

Embracing Your Inner Child: Adolescents and Attachment Objects

Isabella Galbis¹ and Hannah North^{1#}

¹Westminster Christian School

#Advisor

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship between adolescents and their attachment objects through a two-part mixed method study. The study with 753 participants is a concentrated analysis of the way in which attachment levels change across a wide age group from three to eighteen-year-old participants. This study additionally explores how high levels of adolescent attachment to their attachment objects can be coded to the four existing attachment styles, ultimately determining the security of this relationship. Results illustrate the necessity for further research into developing a new adolescent-specific criteria in order to understand these relationships more accurately. However, this study developed a new understanding about the trends in attachment levels in relation to age and the specific nature of adolescent attachment style.

Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly, causing a worldwide panic. Millions of people globally were forced into isolation as a preventative measure to slow the spreading of the virus, causing people to develop a new craving for comfort and entertainment. During the first months of the pandemic, the brand Squishmallow rose quickly in popularity due to social media advertising. Squishmallows are defined as round, huggable, plush toys that come in a variety of different styles such as animals, food, and fantasy creatures. In fact, the rise in popularity of the brand proved to be an effective solution to the new craving people were developing as it not only provided the warmth and comfort people sought but did so in an engaging manner as consumers can now collect over 1,000 different types of Squishmallows. The advertisements were most often seen on TikTok, an app targeting the adolescent age group and encouraging them to purchase a Squishmallow of their own. Far from being considered a juvenile toy, Squishmallow appealed to this older adolescent audience much like the Beanie Baby craze of the mid 1990's. While much of the attention Squishmallow is currently enjoying can be attributed to its trendy quality, it would be wrong to dismiss the close attachment to these toys as simply a fad. In fact, it is possible that something far more complex - and more lasting - is at work.

Literature Review

Attachment Theory

Teaching assistant Paul McLeod from the University of Manchester Division of Neuroscience & Experimental Psychology defines attachment as, “a deep and enduring emotional bond between two people in which each seeks closeness and feels more secure when in the presence of the attachment figure” (McLeod 2017). The earliest behavioral theories suggested that attachment was a learned behavior and was, “the result of the feeding relationship between the child and the caregiver” (Cherry 2019). The first official theory was developed by British psychologist John Bowlby

disproving this idea and describing attachment as “a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Cherry 2019). Bowlby held the firm belief that the earliest bonds that caregivers form with their child have tremendous impacts on the life of a child. Going against what the earlier theories suggested, Bowlby proposed the idea that attachment was a product of evolutionary processes and was not solely a learned behavior. Through his studies, Bowlby introduced the idea that children were born with an innate drive to create attachments in search of comfort and protection (Cherry 2019). Bowlby’s attachment theory still acknowledged, however, the idea that primary caregivers were responsible for being available and responsive to an infant need, which would allow them to develop a sense of security with that person.

In the 1970s, Bowlby’s work was then furthered by psychologist Mary Ainsworth. Through her “Strange Situation” study, Ainsworth, with the help of other scientists, observed children between the ages of 12 and 18 months. The reaction of the children as they were briefly separated and reunited with their caregivers was observed in detail. Ainsworth, as a result of the different responses she analyzed, was able to categorize attachment into different groups describing the behavioral tendencies and their impact for every category.

The four attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, dismissing and unresolved attachment) were created to differentiate the way in which people perceive and deal with emotional intimacy, their ability to communicate their emotions as well as listen to the emotions of others, their ways of responding to conflict, and finally their expectations about their partner and their relationship.

Secure Attachment

The original categorization of secure attachment refers to a non-verbal, emotional connection between an infant and their caregiver (Forthingham 2019). Secure attachment allows for optimal development of a child’s nervous system as it meets their needs regarding security, calmness, and understanding (Forthingham 2019). Secure attachment builds a foundation purely based on the feeling of safety. It is often associated with being a low anxiety and low avoidance category as people belonging to this category are usually comfortable in situations of intimacy and are not burdened with overwhelming worry that they will be rejected within their relationship (Levy 2017).

Preoccupied Attachment

Preoccupied attachment refers to a higher anxiety attachment style as people often face insecurities within their intimate relationships and a fear of being faced with rejection in their everyday lives (Marschall 2022). People who are categorized as having preoccupied attachment are considered to be highly emotional and deal poorly with these emotions causing this to impact their communication skills and relationships negatively (Levy 2017).

Dismissing Attachment

People who typically distance themselves from others fall into the dismissing attachment category. In the mind of someone with this attachment style, intimacy equates to a loss of independence which does not allow for trust or dependence to flourish within a relationship (Levy 2017). Communication for this attachment style is considered to be strictly intellectual as the subject of emotions often make them uncomfortable (Levy 2017). However, people within this category can effectively make important decisions without allowing their emotions to influence them (The Attachment Project 2020).

Unresolved Attachment

Unresolved attachment is considered the unhealthiest form of attachment and is often stimulated by prior trauma which is yet to be resolved (Subic-Wrana, et al. 2011). Due to issues that people in this category are facing in their personal lives, they are often emotionally unavailable for others and are associated with being anti-social (Levy 2017).

Attachment Objects

Although McLeod's definition of attachment refers strictly to human relationships, the definition can seamlessly be applied to human and object relationships. The capacity of humans to maintain attachment relationships extends past humans and applies to inanimate objects as well. According to Mary E. Dozier from the Department of Psychology in Mississippi State University, object attachment is "the experience a person has when they feel an emotional attachment to an inanimate object and may even feel a sense of loss if they were to part with the object," (Dozier 2020). Attachment relationships with objects that instill comfort and security in people can be traced back to evolutionary time periods. The overall goal of these objects is to provide a safe- haven when one feels anxious, vulnerable, or frightened. However, it is crucial to understand that in the same way attachment with other people shifts people age, so too might attachment with objects. Individuals each grow personal and distinct relationships to attachment objects which can be analyzed through a series of different variables.

Extent of Attachment

A common way in which attachment is shown is through name-giving. Humans are innately social beings tracing back to evolutionary time periods. Consequently, humans are wired to anthropomorphize, or give human-like attributes to their belongings (Buzzback014). This idea is represented well in the 1920 experiment of German American psychologist Wolfgang Kohler. Kohler provided two shapes, one with curved edges and another with sharp ones, which the participants of the study were to give one of the two names he had provided: "Bouba" or "Kiki" (Etchells 2017).

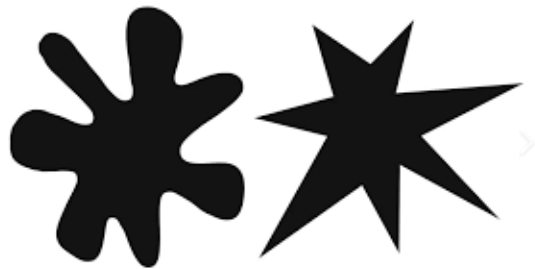


Figure 1. Bouba-Kiki Effect shapes

A surprising number of people gave the shape with the curved edges the softer sounding name of "Bouba" and gave the sharper shape the name "Kiki" (Etchells 2017). This led to what is known as the "Bouba-Kiki effect" which explores the concept of naming objects. David Peterson, a linguist who created the Dothraki and Valyrian languages for the HBO show *Game of Thrones*, further describes the level of attachment which naming provides (Bucklin 2017). Peterson explains that the objects humans use every day may not be the ones they are most attached to (Bucklin 2017). In this way, an object that is used daily like a chair or lamp would score highly in frequency of use but that does not correlate with a high degree of intimacy or attachment. Thus, frequency does not always correlate with attachment, but name-giving is a clear identification of an attachment whether it be a nickname, endearment, or

name for an object. This allows for the connection to be made that name-giving is a clear identification of an attachment between a person and an object.

Different Age Groups, Different Attachment

Although the measure used to identify attachment may be the same, the types of attachment formed between people and attachment objects shift between different age groups. For example, attachment objects are commonly owned by children (ages 1-9) and an extensive amount of research has been done to understand the effects of these objects. The findings suggest that attachment objects act as extensive non-maternal childcare, which play an important part in the development of children. English pediatrician and psychoanalyst David Winnicott concluded that bonds to attachment objects were a healthy part of child development (Fortuna 2014). He coined the term “transitional objects” in that these attachment objects serve as coping mechanisms to reduce stress during a time in which the child is growing and separate from the mother. This process is so vital to the development of a child that during their doctor visits, pediatricians most often ask about these attachment objects to ensure that the child is successfully creating bonds (Zeanah 2011). When a parent responds by saying that the child is yet to make connections with any kind of attachment object, it serves as an immediate red flag indicating some issue in the development or social skills of a child.

Adults (ages 19+) are another age group whose relationship to attachment objects has been studied in great depth, however with a less positive connotation. In a survey conducted by Build-A-Bear Workshop, Inc. more than half of adult participants claimed to own and sleep with an attachment object. This bond, however, is different from that of a child’s attachment to their transitional object as an adult’s bond often compensates for a lack of interpersonal attachment throughout adulthood (Dozier 2020). As adults grow older, their lives are filled with multiple stress factors. However, owning an attached object provides a sense of security and comfort. Different levels of attachment to these inanimate objects can all be traced back to the difficult events that adults face in their lives (Dozier 2020). There are many factors that play a role in the attachment of adults to their attachment objects like trauma, health, and family, and can also be heavily influenced by childhood experiences. Moreover, an excessive connection to these attachment objects, though difficult to measure, is said to have long-term consequences for psychological health (Keefer 2011). Excessive attachments to these objects have been associated with other illnesses. Borderline personality disorder (BPD), characterized by unstable personal relationships, is an example of one of these complications (Hooley 2012). Excessive attachments to these objects have also proven to be a symptom of a hoarding disorder and compensates for a lack of interpersonal attachments (Dozier 2020). Similar to the relationship of children, adults are cushioned by their attachment objects with support and comfort by these objects during hard times of their lives.

With extensive research being done on young children and adults, the question regarding the relationship between adolescents and attachment objects presents itself leading to an age-related gap. Adolescents have been disregarded in academic research on this topic of inquiry, making it unclear if owning an attachment object falls into the healthy or unhealthy categorization.

Stress Factors for Adolescents

Adolescents remain the most unstudied group regarding relationships with attachment objects. However, this area of study is just as important as the well-studied age groups because most adolescents are legally considered minors and thus could potentially show some of the same attachment qualities as younger children with their transitional objects. However, adolescents could also be understood to display attachment to these objects as a closer parallel to adults, as their identity is developed, and they share many of the responsibilities and pressures of adults. This research, as the findings will demonstrate in more depth, is significant for adolescents as over 80% of the 426 adolescents surveyed for this study responded that they did own an attachment object.

Moreover, adolescents are important to study as they grow in their cognitive development. During this period of their lives, teenagers perform more complex thinking known as formal logical operations (University of Rochester

Medical Center). Adolescents, therefore, are in the process of developing their personalities and their unique ways of thinking. Moreover, adolescents are constantly burdened with family, friends, education, and peer pressure stressors throughout this time of their life. Due to this vital stage of a person's life, it is important to understand whether or not attachment objects are healthy for adolescents.

The study explores attachment levels across a wide age range in order to determine if they vary as age increases. Additionally, the study will then further categorize adolescents who have been deemed to have a high attachment level. The goal of the study was to address the attachment levels amongst the adolescent age group as the age group has been disregarded as a whole. Such a large gap makes it difficult for people to understand adolescents' relationships to attachment objects and whether they are beneficial.

Gap-Analysis and Research Question(s) Formation

While there is much discussion and observation surrounding attachment levels among young children and adults, no researchers have directed their efforts to understand the relationship between adolescents and their attachment levels. This paper seeks to understand how attachment levels shift across an increasing age gap, begging the question-

Research Question 1: Does the degree of attachment with attachment objects decrease as age increases?

Being that adolescents are undergoing major cognitive developments, it is difficult to assess if they should be grouped with the healthy nature of a young child's attachment, or the unhealthy nature of adult attachment. In order to understand this, the paper additionally asks-

Research Question 2: For adolescent with high degrees of attachment to their attachment to their attachment object, is there a correlation between high attachment and secure attachment style?

Study Design

In order to explore attachment levels, a two-part, mixed methods study was conducted (Figure 2). This approach allowed for a quantitative and qualitative analysis of attachment levels. The two components combined in this study were a survey followed by validated interviews for a subsection of survey participants. Having both components of the study was vital as it allowed for the first component (e.g., the survey) to explore the way in which attachment levels fluctuated across different age groups and the second component to then narrow the focus of the study and understand the unique attachment style of highly attached adolescents (e.g., the interviews).

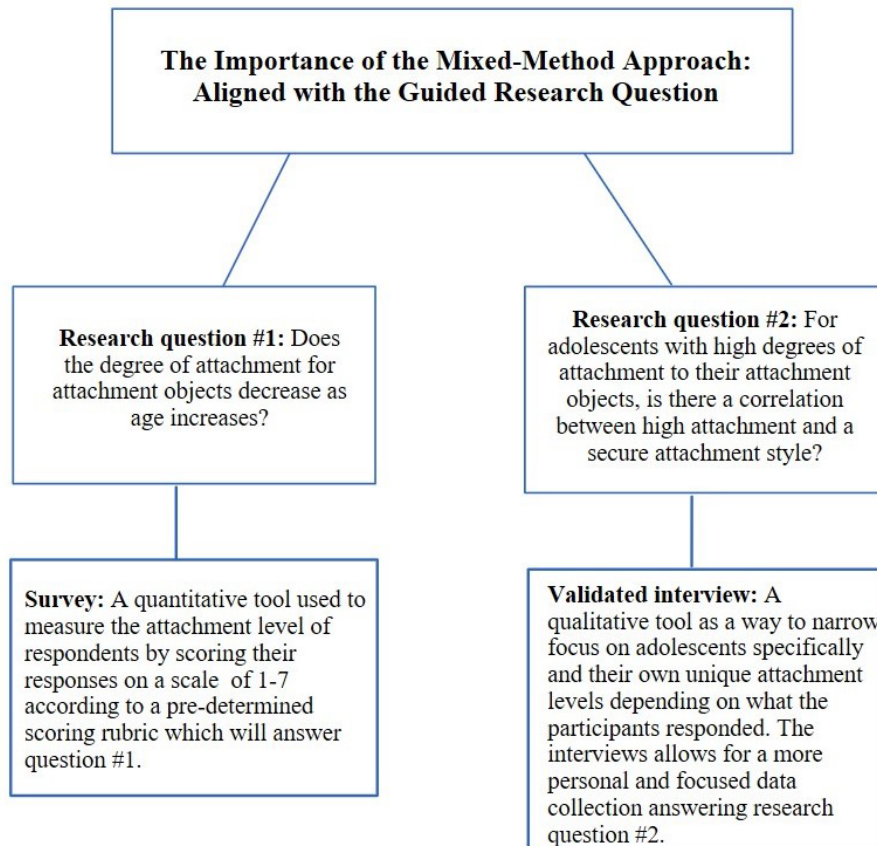


Figure 2. The Mixed Method Approach Design in Alignment with Research Question

Part 1 of Methodology: Survey (Responds to Research Question 1)

The survey, generating 753 responses, allows for a large-scale perspective of how attachment levels fluctuate across the ages three to eighteen.

Subjects

All subjects were students who attend a religious private school in Miami, Florida. The ages of the subjects ranged from 3-18 years old. The demographic consisting of elementary, middle, and high school students was decided upon as an effective way to get a wide perspective of how attachment levels shift throughout the age groups. The study was intentional to limit the subjects to one school to ensure that confounding variables like home-factors (i.e., religion) were affecting the results as little as possible by being held constant. Of the respondents who owned an attachment object, about 46% were male and 54% were female, thus there was a representative sample of the population in the relation to sex.

Research Instruments

The survey utilized as the first component of the research study was meant to quantify every participant's attachment level to their attachment object. The short survey consisted of three personal questions ascertaining name, age, and sex of the respondent.

Survey Question	Participant Response	Points earned
1. Is the attachment object named?	“No”	+0
2. Does the attachment object sleep on your bed?	“No”	+0
3. Do you remember who gave you the attachment object?	“Yes”	+1
4. Have you ever taken your attachment object on vacation with you?	“Yes”	+1
5. Do you talk to your attachment object?	“No”	+0
6. Do you tell your attachment object secrets?	“No”	+0
Attachment level:		2

Figure 3. Example survey response

The survey continues with six questions (Figure 3) relating to attachment objects, distributed using the platform Microsoft Forms. This component was aimed at exploring the degree of attachment of the participant in order to ascertain what that degree of attachment looked like across the age groups. The questions used in the survey were deemed the most effective way to gauge how attached a person was to their stuffed animal as a result of Wolfgang Kohler’s Bouba-Kiki effect which explains an innate quality of humans to anthropomorphize or give human-like attributes to their belongings especially through name-giving (Buzzback 2014). From his research, concepts of what makes an individual attached to an object were noted and turned into questions for participants to answer. In the study, each of the six questions in the survey were allotted one point as a way to ensure that one question did not have more weight than another. Every question in the survey was given a point-value of one for every time a participant responded “Yes.” To calculate the total attachment level of a participant, all the point-values would be added up, resulting in a total score from a range of 0-6. According to this scale, zero indicated the lowest attachment possible and six indicated the highest attachment possible. For example, in the example survey in Figure 3, the participant would have received a total score of two, because they responded “Yes” to two questions.

Procedures

To begin the study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained to ethically conduct the study on humans by providing a form with the necessary information about the study. In order to obtain consent, a statement was provided at the beginning of the survey asking for the consent of participants to ensure participants’ willingness to provide personal information throughout the survey. The official consent statement can be referenced in **Appendix A**. The survey was initially sent out to the high school subjects. After receiving an overwhelming 426 responses, it was then

forwarded to the middle school subjects. Finally, due to age and comprehension barriers, the elementary students were given the survey in person. Fellow student researchers sat with elementary students starting in grades pre-K3 through 5th grade and guided them through the survey. The reason for the more personal approach was due to the fact that some of the language in the survey could have been difficult for young children to understand. For example, when a child of three did not understand the term, “attachment object”, the researcher was able to provide the standard explanation: “An attachment object is like a stuffed animal or teddy bear.” The study was intentional in ensuring that participants understood the ideas presented in the survey, but without saying more than was required and only using simple verbal prompts for particular participants who needed it.

Part 2 of Methodology: Interviews (Responds to research question 2)

The second part consisting of validated interviews allowed for a more personal and in-depth perspective to assess the attachment categorization of highly attached adolescents with their attachment objects.

Subjects

After the collection of the survey responses, each was categorized by age and then in increasing order from highest attachment to lowest attachment. Through this organization, the two highest scoring females and the two highest scoring males in the 13-18 age group were chosen to be interviewed. A more condensed demographic was chosen to be the most effective way to achieve a deep understanding of the nature of adolescent-specific attachment.

Research Instruments

The interview portion of the study was intended to narrow the focus and understand the nature of adolescent attachment specifically. This was done by determining the correlation of highly attached adolescents to being categorized as a secure attachment style. These interviews were adopted from a previous study known as the Adult Attachment Projective (AAP): “...a quasi-clinical interview in which individuals’ mental representations concerning early attachment relationships are explored through a series of questions and probes that are designed to elicit an account of such experiences as separation, physical and psychological hurt, rejection and trauma” (George 2004). Researchers realized the substantial amount of research being performed to understand the attachments of young children and decided to extend this methodology which is used in child attachment research to explore attachment quality in adults. Adult participants were shown simple drawings (Figure 4) and asked to explain what they thought was happening in the drawings in as much detail as they could. According to a rubric provided by the researchers in the AAP study, their responses were each scored and categorized into different types of attachment: secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and unresolved attachment. Categorization depended on three aspects of the story narratives which included discourse, content, and defensive processing. The study’s interviews modeled the AAP as a way to receive credible data.

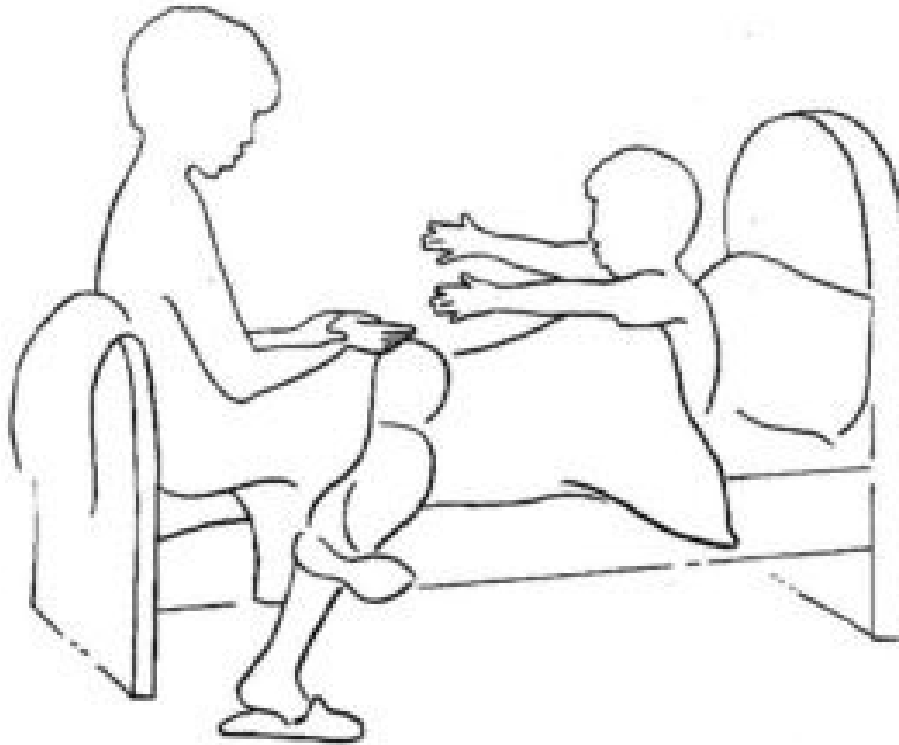


Figure 4. AAP Pictures Used for Interview

Procedures

After all the data from every age group had been collected, the individual survey responses were graded and allotted an attachment level for each participant. This particular age range was chosen because it addresses the gap concerning the quality of attachment between adolescents and their attachment objects. The AAP study interviewed 13 men and women; however, this number was too small for a sample size of 453 adolescents. Instead, 28 students were chosen to be interviewed. Four subjects, 2 females and 2 males, per age were chosen as a way to gauge a representative assessment of the ranging attachment styles. The interviews were held in a quiet classroom setting and in such a way that subjects could not listen to each other's responses. This was done to maintain the authenticity of the categorization and respect the privacy of the participants. The interviews were recorded on the iPhone Voice Memos app, and then later transcribed onto a Word document in order to analyze the responses adequately according to a rubric provided by the researchers.

The rubric adopted by the AAP consisted of three main components: discourse, story content, and defensive processing. The first row of the rubric, discourse, consists of analyzing two features: personal experience and coherency (George 2004). Personal experience, according to the AAP, "signifies the degree to which the individual maintains a boundary between the self and the fictional character (s) in the telling of a story" (George 2004). Interviewees were instructed to describe a drawing in detail, therefore a choice to include a personal anecdote is worth analyzing. The second feature of the discourse component is coherency which aims to analyze the quality, quantity, relation, and manner of the interviews (George 2004). Factors such as over explanation and vagueness in an interview were all considered to be violations of coherency.

Through this categorization process, all 28 interviews were placed into one of the four attachment styles depending on content, diction, and tone during their interview.

Findings

Survey Findings

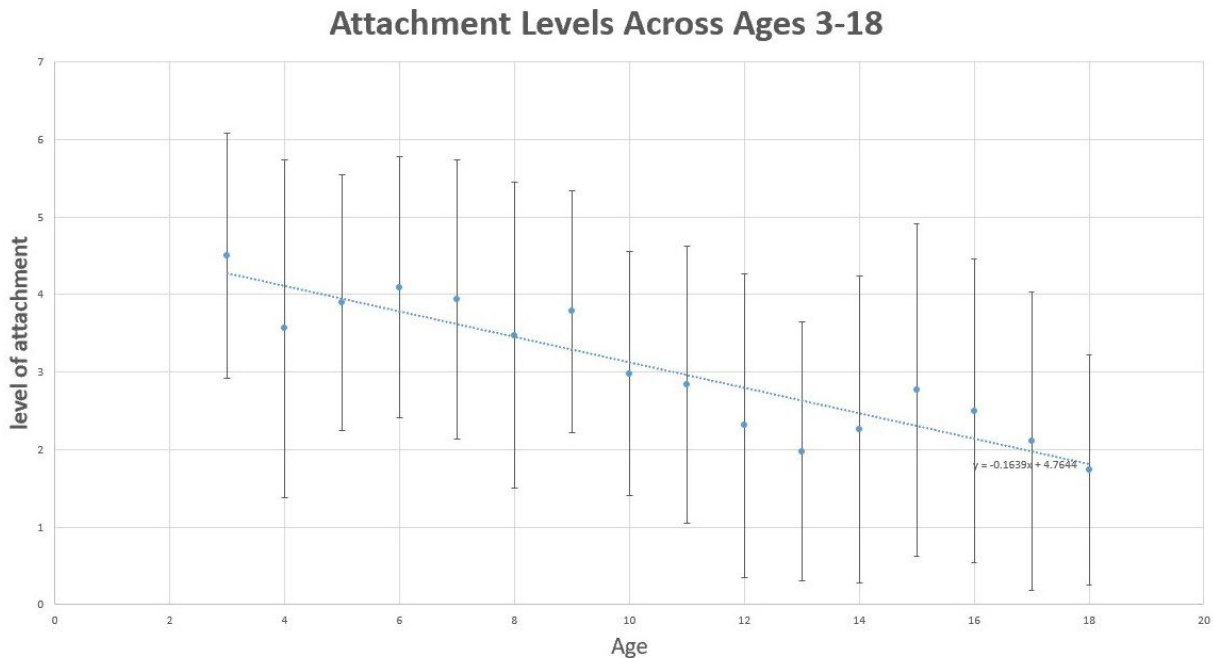


Figure 5. Attachment Level Across Age Gap

The study proved to be significant as 753 students answered the survey and 544 of the students claimed to own a stuffed animal. After scoring all of the 753 survey responses, the data was compiled to generate a graph as seen in Figure 5. Along the x-axis of the graph in Figure 5 can be seen the ages labeled in increasing order from 3 to 18 years old, while on the y-axis different levels of attachment ranging from zero to six can be seen. The average attachment level is displayed for every individual age group creating a clear negative trend across the age groups. The data was deemed to be statistically significant through correlation coefficients resulting in -0.33311 with a p-value of <0.001 demonstrating a statistically significant negative correlation. In other words, as age was increasing, attachment levels were decreasing.

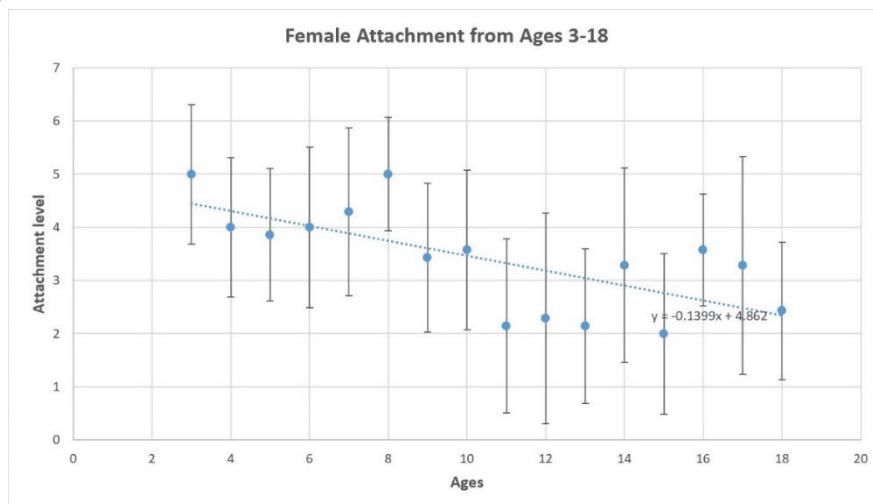


Figure 6. Attachment Level Across Female Age Gap Graph

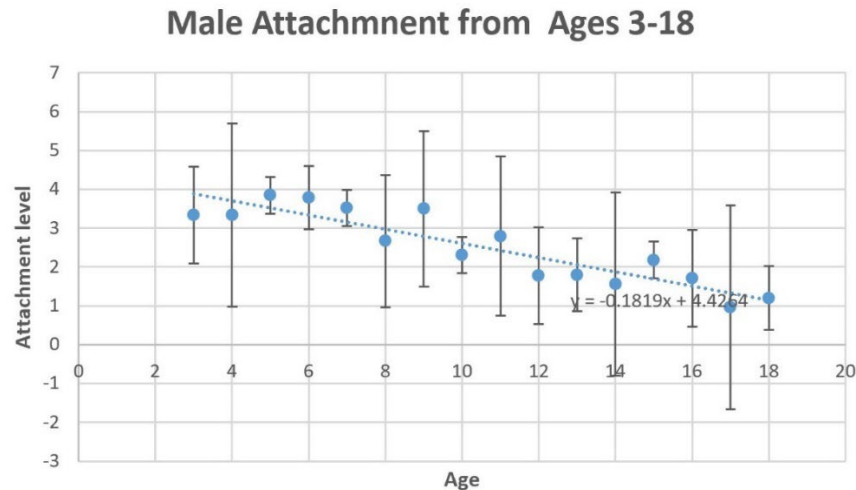


Figure 7. Attachment Level Across Male Age Gap Graph

Furthermore, the sex of the participants was an important point of analysis. Expecting to get an overwhelming number of female responses due to the nature of the study, this was quickly disproved as 54% of participants were females and 46% of participants were males. This nearly even split sparked interest to understand the role which sex had in the trend previously established in Figure 5. The graph in Figure 6 was generated to analyze the trend line across the age gap focusing solely on females, while Figure 7 displayed the trend line specific to male participants. Through a correlation coefficient, the female trend was found to have a p-value of -0.3074 and the male trend was found to have a p-value of -0.40518, demonstrating a statistically significant negative correlation for each of the sexes. This proves that sex plays no significant role in the establishment of the trends as both graphs exemplify negative correlations.

Interviews

Attachment Style	Example Interview
Secure Attachment	<p>“I see either a mom or a dad on their child’s bed and the child is like reaching out to the parent. What do you think led up to this? Maybe the child got like scared of something and they wanted their parent to come and now they’re like more comfortable that their parent’s there. And how do you think that makes them feel? Probably a lot happier than when they were nervous or uncomfortable.”</p> <p>- 13-year-old male</p>
Preoccupied Attachment	<p>“Uh the parent is giving the child something. What do you think led up to that? He’s probably like sick or something. How do you think that makes the child feel? It probably wants whatever is inside the parent’s hand.”</p> <p>- 13-year-old female</p>
Dismissing Attachment	<p>“Um in this picture I see the mom has just like, is talking to the child and the child is saying that like he doesn’t want to go to bed and he wants his mom to carry him like he doesn’t want to leave his mom. What do you think could have happened right before this? Um maybe the kid was like</p>

	<p>playing or doing something or the mom was carrying him, and he liked what he was doing or he liked being with the mom while carrying her. And he doesn't want to go to bed away from her or like away y from what he was doing.”</p> <p>- 17-year-old female</p>
Unresolved Attachment	<p>“Um someone reading a bedtime story to a kid. What do you think could've led up to this? Mmm, I don't know probably like I don't know they could've had dinner before this or something. And how does that make the kid feel? Um happy.”</p> <p>- 14-year-old male</p>

Figure 8. Example Interview Responses

Using the rubric provided by the AAP, different diction choices each coded to a unique attachment style as can be seen in Figure 8. The participant categorized as a secure attachment style delivers the story content with confidence, which differs drastically from the participant categorized as unresolved attachment. Although they are delivering the same content, the unresolved attachment participant does so in a much more hesitant manner including phrases such as, “I think” and “I don't know”. After scoring and categorizing the interviews accordingly, the breakdown shown in Figure 9 was concluded.

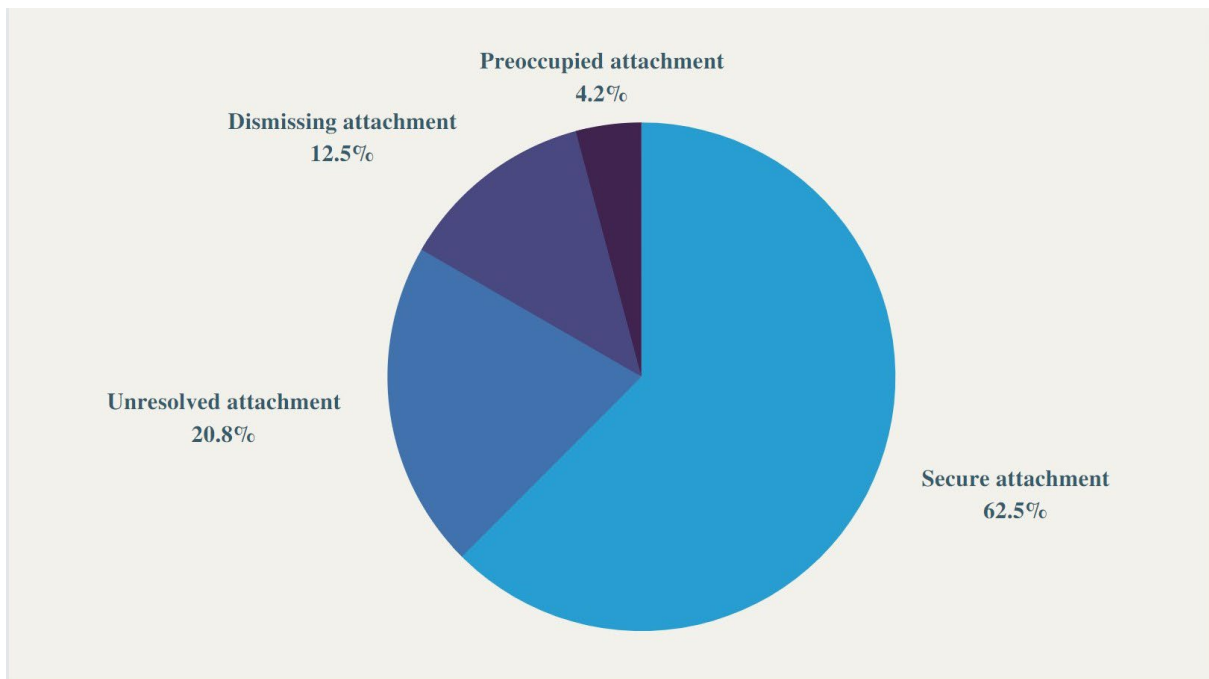


Figure 9. Adolescent Attachment Style Breakdown

Discussion

From this mixed-method study approach, two key new understandings were achieved. First, it was found that as age increases, attachment level decreases. Moreover, with an overwhelming 62.5% of participants being categorized as a secure attachment style, it was concluded that high adolescent attachment is directly correlated with a secure

attachment style. In other words, adolescents who were considered to have a high attachment according to their survey were also said to have a healthy relationship with their attachment objects.

This study gives insight to the understanding of adolescent and attachment object relationship. Due to such a high percentage of participants in the secure attachment categories, schools and families should consider the benefits of adolescents owning attachment objects. Instead of parents encouraging their children to abandon their attachment objects, adolescents should be encouraged to keep them in their possession if they wish to do so as they may lessen stress and provide mental health benefits.

Conclusion

While every effort was made to develop a strong research design, the findings are still limited in various ways. First, due to time constraints, interviewing more than twenty-eight students was not possible. In fact, only four participants in each of the six adolescent years represented in the second part of the study (13-18) were interviewed. With more time, it would be interesting to understand the way in which attachment styles fluctuate between adolescents with high and low attachment styles to see if low levels of attachment-to-attachment objects are also correlated with an attachment style. Moreover, vulnerability was difficult to obtain from the interview participants. Due to the fact that interviewees were not previously acquainted with the interviewer, it was more difficult to ensure that responses were as vulnerable as possible. Regardless of continuous reassuring nods and a comfortable environment, it was often clear that the conversation struggled as can be seen in Figure 11. This directly leads to the final limitation: the adult-specific rubric. The AAP provided a rubric which they adopted from child attachment research and modified in order for it to be applicable to adults. For this reason, using an adult-specific rubric was difficult to apply to adolescents as the mannerisms and speaking styles differ for these different age groups.

For this reason, future research is vital, as a new rubric must be developed in order to accurately categorize adolescents. From the study, it was concluded that high adolescent attachment with their attachment objects correlated with a secure attachment style. However, this study also found that the second most common attachment style for adolescents with a high degree of attachment at 20.8% was the unresolved attachment category, or the attachment style most associated with previous trauma. This finding is fascinating in that it clearly opens the invitation for more research on this topic specifically with regard to the development of an adolescent-specific rubric for the method used in the AAP and in this study as well as further examination into why this significant minority of unresolved attachment might exist. Still, this study finds that adolescents were worthy of study in the field of attachment objects and that the overall nature of even high degrees of attachment with these objects is healthy and secure encouraging adolescents to continue embracing their inner child.

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