Promoting Attachment Security among Internationally Adopted Children with Histories of Early Adversity

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Attachment and children adopted internationally

- Young children are biologically prepared to form attachment relationships
- Children adopted internationally do not have consistent caregivers who are responsive to their cues
- These children are at high risk for attachment-related disturbances prior to adoption

Bowlby, 1969/1982; Dozier et al., 2012; Lionetti et al., 2015; van IJzendoorn et al., 2011
Adoption as an intervention

• Adoption involves moving from a depriving environment to an enriched one

• There are corresponding improvements in the quality of children’s attachments

• But…internationally adopted children are still at risk for insecure attachments with their adoptive parents
  • Especially true for children with histories of adversity

van den Dries, van IJzendoorn, Bakersman-Kranenburg, 2009
Interventions for internationally adoptive families

• Existing evidence-based programs focus on pre-adoptive preparation for parents and internationally adoptive children’s medical problems

• Few evidence-based interventions for improving attachment quality among children adopted internationally

Welsh, Viana, Petrill, & Mathias, 2007; Juffer, van IJzendoorn, & Bakersman-Kranenburg, 2005
Present study

- Evaluate whether an intervention targeting parents’ sensitive responsiveness promotes secure attachments among children adopted internationally

- Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC)
  - Shown to improve parental sensitivity and attachment security among children in foster care and children with histories of CPS involvement

Bernard et al., 2012; Bick & Dozier, 2013; Dozier et al. 2009
Sample characteristics

108 children adopted internationally into the US
• Children were adopted between 2007 and 2012 from 13 countries
• 65% were adopted after 1 year of age
• 73% had been in institutional care prior to adoption

Adoptive families
• Over 90% were married
• High socioeconomic status
Countries of adoption
Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up

• 10-session intervention

• Implemented in families’ homes

• Targets parenting behaviors shown to be important for the development of attachment security in children
Targets of the ABC intervention

ABC Intervention

Enhanced Parenting

Nurture

“Follow the child’s lead”

Avoid harsh behavior

Attachment security
Randomized controlled trial

- Families were randomly assigned to receive ABC ($n = 54$) or a control intervention ($n = 54$)

- Control intervention: Developmental Education for Families (DEF)
  - Same structure as ABC (10 weekly sessions in home)
  - Focused on children’s cognitive and motor development
Measures

• Attachment security
  – Strange Situation Procedure completed at 2 years and 4 years
Measures

• Pre-adoption adversity
  – Composite of 5 variables:
    1. Children’s age of adoption
    2. Duration of institutional care
    3. Stunted physical growth at the time of adoption
    4. Poor pre-adoptive caregiving quality
    5. Pre-adoptive social neglect

Carlson, Hostinar, Mliner, & Gunnar, 2014
Results

![Chart showing the percentage of children securely attached. The chart compares low and high pre-adoption adversity in control and ABC conditions. The results show a significant difference in the ABC condition with a higher percentage of securely attached children (70%) compared to the control condition (49%) under high pre-adoption adversity. Under low pre-adoption adversity, the percentages are 67% for control and 60% for ABC, with no significant difference (ns).]
Conclusions

• ABC intervention promotes secure attachments among internationally adopted children who are at highest risk for problematic development
  – Children have a remarkable ability to recover from early adversity when they experience supportive caregiving

• Questions for future research
  – Will these improvements in attachment quality persist across time?
  – Will these improvements facilitate recovery in other domains?
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