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The father-child activation relationship: a new theory to understand the development of infant mental health

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The activation relationship theory is a complement to the attachment theory. According to John Bowlby (1969), attachment consists of two opposing, complementary behaviour systems: 1) the proximity behaviour system that ensures the child's protection and 2) the exploration system that fosters the child's knowledge acquisition and adaptation to unfamiliar environments. Children regularly seek comfort through contact with attachment figures when tired, hungry, sick or afraid or when feeling insecure in the presence of novelty, and this comfort provides them with the necessary confidence to explore their environment further. The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) developed by Mary Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) has made it possible to assess the quality of the attachment relationship in children ages 12-18 months by focusing more on the secure base than on the parent's response to the baby's need for stimulation in exploratory contexts. Paquette (2004a; 2004b) has theorized father-child attachment by developing the concept of the "activation relationship", the affective bond that permits children to open up to the outside world, focusing primarily on parental behaviour in relation to orduring child exploration of the environment.

The activation relationship theory evolved out of three findings. The first finding was that father-child attachment has a lower explanatory potential than mother-child attachment as assessed with the Strange Situation. The low stability, low transmissibility and low predictability of father-child attachment have led increasing numbers of researchers to question the appropriateness of using this procedure with fathers who have little involvement in daily caregiving (Suess, Grossmann & Sroufe, 1992; van IJzendoorn, 1995; Youngblade, Park & Belsky, 1993). The second finding concerned emerging literature with an increasing focus on the paternal function of opening the child to the world (Paquette et al., 2009). According to Le Camus (2000), paternal roles can be grouped together under the function of opening children to the outside world. Fathers act as catalysts for risk-taking, inciting children to use initiative in unfamiliar situations, to explore, take chances, overcome obstacles, be braver in the presence of strangers, and stand up for themselves (Paquette, 2004a, 2004b; Paquette, Eugène, Dubeau & Gagnon, 2009). This function of opening children to the world is also mediated by language. Studies have shown that fathers play the role of a linguistic bridge to the outside world by using more complex forms of language (by referring to past events, using unfamiliar words and requesting clarification more) than do mothers (Ely et al., 1995; Ratner, 1988; Tomasello, Conti-Ramsden & Ewert, 1990), which causes children to speak more and to use a more varied vocabulary with their fathers (Rowe, Cocker & Pan, 2004). In addition, mothers' verbalizations mostly pertain to emotions while those of fathers refer primarily to actions (Marcos, 1995). Fathers also make more problem-solving related demands than mothers, who tend to solve problems in place of their children (Labrell, 1992). Accordingto Labrell (1996), children must learn to respond to unforeseen events and it is fathers who facilitate such learning by teasing them and destabilizing them with creative, non conventional games. Fathers tend to excite children more and to engage in more physical play with them than do mothers, especially as far as boys are concerned (Dixon et al., 1981; MacDonald & Parke, 1986). Men generally take more risks than women (Byrnes, Miller & Schaffer, 1999), and father-child physical

Contents

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play and physical aggression by children represent particular forms of risk-taking (Paquette, Bigras & Crepaldi, 2010).

The third finding concerned human-specific adaptations and especially human fathers' unique status in the species as compared to other primate species. Humans live longer, and human children are dependent on their parents for longer. A large brain and a prolonged period of development (requiring a high degree of parental involvement) allow humans to learn the great number of things necessary to ensure their adaptation to an environment that has become increasingly complex over the course of history (MacDonald, 1993).

There is a relation between paternal involvement, sexual dimorphism, and mating systems in animals. Polygynous primate species are characterized by pronounced sexual dimorphism, with males being bigger and more aggressive than females (e.g.: baboons). This dimorphism can be explained by the strong competition among males for exclusive access to females, and also by the fact that females choose dominant males (Barash, 1982; Fedigan, 1982). Polygynous primate males generally provide no paternal care and are either indifferent to youngsters or attack them as the latter near puberty, but do protect their group of adult females. In promiscuous primate species (e.g.: macaques, chimpanzees), sexual dimorphism is less pronounced than in polygamous species. Malesand females engage in sexual relations with many partners, but dominant males have priority in terms of access to females. Males show tolerance toward youngsters in the group and may sometimes play with them, but provide no paternal care. Finally, there are a few monogamous primate species (e.g.: siamangs, titis); these species show little or no sexual dimorphism in terms of size and aggressiveness and males provide intensive parental care. Humans also display sexual dimorphism in terms of size, strength and aggressiveness, but fossils show that size-related sexual dimorphism is less pronounced in humans today than it was in our hominoid ancestors (McHenry, 1996). Moreover, the human species differs from all other primate species in that while fathers may give very little or no direct basic care to children (Hewlett, 2000), they do adopt parental roles that are distinct from those of the mothers (Le Camus, 2000). Human fathers play, at minimum, the role of provider of resources and protection for their spouses and children and assume various parental responsibilities, generally with boys at the end of childhood, depending on the culture (Paquette, 2004a). This parental specialisation may have occurred phylogenetically with the emergence of the sexual division of labour (hunting for men and gathering for women[1]), fostered, on the one hand, by the extremely high demands of the human infant due to its immature status and, on the other, by the growing complexity of the human societies to which the offspring must adapt.

The extraordinary increase in the volume of our ancestors' brains would have caused problems at childbirth, and natural selection would have favoured women who gave birth prematurely. This would explain why the human infant's brain is not completely developed at birth and continues to develop over the course of the first year oflife. Being more vulnerable and dependent than other primate infants, the human baby would have required more care from its mother, who would thus have had less time available to find food, thus resulting in selective pressure for greater paternal involvement (see Paquette, 2004a, 2004b). A series of evolutionary strategies (greater genital sensitivity; the establishment of continuous sexual activity—due to females being sexually receptive twelve months a year and soon after delivery—; concealed ovulation; female selection of male providers, etc.) would have resulted in males staying with females for as long as possible (Alexander & Noonan, 1979), bonding with them, and eventually becoming involved on both conjugal and parental levels. In addition to protecting the mother-child dyad from predators, the father would thus have developed an important provider role by supplying the mother-child dyad with necessary resources. The literature supports the notion that this provision of resources helped reduce the risk of infant mortality and ensure better physical health for children (Geary, 2000). This type of distribution of labour would also have permitted the human species to increase its population by reducing the interval between births (1 to 2 years in humans versus 5 to 6 years in chimpanzees).

Fathers would have become involved directly with boys especially through their previously mentioned function of opening the child to the world, thus helping boys develop the skills necessary to fight, hunt and explore territory in search of resources; skills they would

[1] — given that our brain today is still the same as that of the hunter-gathers of the Pleistocene Epoch, the period spanning from 1.8 million to 10 000 years ago (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990) —

need once they were adults in order to ensure the survival of their own children (see Paquette, 2004a). Due to the great plasticity of human behaviour, we are currently witnessing increased paternal involvement in Western industrialized societies, especially in middle socio-economic families: fathers are more involved in caregiving than before, with younger and younger children, and progressively more with girls, even in rough-and-tumble play (Dumont & Paquette, 2008; Paquette, 2005; Paquette, Carbonneau, Dubeau, Bigras, & Tremblay, 2003). While fathers involved in caregiving become increasingly important sources of comfort for their children, studies show that such fathers continue to engage in vigorous, physical play with their children (Dumont & Paquette, 2008). Further, humans engage in the most parent-child play of all primates that live in their natural environment (Biden & Suomi, 1993).

The secondary role attributed to fathers in attachment theory is not surprising given that Bowlby's inspiration came from research on sexually promiscuous primate species (rhesus monkeys, baboons, etc.) in which the young are raised by their mothers. However, the activation relationship theory predicts that, under difficult environmental conditions, children will benefit more from the direct involvement of both their parents when the latter play complementary parental roles. It also predicts that, in general, fathers will serve as children's primary activation figures and secondary attachment figures, while the opposite will be true of mothers. The activation relationship theory predicts that the activation relationship will be the result of the interaction of child temperament with parental encouragement to explore (especially to take calculated risks) and parental control (aimed at protecting the child). To a certain extent, temperament is a reflection of the inherited variability of a group of adaptive dimensions tied to our ancestral environment. The activation relationship fosters children's confidence in their own abilities to cope with threats and strangeness in their physical and social environments as their parents stimulate them to push their exploration further while at the same time providing them with the confidence of knowing they are protected from possible danger —hence the importance of discipline. In other words, children have an innate motivation to explore their environment and develop their autonomy, and the role of parents is to channel this energy according to their child's biological predisposition as well as environmental conditions or dangers.

The activation relationship theory also predicts that fathers will activate children more than mothers will, and that boys will be activated more than girls. In addition, the activation relationship theory should predict competition and risk-taking in children. The theory considers aggression to be a form of risk-taking, and therefore predicts that the father-child relationship will be a greater determinant of the development of aggression problems in boys than the mother-child relationship. Indeed, to date, problems of aggression have been linked more to disorganization (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008) than to the A-B-C types of attachment (Berlin, Cassidy & Appleyard, 2008; Deklyen & Greenberg, 2008). The prediction can be made that over-activated children will have a greater tendency to develop externalising problems while under-activated children will have a greater tendency to develop internalising problems.

Paquette and Bigras (2010) have validated a procedure called the Risky Situation (RS) which allows for assessment of the parent-child activation relationship in children 12-18 months. Gaumon and Paquette (submitted) have adapted this procedure for preschool-age children. The RS is a twenty-minute-long observational procedure that takes place in an unfamiliar room with toys and in the presence of a male stranger. It is divided into six structured episodes during which the child is presented first with a social risk (an increasingly intrusive male stranger), then with a physical risk (a set of stairs), and then forbidden by the parent to climb the stairs. In the RS, under-activated children tend to engage in little exploration, to be passive and anxious and to remain close to the parent. Activated children are confident and prudent in their exploration and obey when the parent sets a limit. Over-activated children are reckless and do not obey when the parent sets limits. The under-activated relationship is linked to parental overprotection, while the over-activated relationship is linked to parental difficulty in obtaining obedience from the child. The coding sheet also provides an activation score between 0 and 5 indicating the extent to which the child is optimally activated (with a score of 5 corresponding to the most positive activation relationship). Results have shown that boys are more activated by mothers and fathers than girls are, and that, depending of the sample, child's temperament (shyness, impulsivity, sociability) may be linked to the activation score. Moreover, and most importantly, the activation relationship reflects the history of parent-child interactions and not only child characteristics: parental stimulation of risk-taking significantly explains the activation score after controlling for child characteristics (sex and temperament). Finally, Paquette and Bigras' (2010) article showed that fathers of activated children tend to have a greater tendency to supervise from slightly more than arm's length than do other fathers. This father-child distance, in which the father is neither too close to nor too far from the child, allows the father to protect the child in case of danger while providing the child with the necessary room to practice abilities independently.

Flanders et al. (2009, 2010) have shown that the association between the frequency of father-child rough-and-tumble play (RTP) in the preschool period and the frequency of physical aggression (which are both evaluated with a self-report questionnaire) is moderated by the father's dominance during RTP (evaluated through observation). When fathers are not dominant over their children, the greater the frequency of RTP, the more physically aggressive the children are and the less they regulate their emotions five years later.

Paquette and Dumont (submitted) have found a positive association between the activation relationship in toddlerhood and RTP frequency at the age of three years only in boys, despite the fathers in their sample engaging in as much RTP with girls as with boys. When fathers encourage their boys to take risks in their physical and social environments, protecting their sons through the use of a combination of supervision and discipline, the boys engage in more risky physical play such as RTP with their fathers. The study's results also support the idea that the Strange Situation evaluates something different when used with father-child dyads (see also Dumont & Paquette, submitted).

Using the preschool risky situation, Gaumon and Paquette (submitted) have confirmed the hypothesis of an association between the activation relationship and internalising disorders (ID) in children (as evaluated with the Child Behaviour Checklist: Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). The more positively activated children are in their relationship with their father, the fewer internalising disorders they display. The association was found to be significant after controlling for child temperament, parental behaviour and the number of hours worked per week by fathers. Moreover, underactivated children have significantly more ID than activated children. The exploration of links between the activation relationship and ID subscales revealed a unique connection to anxiety. Underactivated

children are more anxious when they receive less encouragement to take risks and explore their environment and when they are overprotected through the use of more control than necessary in light of any potential danger. Dumont and Paquette (submitted) also have found the same results in a longitudinal study with another sample, assessing the activation relationship in toddlerhood with the Risky Situation and assessing internalising problems at three years with the Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation Scale (SCBE: LaFreniere & Dumas, 1995).

In conclusion, the activation relationship theory has the potential to provide us with a better understanding of the development of infant mental health by taking into account the specific roles played by fathers as a complement to those exercised by mothers in the family system.

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News from the WAIMH Affiliates Council

Affiliates Corner

March 2012

Welcome to 2012 – the year of the WAIMH congress in Cape Town. This congress will include a time to reflect on how we are going in regard to our growing relationships with each other and with WAIMH. This brief letter invites you to join with us in reflecting on a few issues for us all as affiliates.

First, affiliates have the opportunity to create and sustain an interdisciplinary collaboration based on a shared view of infant mental health. While interdisciplinary theory and practice is often espoused, the actual practice of this is more difficult with both academics and practitioners increasingly identifying themselves within specific streams of theory and practice. While the benefit of this trend is potential depth of knowledge, a coexisting risk is creating a world within a stream; a bit like seeing a baby on its own. Yet, as Winnicott would remind us; there is never a baby there is always a baby and someone. We encourage you all to embrace the tensions and struggles that come with growing a shared view within your affiliates – perhaps as our affiliates grow they will do so amidst the ebb and flow of "rupture and repair" – a process Ed Tronick so eloquently has described.

Second, as WAIMH reaches out to its members via the affiliate council it has become increasingly clear that some WAIMH members are not actively engaged with their local affiliates and vice-versa. We are keen to understand this situation more and invite your ideas and experiences of this issue. Your contribution will help to build a broader picture, from which we can meaningfully respond. It is clear however, we have some more bridges to build in this regard with each other. So if you are reading this and you are a member of WAIMH but not linked in with an affiliate, but you would like to be, let us know and we will put you in touch with the nearest affiliate to you – which may be a different country. This capacity within WAIMH is a great strength that we can tap into. Also if you are a member of an affiliate but not of WAIMH and would like to share with us your experience of this, please send us an email. We would be delighted to hear from you.

Third, at the WAIMH congress, we will meet as a council. We are in the process of formulating the agenda. So, whether you plan to be at the congress or not we would very much appreciate any ideas you might wish to have discussed. If you do, you can send these to office@waimh.org or to either of us.

Finally, we wish you all the very best for 2012. We especially look forward welcoming new affiliates from across the globe; and in turn introducing them to you during the year.

Martin St-André
Affiliate Council Chair

Maree Foley
Affiliate Representative