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The Father-infant relationship beyond caregiving sensitivity

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ABSTRACT

Parental sensitive behavior is seen as one of the main determinants of attachment security. However, studies also suggest that other behaviors may be stronger predictors of the parent-child relationship (Lucassen et al., 2011). The lack of a significant association between sensitive behavior and the quality of the attachment relationship between father and child in Olsavsky et al.'s study indeed seems to reflect the notion that other interactive behaviors may be specific in father-child relationships (i.e., destabilizing behavior followed by sensitivity). Since the strength of the association between the quality of parental interactive behavior (e.g., sensitive, responsive behavior) and child attachment security is moderate (Fearon & Belsky, 2016), and weaker for fathers (Lucassen et al., 2011) there is a need to examine other factors beyond caregiving sensitivity in attachment research. For example, the important role of reparation of mismatching to matching states and fathers’ own attachment history as related to frightening behavior and mentalization are factors that need to be taken into account. It is essential to apply a broader view of father’s parenting behaviors in different contexts (distress, non-distress, or risky contexts) and a broader view of child attachment behaviors in relationship with the father.

KEYWORDS

paternal sensitivity; fathers; child behavior

It is generally acknowledged that parental sensitive behavior is one of the main determinants of attachment security, but previous studies also showed sensitivity to be a weak predictor of father-infant attachment security. Studies suggest that other behaviors may be stronger predictors of the parent-child relationship (Lucassen et al., 2011). However, the concept of sensitivity has received persistent interest in research on parent-infant attachment, whereas the role of other interactive behaviors has received less attention. Therefore, the findings of the paper of Olsavsky and colleagues (this issue) are important in this respect and emphasize the impact of paternal stimulating behavior on the development of secure attachment relationships. The lack of a significant association between sensitive behavior and the quality of the attachment relationship between father and child indeed seems to reflect the notion that other interactive behaviors that may be specific to the father should be studied (i.e., destabilizing behavior followed by sensitivity). Olsavsky et al. describe their findings in light of theoretical models that define the father-infant relationship as similar to the mother-infant relationship in some ways, but also with unique features. They examined the quality of the father-child attachment by using the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP),...
showing significant relations between fathers’ play behaviors (stimulation in combination with low-to-moderate levels of intrusiveness) and the child’s future attachment quality.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the SSP would not capture the full nature of the father-child attachment relationship. When viewing the father-infant relationship as a “secure-exploration concept” (and not only as a secure-base or safe-haven concept; Grossmann et al., 2002), the focus of father-child attachment should be not only on separation and stress responses, but also account for a range of behaviors, from seeking close bodily proximity to confident exploration, depending on the situation and the child’s state of anxiety (Grossmann, Grossmann, & Zimmermann, 1999). Moreover, the concept of the “father-child activation relationship” by Paquette (2004) and similar descriptions by Hazen, McFarland, Jacobvitz, and Boyd-Soisson (2010) suggest that fathers may possess a distinctive ability to excite and destabilize their infant while simultaneously providing safety, warmth, and security. Crucial, however, is that fathers show sensitivity after their destabilizing behavior, helping their infants to regulate their intense emotions.

**Sensitivity after destabilization of child behavior**

The model of communication systems described by Tronick (2017) in his recent buffer-transducer model and previous mismatch-repair theory (Tronick & Cohn, 1989) stresses the important role of reparation of mismatching to matching states. Adequately balancing between mismatch and match powerfully affects the development of infants’ sense of self and adds significantly to the emotional quality of relationships. If the resulting experience of dysregulation is brief and quickly repaired, it may be growth-promoting because infants make non-symbolic meanings that they and their caregivers are competent to repair ruptured interactions. When fathers use mild levels of intrusiveness during play and challenging tasks, this destabilizes the child for a moment (mismatch in emotional states). When fathers are able to sensitively turn destabilizing behavior into a state of matched affect this behavior may have positive effects. Repairing a mismatch can create “positive stress,” which may promote infants’ regulatory skills and socio-emotional competence (Tronick & Beeghly, 2011). This may also apply to Olsavsky et al.’s results, where fathers who are stimulating and display low to moderate levels of intrusiveness during play are more likely to have infants who develop secure attachments with their fathers. These fathers are able to repair a mismatch and turn it into a matching state. Stimulating the infant’s play in a more intrusive way does not promote security in the father-infant relationship, because of assumed ongoing destabilizing mismatches.

In Olsavsky’s et al.’s study, the SSP was used to measure the quality of child attachment. Although the SSP has been acknowledged as the gold standard to measure parent-child attachment, in studies with fathers the procedure “the Risky Situation (RS)” that was developed by Paquette and Bigras (2010), may be proposed. The RS is a specific procedure to assess the quality of the father-child relationship and is based on the activation relationship theory (Paquette, 2004). Central to this procedure is the father-child distance, in which the father is neither too close nor too far from the child, which allows the father to protect the child in case of danger while providing the child with the necessary room to practice abilities independently. This different view
on the attachment relationship between fathers and children may be an attractive focus for future research.

**Fathers’ own attachment history as related to frightening behavior and mentalization**

Interestingly, Olsavsky et al.’s study showed that only fathers showing stimulation in combination with (at most) moderate levels of intrusiveness promoted future attachment security. The question is whether fathers’ own attachment history is involved in the relationship between stimulation, intrusiveness, and child attachment. A meta-analytic study conducted by Verhage et al. (2016) showed that parents’ own histories of attachment relationships led to individual differences in the quality of their child’s attachment relationship through the quality of dyadic interactions, consistent with theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Recently, Ahnert et al. (2017) provided direct evidence that fathers who had experienced severe childhood adversities (e.g., removed from their homes, raised by foster parents or in orphanages) demonstrated significantly lower play quality in interaction with their children than fathers without childhood adversities. In other words, fathers who have experienced much adversity and stress in their own childhoods may have greater difficulty maintaining a level of mild intrusiveness during play with their child.

Olsavsky et al. also referred to the study of Hazen et al. (2010), which showed that fathers with secure attachment relationships with their infants were more likely to exhibit sensitivity after displaying a frightening behavior. In contrast, fathers with insecure attachments with their infants were less likely to exhibit sensitive behaviors after displaying a frightening behavior. Surprisingly, the authors found that many fathers, secure as well as insecure, engaged in frightening behaviors with their infants. However, secure-autonomous fathers were more likely than insecure fathers to show sensitive and frightening behavior concurrently (Hazen et al., 2010). This suggests that fathers’ own attachment history may play an important role in balancing sensitive, stimulating, and mildly intrusive behavior during father-infant interactions.

Moreover, parents’ own attachment history relates to their capacity to mentalize about the relationship with the infant and to parent-child attachment (Madigan, Hawkins, Plamondon, Moran, & Benoit, 2015). Even during pregnancy, fathers – like mothers – start to mentalize about the baby. They have fantasies, ideas, and expectations about their (unborn) infants and develop attachment representations regarding them. The quality of these prenatal attachment representations is relatively stable (Vreeswijk, Maas, Janneke, Rijk, & van Bakel, 2014), with high concordance levels pre- and postnatally. Paternal representations of the infant are important predictors of future interactive behaviors. Fathers with balanced (“secure”) representations of their infants in the first months of life display a higher quality of interactive behavior towards their infants, which is in turn correlated with infant developmental outcomes (Hall et al., 2014). Being able to mentalize and take the child’s perspective, as a balanced father is capable of, is needed to attune the level of destabilization/intrusiveness and sensitivity. In Olsavsky et al.’s study, when fathers took their 9-month-old infant’s point of view into account (i.e., by exhibiting average to low intrusiveness), while stimulating their infant more frequently and intensely (physically or using an object), their infants were more likely to demonstrate a secure attachment to their father. Fathers’ mentalizing capacities may be a key factor in their ability to balance stimulation with mild intrusiveness.
Final remarks

Overall, there is a need to examine other factors beyond caregiving sensitivity in attachment research. The strength of the association between the quality of parental interactive behavior (e.g., sensitive, responsive behavior) and child attachment security is moderate (Fearon & Belsky, 2016), and weaker for fathers (Lucassen et al., 2011). Therefore, it is essential to apply a broader view of fathers’ parenting behaviors in different contexts (distress, non-distress, or risky contexts) and a broader view of child attachment behaviors in relationship with the father. Olsavsky et al.’s study yields additional evidence that paternal behavior contributes to the relationship that the infant develops with the father. It points to the fact that specific interactive behavior patterns in fathers help the young child to develop a good relationship with the caregiver from which she may develop further capacities and skills. The finding that specific paternal behaviors (stimulating behaviors) and not sensitive behavior were related to attachment security gives direction to further research on the specific role fathers have in their infants’ first years of life and beyond.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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