



Initial Reactions and Attachment Formation in Post-Institutionalized Toddlers

2012 UROP project by Megan J. Heise, under the direction of Dr. Megan Gunnar



Abstract

87 parents were interviewed about their post-institutionalized toddler's behavior in the first hours and days while families were in the birth country. Interview questions covered common problems for adopted children – eating, sleeping, upset, and comfort seeking. Attachment formation and security were assessed in the laboratory 1-3 and 7-9 months post-placement. While many children easily transitioned, for 20% of families the initial days were hard or overwhelming. None of the behaviors displayed in the first days in the parents' care were correlated with attachment formation or security at the second assessment 7-9 months post-adoption, although at 1-3 months there were some associations.

Introduction

Families formed through adoption face a radical shift in daily life, and this change is particularly pronounced in international adoptions. The first few days of an adoptive family often take place in a foreign country while the parents work through the legal and governmental processes required for them to take the child home. Thus they take place under challenging conditions, often with the need to care for the child in public places. For the post-institutionalized child, these first days may also bring their first experience outside the walls of the institution, and thus may bombard them with previously unknown sights, sounds and smells. As parents get to know their new son or daughter, there is naturally concern over whether they will bond with the child, and critically, whether the child will form a healthy attachment to them. The goal of this analysis was to provide empirical data to adoption professionals so that they can more effectively prepare families to navigate the first days when the post-institutionalized child is in their care.

Methods

Participants. The participants were 87 parents (75 mothers) who had recently ($M=5.79$ mos, $Sd=3.6$ mos) adopted a toddler (range 15-36 mos, $M=24.35$ mos) from institutional care and who had traveled to the child's country and been with the child during his/her first days outside the institution. The children were from Russia/Eastern Europe ($n=23$, 11 girls), Southeast Asia/Pacific Islanders ($n=28$, 19 girls), Latin America/Caribbean ($n=12$, 5 girls) and Africa ($n=26$, 17 girls). Most adoptive families were well-educated and upper middle-class, with the median education being a Bachelor's degree and the median income between \$100,000 to \$125,000 per household. Adoptive families were largely two-parent families (83%) and in most instances (71%) both parents traveled to pick up the child. Over one-quarter of parents (28%) had previously adopted a child internationally, although not always from the same country as the current adoption.

Measures. *Initial Behaviors:* Parents were asked specifically about eating, sleeping, distress, and comfort seeking. *Background Measures:* Parents reported on the child's birth country, how long they were in the country prior to returning home, and on whether this was their first internationally-adopted child, and whether they had adopted another child at the same time as the target child (22% of the sample).

Attachment Behaviors: Behaviors were scored from videotapes of the sessions held at 1-3 and 7-9 months after the family returned home. *Attachment Formation* was scored on 5-point scale, and was based on the first 20-30 minutes of each session during which a modified Strange Situation assessment was performed (Ainsworth, 1978; Zeanah et al., 2005). *Attachment Security* was measured using a slight modification of the Attachment Q-Sort to make it appropriate for the laboratory assessment context (Waters & Deane, 1985). At each assessment we examined whether the child's initial behavior predicted insecure profiles or not.

Procedure. The participants were part of a longitudinal study of the impact of prolonged periods of early adversity on children's neurobehavioral development. *Phone Interview:* A retired social worker conducted the phone interview, which covered information about the child's background and the parent's experiences with the child in the first days after they received the child into their full-time care. The parent was asked to describe events and then to rate them on pre-determined scales. *Laboratory Testing:* The primary caregiving parent and child were seen in the laboratory every 8 months for the first two years post adoption. Each of these sessions included interaction with strangers, brief separations from the parent (one in session 1, two in session 2), exposure to arousing and potentially scary toys, physiological data collection, growth assessments, and parent-child free and structured play.

Results

Eating. Nearly 30% of the parents reported that their child ate and drank ravenously on the first day. Another 32.6% said their child ate and drank normally. The other parents reported that their child ate only a little (22.5%) or refused food and drink (12.4%).

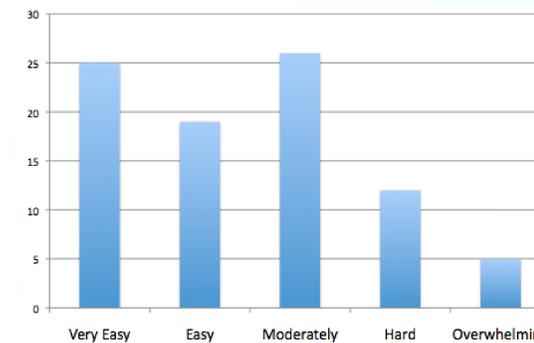
Sleep. The majority of parents (74.4%) said their child went to sleep easily on the first night. However, 16.9% reported that it was hard to settle the child and 6.7% said the child did not sleep at all on that first night.

Distress. Very few parents said that their child behaved normally and showed little indication of distress on that first day (16.9%). Nearly 43% indicated that their child cried and was upset on that first day, while 38% described their child as being extremely quiet and withdrawn.

Sought Comfort. Most parents reported that their child (75%) sought comfort and contact on that first day; although 5.6% said their child rejected contact and comfort and 18% said their child was passive and ignored the parent. As would be expected from the descriptors, 62% of the children who did not seek or accept comfort were described as being extremely quiet and withdrawn, while crying or not crying on that first day did not distinguish those who did and did not seek comfort, $c^2(2)=6.09$, $p<.05$.

Ease of Transition: Overall, about half of the parents described that first day as either very easy (28%) or easy (21%). Another 29% described it as moderately difficult. The remaining parents said it was hard (13.5%) or very hard/overwhelming (5.6%).

Differences Between Boys and Girls: There was an indication that parents were more likely to describe girls as eating less or refusing to eat (46%) than they were boys (22%), $c^2(2)=6.66$, $p<.02$.



Predictions to Attachment Scores: Finally, we examined whether any behavior pattern on the child's first days and nights in the parents' care predicted how quickly or securely they would express an attachment to the primary caregiving parent. Children who refused to eat on the first day were somewhat more likely (52%) than other children (31%) to have formed an attachment to the parent by 1-3 months after arrival in the US, $c^2(1)=2.79$, $p<=.09$, but were less likely to express secure behavior (42%) than other children (66%) towards the parent at this point after arrival $c^2(1)=3.18$, $p=.07$. Examined at 7-9 month post adoption, there were no associations between any of the initial behaviors and either attachment formation or attachment security.

Discussion

Although nearly half of the families said the first days with the child were easy or very easy, about a fifth experienced these days as hard or overwhelming. The prevalence of difficult behaviors in eating, sleeping, upset, and comfort seeking mean that they are fairly typical for children upon removal from an institution and parent preparation should include discussions of these responses as ones that are likely. There was no evidence that the behaviors described on the initial days in the parent's full-time care were predictive of the child's attachment to the parent 7 to 9 months into the relationship. These results indicate that while many families have a relatively easy go on those first days, a significant number have children who are distressed or withdrawn and who reject them. For these families, having children who are distressed or rejecting may not have a significant impact on attachment formation and security.

References

- Ainsworth, M., Blehar, M., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of Attachment*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Waters, E., & Deane, K. E. (1985). Defining and assessing individual differences in attachment relationships: Q-methodology and the organization of behavior in infancy and early childhood. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 50(1-2, Serial No. 209), 41-65
- Zeanah, C.H., Smyke, A.T., Koga, S.F., Carlson, E., & the Bucharest Early Intervention Project Core Group. (2005). Attachment in institutionalized and community children in Romania. *Child Development*, 76(5), 1015-1028.