

# Maternal Attachment, Peer Relationship and Behavior Problems among Primary School Children

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## Abstract

Behavior problems that occur during childhood often persist into adolescence and they can also lead to various negative outcomes. Since mothers and peers play a significant role in developing children's behavior, this study aimed to determine the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among children. A total of 440 children aged between 10 to 11 were chosen by using the multistage cluster sampling technique. The data for this study were collected by using a self-administered questionnaire. The result indicated that maternal attachment posed a significantly negative relationship with behavior problems. The result also indicated that peer relationship was significantly and positively correlated with behavior problems. Meanwhile, multiple regression outcomes showed that peer relationships yielded the strongest influence on behavior problems. In conclusion, a good peer relationship is crucial to overcoming behavior problems among primary school children.

**Keywords:** Ecological System Theory, Behavior Problems, Children, Maternal Attachment, Peer Relationship

## Introduction

Children's behavioral problems have long been a topic of interest across a range of disciplines. The most frequent behavior problems in children can be categorised into two broad categories, namely externalizing and internalizing problems (Stone et al., 2015). Externalizing behavior problems are manifested in acting out behaviors, including aggression and hyperactivity (Liu, 2004), whereas internalizing behavior problems are characterized by symptoms of anxiety and depression, fearfulness, social withdrawal, and somatic complaints (Gobel et al., 2016). Internalizing and externalising behavior problems put children at risk for school difficulties such as lower academic engagement and performance (Olivier et al., 2020), truancy, and negative evaluations of school climate (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). A Previous study conducted by Idris and colleagues (2019) revealed that the prevalence of school

children in Malaysia was 9.3% (teacher-report) and 8.5% (parent-report). According to Hammer and colleagues (2017), emotional and behavioral problems during childhood are associated with the occurrence of later problems including delinquency and poor performance in academics. Behavior problems during childhood might also develop mental health problems later in life (WHO, 2019). According to National Health and Morbidity Survey (2019), 424,000 children in Malaysia are struggling with mental health problems. Understanding the factors that contribute to the emergence of behavior problems issues in children is crucial for developing interventions that can increase the likelihood of children pursuing healthy developmental trajectories.

One of the risk factors for behavior problem among children is maternal attachment. Attachment has been defined by Bowlby (1969, 1982) as an emotional bonding between a child and their primary caregiver. In 1978, Ainsworth and colleagues came up with a theory of attachment that explains how early attachment relates to later developmental outcomes. The attachment between mother and child can be classified as secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children who have a secure attachment tend to show a good balance between their need to explore their surroundings and their attachment behaviors, such as attempting to get close to the caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children with insecure-avoidant attachment styles devalue the attachment figures since they have been rejected and shown little empathy by their caregivers. Children that have insecure or ambivalent attachments have inconsistent relationships with their caregivers and, thus, maximize their attachment behaviors in order to keep the caregiver's attention (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Different types of attachment may lead to different behavioral outcomes for children. Previous studies have reported that children who are insecurely attached to their primary caregivers are at greater risk of for developing externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Dejko–Wanczyk et al., 2020; Groh, et al., 2017; Spruit et al., 2020). According to Yuniar (2021), secure attachment may facilitate children to develop coping skills and be an important protective factor for mental health in later childhood. In contrast, children who are securely attached to their caregivers are less likely to develop behavior problems (Boldt et al., 2017). A secure attachment between children and caregivers may foster an appropriate context for children's development (Kockanska & Kim, 2013).

In addition, another factor that may influence behavior problems among children is peer relationships. It is known that relationships with peers during primary school age have critical importance in children's life (Uz Bas & Siyez, 2011). According to Wentzel (2017), peer relationships offer companionship and entertainment, as well as assistance with problem solving, personal validation and emotional support, and a foundation for identity development. As a result, children who have positive peer relationships tend to have higher levels of emotional well-being, self-esteem, and values for prosocial kinds of behavior and social engagement compared to children who do not have positive relationships with their peers. Positive peer relationships also may predict better emotional adjustment, school retention, and academic performance over time (Healy, 2018).

The researchers found that most studies on this topic have been widely conducted in Western countries. Hence, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by empirically determining the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children, particularly in the Malaysian context.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to determine the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children. Specifically, this paper will describe the respondent's background; determine the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children; and determine the unique predictors of behavior problems among primary school children.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Maternal Attachment and Behavior Problems*

According to Bowlby (1982), attachment is an emotional bond between a child and his/her primary caregivers. This emotional bond may provide safety, comfort, and support to the children. Children's attachment to their caregivers is their earliest and most important relationship. Numerous studies have attempted to explain the relationship between maternal attachment and behavior problems among children. For example, Demby and colleagues (2017) have demonstrated that children with secure attachment were less likely to have behavior problems. Moreover, children with secure attachment are more likely to be confident in exploring their environment, acquire emotional regulation skills and social skills (Bowlby, 2008). Meanwhile, children with insecure attachment tend to have problems regulating their emotions and impact their social relationships with others (Linsell et al., 2019). A Prior study revealed that children with insecure attachment with their caregivers tend to have high levels of externalizing behavior problems (Katsurada et al., 2017).

#### *Peer relationship and Behavior Problems*

Friendships during childhood may provide an environment that may develop social competencies and self-esteem, enhancing health throughout the lifetime (Delgado et al., 2022). Peers and friends also provide emotional assistance, facilitating access to other resources, whether material or symbolic, and ensuring emotional well-being (Kwame & Pamela, 2015). Numerous studies have revealed the correlation between social relationships with peers and behavior problems during childhood. The Study conducted by Shin and colleagues (2016) has found a significant relationship between peer relations and problems regarding behavior, emotion, and adjustment. Specifically, children with good relationships with peers tend to have high levels of adjustments, whereas children with poor relationships with peers tend to have problems in those aspects. In another study, Pepler and Bierman (2018) have shown that peer relationships contribute negatively to socio-emotional development through bullying, exclusion, and deviant peer processes.

#### *Theoretical Perspective*

The current study adopts the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) as a theoretical framework to determine the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), there were five different systems that influence a child's development: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem, which includes family and peers, is the nearest and most influential system to the child. Most of the child's behavior is learned in this system, which is constructed by these individuals. This theory clearly explained that reciprocal interactions between the mother-

child attachment and peer relationship were important and might influence the children's outcomes.

## **Materials and Methods**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a quantitative survey methodology to gather information regarding the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children.

### *Population and Sampling Procedures*

The target population for the current study was primary school children aged 10 and 11 years old in Selangor. A total of 440 children aged between 10 to 11 were chosen by using the multistage cluster sampling technique. The sample size was determined based on the sample size formulation by (Cochran, 1963).

## **Procedure**

Permission for field data collection in primary schools were obtained from the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia, Selangor Education Department, and selected schools before conducting the study. The researchers explained the study protocol to the children and their parents by using the information sheet. Prior to data collection, written consents were obtained from children and their parents, respectively. The participants were informed that their consent was voluntary, that they had the option to refuse to participate, and that their anonymity and confidentiality would be protected.

## **Variables and Measurements**

Maternal attachment has been measured using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The inventory consists of 75 items: 25 items related to maternal attachment, 25 items relate to paternal attachment and 25 items relate to peer attachment. For the purpose of this study, researchers only employed 25 items of maternal attachment. Example items include "My mother respects my feeling", "I feel my mother does a good job as my mother", "I like to get my mother's point of view on things I'm concerned about" and "My mother has her own problems, so I don't bother her with mine". Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = almost never or never true to 5 = almost always or always true. Negative items were reverse scored and then summing the scores for the 25 items. Possible scores thus range from 25 to 125. Higher scores indicate more secure attachment. According to past research conducted by Armsden and Greenberg (1987), the reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) of the overall maternal attachment items was .87. In the current study, the Cronbach's Alpha was .83.

Peer relationship was assessed using the Index of Peer relationship (IPR) (Hudson et., 1993) It is comprised of 25-items designed to measure the problems faced in an interpersonal relationship with peers in social, school or other social situations. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = none of the time, 2 = very rarely, 3 = a little of the time, 4 = some of the time, 5 = a good part of the time, 6 = most of the time, 7 = all of the time). Negative items have been recoded during data analysis. A higher score indicates poor peer relation. According to past research conducted by Hudson and colleagues (1993), this scale exhibited good internal consistency with Cronbach's Alpha of .94. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha

was .89.

Behavior problems have been measured using The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997). The 25 items in the SDQ comprise five types of behavioral attributes among children: 1) The emotional symptoms subscale (5 items); 2) The conduct problems subscale (5 items); 3) The hyperactivity/inattention subscale (5 items); 4) The peer relationship problems subscale (5 items) and 5) The prosocial behavior subscale (5 items). This instrument is rated on a 3-point Likert type scale scoring from 1 (not true) to 3 (certainly true). The total difficulties score was calculated by summing the scores of the emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationship problems subscales (excluding the prosocial subscale). A higher total score for difficult behavior indicates higher levels of behavior problems. A study conducted by Goodman (2001) found a mean Cronbach's Alpha for this instrument was .73. In the current study, the Cronbach's Alpha was 0.72.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were subjected to an analysis by using SPSS version 25, while descriptive statistics were performed to describe the respondent's background. Next, an analysis of Pearson's correlation was utilised to determine the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children. This was followed by a multiple regression analysis, which served to identify the unique predictors of behavior problems among primary school children.

### **Results**

#### *Descriptive Analysis*

Table 1 shows the distribution of the respondent's backgrounds. According to the table, most (56.4%) of the children in the study were female, while the rest (43.6%) were male. Of the 440 children studied, there were equal numbers of children ages 10 and 11 years (Mean = 10.50). Findings showed that a large proportion (56.40%) of the mother's years of education a range from 7 to 14 years (Mean = 13.84). Majority (38.4%) of the respondents' family monthly income ranged from RM1000 to RM3000 (Mean = RM4569.05).

Table 1

*Distribution of respondents' background (N = 440)*

Variables	N (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Child's gender</b>			
Male	192 (43.60)		
Female	248 (56.40)		
<b>Child's age (years)</b>		10.50	0.50
10	220 (50.00)		
11	220 (50.00)		
<b>Mother's years of education (years)</b>		13.84	2.63
< 6	2 (0.50)		
7 – 14	248 (56.40)		
15 >	190 (43.10)		
<b>Family monthly income</b>		4569.05	3407.89
< RM1000	30 (6.8)		
RM1000 – RM3000	169 (38.40)		
RM3001 – RM5000	121 (27.50)		
> RM5000	120 (27.30)		

### Maternal Attachment, Peer Relationship, and Behavior Problems

The relationship between maternal attachment and behavior problems was analysed in this study by using Pearson's correlation. The results showed significant negative relationships between maternal attachment with behavior problems ( $r = -0.40$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ) (see Table 2). These findings demonstrated that children who had reported higher levels of maternal attachment were more likely to experience lower levels of behavior problems. According to Table 2, there is a positive and significant relationship between peer relationships and children's behavior problems ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). These findings indicated that children with higher levels of peer relationship problems were more likely to experience higher levels of behavior problems.

A Multiple regression was conducted to determine the unique predictors of children's behavior problems. Table 3 shows the results of multiple regression analyses of the two independent variables which maternal attachment and peer relationship against the dependent variable which is behavior problems. Based on the table, the overall model was significant with an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.26. This model explains 26% of the variance towards children's behavior problems with  $F = 20.20$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ . The results showed that maternal attachment and peer relationships were found to be significant predictors of children's behavior problems. The result revealed that peer relationship ( $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ) was found to have strongest influence on children's behavior problems compared to maternal attachment ( $\beta = -0.28$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

Table 2

*Pearson's correlation between maternal attachment, peer relationship, and behavior problems*

Variables	Behavior Problems	
	r	p
Maternal Attachment	-0.40**	.000
Peer relationship	0.43**	.000

Table 3

*Summary of multiple regression analysis for variables predicting behavior problems*

Variables	Behavior Problems	
	$\beta$	p
Maternal Attachment	-0.28	.000
Peer relationship	0.34	.000
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.25		
F = 20.20		

### Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children. As a result, the outcomes yielded a significantly negative correlation between maternal attachment and children's behavior problems. The finding is consistent with prior research indicating that securely attached children tend to have low levels of behavior problems such as anxiety, depression, and aggressive (Ensink et al., 2019; Spruit et al., 2020). According to Sloan and colleagues (2020), secure attachment provides the 'secure base' where the children can develop their emotional and social skills. Several past studies also demonstrated that insecurely attached children have higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Breinholz et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2020). These findings highlight the importance for mothers to build a secure relationship with their children in order to enhance positive behavioral outcomes.

Also, the results revealed a significant positive correlation between peer relationships and children's behavior problems. Specifically, children with high levels of peer relationship problems were more likely to experience high levels of behavior problems. The results of this study are also in line with previous studies which also found that peer relationship is related to children's emotional and behavioral problems (Shin et al., 2016). The present findings supported the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) which concluded that the mother and peers at the microsystem level may influence the children's behavioral outcomes. Next, the third objective of this study was to determine the unique predictors of behavior problems among primary school children, following which peer relationship was found to be the strongest predictor in explaining children's behavior problems. The research study by Healy (2018) also found that positive peer relationships may predict better outcomes.

The current study attempted to determine the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children. Practically, the findings of this study may provide guidance for parents especially mothers on how to shape their children's behavior. Besides that, it may also assist educators in planning intervention

programs in the community for children who are struggling with behavior problems. These findings may also be useful for a psychologist to develop efficient ways of managing children's behavior problems. Another important implication that derives from the current study is that parents and teachers should monitor children's peer relationships to enhance their psychological adjustment and well-being. In addition, peer groups might also provide an important context for early intervention or prevention to increase positive behavioral outcomes among school-aged children.

However, there are some limitations that should be highlighted here to ensure maximum benefits. First, this study only involved primary school children between 10 to 11 years old in Selangor. Therefore, these findings may not be generalisable to all primary school children in other states in Malaysia. Future research might expand this study by using more diverse samples and different settings to provide greater generalization. Moreover, the current study did not attempt to investigate other potential factors that may influence behavior problems among children such as parenting styles, home environment, and socio-economic status. Hence, future studies should explore the influence of these factors on children's behavior problems. Lastly, the present study implemented the correlational research design, which disallowed determining the direction of effects between the tested variables. Therefore, future studies might include any other statistical analysis in order to find more interesting findings regarding the influence of maternal attachment and peer relationships on children's behavior problems. Regardless of these limitations, this study contributes to the available body of knowledge by enhancing the current understanding of the relationship between maternal attachment and peer relationship with behavior problems among primary school children. Additionally, the findings offer crucial information potentially utilisable in ensuring the development of secure mother-child attachment and positive peer relationships to enhance children's positive behaviors.

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