

# Kids with strong bonds to parents make better friends, can adapt in relationships

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What social skills does a three-year-old bring to interactions with a new peer partner? If he has strong bonds to his parents, the child is likely to be a positive, responsive playmate, and he'll be able to adapt to a difficult peer by asserting his needs, according to a new University of Illinois study published in *Developmental Psychology*.

"Securely attached children are more responsive to suggestions or requests made by a new peer partner. A child who has experienced a secure attachment relationship with caregivers is likely to come into a new peer relationship with positive expectations," said Nancy McElwain, a U of I professor of human development.

In the study, the researchers assessed the security of child-mother attachment relationships for 114 children at 33 months, and parents reported on their child's temperament, including anger proneness and social fearfulness. At 39 months, children of the same gender were randomly paired with one another and observed over three laboratory visits in a one-month period.

Securely attached kids were more responsive to a new peer partner the first time they met, even if the new child was prone to anger. Kids with secure attachments continued to respond favorably on the second and third visits when the peer partner's anger was low—but not when the other child's anger was high, the researcher said.

When a child is paired with a peer who is quick to become frustrated or angry, the positive social expectations of a child with a secure attachment are likely not met. The securely attached child may then adapt to the situation and dampen his responsiveness to the challenging partner, McElwain said.

"A more securely attached child was also likely to use suggestions and requests rather than commands and intrusive behavior (such as

grabbing toys away) during play with an anger-prone peer during the first two visits. By the final visit, a child with a secure attachment had adjusted to the controlling assertiveness of her anger-prone partner by becoming more controlling herself," she said.

The study showed that a child's level of attachment security, their partner's tendency to become angry, and how well the children knew each other (earlier vs. later visits) combined to predict a child's behavior.

"Behavior toward a peer partner depended on the partner's temperament as much as the child's own attachment. Consideration of both factors in combination is needed to understand a child's behavior toward a new peer," McElwain said.

The [child's](#) own temperament also played a role in understanding her behavior toward new peer partners. Children whose parents described them as socially fearful were less assertive overall, she noted.

"But don't confuse a difficult temperament with an insecure attachment. You may have a fussy infant, but if you respond to him sensitively, he will develop a strong bond with his parents and will likely go on to enjoy positive, close relationships with others," she said.

**More information:** "Getting Acquainted: Actor and Partner Effects of Attachment and Temperament on Young Children's Peer Behavior" is available online at *Developmental Psychology* at [psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2014-09033-001/](http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2014-09033-001/)

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