Chapter 13

Attachment Security and Emotional Availability: The Broadening of Two Prominent Concepts

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ABSTRACT

Attachment theory posits that sensitive interactions between caregivers and children are the bedrock of a secure attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The larger concept of “emotional availability” (Biringen, Robinson, & Emde, 1998) refers to the avenue by which secure attachments are formed, including qualities additional to parental sensitivity. That is, according to the emotional availability framework (Biringen et al., 1998), parental structuring, non-intrusiveness, and non-hostility and sensitivity contribute to the climate that nurtures secure attachment. Child qualities also contribute to secure attachment, in the form of child’s responsiveness and child’s involvement/engagement with the caregiver. This paper will explore the similarities and differences in these two (primarily) observational concepts as well as propose areas that require broadening, given recent research on family dynamics. Moreover, we describe implications for clinical practice involving intact and divorced families.

ORIGINS IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

Both attachment and emotional availability draw from therapeutic insights about the early parent-child relationship. Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975) first used the term “emotional availability” to describe the mother’s supportive presence as she encourages the infant’s autonomous pursuits. They noted that healthy emotional relationships between a parent and child allow for exploration and autonomy, as well
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as the need for connection or ‘refueling.’” Emde and Easterbrooks (1985) stated that emotional availability involves the expression of a full range of emotions (negative and positive) by both parent and child and that the child’s emotional expressions provide the parent with information about what the child is feeling and communicating, a critical piece in a mutually rewarding feedback loop.

The concept of attachment also has its origins in clinical work (e.g., Bowlby, 1969/1984) and especially in those situations that involve separation and loss experiences. Attachment is especially useful in today’s clinical work with young children and families (Lieberman, Van Horn, & Ghosh, 2005). Even under difficult and traumatic circumstances, attachment figures are viewed as able to recall positive models from their own childhood experiences of parenting (that is, “angels in the nursery”) (Lieberman, Padrón, Van Horn, & Harris, 2005) and enact them with their own young children. Parents unknowingly carry forward care-receiving experiences or angels from their childhoods, even if only in fleeting positive moments. In the therapy context, a focus on these positive and loved experiences with attachment figures in one’s childhood is drawn upon to help parents not only heal from trauma but also to interrupt its cycle of transmission.

Attachment theory’s important postulate is that actual interactions pave the way for secure as well as insecure attachments (Bowlby, 1969; 1980). Emotional availability is a construct that has been found to be predictive of attachment security, with a similar proposal: the relationship quality between a caregiver and child is based on their actual experiences with one another (Biringen et al., 2014). To limit the scope of this chapter, we first review each construct (focusing on the observational) and then describe how they may benefit from being broadened to include others’ influences, particularly the influence of those within the larger family system. We hope that this broadening of both constructs may help practitioners as they work with families as well as encourage research on how internal working models are formed (from both actions/interactions as well as what might be said about such actions/interactions). Finally, we focus on families who are not traditional. Such families include, but are not limited to, those which are separated/divorced, adoptive, or where a significant attachment figure has been lost.

THE CONCEPT AND MEASUREMENT OF ATTACHMENT SECURITY

Theoretical Underpinnings

John Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory posits that the bond between a mother and her child is based on love and trust, rather than on the satisfaction of basic needs, such as the need for food and water. Attachment theory also posits that attachment bonds serve the purpose of ensuring and promoting the social and emotional needs of the young child. According to this perspective, many different attachment bonds may be formed in a family. Traditionally, these different relationships were not viewed as of equal value in fulfilling the young child’s needs for emotional security. In fact, the concept of “monotropy” refers to the explicit hierarchy in such bonds, with a principal attachment figure being sought out by a child in times of stress, distress, fatigue, or illness.

When an infant feels stressed, the primary attachment figure serves as a source of comfort, and the infant learns to turn to this attachment figure. In addition, the infant becomes wary of unfamiliar others over time, and this wariness serves an evolutionary purpose because it protects the infant when
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