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## **A FORM OF SECURE AFFECTIVE ATTACHMENT FOR CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES - A CONDITION FOR ADAPTATION IN A SPORTS TEAM**

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**Abstract:** The goal of the work is to show the importance of affective attachment as an important component that defines the relationship of parents to the child, as well as its irreplaceable role in stimulating the child and overcoming certain social problems, especially in children with developmental disabilities when the child enters a new environment such as a sports team.

Children with developmental disabilities have absolute rights to be an integral part of the education system as well as sports institutions, which includes staying in sports teams with children of the typical population with the support of professionals and adapting the program to their capabilities in order to make adequate progress in the psycho-social sense.

The paper applies a theoretical analysis of the importance and characteristics of affective attachment as an inseparable characteristic of children and parents and its important role in understanding personality as the main result of this research when including children with developmental disabilities in a sports team.

**Keywords:** parent, child, sport

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## **Introduction**

Affective attachment theory is one of the most important theoretical frameworks for understanding personality development. The importance of affective attachment focused on the development of behavior, the periods of development of affective behavior, personality formation, the influence of upbringing and other factors that influence and have a close connection with affective attachment are described in a large number of necessary researches and professional works.

The paper will attempt to present the aspects of affective attachment, as well as its influence, i.e. its role for adaptation in the sports team of children with developmental disabilities, through various research systematized according to empirical studies and review articles.

## **Theory of affective attachment**

Affective attachment theorists and researchers commonly use the constructs of sensitivity and responsiveness to describe the quality of parenting that leads to the adoption of affective attachment strategies. Maternal sensitivity, which is defined as the mother's ability to respond appropriately, sensitively and quickly to the baby's signals, is an important condition for the development of a secure affective bond (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997).

It is considered that the theory of affective attachment was created in the middle of the last century and in its interpretation it went through various stages in which psychology made a great contribution and today it is considered to be a theory about the origin and nature of human sensitivity. According to Bowlby, affective attachment refers to a specific relationship that is formed in early childhood between mother and child and lasts throughout life, as a permanent psychological bond established between two people (Bowlby, 1988).

Fraley (2002) states that affective attachment implies a special and affectionate relationship between the parents and the child, which will be essentially undisturbed but at the same time reasonable, more sensitive and stimulating for the child in synchronization with the mother so that the child feels safe and confident. In essence, mothers who are especially sensitive and connected to their child react faster to all the child's reactions, feel the child and his emotions more strongly, and therefore, looking at the child's face, they more easily interact with each other. Responsiveness implies correct interpretation of the child's signals, as well as timely and consistent

response to them. It is important for the child to get the impression that she is available through interaction with the mother and to develop positive expectations in relation to their needs. If parents are usually warm, positive and consistently available, the child will learn to count on them when he needs them, and develop secure patterns of affective attachment.

Also, in his early research, Bowlby (1973) observed individual differences in the functioning of the affective attachment system and believed that only a sincere and strong connection between parents and children, who are sensitive to all the child's feelings and reactions, leads to the formation of a pattern of secure affective attachment.

A secure affective attachment develops in a relationship with happy mothers, who have a positive attitude towards the parental role and who respond in a timely and adequate manner to the child's signals. Children with this characteristic of affective attachment, when the mother is present, certainly examine the environment, are disturbed by the mother's departure, and upon her return, they calm down and return to the game.

According to Stefanović et al. (2012), a securely attached infant is characterized by the following:

- Can rely on the mother as an available source of comfort and protection if the need arises;
- He is able to direct attachment behaviors towards his mother and to be comforted and soothed in contact with her;
- Readily explores and masters the environment.

Psychologists believe that children with developmental disabilities and children of the typical population, if in their younger years they showed a model of behavior as safe and more stable children, that this pattern of behavior will also be maintained in their older years because they are better.

Psychologists believe that children with developmental disabilities and children of the typical population, if they showed a model of behavior as safe and more stable children in their younger years, they will keep that pattern of behavior in their older years because they manage better in negative situations, have more self-confidence, are more emotionally mature and find solutions more easily. In the same situation, children who belong to patterns of insecure affective attachment react with so-called secondary strategies, which mean adaptation to specific experiences acquired through daily contact with their mother (Tošić et al., 2013).

Tošić et al. (2013) state that based on the characteristics of children's behavior, and on the basis of their formed nature of relationships, Mary Ainsworth distinguishes two types of insecure attachment in addition to secure: rejecting and ambivalent. Rejecting affectively attached children show a behavior model such that they do not react to the presence or absence of parents, especially the mother. When the mother is not present in the child's environment, the child behaves without a pattern of sadness, and in the presence, i.e. the return of the mother, they almost ignore her presence. Ambivalently attached children are disturbed by separation, reserved in communication with an unknown person, and upon the mother's return, they want her closeness and show a model of longing for the mother's presence. The aforementioned models of children's behavior are the causes of mothers not responding to children, their insufficient attachment and connection with their children, as well as insufficient presence when the child needs support and her presence. All this describes a pattern of ambivalent affective attachment.

### **Children with developmental disabilities**

Searching the professional literature, there are a large number of definitions of "developmental disabilities" that are adapted to different contexts and situations in which they are applied. Developmental disabilities can represent a social construct because the environment sometimes sees them as a problem because this population is the first to notice what they cannot do. The inclusion of these children in sports content changes the attitudes and opinions of the environment because a person with a developmental disability can show his hidden potentials and abilities through sports activity (Milićević Marinković, 2020).

The starting point for a set of individual and social activities for children with physical or mental disabilities is contained in the text of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and reads: "A child with developmental disabilities is a child with a need for special care, and a child with special care is a child." It is clear from the documents created by the elaboration of the Convention that in the search for improving the quality of life of every child, including a child with a disability, one should look for ways that would help meet their human needs. To this general set of human needs should be added those that are really special (such as, for example, the need for orientation in space in children who have difficulties with vision) (Mitić, 2011). Certain neurological conditions such as cerebral palsy can interfere with the child's emotional and verbal expressiveness, and parents fail to interpret the child's signals. Thus, the child's distraction, especially those conditions that affect the child's

communication, represents a specific challenge to the parent's ability to respond to the child's unclear signals (Walden, 1996).

Namely, parental/guardian figures provide the child with security by providing sensitive responsiveness, protection, comfort and providing a secure base from which children conduct further research (Ainsworth et al., 1978 according to Clements & Barnett, 2002). This is where the importance of establishing an affective relationship lies, as research has shown its connection with the subsequent social, emotional and behavioral development of the child (Lyons-Ruth, Easterbrooks, & Cibelli, 1997).

### **Adaptation of children with developmental disabilities to the sports team**

The notion of a secure base is one of the central terms of affective attachment theory. When we talk about a safe base, we are talking about the conditions that the figure of affective attachment creates so that the child (or another person who is affectively attached to him) feels safe enough to explore new spaces, roles or relationships. It is considered that a secure base represents the quality of interaction with a preferred person, which contains support and the possibility of independence, as well as a sense of psychological closeness as a prerequisite on the basis of which the interaction is maintained (Heord and Lake, 1986).

When the process of adaptation of children with developmental disabilities in a sports team takes place, it depends on a large number of factors such as: the child's individual characteristics, age, state of health, i.e. form of disability or developmental disabilities, attachment to parents, most often the mother, general living conditions from which the child comes, fear, etc. An important role in this process of adaptation is played by the mother because she gives the child the feeling of being safe and accepted.

Marvin & Pianta (1996) state that when the resolved guardian system of the parent is activated by the child's affective relationship behavior or some perceived threat to the child, the parent has a relatively integrated representational model of himself and his child, and is able to adequately direct his guardian behavior by properly sensing the child and his needs and applying an adequate model of behavior and timely reactions in order to help the child and fulfill his parental task or role in full capacity.

According to Stojić et al. (2010), numerous results indicate that the early pattern of affective attachment can predict later behaviors, of which for early social development, among the most significant is the prediction of adaptation to kindergarten -

among other things - relationships with peers (Wood et al., 2004), or the teacher (Cugmas, 2004). From the point of view of affective attachment theory, by starting kindergarten, the child gets a chance to change the figure of affective attachment and to achieve attachment to the teacher, qualitatively different from the pattern he achieved with his mother, thanks to the innate, adaptable mechanism of affective attachment. The nurse-educator potentially becomes a figure to whom the child becomes attached, which gives the child a learned and safe base from which to explore, learn and participate in activities (Stojić, Divljan, Avramov, 2010). All these interpretations can also be applied to the child's adaptation to the sports team.

Children with biologically based disorders that significantly disrupt their social functioning (eg, autism) establish an affective bond with their parents (Capps, Sigmann, & Mundy, 1994; Oppenheim et al., 2009). Parental responsiveness and sensitivity have a positive impact on the development and well-being of all children, when a child has a disability or developmental delay, parental protection and sensitivity can be even more important for their survival and progress (Barakt & Liney, 1992; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). Children with damage to the central nervous system may exhibit unusual behavior, making it difficult for the parent to understand and respond appropriately in the situation. Also, children with developmental disabilities cannot always provide the stimuli and responses necessary to support sensitive interaction with their parents (Moran et al., 1992 according to Atkinson et al., 1999; Sayre, Pianta, Marvin, & Saft, 2001). From the perspective of affective attachment theory, separation from the mother is an indicator of the quality of the affective attachment that the child and mother have developed. Research shows that children who have developed a secure emotional bond with their mother adapt much more easily to an unfamiliar and new environment.

Sports experts play an important role in the adaptation phase of a child with developmental disabilities and it is necessary to adequately cooperate with parents so that the child fits well into the new environment. It is necessary to respect the individual development of a child with developmental disabilities in order to meet all the basic needs of his learning and adaptation. This includes opportunities for the child's learning development in the area of physical, sensory, sensorimotor and psychomotor development, language, intellectual, emotional and social development. With adequate and special pedagogical work, it is necessary to create the conditions for the development of the remaining, preserved abilities of the child, with proper correction and perhaps elimination of some disabilities and disorders in the individual development of each child.

According to Stefanović-Stanojević (2005), it is stated that certainly affective children when starting kindergarten are usually saddened by separation, but ready to receive and accept the comfort of an unknown person (nurse); they gradually join the game; the reunion with the mother is full of positive exchanges, they greet her, hug her; the foreign teacher can comfort them, but it is clear that they prefer their mother. In this context, similar situations can be recognized in sports teams.

The child's characteristics, that is, his behavior can therefore increase stress in parents and vice versa - increasing stress in parents can affect the child's behavior, that is, the quality of the parent-child relationship (Coplan et al., 2003). A high level of parental stress leads to suboptimal mother-child interaction, poor responses to the child's needs, and an insecure affective bond between mother and child (Crnic, Greenberg & Slough, 1986, according to Damjanović et al., 2014). The process of adaptation will be associated with factors that could be grouped into factors related to the characteristics of the child and factors related to the characteristics of the parents, i.e. the family, the characteristics of the institution, the quality of parent-child and educator-child relationships (Cjetičanin and Subotin, 2010).

## Conclusion

Affective attachment theory is a theory about the origin and nature of human sensitivity. When adapting children with developmental disabilities to a sports team, it is necessary for sports experts to fully utilize and cooperate with parents in order to create a safe base for the child, his sense of belonging and the best possible conditions for adaptation to the new environment. It is important to listen to both the child and the parent, follow the signals, which will strengthen the emotional connection and ease the period of separation from the family. In this sense, affective attachment plays an important role.

Children with the characteristic of secure affective attachment have better communication possibilities, show more attention, are more cooperative, which is especially important when fitting in, i.e. adapting to a new environment such as a sports team.

Applying the theory of affective attachment enables an integrated approach in adaptation, not only of a child with developmental disabilities, but also of the whole family, which enables further development of the child's social and emotional capacities.

**Conflict of interests:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Author Contributions:**

Conceptualization: B.M. Investigation: B.M. Theoretical Framework: N.M. Data Curation: B.M; N.M Resources: B.M. Writing – Original Draft: N.M. Writing – Review & Editing: B.M.

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