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Strengths and competencies in adopted adolescents: links with attachment to parents and problem behavior



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Reporter	Case 1	Case 2
Adopted Child	Athletic, nice, smart	Nice, Athletic, liked
Adoptive Mother	Giving, well rounded young man. Enjoys doing his own thing yet enjoys helping others. Tries hard in all he does.	He is intelligent, kind, talented, and athletic. He is also gentle and I find that to be a great attitude.
Adoptive Father	Very well rounded- interested in many activities, shows concern for others	Good athlete, good academics, nice friends, well behaved

*Each case represents reports from one family

Background

- Much of the literature on adopted adolescents has been problem focused, and neglects acknowledgement of the positive attributes that may be found within adopted adolescents. This has created a distorted view of adopted adolescents which is highlighted in the popular media. Due to the abundance of negative media surrounding the adjustment of adopted adolescents, the public perceives adopted adolescents to have more social, behavior and academic problems (National Adoption Attitudes Survey, 2002).
- Past research has indicated that adopted adolescents are higher in prosocial behavior (Sharma, 1996) and that they were found to have self-esteem equal to that of their non-adopted peers (Juffer, 2007).
- Positive Psychology focuses on strengths of individuals, and how these strengths can exist even in the presence of difficulty (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This study uses this framework and focuses on strengths of adopted adolescents, even in the existence of problem behaviors.

Measures

- Adolescent Report: Achenbach's Youth Self Report (YSR), with a focus on standardized social competence scores and responses to the question "Please describe the best things about yourself".
- Parent Report: Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), with a focus on standardized social competence scores and responses to the question "Please describe the best things about your child".
- IPPA: Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment

Participants

- From Wave 2 of the Minnesota- Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP), when adopted child was in adolescence.
- Data were analyzed from 161 families, with specific data from 135 adopted adolescents (45.1% male, mean age = 15.5 years), 144 adoptive fathers, and 158 adoptive mothers.

Method

The authors developed a coding system based on the work of the Search Institute and literature on positive youth development. The original 26 codes were subsequently grouped into five categories: relational competence, specific skills, positive disposition, moral behavior, and motivation. Total strength scores were then computed as well. Each person's responses were coded independently by two of the co-authors, with disagreements reconciled by discussion.

- Correlation was used to analyze the association between parental reports of relational competence and problem behaviors and adolescents' self reported attachment scores to their parents. Correlation was also used to analyze the association between adolescents' self-reports of relational competence and problem behaviors and their self reported attachment scores to their parents.

Results

Mothers Reports

- Total competence was correlated with attachment to both the mother ($r(157)=.29, p=.001$) and to the father ($r(157)=.26, p=.004$).

Fathers Reports

- Social competence correlated with attachment to both the mother ($r(136)=.19, p=.037$) and to the father ($r(136)=.28, p=.002$).
- Total competence correlated with attachment to both the mother ($r(134)=.23, p=.013$) and to the father ($r(134)=.24, p=.010$).
- Moral competence** was positively correlated with attachment to the father ($r(135)=.18, p=.047$)
- Motivation** was positively correlated with attachment to both the mother ($r(135)=.20, p=.026$) and to the father ($r(135)=.27, p=.002$).

Adolescent Reports

- Social competence** positively correlated with attachment to both the mother ($r(129)=.18, p=.040$) and to the father ($r(129)=.19, p=.032$).
- Total competence** positively correlated with attachment to both the mother ($r(125)=.23, p=.009$) and to the father ($r(125)=.23, p=.011$)
- Moral competence** positively correlated with attachment to the mother ($r(135)=.17, p=.053$)
- Total** positively correlated with attachment to the mother ($r(135)=.17, p=.054$).
- Attachment to both parents was also significantly negatively correlated to problem behavior scores, total, internalizing, and externalizing.

Discussion

This study demonstrated that regardless of problem behaviors reported in standardized tests, parents and adolescents themselves still reported many strengths and competencies

- Study showed that the higher the report of competencies, the higher the attachment between the adolescent and their parents. Such findings suggest that by recognizing and valuing competencies and strengths, parents have the ability to influence and enhance attachment despite the presence and disruption of problem behaviors.
- For instance, adolescents who score higher on externalizing problems may be able to be characterized as having high social competence, or those scoring high on internalizing problems could be characterized as being introspective and insightful.
- According to the work of Grotevant and his colleagues, parents of adopted adolescents reported their child as having higher social competence and attachment when they perceived that there was an increase or stable high compatibility with their adoptive relationship. Based on this and the reciprocal relationship between these variables, it can be theorized that by increasing parents' awareness of their adolescents' strengths, in addition to its effect on attachment, parents' perceived compatibility of their relationship with their child can be impacted.

Limitations

- No non-adopted control sample
- May not be applicable to foster care, international, or transracial adoptions
- Data is based off of self-report

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