

# Relationship between Avoidant Attachment Type and Relational Aggression among Pre-Schoolers in Kenya

Onyango Daughty Akinyi<sup>1</sup>, Benson Charles Odongo<sup>2</sup>, Peter J. O. Aloka<sup>3,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Candidate in Early Childhood Education, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Bondo, Kenya

<sup>2</sup>Department of Special Needs and Early Childhood Education, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Bondo, Kenya

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology and Educational Foundation, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Bondo, Kenya

**Abstract** The purpose of the study was to establish the relationship between avoidant attachment and relational aggression among pre-schoolers. The study was based on Attachment theories by Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth (1969) supported by Aggression theory by Bandura (1969). The study adopted Concurrent Triangulation Research Design within the mixed methods approach. The target population comprised of 131 preschool teachers, 923 parents, 1,159 Learners and 1 education officer in Nyakach Sub-County. A sample size of 40 pre-school teachers, 277 parents, 348 pre-schoolers and 1 Sub-county Coordinator of ECDE was obtained using a combination of simple random sampling, cluster random sampling and purposive sampling techniques respectively. Parent-child attachment and Relational Aggression questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data while interview schedules were used to obtain qualitative data. In addition, observation checklist was also used to obtain data. The research supervisors at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology evaluated the instruments to ascertain their content, construct and face validities. The reliability was ensured using cronbach alpha technique and an alpha of 0.786 was reported. Trustworthiness of qualitative data was also ensured. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics such as Pearson correlation and linear regression while qualitative data was analyzed by thematic analysis. The study findings showed a non significant ( $n=236$ ;  $r = -0.043$ ;  $p = .772$ ) weak negative correlation between avoidant attachment and relational aggression among pre-schoolers. Based on findings, the study recommended that the Board of Management of schools should develop school mental health programs, with the specific aim at addressing emotional and conduct related needs and difficulties of the learners especially for the withdrawn from avoidant attachment backgrounds.

**Keywords** Relational Aggression, Avoidant Attachment, Parent-child Attachment Style, Pre-schoolers

## 1. Introduction

Parents play many different roles in the lives of their children (Mercer, 2006) including teacher, playmate, disciplinarian, caregiver and an attachment figure. Of all these, their role as an attachment figure is one of the most important in predicting the child's social and emotional outcome. Without an appropriate attachment (Bowlby, 1973) children suffer serious psychological and social impairment. How the parents respond to their infants in the first two years particularly during the time of distress (Waters, 2005) established the types of attachment their children form; secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized. The attachment system serves to achieve or maintain proximity to

the attachment figure (Berlin, 2008). In close physical proximity this system is not activated, and the infant can direct its attention to the outside world like on other children while in class. Relational aggressive behaviors in preschool-age children tend to be overt and direct (and therefore easily observed) as opposed to indirect, discrete or subtle as more often manifest in older children (Ostrov, 2004).

The process of attachment with a new baby is natural for most mothers. According to Treleavan (2012), left alone, new mothers will hold their baby next to their bodies, rock them gently, strive for eye contact, sing or talk to the baby and begin to nurse. Often within just hours of birth, mothers report feelings of overwhelming love and attachment for their new baby. Crying and making other noises, smiling, searching for the breast, and seeking eye contact give cues for a caring adult to respond. When a caregiver consistently responds to an infant's needs Hazan, (2013), a trusting relationship and lifelong attachment develops that sets the stage for the growing child to enter healthy relationships with other people throughout life and to appropriately

\* Corresponding author:

jairopeteraloka@yahoo.com (Peter J. O. Aloka)

Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/edu>

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experience and express a full range of emotions. Babies who are held and comforted when they need it during the first six months of life tend to be more secure and confident as toddlers and older children (Kayastha, 2010). Avoidant attachment is the relationship between the parent and child where the parent meets the child's needs but is emotionally unresponsive. These parents are emotionally unavailable, imperceptive, unresponsive, and rejecting. Some are responsive in many non-emotional interactions, but are very dismissive and non-responsive when the infant is emotionally needy, frustrated, or angry Robertson and Bowlby (1952). These infants often express random aggression, and are *more* clingy and demanding. The internal working model is likely, "mom does not respond to my emotions, especially when I am needy or angry, so I will shut down my needs and try to become independent." The infants then protect themselves from this difficult situation by dissociating from contact with their normal need for connection, and repress their emotions. The study was informed by the John Bowlby's attachment theory (1973) and Albert Bandura's social learning theory of aggression (1969). Attachment theory attempts to explain that a child has an innate need to attach to one main attachment figure and that children are born with the tendency to display certain innate behaviors (called social releasers) which help ensure proximity and contact with the mother or attachment figure (e.g. crying, smiling, crawling, etc.) – these are species-specific behaviors.

In the study by Rozita (2013), in Iran reported that avoidant attachment style on the other hand had a significant positive correlation with total score of aggression ( $P < 0.05$ ,  $r = 0.24$ ). This implies that avoidant attachment style has no significant effect on the total score of aggression. According to the results of this study, avoidant attachment of mother with infant could reduce aggression during childhood. Tur-Porcar, Doménech and Mestre (2016) confirmed the positive relationships between pro-social behavior and parental avoidant attachment. Waddell, (2012) conducted a study on Childhood Factors Affecting Aggressive Behaviors. A cross-tabulation between parental affection and respondent aggression showed no significant relationship. Specifically, 20% of the respondents whose parents never or rarely showed affection toward them reported a tendency to hit other people, while 27.5% of the respondents who typically received affection had a tendency to hit other people. Nikiforou, Georgiou and Stavrinides (2013) conducted a study on Attachment to Parents and Peers as a Parameter of Bullying and Victimization in Cyprus. Data was analyzed using the cronbach's alpha which showed that bullying is significantly positively predicted by father & mother poor communication. The reviewed study was carried out in Cyprus but the present study was done in Kenya to fill the gaps in the literature. Tirkkonen (2015) conducted a study that focused on early attachment and its effects on later cognitive development and mental well-being in Finnish twins and singletons from fromOula Finland. In the whole sample, approximately one third (37%) of the

children were assessed as using avoidant/defended insecure (Type A). Type A attachment strategy with the mother among singleton toddlers was significantly associated with higher CBCL scores reported by mothers, concerning withdrawal, somatic problems and total internalizing symptoms, whereas among twins there were no such correlations. In addition, on the basis of the parental reports singletons had significantly more behavioral and emotional symptoms than the twins.

Koiv (2014) in Estonia indicated that Bullies had higher scores in avoidant attachment scales. Seibert and Kerns, (2015) reported that avoidant children were rated high by mothers and teachers on a social behavior, and lowest by teachers on relational aggression. Another study that researched the effect of attachment, but in adulthood, was conducted by Hansen, *et. al.*, (2011) in Norway. In this example, the researchers studied the attachment during adulthood instead of childhood, but the findings tend to support my hypothesis. The findings showed that inmates who were incarcerated for violent crimes scored higher on avoidant attachment than anxious attachment which was correlated with inmates who committed non-violent crimes (Hansen, *et. al.*, 2011). The reviewed study was conducted on male law offenders but the current study was done on pre schoolers to fill in gaps in literature. Nicholson, Clark and Dahlen, (2015) indicated that avoidant and parental psychological control predicted relational aggression. Wu, Tseng, Wu and Chen (2016) conducted a study on the relationship between Parent-Child Interactions and Prosocial Behavior among Fifth- and Sixth-grade Students in Taiwan. Based on an analysis of data using structural equation modeling (SEM), the following conclusion was reached that there was a significant positive correlation between parent-child interaction, gratitude, and prosocial behavior. The reviewed study was conducted on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students who were primary schoolers but the current study was conducted on preschoolers to fill the gaps in the literature.

While most reviewed studies were qualitative, they lacked quantitative aspects hence, the present study adopting the mixed method approach that enabled analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. In addition, most reviewed studies were conducted on females but they lacked findings from males hence the present study was conducted on both males and females to fill the gaps in the literature. In addition, most of the reviewed studies were conducted on single parents especially mothers hence the present study was conducted on both parents to fill the gaps in the literature.

Tomlison, Cooper and Murray, (2005) in South Africa revealed that, at 18 months, 4.1% the infants were rated as avoidant. An infant with an avoidant pattern of attachment tend to avoid or ignore the parent showing little emotion when the parent departs or returns. The infant does not explore very much regardless of who is there. Infants classified as avoidant represented a puzzle in the early 1970s. They did not exhibit distress on separation, and either ignored the parent on their return or showed some tendency

to approach together with some tendency to ignore or turn away from the caregiver or the parent. Bell, (2010) stated that the apparently unruffled behavior of the avoidant infants was in fact a mask for distress, a hypothesis later evidenced through studies of the heart-rate of avoidant infants (Ainsworth, 1970). The study did not look into other factors that could be affecting the parents like parental state of mind and child's psychosocial functioning which may bring about the distress in children hence the present study.

According to Bell, (2010) avoidance has two functions for an infant whose parent is consistently unresponsive to their needs. Firstly, avoidant behavior allows the infant to maintain a conditional proximity with the caregiver: close enough to maintain protection, but distant enough to avoid rebuff. Secondly, the cognitive processes organizing avoidant behavior could help direct attention away from the unfulfilled desire for closeness with the parent avoiding a situation in which the child is overwhelmed with emotion ('disorganized distress'), and therefore unable to maintain control of themselves in all environments.

Some studies have been conducted on the possible predictors of relational aggression on learners. For example Casas et al, (2006) reported that maternal psychological control was positively associated with preschool-age boys and girl's relational aggression, Curtner-Smith et al (2006) reported similar concurrent relations of low maternal empathy and a controlling parenting style as predictors. Early child care experiences have been linked to children's subsequent aggression, (NICHD ECCRN, 2003). However, scanty studies have been done on the parent-child attachment style as a predictor of relational aggression.

A study by Obure et al (2012), in nine countries indicated that Kenya had the highest rate of Relational Aggression among pre-schoolers. Atieno, (2014) on the other hand examined major factors influencing indiscipline in public day schools in Makadara district Kenya which indicated that most indiscipline cases in Public day Schools in Makadara district were fuelled by inadequate guidance and counseling by parents and lack of school - based families. In Nyakach, though it is expected that with adequate parent-child attachment, parental involvement and support and quality teaching in Nyakach Sub-County, pre-schoolers should be of good behaviors. However, the records on learners behavior is not pleasing at all. According to the records from the Sub-County Director of Education's office (2017), in the year 2012 the sub-county recorded a high rate of relational aggression among the pre-schoolers and in 2013 it recorded worse same to 2014. The preschoolers behavior was on a downward trend for two consecutive years from 2013 to 2015, and falling below the National and Kisumu County average behavior all the years. In Nyakach sub-county, there is a worrying trend of Relational Aggression among the pre-schoolers; accidents, withdrawal and unnecessary crying.

The relational aggressive tendencies among pre-schoolers in Nyakach sub-county is of great concern. However, there are previous studies, particularly in Kenya, that have focused

on other factors that influence learner behavior, like teacher attitude and parental state of mind, many pre-schoolers still behave below average according to the national expectation. Furthermore, scarce literature is available on the contributions on learner aggressive tendencies which could be inadequate. Based on this, the study was geared towards establishing the relationship between parent-child attachment types and relational aggression among pre-schoolers in Nyakach Sub- County, Kenya.

## 2. Research Methodology

A research design is the arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedure (Kothari, 2011). It is a plan, structure and strategy of investigation conceived so as to obtain answers to research questions. The study adopted Concurrent triangulation design within the mixed method approach. The design converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. In this design, the investigator typically collects both forms of data at roughly the same time and then integrates the information in the interpretation of the overall results (Creswell, 2014). The study targeted 2,214 participants from Nyakach sub-county Kenya. The study adopted purposive sampling to sample teachers, learners and the sub-county coordinator for EC and simple random to sample the parents. The sample size for the study therefore consisted of 40 pre-school teachers, 348 pre-schoolers, 277 parents and 1 Sub county coordinator hence a sample size of 666 respondents.

The data collection instruments were structured questionnaires for parents where they gave ratings on parent-child attachments and relational aggression which generated quantitative data and interview schedules and document analysis which sought to elicit in-depth information for qualitative data. Items to measure parent-child attachment type and relational aggression were adapted from Attachment Questionnaire (AQ) previously used by Kerns (2009) and Relational Aggression Questionnaire (RAQ) by Crick (2006). They were suitable because previously adopted to study Parent-Child Attachment and Monitoring in Middle Childhood and Relational Aggression among adolescents. In using the questionnaires for this study, the items were rephrased specifically to align to Kenyan educational context to ensure that the parents understand the survey items and respond appropriately. Using the parents responses based on a five point scales of; Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Undecided (3), Disagree (2) or Strongly Disagree (1), a sixty five itemed Likert-scaled questionnaire which explored the parents' views on the attachment type and relational aggression tendencies was adopted. Validity was ensured by expert judgment from university supervisors from Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology. Cronbach Alpha was used establish reliability and an alpha of 0.786

was reported. Trustworthiness of qualitative data was ensured by use of multiple sources of data. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and linear regression were used to analyze quantitative data while the Qualitative data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis Approach.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between Avoidant Parent-child Attachment Type as a determinant of Relational Aggression among Pre-schoolers in Nyakach Sub-County, Kenya.

The hypothesis was stated as follows:

H<sub>0</sub>1: ***“There is no statistically significant relationship between avoidant attachment and relational aggression among pre-schoolers”***

To establish whether there was any statistical significant influence of Avoidant Parent-child Attachment Type on Relational Aggression, the researcher computed abivariate Pearson’s Product-Moment Coefficient of Correlation between the scores of the two variables. The SPSS output Table 1 shows the correlation results.

**Table 1.** Correlation between Relationship between Avoidant Attachment and Relational Aggression among Pre-schoolers

		Avoidant Attachment Score	Overall Relational Aggression
Avoidant Attachment Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.043
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.772
	N	48	48
Overall Relational Aggression	Pearson Correlation	.043	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.772	
	N	48	48

From Table 1, it is evident that although there was some positive correlation between avoidant attachment and relational aggression among pre-schoolers, it was not statistically significant [ $n=48$ ;  $r=.043$ ;  $p=.772$  (ns)]. Given that the p-value obtained 0.772 was greater than .05, the null hypothesis which stated that *“There is no statistically significant relationship between avoidant attachment and relational aggression among pre-schoolers”* was not rejected since the results were not significant. It was therefore concluded that there is no statistically significant relationship between avoidant attachment and relational aggression among pre-schoolers. This finding agreed with McDade (2013) study in America which indicated a negative correlation between avoidant parent attachment and aggression and between parent attachment and depressed mood. It however, disagreed with Mutie (2015) study in Kenya which revealed that younger participants in forms one and two were affected by the emotional absence of their parents. Majority of participants as represented by 35.7% who expressed emotional parental neglect also expressed hatred for school rules and elders, and reported

having engaged in different forms of indiscipline while in school. Qualitative data obtained from the teachers and the sub-county coordinator for Early Childhood indicated the contrary;

*“Most of the learners from APCH do things to get the others attention which at times is quite annoying. They usually blurt out and tell what they did, or that they have finished their work or that somebody is copying their work. Their desire for attention is almost insatiable. Much of what they do is done to get attention. Failure to provide lots of the attention make them be aggressive”* (T, 11)

*“Majority of them seem to have something to prove and don’t take as much pride intrinsically as they do extrinsically. They do not have a sense of belonging and may need some confidence building”* (SCCEC).

However to estimate the level of influence of avoidant attachment on relational aggression, a coefficient of determination was computed. This was done using regression analysis and the results were presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Model Summary on Regression Analysis of Avoidant Attachment on Relational Aggression among Pre-schoolers

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.043 <sup>a</sup>	.002	-.020	.23660

a. Predictors: (Constant), Avoidant Attachment Score

b. Dependent Variable: Overall Relational Aggression

From the model, only 0.2% of the variation in relational aggressiveness among preschoolers Nyakach Sub-County was explained by the level of parent-child avoidant attachment, as signified by R Square of .002. This was fairly small amount of effect a predictor on the dependent variable. However, the regression model is a good fit of the data, meaning that information on level of parent-child avoidant attachment could be used to significantly predict of relational aggression as confirmed by Young, Johnson and Thomson (2010) study which found out that avoidant attachment on infancy continued to predict both aggression and passive withdrawal among the children.

### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study sought to investigate avoidant parent-child attachment type as a determinant of relational aggression among per-schoolers in Nyakach Sub-County, Kenya. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that Parents who do not realize their own duties and importance of parenting potentially lead their children to have interpersonal difficulties in later life, because the start of behavioral training comes from the family and it forms the character of children like avoidance. Hence, the development of aggressive behavior begins via inadequate parental attention and support with the study concluding that avoidant parent-child attachment is a strong predictor of relational

aggression pre-schoolers.

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