Attachment and developmental risk in boys: An evolutionary perspective

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Risk for externalizing disorders, aggression, generalized psychopathology

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Sensitive caregiving
Secure attachment

Insensitive, rejecting, or inconsistent caregiving
Anxious/ambivalent attachment

Unresolved trauma, frightened/frightening caregiver

Disorganization
Avoidant attachment
Romantic attachment

Effect size by region

Del Giudice (2011)

Anxiety ES

Avoidance ES

Relationship instability/divorce
Promiscuous sexuality
Avoidance

Relationship conflict/distress
Impulsive sexuality

Anxiety
Infancy/early childhood
No sex differences

Middle childhood
as a key transition point

Adulthood
Sex differences avoidance/anxiety

“5-to-7 years shift”
- Major changes in behavior/cognition

Social integration
- Social role learning
- Helping, contribution to family needs
- Responsible behavior

Social competition
- Peer hierarchies
- Dominance, status, social networking
| Brain growth                          | Approaching peak of overall brain volume |
|                                     | Peak of gray matter volume               |
|                                     | Continuing increase in white matter volume/integrity |
| Motor and perceptual skills         | Increased gross motor skills (e.g., walking) |
|                                     | Increased fine motor skills               |
|                                     | Local–global shift in visual processing preferences |
| Cognitive skills                    | Increased reasoning and problem-solving skills |
|                                     | (e.g., concrete operations)              |
|                                     | Increased self-regulation and executive functions |
|                                     | (inhibition, attention, planning, etc.)   |
|                                     | Increased mentalizing skills (multiple perspectives, conflicting goals) |
|                                     | Increased navigational skills (working memory, ability to understand maps) |
| Motivation and social behavior | Acquisition of cultural norms (e.g., prosociality)  
Complex moral reasoning (conflicting points of view)  
Increased pragmatic abilities (gossiping, storytelling, verbal competition, etc.)  
Consolidation of status/dominance hierarchies  
Changes in aggression levels (individual trajectories)  
Development of disgust  
Changes in food preferences (e.g., spicy foods)  
Onset of sexual/romantic attraction  
Increased frequency of sexual play  
Increased sense of gender identity  
Peak of sex segregation  
Peak of sex differences in social play (including play fighting vs. play parenting)  
Increased sex differences in physical aggression (M > F)  
Emergence of sex differences in attachment styles |
|---|---|
| Psychopathology | Early peak of psychopathology onset (externalizing, anxiety, phobias, ADHD)  
Peak onset of fetishistic attractions  
Emergence of sex differences in conduct disorders (M > F) |
| Social context | Active involvement in caretaking, foraging, domestic tasks, helping  
Expectations of responsible behavior  
Attribution of individuality and personhood (“getting noticed”) |
Doll-play task (7 y)  

Del Giudice (2008)

Questionnaire study (8-10 y)  

Del Giudice & Angeleri (2015)
Anticipates Parent-child attachment in middle childhood

Avoidance in boys:
- Functional to maximize self-reliance
- Reduced empathy, aggressive status competition with peers

Romantic attachment in adulthood

Avoidance in men:
- Functional to minimize commitment, maximize short-term sexual relationships

Can be biologically adaptive - especially in dangerous, unpredictable contexts

Natural selection favors: anything that improves reproduction and transmission of genes to the following generations

...survival is optional...

...health and well-being are luxuries!
infancy
early childhood

middle childhood

adolescence
adulthood

environmental
risk /
alloparents

secure
attachment

insecure
attachment

insensitive
parenting

unavailable →
ambivalent
unwilling →
avoidant

secure
reprod. strategies
♀ ~ ♂

secure
attachment

ambivalent
attachment

high stress

secure
reprod. strategies
♀ > ♂
♂ > ♀

avoidant
reprod. strategies

future reprod.,
high parenting
effort

other environmental factors
(e.g. age, experience,
changing environment,
operational sex ratio)

current reprod.,
low parenting
effort

other heritable factors
(e.g. K-factor)

prenatal /perinatal
hormones

genetic influence
on environmental
sensitivity

genetic influence
on sex-hormones
pathways

Del Giudice (2009)
Adrenarche

Adrenal androgens

Testosterone

Estrogen

Emergence/intensification of sex differences

Activation of prenatal hormonal effects

Shift toward avoidance in insecure boys?
285 children, 8-10 years

Del Giudice & Angeleri (2015)
Adrenarche as a developmental “switch” (West-Eberhard, 2003)
Implications

Insecure attachment: not a “dysfunction” but an adaptive response

Correlates of avoidance as a coordinated, adapted set of traits: no “magic bullet” to fix them

The environment is not everything: sex differences, genetic factors…

Transition from early to middle childhood: a “switch point” in developmental trajectories

Transition to middle childhood/adrenarche: a plasticity “hot spot” for interventions?
Thanks for your attention!

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References


Also of interest:

