



Attachment and autism: what do we know?

By WILLIAM TROTTIER-DUMONT

Why study attachment in autism?

Attachment is defined as the unique relationship a child develops with their caregiver. It is considered a foundation for children's ability to regulate their behaviour, and is therefore associated with the development of social, emotional, cognitive and language skills. Parental behaviours towards the child, particularly when the child is upset, predict how children will demonstrate attachment towards the parent. We refer to an attachment as secure when a child feels safe with their caregiver and knows they can rely on them.

Given that autism is associated with differences in social interactions and relationships, many researchers have hypothesised that these differences could be an obstacle to developing an attachment bond. Researchers have therefore investigated factors influencing the development of attachment in autistic children.

One factor which has been heavily researched in the attachment development literature is Maternal Sensitivity (MS). A secure mother-child attachment is more likely to develop when the mother is sensitive to her

child, meaning she understands her child's needs and displays warm, consistent and predictable behaviour towards her child.

In this study, the authors therefore looked into what we already know about MS and attachment in autistic children. They undertook a systematic review of the scientific literature on this topic, as well as a meta-analysis¹.

Their first goal was to determine the strength of the relationship between MS and attachment security in young autistic children (aged 1 to 7). Their second goal was to determine whether other variables also had an impact on this relationship, such as intellectual ability, autistic signs or child temperament.

How was the study carried out?

To undertake a meta-analysis, researchers must first collect absolutely all studies conducted on the topic of interest. To ensure that this important first step is carried out systematically, the authors decide on a few key words and apply them to different scientific paper

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¹ A meta-analysis is a scientific method that allows to group together the studies on a subject, in a way it is a study of studies!



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Original article:

Cossette-Côté, F., Bussi res, E. L., & Dubois-Comtois, K. (2021). The association between maternal sensitivity/availability and attachment in children with autism Spectrum disorder : A systematic review and Meta-analysis. *Current Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02227-z>

databases. Table 1 lists selected key words used in this study, databases searched, and inclusion criteria for studies that were eventually selected as relevant. Initial database searches turned up 151 papers (published articles and non-published theses). Following careful triage based on the inclusion criteria, only 7 articles were ultimately selected!

What do these studies tell us?

From the 7 studies selected, the researchers were able to calculate the strength of the relationship between MS and attachment security in autistic children. They found a moderate relationship size, which is higher than what is usually found in neurotypical children. The strength of the relationship found varied greatly across studies included in the meta-analysis, from a null to a large effect size. It would have been relevant to undertake variable analyses on these results, to better understand which other variables could impact the strength of this relationship. Unfortunately, there were too few studies included to analyse the effects of variables such as the level of autism symptoms, intellectual ability, and child temperament.

Despite these limitations, meta-analysis results indicate that the relationship between MS and attachment in autistic children is twice as high as in their neurotypical counterparts. These results suggest that MS plays a more important or different role in creating an attachment relationship, though this does not mean it is the only variable implicated. One hypothesis to explain this link

could be that it is possible that many mothers, following their child's autism diagnosis, decide to stay home or work part-time, thereby spending more time with their child. It may be interesting to consider time spent with the child as a variable to explain these results. At this stage, this is simply a hypothesis which could go on to be tested in further studies. It is also important to exercise caution when interpreting these results. Since few studies met the inclusion criteria for selection, it could be that adding a few more studies could modify the results of the meta-analysis.

At the methodological level, we can also question our understanding of "sensitivity" when it comes to the mothers of autistic children. Indeed, it may be that sensitivity to an autistic child's needs looks very different than for neurotypical children. If this is true, meaning that mothers of autistic and neurotypical children both display MS but in different ways, the assessment tools used to measure sensitivity in mothers of neurotypical children may not be appropriate for use in mothers of autistic children. Other measures may prove more adapted, such as mother-child interaction measures.

In conclusion, a robust assessment of MS and attachment provides us with a singular description of the relationship between a mother and her autistic child. However, further research is needed to understand the effects of other variables on the link between MS and attachment in autistic children. Too few studies exist on this topic, highlighting the need for more research on Maternal Sensitivity and attachment in autistic children. 🌟

Tableau 1

Inclusion criteria for selecting studies for analysis

Key words	(autism* OR ASD) AND attachment AND («maternal sensitivity» OR «parental sensitivity» OR «caregiv* sensitivity» OR «parenting behavior» OR responsiveness)
Databases	Web of Science PsychInfo Medline (Ovid) ProQuest Dissertations Theses Global
Inclusion criteria	1. Sample includes autistic children aged 1 to 7 2. Use a tool assessing maternal sensitivity, emotional or maternal availability, or maternal response, or mother-child interaction 3. Use a tool assessing childhood attachment 4. Test the association between the two measures or provide information allowing the
Autre	No time restrictions in terms of year of publication for the studies (database research conducted in August 2020)