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www.ijpes.com
International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies
ISSN: 2148-9378

A study of the Attachment Stability of Children Living in Different Family Types (A Longitudinal Study of Children from the Age of 6 to 11)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History
Received 05.04.2021
Received in revised form 28.05.2021
Accepted 22.06.2021
Available online: 25.07.2021
Article Type: Research Article

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the attachment stability of children living in different family types from the age of 6 to 11. The study sample comprises 56 children living in Muş, Turkey, including 28 nuclear families and 28 extended families. The "Incomplete Doll Family Story Scale" was used to evaluate the attachment styles of 6-year-old children. The attachment styles of 11-year-old children were evaluated with the "Kerns Secure Attachment Scale". The analysis revealed that the attachment of 52% of the study group was stable. No changes were observed in the attachment styles of 52% of children living in nuclear families and 47% of children living in extended families, considering attachment consistency in family type. The results show that the attachment levels of children from both family types are significantly consistent from the age of 6 to 11, and the attachment stability of children living in nuclear families is stronger than children living in extended families.

Keywords:
Attachment stability; extended family; nuclear family; early childhood; middle childhood

1. Introduction

Bowlby, the pioneer of Attachment Theory, defined attachment as the meaningful emotional tie established between the infant and the caregiver (often the mother) in the first years of life (Bowlby, 1969; 1982; 1988). An important factor in the establishment and development of attachment is the consistent and loving responses given by the caregiver to proximity-seeking infant behaviours such as crying, smiling, and gestures (Main et al., 1985; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Timely, consistent, loving responses from the caregiver to the infant and comfort provided often result in secure attachment. On the other hand, late and inconsistent responses given by the caregiver to the infant and lack of love result in an insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1980; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

Attachment styles shaped in infancy continue to influence individuals' emotional and behavioural aspects in other periods of life. Attachment experiences, particularly those involving the mother, form the basis of

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Citation: Uçar Çabuk, F., Seven, S., Ildız, G. İ., Yeşilyurt, F., & Seven, Z. D. (2021). A study of the attachment stability of children living in different family types (A longitudinal study of children from the age of 6 to 11). *International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies, 8*(3), 222-229.
https://dx.doi.org/10.52380/ijpes.2021.8.3.525

individuals' expectations of themselves and other people. Bowlby defined these expectations as internal working models (Bowlby, 1969; 1973). Bowlby (1980) referred to two key aspects of internal working models. The first is whether the infants consider the attachment figure an available, comfortable, and loving adult. The second is whether they perceive themselves worthy of being helped, comforted, and loved. The establishment of a secure attachment between the infant and caregiver affects the development of these two aspects of internal working models favourably, causing the infants to consider the caregiver as an available, comfortable, and loving adult and themselves as individuals worthy of being helped, comforted, and loved (Bretherton, 1985; Bowlby, 1969). On the other hand, insecure attachment affects the development of internal working models unfavourably, causing the infants to consider the caregivers as unavailable and far from comforting and loving, while they perceive themselves as individuals as being unworthy of help, comfort, and love (Bowlby, 1973; Bretherton, 1992).

Internal working models shaped in the early stages of life are driven into the unconscious mind over time and become resistant to change (Main et al., 1985). Internal working models are also generalised to other individuals and direct people's relationships with others (Bowlby, 1969; 1973).

Although Bowlby (1969) implied that attachment styles are initiated and consolidated in early childhood, his theory and most of his clinical studies were based on children's internal working model experiences until adolescence. This is best explained by Bowlby's idea that attachment continues stably. Many short, middle, and long-term studies in the literature on attachment stability aimed to test this idea proposed in Attachment Theory. Granot and Mayseless (2001) and Schmueli-Goetz et al. (2008) concluded that attachment styles in early childhood continue through to middle childhood. A longitudinal study conducted by Seven and Ogelman (2012) revealed that the attachment stability of children from the age of 6 to 9 was 54%. Ammaniti et al. (2000) and Grossmann et al. (2005) identified the stability of attachment styles in their longitudinal study on children from middle childhood to adolescence. Ammaniti et al. (2000) revealed in their longitudinal study that the attachment stability of children from the age of 10 to 14 was 74%. However, other studies in the literature do not support the stability of attachment. Pinquart et al. (2013) found that attachment stability dropped after the preschool period in their meta-analysis study.

Attachment stability is considered to be affected by several factors. The leading factor is the relationship network in the family, which affects the relationship between the child and caregiver. Family roles are quite explicit and clear in nuclear families comprised of parents and children. However, family roles and relationship networks have a more complex nature in extended families that involve grandparents and other close relatives (Marvin & Stewart, 1990). It is particularly believed that living with grandparents affects the quality of the mother-child relationship negatively (İlhan-Ildız & Ahmetoğlu, 2016; Kerns & Richardson, 2005). This study analyses attachment stability from the age of 6 to 11 regarding the nuclear family and extended family variables. Therefore, answers are sought to the questions "Do the attachment styles of children have stability from the age of 6 to 11?" and "Do the attachment styles of children from the age of 6 to 11 depend on whether they live in a nuclear family or extended family?". A literature review reveals that although attachment stability has been a subject of study, the number of researchers that have analysed attachment stability in nuclear and extended families remains limited. Another limitation in the literature is the limited number of longitudinal studies that extend from early childhood to middle childhood.

In a survey conducted on the family structures in Turkey, they were nuclear families, broken families, patriarchal families, and extended families according to the number of spouses in the family and width of the generations (Karslı, 2006). The traditional Turkish family is rooted in the extended family. The nuclear family has emerged as the dominant family type in Turkish society in the last 50 years. However, studies in recent years have found that parents in nuclear families continue to display many behaviours related to the roles in the extended family (Seven & Alabay, 2020). Ilhan-Ildız and Seven (2018) revealed in their study that parents continued extended family attitudes and behaviour patterns towards their children regardless of the dominance of the nuclear family type in Turkish culture. The problem of this study is the attachment stability of children living in nuclear and extended families in Turkish culture from early childhood to middle childhood. From theoretical and cultural perspectives, the study is important due to the limited research on the subject and the description of attachment due to cultural change. It is considered that the results obtained in the study will contribute to the attachment literature and serve as a reference for other researchers.

2. Method

2.1. Research Model

The study was designed in a longitudinal survey model that might be described as semi-experimental. Longitudinal studies aim to collect data from the same person or sample group with the same or similar data collection tools twice or more to detect the change in time in what is measured.

2.2. Participants

The study group comprised 56 normally developing children living with both family structures in Muş, Turkey. 51.7% of the children (n=29) were boys and 48.3% (n=29) were girls. The first evaluation was carried out in the kindergarten in which the children received preschool education. The mean age of the children was 6 (M = 67.9 months, SD = 2.1) in the first evaluation. The second evaluation was carried out 5 years later when the children were attending the 3rd grade of secondary school. The mean age in the second evaluation was 11 (mean age = 11 years; M = 127.9 months, SD = 2.1).

Table 1. *Demographic Data of Nuclear Families*

Socio-demographic Characteristics	Groups	f	%
Number of Siblings	One Sibling	7	25
	Two siblings	21	75
Mothers Education Level	Illiterate	3	10.71
	Primary School	16	57.14
	High school	5	17.86
	Bachelor's degree	4	14.29
Fathers Education Level	Illiterate	1	3.57
	Primary School	7	25
	High school	11	39.29
	Bachelor's degree	9	32.14
Economic Level	Lower	5	17.86
	Middle	20	71.43
	Higher	3	10.71

Socio-demographic data of the nuclear families are displayed in Table 1 above. According to the data, 25% of the children (n=7) had one sibling, and 75% (n=21) had two siblings. In terms of the educational status data of the mothers, 10.71% (n=3) were illiterate, 54.14% (n=16) were primary school graduates, 17.86% (n=5) were high school graduates, and 14.29% (n=4) were university graduates. The educational status data of the fathers shows that 3.57 (n=1) were illiterate, 25% (n=7) were primary school graduates, 39.29% (n=11) graduated from high school, and 32.14% (n=4) were university graduates. Analysis of the economic status of the families indicates that 17.86% (n=5) had low economic status, while 71.43% (n=20) had middle, and 10.71% (n=3) had high economic status.

Table 2. *Demographic Data of Extended Families*

Socio-demographic characteristics	Groups	f	%
Number of Siblings	Two Siblings	13	46.43
	Three Siblings	15	53.57
Mothers Education Level	Illiterate	10	35.71
	Primary School	13	46.43
	High school	4	14.8
	Bachelor's degree	1	3,57
Fathers Education Level	Illiterate	4	14.8
	Primary School	10	35.71
	High school	9	32.14
	Bachelor's degree	5	17.86
Economic Level	Lower	11	39.29
	Middle	14	50
	Higher	3	10.71

Socio-demographic data of the nuclear families are displayed in Table 2. According to the data, 46.43% of the children (n=13) had two siblings, and 53.57% (n=15) had three siblings. In terms of the educational status data of the mothers, 35.71% (n=10) were illiterate, 46.43% (n=13) were primary school graduates, 14.8% (n=4) graduated from high school, and 3.57 % (n=1) were university graduates. The educational status data of the fathers show that 14.8% (n=4) were illiterate, 35.71% (n=10) were primary school graduates, 32.14% (n=9) graduated from high school, and 17.86% were (n=5) university graduates. Analysis of the economic status of the families indicates that 39.29% (n=11) had low economic status, while 50% (n=14) had a middle, and 10.71 (n=3) high economic status. On the other hand, at least two close relatives, such as an aunt, grandfather, or grandmother, live in the extended families. No significant changes occurred in the demographic structure of the children when they turned 11.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Demographic Data Form: The authors developed this form to collect demographic data of the children and their families. The form includes questions about the children regarding their gender, age (in months), number of siblings, and parents' educational status.

Incomplete Stories with a Doll Family Scale (ISDFS): The Incomplete Stories with a Doll Family Scale (ISDFS) was developed by Cassidy (1988) to identify the attachment styles of 6-year-old children. Seven (2006) developed the Turkish version of the scale. The scale is based on projective stories. There are 6 stories in the ISDFS, and for each story, doll family figures and scale materials are used to present problem situations to children, and they are asked to complete the rest of the story. Each story narration is video recorded and scored from 1 to 5 according to criteria such as whether the children perceive that they have a secure relationship with their mothers, use them as secure bases in stressful situations, and are comforted by their mothers. If the total score received for the stories is between 6 and 17, the attachment style is classified as "fearful", while "18-24 points" are classified as avoidant, and "25-30" points as secure. While adapting the scale to Turkish, the stories were scored by two independent coders, and the Pearson correlation coefficient was found to be .95. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculated to evaluate the internal consistency of the scores in the ISDFS is .83. The split-half reliability calculated for the scale scores was .83.

Kerns Secure Attachment Scale (KSAS): The Kerns Secure Attachment Scale was developed by Kerns et al. (1996) to identify children's secure attachment level in the middle childhood period. Sümer and Anafarta-Şendağ (2009) adapted the scale to Turkish. The scale has two separate forms, namely the Kerns Secure Attachment Scale Mother Form and the Kerns Secure Attachment Scale Father Form. The scale has 15 items based on the extent to which children "(a) believe that their attachment figures will be sensitive and available, (b) are likely to trust their attachment figures under stress, and (c) how willing they are to communicate with their attachment figures. Scale scores range between 15 and 60. Higher scores indicate higher secure attachment levels. There is a two-way statement for each item on the scale (Some children... but some children...). Two types of children are described on the right and left of the BUT box, and participants are first asked to decide which type they fit most. Then, they are asked to go to the selected side and state the extent to which they fit the description. The 4th, 9th, 10th, 13th, and 15th items of the scale are reverse coded. While adapting the scale to Turkish, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients were found to be .84 for the mother form and .88 for the father form (Sümer & Anafarta-Şendağ, 2009). The Kerns Secure Attachment Scale Mother Form was used in this study, and its internal consistency coefficient was calculated as .91.

2.4. Procedure

Relevant permission was obtained from the Directorate of National Education in Muş province before commencing the study. The kindergarten selected for the practice was a school attended by children of families from a middle socioeconomic level. A parent permission form describing the study's goal, duration, and practice procedure was sent to the parents of normally developing 6-year-old children living with both parents. After receiving parental permission, a total of 56 children were selected for the study, where 28 children were from nuclear families, and the other 28 were from extended families. "Incomplete Stories with a Doll Family" was practised with these children in their schools. On the other hand, the parents were asked to complete the Demographic Data Form. Parents who consented to their child's participation in the scale were

contacted at certain intervals during the procedure. When the children reached 11 years old, permission was again obtained from the Directorate of National Education in Muş to administer the "Kerns Secure Attachment Scale Mother Form" to the study group of children in their schools. A total of 11 different schools were visited to reach the children. In the second practice, the same demographic form was sent to the parents again to determine whether there had been any parental loss, divorce, or significant changes in the socio-demographic features of the families.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data collected were subjected to data analysis. A normality test was applied to the data set in the first stage of the analysis, and the groups' distribution was identified. In the second stage, as different scoring systems were used in the two scales, scoring was performed by converting the raw scores into standard scores. After converting to standard scores, regression analysis was conducted to identify the predictive role of attachment styles, while the ANOVA test was carried out to evaluate the attachment stability.

3. Findings

3.1. Preliminary Analyses Results

The analysis results showed that the arithmetic mean value of the Incomplete Stories with a Doll Family Scale was 19.25, while the median value was 19.00, the standard deviation was 4.9, the skewness value was-.149, and the kurtosis value was -.337. On the other hand, the arithmetic mean value of the Kerns Secure Attachment Scale was 49.5, while the median value was 51, the standard deviation was 7, the skewness value was -1.22, and the kurtosis value was 1.58. Arithmetic mean values and median values are very close to each other, and the skewness and kurtosis coefficients are in the 1.00 range according to the results indicating that scale scores are close to normal distribution. Therefore, it was accepted that both scales had normal distribution values.

The total scores that the children received in ISDFS were separated into three groups: secure, avoidant, and negative attachment styles. ISDFS and Kerns Secure Attachment Scale scores were transformed into standard scores ranging from 1 to 3 for the repetitive measurement ANOVA test. Accordingly, those who received a score under the standard deviation (ISDFS 15, KSAS 42) 1, those who scored over the standard deviation or higher (ISDFS 25, KSAS 58) and were in the 1.00 standard deviation range (ISDFS 16-24, KSAS 43-57) were classified as the avoidant group.

3.2. Distribution of Attachment Styles

The distribution of the attachment styles of the 56 children in the study according to the ISDFS at the age of 6 and KSAS at the age of 11 is as follows: For the 6-year-old study group, the attachment styles were: 46.43% (f=26) had secure, 35.71% (f=20) had avoidant, and 17.86% (f=10) had fearful/negative attachment style. With regard to the 28 children living in nuclear families: 53.57% (f=15) had a secure, 35.71% (f=10) had an avoidant, and 10.71% (f=3) had a fearful/negative attachment style. In the context of 28 children living in extended families, 39.29 % (f=11) had a secure, 35.71 % (f=10) had an avoidant, and 25% (f=7) had a fearful/negative attachment style.

In terms of the distribution of attachment styles of the 6-year-old children according to gender, 48.15% (f=13) of the girls (f=27) had a secure attachment style, 40.74% (f=11) had avoidant, 11.11% (f=3) had a fearful/negative attachment style; on the other hand, while 44.83 % (f=13) of the boys (f=29) had a secure attachment style, 31.03% (f=9) had an avoidant, and 24.14% (f=7) had a fearful/negative attachment style.

Table 3. 6 *Classification of Attachment Styles of 6-Year-Old Children According to Family Type and Gender*

	Type of Family		Gender		Total
Attachment categories	Nuclear	Extended	Boys (29)	Girls (27)	
Negative/ hostile	3 (10.71 %)	7 (25.00 %)	7 (24.14 %)	3 (11.11 %)	10 (17.86 %)
Avoidant	10 (35.71 %)	10 (35.71 %)	9 (31.03 %)	11 (40.74 %)	20 (35.71 %)
Secure/open	15 (53.57 %)	11 (39.29 %)	13 (44.83 %)	13 (48 .15%)	26 (46.43 %)
Total	28 (100 %)	28(100 %)	29 (100 %)	27 (100 %)	56 (100 %)

Table 3 above shows that boys were more likely to be classified as hostile/negative (24.14 % boys and 11.11% girls). Similarly, children from extended families were also more likely to be classified as hostile/negative (25.00% extended, 10.71% nuclear). In contrast, children who lived in nuclear families showed a higher prevalence of secure/open attachment (53.57% nuclear, 39.29% extended).

Table 4. *Predictive Role of The Attachment Styles of 6-Year-Old Children on Their Attachment Styles at The Age of 11 According to Family Type*

	β	R^2	ΔR^2	F
All cases (n = 56)	.519	.269	.255	19.856***
Extended family (n = 28)	.466	.218	.187	7.230**
Nuclear family (n = 28)	.517	.268	.239	9.502**

** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 4 above shows the simple linear regression analysis results related to the predictive role of the attachment styles of 6-year-old children on their attachment styles at the age of 11 according to family type. It can be seen in Table 4 that the attachment styles of the 6-year-old children in the study group significantly predicted their attachment styles at the age of 11 ($F = 19.85$; $p < .001$). Analysis of the predictive role of the 6-year-old children's attachment styles on their attachment styles at the age of 11, according to gender, reveals that the attachment styles of 6-year-old children of extended families ($F = 7.23$, $p < .01$) and nuclear families ($F = 9.50$, $p < .01$) significantly predict their attachment styles at the age of 11. According to Table 4, children's attachment styles have significant stability from the age of 6 to 11. A comparison of the stability of attachment styles according to family type reveals that the attachment stability of children in extended families ($r = .52$, $p < .01$) is stronger than children living in nuclear families ($r = .47$, $p < .01$).

Table 5. *One-Way ANOVA Test Results of Total Attachment Score Stability from The Age of 6 To 11 in The Context of Family Type*

	Years		*M*	SD	*F*	Sig.
All cases (*n* = 56)		6	2.0714	.65663	.161	.690
		11	2.0357	.65663		
Family type	Nuclear family	6	2.2143	.68622	.074	.787
		11	2.1786	.72283		
	Extended family	6	1.9286	.60422	.088	.769
		11	1.8929	.62889		

According to the One-Way Anova Test results presented in Table 5 above, there is no significant difference between the total attachment scores of the study group at the ages of 6 and 11 ($F = .16$, $p > .05$). Similarly, Table 5 indicates that there is no significant difference between children in nuclear families ($F = .074$ $p > .05$) and children in extended families ($F = .088$, $p > .05$) according to their total attachment scores at the ages of 6 and 11.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study analyses the attachment stability of children from the age of 6 to 11, according to their family type variable. The simple linear regression analysis results to identify the predictive role of attachment at the age of 6 on the attachment style at the age of 11 showed a significant prediction of 52%. However, according to the One-Way Anova Test conducted to identify the attachment stability between the groups, results show no significant difference between total attachment scores according to family type.

The literature review revealed some studies that support the findings of this research. Pinquart et al. (2013), Fraley (2000), and Ammaniti et al. (2000) reported findings on attachment stability in their longitudinal studies. Bowlby (1969; 1982) suggested in his Attachment Theory that internal working models that determine attachment are likely to be stable throughout life. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the results obtained in this study overlap the theoretical basis. Additionally, the study results are important as they specifically reveal that attachment follows a stable course from the age of 6 to 11.

Another important conclusion of the study is that children's attachment security and stability in nuclear families is stronger than children living in extended families. The study findings also reveal that children's

negative/fearful attachment rate in extended families is higher than children living in nuclear families. The literature review revealed study results showing that children's attachment security in extended families is unfavourably influenced by the complicated and inconsistent nature of in-family relations (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). Seven and Ogelman (2012) studied attachment stability from the age of 6 to 9 and concluded that the attachment stability of children living in extended families was 47%, while the attachment stability of children living in nuclear families was 59%.

The distribution in terms of gender showed that 7 out of 10 children identified as hostile/negative were boys while the other 3 were girls. This finding shows that boys are more likely to display a hostile, negative attachment style than girls. This finding concurs with other studies in the literature (İlhan-Ildız & Ahmetoğlu, 2016; Diener et al., 2008).

One of the study's strengths is that the selected sample comprised Turkish children who were living permanently with their parents. Many longitudinal studies reported that some children had a multiple attachment experience, and some children went on with their lives with a single parent in the study process. However, this study has several limitations. One of the main limitations is that it was restricted to a specific region. Considering the cultural diversity and family types in Turkey, longitudinal studies could be conducted in different regions with broken families. On the other hand, another limitation of this study might be that multiple attachment styles in the extended family were not taken into account. Several suggestions can be made according to the study results. First, to carry out studies with an increased number of age groups, new scales must be developed to measure parent and child-oriented attachment from early childhood to adulthood, or existing scales must be adapted to Turkish. There are projective attachment scales for early childhood. Projective scales could be strengthened, and scales could be adapted to the Turkish culture to measure attachment in middle childhood.

Consequently, this study reveals that children's attachment from the age of 6 to 11 has stability. This stability was also found to be significant in terms of family type. On the other hand, it was discovered that extended families are more advantageous in terms of children's attachment stability. The findings obtained in this study have contributed to the literature as they both identified attachment stability during the middle childhood period and revealed the effect of the nuclear family type on attachment stability.

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