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Adult Attachment, Father Involvement, and Relationship Satisfaction and Maintenance among Low-income African-American Mothers of Premature Infants

In the simplest terms, attachment security refers to an individual's tendency to view others as trustworthy and dependable, and to view oneself as being worthy of both giving and receiving love. Those with secure (autonomous) attachments tend to value their relationships with others and do not exhibit excessive needs for dependency or autonomy, as do those with insecure (nonautonomous) attachments. Further, secure/autonomous individuals tend to be more emotionally supportive, trusting, satisfied, and committed in their relationships than insecure/nonautonomous individuals. Adults with secure attachments tend to have romantic relationships that are of higher quality and greater stability. In addition, higher quality relationships among mothers and fathers are associated with greater levels of fathers' involvement with their infants.

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) inquires about early relationships with caregivers, including experiences of rejection, separation, loss, trauma, abuse, and changes in relationships with caregivers during adolescence and adulthood. The AAI classifies adults by their predominant strategy for dealing with the attachment-related stress of the interview, also known as one's "overall state of mind regarding attachment." Secure/autonomous individuals are able to deliver a coherent life story, while insecure/nonautonomous individuals demonstrate either vague or lengthy, angry speech, or short responses, while claiming a lack of memory regarding early caregiving experiences or a failure to support their positive descriptions of their parents with specific memories. Adults may also exhibit disorganization in their speech related to loss or abuse, suggesting that they have not fully processed and dealt with these events from their past. Thus, an individual's attachment classification is based more upon the process of discourse used in the interview as opposed to the specific content of the interview.

The present study examined whether parents' attachment classification was related to mothers' self-reported relationship quality and stability, whether fathers' involvement with their infants was related to mothers' self-reported relationship quality and stability, whether fathers' state of mind with respect to attachment was related to fathers' level of involvement with their infants, and whether mothers' attachment classification was related to fathers' attachment classification.

A sample of 173 predominantly urban, low-income African-American mothers of premature infants participating in a larger early intervention study completed self-report measures of relationship adjustment/satisfaction and father involvement, and both mothers and fathers completed the AAI. Consistent with what was hypothesized, a relation was found between mothers' and fathers' attachment classification. Greater levels of father involvement were associated with higher reports of relationship satisfaction and stability in mothers. Attachment classification was not related to relationship satisfaction or stability. Both insecure/nonautonomous, cohabitating fathers, as well as married or cohabitating fathers who were disorganized in their discussion of loss or abuse were less involved with their infants shortly after birth. In general, fathers who were disorganized in their speech regarding loss or abuse were less involved in

childcare responsibilities four and a half months later. However, no relations were found between the number of secure/autonomous individuals in the relationship and mothers' relationship satisfaction or maintenance. Among cohabitating couples, the greater the number of individuals in the relationship who were disorganized in their discussion of loss or abuse, the lower the mothers' self-reported relationship adjustment.

Future research and interventions should identify factors to promote father involvement, particularly in low-income, urban families. Further, psychoeducational interventions may be beneficial in helping both parents understand the importance of fathers' involvement in their infants' lives even if the parents do not remain in a romantic relationship. Interventionists must identify fathers who are still dealing with loss or trauma and refer them to appropriate mental health professionals, which may allow fathers to become more available to their families.