

Attachment networks to multiple caregivers: An introduction to a special issue

This special issue aims to bolster important research that has been inconsistently and rather scarcely conducted in the past 35 years: the role that multiple caregivers jointly play in the developmental trajectories of children. Despite theoretically and empirically driven calls to assess children's development through the lenses of simultaneous and independent attachment relationships (van IJzendoorn & Tavecchio et al., 1987; van IJzendoorn et al., 1992), attachment research has predominantly focused on mother-child relationships, deeming other caretakers, at best, as subsidiary attachment figures with a marginal influence on the child's development. This special issue aims to expand on the topic by providing historical, ethological, cross-cultural, clinical, methodological, and legal perspectives on the matter.

This special issue opens with a review paper by Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2021), who briefly present an historical account of the nonlinear shift in attachment theory and research, from a wide interest in assessing almost exclusively mother-child attachment relationships, to assessing father-child attachment patterns, and leading up to the current increase in interest and empirical work on attachment network to multiple caregivers. The authors also revisit their recent proposed attachment network assessment models (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018, 2020).

Karaskiewicz et al. (2021) present an ethological study on the network of attachment in mother-father-infant titi monkey (*Plecturocebus cupreus*) triads. The authors assessed the change in pair bonding quality before and after the couples' first offspring birth. They show that affiliation between the parents significantly decreased after birth of the first offspring and stayed relatively low even after infants' transition to behavioral independence, with multiple factors contributing to variability in such pair bonding trajectories. Importantly, Karaskiewicz and colleagues highlight a unique perspective on how new members of the attachment network (i.e., newborns) can influence the relationship quality between its existing members (e.g., mothers and fathers).

The meta-analysis by Deneault et al. (2021) quantifies the associations between father-child attachment and behavior problems across 15 studies. The authors report two intriguing results. The first is that insecure child-father attachment is significantly associated with higher internalizing and externalizing behavior problems compared with secure dyads. The second surprising finding revealed that the effect sizes for insecure child-father attachment are equivalent to those reported in previous meta-analyses on child-mother attachment in relation to behavior problems.

The individual participant data meta-analysis by Dagan et al. (2021) expands on Deneault and colleagues' study-level meta-analysis by examining the associations between attachment networks to mothers *and* fathers and behavior problems. This study indicates

that it takes two secure attachments and at least one nondisorganized attachment to buffer children from an increased vulnerability to internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems, respectively. In addition, this study supports the Deneault et al. (2021) conclusion that the quality of attachment patterns to mothers and fathers are equally important in predicting behavioral problems.

The fifth paper by Liang et al. (2021) expands the scope of early caregiving networks to examine grandmothers' role in the children's attachment bonds with their mothers—a role that has rarely been acknowledged, let alone studied, in developmental science. Moreover, the authors expand previous research on multiple caregivers by studying mother–grandmother–child triads in China. Liang and colleagues show that mother–grandmother coparenting network, in particular nonjudgmental grandparenting, may predict more secure mother–infant attachment and less externalizing problems.

Next, Bakermans-Kranenburg (2021) brings together evidence from residential care facilities and SOS villages to warn us that despite the evolutionary wired readiness of children to attach to multiple caregivers and the benefits that networks confer (compared, for example, with a single caregiver–child attachment), such networks cannot be stretched too much. The frequent shifts of caregivers that characterizes 24/7 institutionalized care, for example, exposes children to too many “nonemotionally significant” caregivers, which in turn damages their ability to develop attachment bonds, let alone secure ones.

Forslund et al. (2021) discuss how attachment theory and research in general, and attachment networks in particular, may inform courts' decision-making on child custody. Using Faigman et al.'s (2014) admissibility criteria for scientific evidence and testimony, the authors argue that findings on attachment networks, should be admissible as framework evidence and conceptual guidelines (though not as a diagnostic testimony) in child custody settings. They contend that evidence for the socioemotional benefits that children derive from continuous interactions with multiple caregivers is scientifically valid, relevant, and helpful, and should replace misunderstood and misused applications of attachment theory and instruments in court procedures.

This special issue is concluded by two commentaries. The first—by Steele and Steele (2021)—highlights some of the potential clinical applications of moving attachment research to the level of attachment networks. Specifically, the authors emphasize the clinical need to consider the attachment network when assessing children's mental health and intervention strategies. In the second commentary, Thompson (2021) proposes that incorporating the qualitative characteristics of the different attachment relationships within a network, as well as considering how relationships within the family influence the qualities of these attachment relationships, can significantly expand the specificity of predicting different developmental outcomes.

Across domains of parenting and their influence on child development, a focus on relational networks might be indispensable for understanding the complexities of ecologies in which children thrive or wither away. As guest editors, we hope that this special issue on early attachment networks to multiple caregivers will significantly contribute to such understanding.

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