

Attachment theory and juvenile delinquency



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Juvenile Delinquency is a major crisis throughout the United States. In recent years attention has been focused on the apparent rise of juvenile delinquency. Most of this attention has been fueled by several high profile cases in the media like the Columbine shootings and the Virginia Tech youth massacre.

The literature indicates that individual, family and societal factors contribute to juvenile delinquency. Some research has investigated these factors by examining the attachment styles observed in juvenile delinquents.

Attachment is defined in terms of a psychological and/or emotional connection with significant others. It represents an essential element in the development of social bonds (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008).

A high incidence of mental health disorders such as bipolar disorder, conduct disorder (CD) and oppositional defiant disorder have been observed in the development of juvenile delinquency (Juvenile delinquency, 2010). Some of the juveniles diagnosed with conduct disorder demonstrate a lack of empathy which contributes to them committing crimes (Conduct disorder, 2010). The lack of empathy, in addition to their inability to relate, communicate and bond with others speaks to their negative attachment patterns. Children with no moral restraints demonstrate a lack of attachment. These children have no empathy and/or sympathy and are deemed likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008).

The connection between juvenile crimes and parent-child attachment was first addressed by John Bowlby. Bowlby described the attachment between parent and child as a mechanism that insured survival through proximity

during stressful situations. Parents who are attentive and attuned to their children's needs and expectations promote a safe environment. This environment allows a child to develop healthy social, emotional, secure attachments. A home where a child's needs go unmet fosters distrust and chronic anxiety. The child then begins to see the world as an uncomfortable and unpredictable place from which they must hide or fight against. In addition to parent-child relationships, poor discipline practices also contribute to insecure attachment in children.

Adolescents with disruptive and antisocial behaviors have a history of poor parent-child relationships and parental neglect. Research on troubled adolescents indicates that insecure attachment and negative parent-child relationships promote repressed, hyper vigilant or unsure reactions to parents, random friendliness, and evident psychopathology. These children are mistrustful and angry toward their parents, do not adopt their parent's morals, and are unable to regulate their emotions (Elgar, Knight, Worrall, & Sherman, 2003).

It is therefore important that parents/caregivers devote time to their children's interest, academics and guidance. This will promote feelings of attachment, obligation and responsibility that bond the child to family and traditional role models. This bond will avert children from partaking in criminal behavior. Children with strong parental/caregiver bonds have a greater pledge to traditional values and are less likely to engage in criminal behavior. They may believe that delinquent behavior places their beliefs and values at risk (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008).

The Denver Youth Study established that the quality of attachment relationship was connected to both victimization and criminal behavior (Esbensen, Huizinga, & Menard, 1999). Links between insecure attachment relationships and behavioral problems have also been seen in cross sectional research (Gardner, 1987; Moss, Rousseau, Parent, St-Laurent, Saintonge, 1998). DeKlyen and colleagues found that a greater number of children with oppositional defiant disorder or those who had elevated ratings on the Child Behavior Checklist aggression scale showed insecure attachment traits (DeKlyen, 1996). Moreover, other studies indicated that insecure attachment contributes to violence and sex offenses (Elgar, Knight, Worrall, & Sherman, 2003).

Studies indicate that children who have been abused and/or neglected are at a higher risk of having behavioral problems and committing crimes (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008). Carlston, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Braunwald, (1995), found that 80% of infants who were abused and neglected had signs of disorganized attachment disorder. Disorganized attachment is linked to development issues such as dissociative symptoms, depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems (Carlston, 1988; & Lyons-Ruth, 1996).

Children who have been physically and sexually abused and neglected are also more likely to develop Reactive attachment disorder (Child abuse, 2010). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) of the American Psychiatric Association (2000) describes the essential feature of Reactive attachment disorder (RAD) and classifies under ICD-10 94. 1 and 94. 2, and DSM-IV 313. 89. RAD is caused by the inability of a child to form normal attachments to a parent or caretaker.

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Abused children develop rigid self-reliance and an obsessive need to control all areas of their lives. They see their caregiver not as a safe source of guidance but as a source of fear which must be controlled in order to remain safe. This control is exerted via manipulation, conformity, intimidation and/or role reversal (Child abuse, 2010).

Affect attunement between parent and child is pivotal in the development of secure attachment and a positive, integrated, sense of self. Children who are continuously exposed to abuse are more likely to develop a fragmented sense of self and disorganized attachment patterns. In order to function daily in the world these children expend all of their psychological and physical energy. In addition, they are reactive, concrete, impulsive and are dissociated from personal events. These characteristics may persist throughout an individual's lifetime (Hughes, 2004).

Studies indicate that children who are raised by a single parent are at a higher risk of being involved in criminal behavior than those raised by two parents. Nevertheless, when the attachment between parent and child is accounted for, a child raised by a single parent is no more likely to commit crimes than their counterparts. This demonstrates that children with poor parental attachment despite the composition of the home, are at a higher risk of committing crimes (Juvenile delinquency, 2010).

Literature reviews support prior findings on deviancy. They show that the greatest predictor of juvenile delinquency is an adolescent attachment to parents. Relationships with parents which are defined as warm, accepting, and safe not only impede behavioral problems but they also decrease the

development of anxiety, depressive mood, and psychological stress (Overbeek, Vollebergh, Engels, & Meeus, 2005). As indicated earlier, a healthy attachment to parents contributes to an adolescent's development and assessment of self identity. Insecure attachment styles place adolescents at a greater risk of mental health problems (Schochet, Smyth, & Hommel, 2007).

In the United States 52% of the children in foster care who are available for adoption had indications of attachment disorder (Cicchetti, Cummings, Greenberg, & Marvin, 1990). Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, (2008), found that more positive relationships between the foster children and their foster parents are associated with a decreased risk of delinquency. In addition, foster children who engaged in religious organizations were less likely to experience a delinquency petition. Foster children who were suspended from school were more likely to partake in criminal behavior.

The results of this study also indicated that the children who foresaw a change in placement (perceived instability) were significantly more likely to experience delinquency petitions as compared with those predicting no change in their foster placement. The children that experience multiple movements within the foster care system were deemed to be more likely to engage in delinquency as compared to children with stable placement (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008).

Elgar, Knight, Worrall, & Sherman, (2003), found that insecure attachment characteristics correlated with not only behavioral problems and dysfunctional family but also with substance abuse. Urban juvenile

delinquents reported more substance abuse problems, more interpersonal problems with peers and family members and more externalizing behavior (hyperactivity, aggression, inattention) as compared to their rural counterparts.

Children who have a low attachment to academics are also more likely to engage in criminal behavior (Juvenile delinquency, 2010). Cowan, Cowan, & Mehta, (2009), found a direct association between parents' quality of attachment and their children's early school adaptation. This study indicated that insecure attachment in the couple's relationship and sadness and anger in the parents' communication when working with their child are risk factors that contribute to a child's lower academic achievement scores and behavioral problems early in elementary school.

Shochet, Smyth, & Homel, (2007), found a strong link between parent attachment and overall sense of school connectedness, as well as the link between parent attachment and the perception of the school environment which provided support for attachment theory and the continuity of attachment relationships as the individual develops. It should be noted that likeability of teachers was one of the major school environment variables predicted by parent attachment. These findings suggest that while it is important for a school instructor to be warm and engaging, their likeability is not solely in their control.

Child protective services as well as academics believe that attachment is an excellent predictor of strong psychological development. Quality attachment engenders a safe environment which promotes relational skills that remain

through adolescence (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008). It is important when analyzing the personal history of a juvenile delinquent to account for their social, emotional and behavioral traits.

Delinquent behavior is defined by the violation of the rights of others and age-appropriate norms (Juvenile delinquency, 2010). These norms are created by society, instituted by criminal law and diagnosed by criteria for disorders such as Oppositional Defiant, Conduct Disorder and Antisocial Personality (Elgar, Knight, Woorrall, & Sherman, 2003). Law enforcement officers, especially those working crimes against children, deal on a daily basis with youth who are victims, witnesses, and perpetrators of violence. Unfortunately, most of these law enforcement officers lack the professional expertise to address the juvenile delinquents emotional and psychological needs of the juvenile delinquent.

It is imperative that law enforcement officers immediately coordinate with mental health workers and child protective services when investigating violent incidents involving children. This would allow for early intervention which can provide stabilization and referrals to mental health services for the children and their families (Beresin, 2009).

Special focus should be placed on implications of the studies analyzed in this paper. It would behoove all parties involved with trouble children to facilitate and maintain a secure and stable attachment with the child and their parent/caregiver and involvement with important social institutions (school, religious organizations, after school programs etc). This may be the

difference between a juvenile delinquent becoming a repeat offender or being rehabilitated and becoming a valuable contributor to society.