Influence of mental models of attachment during middle childhood on self-esteem and social competence: a short-term longitudinal study

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Purpose:

This short-term longitudinal study examined the influence of attachment mental models (AMM) during middle childhood on self-esteem and social competence. Additionally, given recent evidence for multiple attachment models, we examined the structure of the AMM. We compared three models: the hierarchy model, independence model, and integration model. In the hierarchy model, the mental model for the first attachment person influences the mental model for other attachment persons and strongly influences the dependent variable. In the independence model, the mental models for specific persons are separated and independently influence the dependent variable. In the integration model, the mental models for specific persons are integrated via the general model and influence the dependent variable. Attachment theory hypothesizes that secure attachment predicts good development. Thus, our study regarded the dependent variables of self-esteem and social competence as developmental outcomes.

Method:

A questionnaire survey was administered to 764 elementary school pupils (grades 4–6; 393 boys, 371 girls) at two intervals, separated by was eight months. First, we identified the attachment figures in middle childhood. These figures were assessed by three nominated important people with respect to proximity-seeking function, secure-haven function, separation-protest function, and secure-base function. Second, we measured the children's AMM for each of these attachment figures. Two dimensions of the AMM were assessed: avoidance of intimacy and anxiety regarding abandonment. Third, we measured self-esteem and social competence.

Results and discussion:

SEM analysis was conducted on the hierarchy, independent, and integrated models. Results showed that the integration model had a better fit than the other two models regarding BIC criteria. In the integration model, the general avoidance model and general anxiety model at Time 1 significantly influenced self-esteem (β = -.16 and -.07 respectively) as well as social competence (β = -.12 and -.10 respectively) at Time 2. These results indicate that the integration model could adequately explain the structure of the AMM in middle childhood and that the AMM predicted self-esteem and social competence.