

## Infant-Mother Attachment in Separated and Married Families

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**SUMMARY.** Two contrasting predictions about the effects of parental marital separation on infants' attachment to their mothers are considered. The "early adversity" hypothesis suggests that infants will be adversely affected by negative life events and thus will develop anxious attachments to their mothers. The "protective" hypothesis claims that infants are resistant to stressors because of their limited cognitive ability, and therefore will be no more likely to develop anxious attachments than other infants. Results from 76 mother-child pairs in the "strange situation" procedure (assessing infant-

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mother attachment) supported the "protective" hypothesis in that there were no significant differences between infants in two marital status groups. The role of marital status versus unfavorable life events in affecting children's development was discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [gelinfo@haworth.com](mailto:gelinfo@haworth.com)]

The general consensus in the divorce literature seems to be that the separation/divorce of their parents negatively influences children's development (e.g., Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). The effects are said to be greater if the breakup occurred before the child's fifth birthday (e.g., Allison & Furstenberg, 1989), and that boys are more affected than are girls (e.g., Hetherington et al., 1982; Rutter, 1971). Yet these conclusions have referred almost exclusively to children who have been examined at school-age or older. There is almost no attention devoted to children under the age of three.

Knowledge about the effects of divorce on children at such a young age remains speculative. Two major contentions are observable in the literature. One is that early adversity leads to current and long-lasting difficulties for the individual. The other suggests that due to their young age, infants are not greatly affected by events that occur during this time period (Rutter, 1989). The arguments for both points of view will be reviewed next.

Ethological attachment theory (e.g., Vaughn, Egeland, Sroufe, & Waters, 1979), which suggests that the failure to develop a secure attachment (with the mother) by 12 to 18 months results in less than optimal development for the child, concurs with the "early adversity" hypothesis. Ethologists claim that events which affect the quality of the mother-infant relationship may affect the attachment of the infant to the mother. Marital separation and divorce often result in an overburdened mother (Brandwein, Brown & Fox, 1974; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979a), and one who is self-absorbed (Rohrlich, Ranier, Berg-Cross, & Berg-Cross, 1977). Life in a one-parent family requires new negotiation of roles and necessitates a period of trial and error before a new equilibrium is reached (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976). These are not considered to be ideal circumstances for a mother to be sensitively responsive to her infant (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974). Research on mothers' parenting after divorce suggests that they are more punitive and controlling than mothers who are married (Hetherington et al., 1976; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Thus it is likely that infant-mother relationships in divorced families may not be conducive to a child feeling secure in its attachment to mother. The above data may suggest that the disruptions of marital separa-

tion would affect the mother's sensitivity to the infant's needs and therefore disrupt the infant-mother attachment.

There is very little empirical evidence upon which to draw to assess the accuracy of this contention. Studies of lone-parent families investigating infant-mother attachment have been limited to samples of families at risk (poverty stricken, poorly educated mothers, unplanned pregnancies, unstable relationships, mental retardation, abusing/neglecting parents). Using these "high risk" samples, Crittenden (1985) and Egeland and Farber (1984) found no significant differences between infants from one- vs. two-parent families. However, Egeland and Farber found a tendency for boys from one-parent families to be the most likely group to show an anxious attachment. When Vaughn, Gove, and Egeland (1980) observed a subsample of the infants from the Egeland and Farber study six months later, they found a trend for more infants from non-intact families than from intact families to be anxiously attached to their mothers (65% of the anxiously attached group were from single-parent families). While the effect of parental marital separation on young infants' attachment is still equivocal, circumstantial evidence with slightly older children gives tentative support to the early adversity hypothesis. For example, Peretti and di-Vitorrio (1993) found that children aged between three and six reported the experience of guilt, low confidence, and feeling less sociable if their parents were divorced.

In contrast to the research on attachment, evidence from the literature on stress and children suggests that infants may in fact be protected from adverse events such as father absence and divorce due to their young age. Rutter (1989) argued that since infants under about six months of age have not yet formed attachments to others, and because they also lack the cognitive capacity to understand what was happening during times of stress, they suffered no lasting effects. It is possible that infants will have no recollection of any strife between parents and will be more adaptable than older children to new situations (such as living in a one-parent family or in a step-family) because they will not have recalled anything different (cf. Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The present study is one of the first empirical attempts to assess the effects of parental marital separation on children as young as one to two years of age. Using questionnaire data, Hodges, Landis, Day, and Oderberg (1991) found that mothers' reports of the quality of the relationships children (aged one to three years) had with their parents was related to the fathers' visitation patterns. The present study expands upon this by utilizing a standard laboratory observation procedure to assess the infant-mother attachment relationship. The aim of this paper is to assess whether infants from separated/divorced families are

more likely to display an anxious pattern of attachment in contrast to a matched sample of infants from married-parent families. If the hypothesis that marital separation is necessarily harmful is correct (herein referred to as the "early adversity" hypothesis), marital separation will result in more anxious attachments among the infants in the separated sample. On the other hand, if Rutter's hypothesis about infancy being protective is correct (herein referred to as the "protective" hypothesis), there should be no differences in the number of securely attached infants in the two groups.

There have been some recent suggestions that the strange situation procedure may have different meanings for children from families that do not fit into the traditional mold of the middle-class, two-parent family with one breadwinner and one major caregiver who remains at home (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, 1989). However, given the strong record of the reliability and validity of the strange situation (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) the method is worth employing as long as the interpretation of any group differences is conducted with caution.

## *METHOD*

### *Subjects*

Seventy-six infants and their mothers served as participants. Half of the mothers had separated from their husbands/partners on average 13.13 months ( $sd = 9.59$ ) prior to the study. They had been living with their former partners for an average 4.96 years ( $sd = 3.44$ ) prior to the breakup of the relationship. (Thus their weddings took place on average 6.3 years prior to the study.) The mean age of the infants in the separated group was 21.82 months ( $sd = 9.10$ ).

The other half of the sample was still living with the father of their child. They had been living together an average of 7.64 years ( $sd = 3.25$ ; their weddings took place approximately the same time as those of the separated families). The mean age of the infants in the married group was 20.08 months ( $sd = 7.13$ ). There were 15 boys and 23 girls in each group, matched for age. Volunteers were recruited from health visitors ( $N = 24$ ), mother/toddler groups, playgroups, and other parenting groups ( $N = 24$ ), the local media ( $N = 8$ ), the local courts ( $N = 3$ ), and referrals from other participants ( $N = 16$ ). In one separated family two children participated.

### *Attachment Assessments*

All infants and mothers participated in the strange situation procedure as described by Ainsworth et al. (1978). The women who acted as the

stranger were unaware of the aims of the study. A coder trained to classify infant patterns of attachment in the standard manner who was also blind to the hypotheses of the study scored all the videotaped sessions. Four patterns were coded, as described by Ainsworth et al. (1978) and Main, Kaplan, and Cassidy, (1985): secure (B), anxious-avoidant (A), anxious-resistant (C), and anxious-disorganized (D).

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the attachment classifications for the separated and married groups separately. For infants from separated mothers, 52.6% were securely attached, 21.1% showed the avoidant attachment pattern, 5.3% displayed the resistant attachment pattern, and 13.2% were classified as showing the disorganized pattern. In the married group, 68.4% of infants were classified as securely attached, 13.2% were scored as avoidant, 13.2% resistant, and 2.6% disorganized. The distribution of categories for each group is comparable to that obtained by other researchers in the field, who obtain roughly 66% secure (B) infants, 22% avoidant (A) infants, and 12% resistant (C) infants (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978). (Insufficient information exists thus far on the percentage of disorganized [D] infants to be expected in a sample.)

Because of the small numbers involved, infants rated as avoidant, resistant and disorganized were combined into one "anxious" category for

TABLE 1. Attachment Classifications for Children from the Separated and Married Families.

Group:	Separated		Married	
	n	%	n	%
A (Avoidant)	8	21.1	5	13.2
B (Secure)	20	52.6	26	68.4
C (Resistant)	2	5.3	5	13.2
D (Disorganized)	5	13.2	1	2.6
unclassified/ equipment failure	3	7.9	1	2.6
Total	38	100.1	38	100

data analysis. In order to assess the effects of parental marital status and the child's sex upon the infant-mother attachment category, two binary logistic models were fitted to the data (displayed in Table 2) using the GLIM package (Francis, Green, & Payne, 1993). First a model examining secure (i.e., B) vs. the other groups (A, C, & D) was fitted. There is no evidence at the 5% level of a significant difference in the proportion of B relationships in married families being different from those in the separated families (before fitting sex, Chi-Square [ $df = 1, N = 74$ ] = 1.35; after fitting sex, Chi-Square [ $df = 1, N = 74$ ] = 1.16; after fitting parental marital status, Chi-Square = 1.12). The same holds for the interaction between child sex and parental marital status (Chi-Square [ $df = 1, N = 74$ ] = 2.17). Second, a model was fitted to compare D relationships with the others (A, B, & C). There was a trend to suggest that the proportion of D relationships is higher in separated families (Chi-Square [ $df = 1, N = 74$ ] = 3.4, regardless of whether sex is fitted before or after). However, this analysis should be treated with caution as it was exploratory.

### DISCUSSION

The results suggest that one year post-separation, infants are not harmed by the separation experience, as evidenced by their ability to develop secure attachments to their mothers as frequently as children from married-parent families. The lack of differences between the groups supports the "protection hypothesis" (cf. Rutter, 1989). This predicts that young infants will be shielded from negative experiences such as separa-

TABLE 2. Attachment Classifications for each Sex Within each Marital Status Group.

	<u>Separated</u> <u>Girls</u>		<u>Separated</u> <u>Boys</u>		<u>Married</u> <u>Girls</u>		<u>Married</u> <u>Boys</u>	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Anxious	7	30.4	8	53.3	7	30.4	4	28.7
Secure	14	60.9	6	40.0	15	65.2	11	73.3
unclassified/ equipment failure	2	8.7	1	6.7	1	4.3	0	00.0
Total	23	100	15	100	23	99.9	15	100

tion because they have not yet formed attachments (i.e., to the father) and because their cognitive grasp of events is limited. It is possible that differences were not found in the behavior of the infants in the two types of families because the infants were so young at the time of the parental separation that they were not affected by it.

Although the "early adversity" hypothesis would predict that the infant-mother relationship would be negatively affected by maternal life stress (such as marital separation), it may be that separated mothers put extra energy into their relationship with the child once their marriages have broken down. Infants may not necessarily be at risk simply because their mothers are experiencing stress. Despite the hardships that may have ensued after a marital separation, mothers can still be adequate in their parenting roles. This ties in with the findings of Wynn and Bowering (1990), who reported that the homemaking practices of separated/divorced mothers of preschoolers were similar to those of married mothers. Despite the stresses facing the separated mothers, the authors found that they were able to make practical adjustments in order to cope with their circumstances.

Separated mothers may be attempting to compensate for the absence of a father and therefore expend more effort in caring for their children. Children may become more important to mothers after separation (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Although this may mean that some separated mothers are perceived by professionals as "overprotective," these data suggest that without a partner some separated women have more freedom to devote themselves to their children at this point in time.

Alternatively, there may be a sleeper effect which will be revealed in later years. There is evidence of sleeper effects among children of depressed mothers, and a similar mechanism may operate among children with separated mothers. Ghodsian, Zajicek, and Wolkind (1984) found that there was no relationship between maternal depression and child behavior problems when both were measured when the child was 14 months old, but there was a relationship between maternal depression measured when the child was 14 months old and behavior problems when the child was 42 months old (even among mothers who were no longer depressed at 42 months). The preschool period may thus be a time when the effects of early environmental stress (such as parental separation) are manifested.

A final possibility to explain the lack of differences is that infants may be so difficult to care for in the first place that parenting is not greatly affected by marital separation. Although it has been found that divorced mothers may be less "effective" than married mothers (Hetherington et al., 1976; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989), this research has been limited to older children. Married as well as separated mothers of infants may have so much

to cope with that they are not affected by the presence or absence of a partner. The high rate of depression among mothers with infants and toddlers (New & David, 1985; Richman, 1976; 1977) and the large amount of stress these mothers report in their parenting role (Abidin, 1986) attest to this. Father involvement at this age is reported to be minimal (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1988; Oakley, 1979), thus even married mothers may have little support. This shared difficulty with motherhood may explain the lack of differences that were found between the two marital status groups.

The data are consistent with the notion that any long-term problems which children may face appear *not* to result from the experience of separation per se. School-aged children may experience difficulties due to events which occur *after* the separation. For example, conflict between the parents often increases over time despite the fact they are no longer living together (Hetherington et al., 1982; Westman, Cline, Swift, and Cramer, 1970), or the life circumstances of the one-parent family may continue to deteriorate (Weitzman, 1985). Environmental changes associated with the divorce process may negatively affect children (Stolberg & Anker, 1983). The adjustment of school-age children may depend on the level of cooperation or style of conflict between the parents (Camara & Resnick, 1988), which may require time to become established. Researchers (e.g., Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, & Teitler, 1991; Emery, 1982) have increasingly suggested that conflict in marriage may be the cause of later difficulties for children post-divorce. However, conflict prior to the separation does not explain the fact that infants are adjusting adequately 13 months post-separation. If problems arise at pre-school or school age, this cannot be attributed solely to pre-divorce conflict.

The results from this study present a less gloomy picture than that of many other studies of children from separated/divorced families. It seems that despite unfortunate circumstances for the mother, one- to two-year old children can develop adequately, at least during the first year after separation. Although long-term effects of parental separation on infants may well occur, results from the present study suggest that short term effects are minimal.

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