Children's Attachment Trajectories after the Transition to Adoptive Placement:

A Longitudinal Study of Children with Prenatal Substance Exposure

Adopted From Foster Care

by

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This study examined high risk children’s attachment trajectories over the first 2 years of adoptive placement. The sample consisted of 62 children (ages 1 – 5 _) with prenatal substance exposure who were adopted from foster care, and their adoptive caregivers. Observational measures of children’s attachment to their adoptive caregivers were collected 3 times over the first 2 years of adoptive placement and were coded using a modified version of the Attachment Q-Sort. It was hypothesized that children’s attachment trajectories would increase in a linear fashion over time. In addition, pre-placement environmental risk factors (number of placements, age at placement, living with birth parent, history of abuse/neglect, cumulative risk) were used to predict these trajectories using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). It was hypothesized that increased risk factors would predict lower intercepts and slopes. Parent sensitivity variables were
measured at Time 1 and were used to predict children’s attachment trajectories. It was hypothesized that greater sensitivity would predict steeper attachment slopes.

Results indicated that the data did not fit a positive linear trend. None of the HLM results emerged as statistically significant, possibly due to the small sample size and missing data. Descriptive data suggested that children’s attachment trajectories are relatively flat from Time 1 to Time 2, and become differentiated by Time 3. In particular, exploring means over time revealed that being in a higher risk category was associated with a decline in attachment security by Time 3. Descriptive statistics and an HLM trend revealed that children in higher risk groups had slightly higher mean levels of attachment security compared to lower risk groups at Time 1. HLM trends emerged for number of placements, age at placement, and cumulative risk, such that greater risk contributes to decline in attachment security over time. These trends were supported by correlational findings. None of the parent sensitivity variables emerged as significantly related to attachment trajectories. Findings are discussed with respect to grief and transition processes that children experience after adoptive placement that may impact their attachment development, and implications for interventions and future research are suggested.