as a methodological innovation. We found a relatively strong association between security-insecurity on the AQS and separation/reunion (r=.45, p<.001). This association revealed higher convergent validity than was found in a meta-analysis on the AQS (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2004). An explanation for this finding may be that both attachment security measures were conducted during the same afternoon. This could have had a positive influence on the correlation. Another explanation may be that the observation of secure base behaviour at home (AQS) triggers less attachment behaviour in 4- to 5-year-old children than in a semi-structured setting which is mildly stress-inducing such as the children’s party. Future research should expand on these findings in order to provide more evidence for the validity of the AQS in a semi-structured setting.

Strengths of the present study include the use of a preschool sample, the use of observational data in a new setting, and the short-term longitudinal design. The relative small sample size posed a limitation. Only 25% of the 295 parents who were asked to participate in this study consented. Considering this low response rate, selection may have played a role. Another limitation concerns the distribution of attachment. The number of children in the insecure groups, based on separation/reunion classifications, were small (i.e., 15 children were classified avoidant, 5 children were classified ambivalent/dependent). As a consequence, the statistical power for testing associations with attachment quality was weak. Larger studies have to be conducted before concluding that attachment quality does not play a role as a determinant of the course of victimization at school.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that attachment security as indirect parental influence does not seem to explain variance in the course of peer victimization. This finding does not exclude the possibility that the parent-child attachment relationship may function as a buffer for the emotional impact that peer victimization causes. Future research should address this issue more directly, to further our knowledge on the role of concurrent attachment in case of peer problems at school. The most important results of the study relate to the validity of applying the AQS in a semi-structured setting for preschool-age children. The findings suggest that this new procedure is worth further empirical investigation. Van IJzendoorn and colleagues (2004) concluded their meta-
analytic study with the statement that the assessment of attachment security remains a choice between a time consuming observation in a low stress natural setting (c.q. AQS) or a brief procedure in a stressful laboratory setting (c.q. the Strange Situation). Based on our first promising findings, the children’s party may provide a third alternative which allows the possibility to conduct the separation-reunion procedure and the AQS observation in one session. The procedure is mildly stressful but also appeared to be a lot of fun for both the children and their parents.
References


