Adolescent Attachment Hierarchies and the Search for an Adult Pair-Bond

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Adolescence begins with puberty and the emergence of the sexual behavioral system (Ainsworth, 1989). This development alters the dynamic interplay with well-established attachment and affiliative systems and works to reorganize adolescents’ involvement with parents and peers (that is, friends and romantic partners). In Western industrial societies, the relatively long delay between onset of puberty and childbearing creates a lengthy and gradual transition to adult reproductive and caregiving roles. Initially sexual and affiliative systems work in synchrony to increase teens’ emotional involvement in peer relationships. Time spent with friends and romantic partners creates new opportunities for developing the competencies required for the longer-term tasks of forming adult pair-bonds (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). During this period, most teens maintain attachment bonds to parents while testing peers as sources of safety and support. Despite adolescents’ use of peers to serve secure base and safe haven functions, most friendships or romantic relationships will not become enduring attachment bonds (Ainsworth, 1989). As a result, bonds with a romantic partner or close friend are not usually formed until late adolescence and only after a relationship has lasted for more than two years (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997).

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In this chapter, we explore how Bowlby’s concept of a hierarchy of attachment figures (1969/1982) can advance understanding of adolescent attachment relationships. More specifically, we believe that the concept of attachment hierarchies can lead to a better understanding of (1) whom adolescents identify as attachment figures; (2) when peer relationships are transformed to attachment bonds; (3) how adolescents organize multiple attachment bonds with parents, friends, and romantic partners; and (4) how attachment bonds are reorganized as friends and romantic partners enter adolescents’ attachment hierarchies. Methods for assessing adolescents’ attachment hierarchies may also lead to new ways of examining individual differences in attachment organization. For instance, individual differences in the developmental timing of forming a peer attachment bond may affect adjustment. On the one hand, adolescents who prematurely replace a parent with a peer as their primary attachment figure may be at risk for externalizing or problem behaviors, while on the other hand, teens who delay transfer of attachment functions to a peer relationship may be at risk for anxiety or depressive symptoms.

The Interplay of Sexual, Affiliative, and Attachment Systems

It seems certain that another major shift takes place with the onset of adolescence, ushered in by hormonal changes. This development leads the young person to begin a search for a partnership with an age peer, usually of the opposite sex—a relationship in which reproductive and caregiving systems, as well as the attachment system, are involved [Ainsworth, 1989 p. 710].

Although adolescents rely on peers or romantic partners to serve safe haven and secure base functions (Chapter Two, this volume), few of these relationships meet criteria for an enduring attachment bond. Ainsworth characterized an “affectional bond” as “a relatively long enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual and interchangeable with none other” (p. 711). These bonds are characterized by a desire to maintain closeness and distress when the individual is “inexplicably” separated from his or her partner. Attachment relationships meet criteria for an affectional bond but differ from other affectional bonds by providing comfort at times of distress and confidence in the face of challenge. Most children enter adolescence with attachment bonds to parents that can be traced back to infancy. Puberty marks the emergence of reproductive capacity, the activation of the sexual behavior system, and the initiation of a search for a partnership with an age peer. This search typically results in the formation of an attachment bond in which the peer partner becomes a primary attachment figure and shares responsibility for caring for offspring. Although there is considerable variation in when a peer attachment bond is established, the search for such a partnership initiates a fundamental reorganization of adolescents’ relationships with parents and peers.
The reorganization of relationships with parents and peers is motivated by a reorganization of behavioral systems that occurs with the onset of puberty. As the sexual system becomes more active, it alters the interplay between the attachment and affiliative systems. In many respects, the sexual system works in synchrony with the affiliative system. The roots of affiliative behavior can be traced to the child’s ability to distinguish familiar from unfamiliar individuals (Furman, 1999). Familiar individuals tend to activate proximity and affiliative behavior, and unfamiliar individuals tend to activate the fear system. Whereas during middle childhood, the affiliation system maintains engagement with friends and peer groups, the affiliative system in adolescence supports the emergence of dating and romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 2000; Dunphy, 1963). The synchronous interplay of sexual and affiliative systems increases emotional involvement in peer relationships while reducing time spent with adult caregivers. This increased involvement with friends and romantic partners creates opportunities for developing competencies that contribute to the eventual formation of a peer attachment bond. During adolescence, affiliative and sexual systems tend to take precedence over the attachment system, which contributes to a sense of distancing or disengaging from parents (see Chapter One, this volume).

Increased involvement with friends creates new opportunities to test peers as potential attachment figures. Waters and Cummings (2000) have described ad hoc attachment relationships in which a partner serves a secure base or safe haven function but does not become a primary or secondary attachment figure. The ad hoc nature of these relationships provides teens with opportunities to develop reciprocal interaction skills in emotionally challenging situations. Teens are most likely to rely on peers when parents are not readily accessible, in contexts in which their age-mates are better positioned to provide support or encouragement, and in situations that elicit low-level activation of the attachment system. For instance, problems with teachers and anxiety about romantic rejection may provide opportunities to test peers as ad hoc attachment figures (Waters & Cummings, 2000). Peers may also serve as a secure base for joining group activities, having contact with the opposite sex, or initiating dating relationships. These situations represent relatively low levels of threat or challenge.

The contributions of sexual, affiliative, and attachment systems to peer relationships change over the course of adolescence. Early adolescence is a period in which the activation of the sexual or reproductive system increases teens’ emotional involvement in peer relationships. In addition to serving low-level attachment functions, teens’ friendships promote increased intimacy and self-disclosure (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Close friendships provide adolescents with opportunities to seek autonomy from caregivers and experiment with peers for companionship and advice seeking (Collins & Repinski, 1994). This developmental process enables adolescents to further individuate and differentiate from parents (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Some of this increased intimacy with peers serves an attachment function.
For instance, as early adolescents increase their time spent with peers, they are likely to rely on peers for support at times of low stress or for encouragement to face challenges. Yet this experimentation with peers as ad hoc attachment figures (Waters & Cummings, 2000) is often transitory and rarely results in the formation of an enduring attachment bond or reliance on peers in dangerous or high-stress situations. Although friend and romantic relationships do not result in the formation of attachment bonds, they do play an important role in teens’ developing concepts of self in romantic relationships (Brown, 1999).

By midadolescence, friendships and romantic relationships are perceived as greater sources of intimacy and companionship than relationships with parents (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Furman & Wehner, 1997). Friendships facilitate the development of romantic relationships in several ways. First, sharing thoughts and feelings related to romantic attractions may provide the basis for increased intimacy that characterizes close friendships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Second, peer relationships provide a context for both interacting with prospective romantic partners and acquiring social skills required for the development and maintenance of a romantic relationship (Connolly et al., 2000; Dunphy, 1963). Furman (1999) has argued that relationships that are primarily motivated by the affiliative system provide a context in which teens develop the skills required for forming an enduring romantic relationship. More specifically, reciprocity, cooperation, and reciprocal altruism are competencies required for developing and sustaining a romantic relationship. In addition, friendships help teens to develop conflict negotiation skills (Collins & Sroufe, 1999).

By late adolescence, some friendships or romantic relationships have become more enduring attachment bonds (Connolly et al., 2000). Several factors likely contribute to increased activation of the attachment system during late adolescence. First, the search for a partnership with a same-age peer becomes more focused as teens move away from parents and face the prospects of living independently. Second, older adolescents and young adults face the challenges of forming an identity and entering adult roles that may make their need for a secure base more acute. There is some evidence that the experience of loneliness increases as young adults tend to lack regular contact with parents or close relationship with peers (Russell, Cutrona, Rose, & Yurko, 1984). Together these factors are likely to orient teens to the potential security provided by a close friend or romantic relationship. Clues that may indicate a partner’s commitment to an enduring relationship are likely to become more salient as teens seek partners with whom they can form an enduring bond.

In summary, while early adolescents begin to use peers for attachment functions, by midadolescence teens may rely on a close friend or romantic partner as a safe haven or secure base in contexts involving relatively low levels of danger or challenge. Not only do these situations allow teens to test peers as ad hoc attachment figures, but they also offer opportunities for teens to provide caregiving support to distressed or challenged friends or
romantic partners. In this sense, close friends and dating partners provide a context for experimenting with the skills required for forming adult attachment bonds.

**Attachment Bonds with Parents During Adolescence**

Attachment bonds with parents form an important background for teens’ exploration of peer relationships. These bonds are evident in teens’ continuous monitoring of parents’ whereabouts and availability. Brief daily contacts, along with more frequent instrumental and financial support, are often enough to maintain adolescents’ confidence in their parents’ availability. This daily monitoring allows teens’ attachment concerns to recede to the background and permits the affiliative and sexual systems to take precedence. As a result, parents’ continuing roles as primary attachment figures are likely to be evident only in situations that elicit high levels of attachment system activation. For instance, the attachment system can rapidly take precedence over affiliative and sexual behavioral systems when teens appraise situations as threats to the caregiver’s availability (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1973), dangerous, or challenging (Bretherton, 1980). Situations involving danger may be quite infrequent but include serious illness, accidents, and assault. Threats to parental availability include family conflict, parental illness, and loss. Finally, in situations involving challenge, the attachment system may be activated at lower levels. Parents are likely to be used as a secure base for situations in which they have instrumental knowledge or expertise, such as learning to drive, getting a job, or making plans for the future (Scharf, Maiseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004).

In spite of the persistence of teens’ attachment bonds with parents, these relationships undergo dramatic changes as teens develop increased autonomy and self-regulation (see Chapter One, this volume). A number of studies have demonstrated that parent-teen conflict is normative and allows teens to gain jurisdiction over decisions ranging from curfew to school involvement to friendship choice (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Smetana, 1996). The quality of communication between parents and teens during this period is important in renegotiating a cooperative partnership (Allen & Land, 1999; Kobak & Duemmler, 1994). Parental monitoring plays an important role in ensuring that teens successfully manage increased exposure to dangerous situations or opportunities to engage in risky behavior. Teen problem behaviors such as unprotected sexual activity, substance use, and other forms of delinquent activity may jeopardize their safety and often call for parental involvement. When teens are faced with situations involving serious danger or decisions related to reproductive strategies, their attachment systems are more likely to be activated at high levels, leading to a preference for parent or adult attachment figures over peers. As Weiss (1982, 1991) suggested, parents continue to remain primary attachment figures and serve as “attachment figures in reserve.”
Attachment in Adolescence

Developmental Change in Adolescents’ Attachment Hierarchies

We have suggested that adolescence can be viewed as a period in which teens begin to form attachment bonds with romantic partners or close friends and reorganize attachment bonds with parents. Hazan and Zeifman (1994) framed this developmental perspective and provided a method for identifying adolescents’ primary attachment figures. They proposed a process in which proximity seeking, safe haven, and secure base functions were transferred from parents to a romantic partner or close friend in a sequential fashion. Their WHOTO interview asked participants to whom they would go for different attachment needs. Through these questions, participants identify targets of proximity-seeking behaviors (“Who is the person you most like to spend time with?”), safe haven (“Who would you go to help you feel better when something bad happens to you or you are emotionally upset?”), separation protest (“Who is the person you don’t like to be away from?”), and secure base function (“Who do you count on to always be there for you and care about you no matter what?”). Hazan and Zeifman suggested that a romantic partner becomes a primary attachment figure when attachment functions are fully transferred, a process that typically requires a relationship that endures for at least two years.

Since Hazan and Zeifman’s pivotal study (1994), a number of researchers have employed versions of the WHOTO interview to determine an individual’s primary attachment figure. Two studies investigated college students’ attachment relationships. Fraley and Davis (1997) used a revised version of the WHOTO interview with a sample of college students. They asked participants to write the names of people who “best served” proximity seeking, safe haven, and secure base functions. The first name listed in response to each question was used to identify primary attachment figures. Results confirmed Hazan and Zeifman’s sequence (1994) in the transfer of attachment functions. Peers (romantic partners or friends) were nominated for proximity seeking and safe haven functions, and parents were somewhat more likely to be identified as serving secure base functions. When a romantic relationship lasted more than two years, students were more likely to identify their romantic partner as serving a secure base function.

Trinke and Bartholomew (1997) used a revised version of the WHOTO scale to measure college students’ relationships with multiple attachment figures. Thirty-six percent of the students identified their mothers as primary figures, 31 percent identified romantic partners, 14 percent identified best friends, 11 percent fathers, and 8 percent siblings. Of the students who were in romantic relationships, 62 percent identified their partners as a primary attachment figure, and 30 percent identified their mother or father as primary. For students who were not in a romantic relationship, 64 percent identified their mother or father as primary, and 22 percent identified a best friend as a primary attachment figure.
High school students are less likely than college students to identify a peer as an attachment figure. Freeman and Brown (2001) asked sixteen to eighteen year olds to name the one person they “rely on most for emotional support and closeness.” A parent was identified as primary by 47 percent of the respondents, peers or siblings were identified as primary by 43 percent, and the self was identified by 10 percent. Mothers were nominated ten times more frequently than fathers, and romantic partners were nominated more frequently than friends. Teens with higher levels of self-reported attachment security were more likely to nominate parents as primary figures, and insecure teens were more likely to nominate peers as primary figures (Freeman & Brown, 2001).

Studies of children indicate that preadolescents rarely identify peers as serving attachment functions. Nickerson and Nagle (2005) employed Fraley and Davis's revised WHOTO measure (1997) with a sample of fourth, sixth, and eighth graders. Children circled the category of person (parent, grandparent, sibling, best friend, romantic partner, or other) they preferred for each situation. Nominations of peers for proximity and safe haven functions increased between the fourth and eighth grades, but both groups of children identified parents as serving secure base functions (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005). Kerns, Tomich, and Kim (2006) asked third and sixth graders to respond to four attachment situations (times when children felt sad, tired, sick, or scared) and two companionship situations (wanting to play or tell someone a secret). Whereas over 90 percent of third and fifth graders nominated parents in attachment situations, peers were nominated in 74 to 90 percent of companionship situations. Kerns and her colleagues emphasize the importance of considering context in evaluating proximity seeking (Kerns et al., 2006). Even in middle childhood, children seek proximity to peers in contexts involving affiliation or companionship independent of whom they seek out for attachment needs.

Previous studies of children’s, adolescents’, and young adults’ attachment figures generally converge on several important points. First, the use of peers to serve attachment functions increases over the course of adolescence. Second, by late adolescence, many teens identify a romantic partner or friend as a primary attachment figure. Third, romantic partners are preferred over close friends as primary attachment figures in late adolescence. Fourth, romantic relationships that endure are more likely to become attachment relationships. Together, these findings support Ainsworth’s claim (1989) that puberty marks the beginning of a search for a partnership with a same age peer.

Although previous studies document a developmental reorganization of attachment relationships, they have several important limitations. The original attachment functions proposed by Hazan and Zeifman (1994), including proximity seeking, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base, have not been systematically assessed or validated. For example, proximity seeking may be motivated by affiliative as well as attachment concerns (Kerns et al., 2006). Second, the distinction between relationships that serve safe haven and secure base functions is not clearly differentiated from relationships that meet criteria for an affectional bond. Ainsworth’s criteria
(1989) focus on the enduring nature of the relationship and the separation distress that would ensue from inexplicable separation from an attachment figure. Finally, although previous studies generally support the notion that friends or romantic partners can become primary attachment figures by late adolescence, the exclusive focus on identifying a primary attachment figure minimizes the complexity of teens’ ongoing negotiation of multiple relationships with parents, romantic partners, and close friends. As a result, little is known about the role that secondary or tertiary attachment figures play in adolescents’ social networks. We believe that adolescent attachments may be better conceived in the context of an individual’s hierarchy of attachment relationships. The hierarchy concept captures how individuals maintain multiple attachment bonds, while ordering their preferences for attachment figures at times when their attachment systems are activated.

**Adolescent Attachment Hierarchies: Conceptual and Measurement Issues**

Bowlby’s concept of an attachment hierarchy has been largely ignored by attachment research that has focused on identifying a single primary attachment figure. The notion that individuals can have hierarchically organized preferences for multiple attachment figures provides a way of understanding how peers begin to serve ad hoc attachment functions during adolescence without becoming attachment figures. The major adaptive advantage of an attachment hierarchy is that it provides the child, adolescent, or adult with alternative caregivers if a primary caregiver is unavailable. Adolescents’ attachment hierarchies can be understood in terms of their preferences for particular people at times when their attachment system is activated. These preferences will guide teens’ choice of attachment figures during times of danger (safe haven) and times of challenge (secure base).

The attachment hierarchy is an organized set of preferences for persons whom the individual seeks out when the attachment system is activated (Colin, 1996). In her classic study of infants in Uganda, Ainsworth observed that while infants displayed attachment behaviors toward multiple caregivers, they also showed clear preferences for particular caregivers across a range of situations, including when the caregiver left the infant or when the infant was alarmed, tired, hungry, or ill (Ainsworth, 1967). Cummings (1980) used a laboratory procedure to assess infants’ preferences for mothers and day care providers and found that children showed clear preferences for mothers. A similar laboratory procedure was used to assess infant preferences for mothers and fathers (Colin, 1996). In support of the hierarchy construct, Colin observed that 70 percent of her sample showed clear preferences for their mother over their father during moments of attachment system activation. Infants who did show a preference for their fathers had fathers who spent more time with them and took on more caregiving responsibilities.
These studies suggest two general principles that should guide assessment of an individual's preferences for attachment figures. First, preferences must be observed during situations in which the attachment system is activated. As children mature, the attachment system is activated less frequently. As a result, a growing number of social interactions are motivated by sexual, affiliative, or exploratory behavioral systems that do not involve the attachment system or preferences for attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1991). The growing complexity of teens’ social relationships makes it important for researchers to distinguish situations that activate the attachment system from situations in which other motivational systems are active (Goldberg, Grusec, & Jenkins, 1999).

Three general types of appraisals can activate the attachment system in infants, older children, and adults: appraisals of threat to the attachment figure’s availability (Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth, 1989; Kobak, 1999), appraisals of danger or distress that lead the individual to use the caregiver as a safe haven (Bretherton, 1980), or appraisals of challenge that lead the individual to use the caregiver as a secure base (Waters & Cummings, 2000). In addition, attachment figures are expected to demonstrate consistent availability across time and place or to demonstrate commitment (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001) or investment in maintaining the relationship (Howes, 1999). These expectations mark attachment figures as among the most important people in the child’s life.

A second principle for assessing the attachment hierarchy requires observing the child’s preferences in situations where multiple caregivers are equally accessible. Main (1999) suggests several laboratory paradigms for assessing young children’s preferences for two attachment figures. These laboratory settings are designed to provide the child with equal access to two caregivers. However, naturally occurring situations rarely meet this equal access criterion. Although attachment behaviors can be observed in naturally occurring contexts of danger, challenge, or threat to the caregivers’ availability, the child’s options for seeking support from multiple caregivers are usually constrained by the caregivers’ physical proximity. As children grow older, they face a growing number of challenges and threats in settings in which only peers and nonparental adults are immediately accessible. These peers and adults may serve attachment functions without actually meeting criteria for serving as attachment figures (Waters & Cummings, 2000), thus complicating the use of observations for assessing adolescents’ preference for different attachment figures.

Interviews offer a valuable solution to the challenge of assessing teens’ preferences for attachment figures. The Important People Interview was developed to assess attachment preferences in older children (Kobak, Rosenthal, & Serwik, 2004). This interview approach offers several advantages over behavioral observations and previous interview techniques. First, open-ended nominations allow the individual to identify the important people in his or her life. This differs from the categorical approach that preemptively identifies potential attachment figures by categories such as mother, father, sibling, or day care provider. Second, preferences can be assessed in response to hypothetical situations generated by the interviewer. Hypothetical situations make
it possible to generate contexts that would activate the attachment system while structuring equal access to multiple attachment figures. Finally, by asking the individual to rank multiple caregivers, interview methodology allows subjects to clarify their preferences for different caregivers. In sum, an interview assessment can provide both normative and individual difference information on how children, adolescents, and adults organize their attachment relationships.

By assessing the extent to which teens have organized preferences for attachment figures, interview methods may provide a better portrait of change in attachment relationships with parents and peers. For instance, peers may be nominated as serving attachment functions after parents and thus may enter a teen's attachment hierarchy as a tertiary or secondary figure. If a peer relationship endures or occurs in a context in which the teen is living in closer proximity to the peer than to the parent, the peer may move to a primary place in the attachment hierarchy. However, a parent who previously occupied a primary place in the hierarchy would likely move into a secondary position. This secondary position is consistent with what Weiss (1982) described as parents' acting as an attachment figure in reserve during late adolescence and early adulthood. This position can provide teens with an important backup if the primary peer attachment relationship becomes distressed or dissolves.

Our review of previous studies suggests that the situations used to identify attachment figures should focus on characteristics of the attachment bond identified by Ainsworth (1989). These include the enduring nature of the relationship (someone the adolescent can “always count on”), separation distress (whom the adolescent would miss the most), a feeling of closeness (whom the adolescent feels closest to), or secure base or safe haven (whom the adolescent would seek in times of high stress or danger). By focusing on these aspects, researchers can more clearly differentiate between relationships that may serve attachment functions and relationships that meet criteria for enduring attachment bonds.

Reorganization of Attachment Hierarchies During Adolescence

Reorganization of the attachment hierarchy is a gradual process during which a peer may enter the attachment hierarchy and over time replace a parent as a primary attachment figure. Although studies of American and Canadian middle-class populations suggest that this reorganization typically plays out over the course of adolescence, there is substantial variability in when the process of reorganization begins and how quickly it proceeds. Deviations from the typical timing of reorganization may occur in the form of premature reorganization in which a peer becomes a primary attachment figure by early or midadolescence or in the form of delayed reorganization in which a parent remains a primary attachment figure well into adulthood.
Premature reorganization of teens’ attachment hierarchies can be identified during early and midadolescence. It is likely to be evident when primary or secondary positions in teens’ attachment hierarchies are occupied by friends, siblings, or romantic partners rather than by parents or adult caregivers. This pattern of premature reorganization may represent a risk factor for several types of adjustment difficulties, including association with deviant peers, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and susceptibility to peer pressure to engage in delinquent or antisocial behavior (Goldstein, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2005). Dishion has described this developmental dynamic as one in which teens gain “premature autonomy” from parents (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004).

The quality of relationships with parents and peers may play an important role in predisposing teens to premature reorganization of their attachment hierarchies. Attachment theory suggests that although children seek protection and support from parents, not all parents are available and responsive to their children’s attachment needs. During late childhood and early adolescence, parental availability and responsiveness includes monitoring activities with peers and school and respecting the growing need for autonomy and self-regulation. When parents successfully respond to these needs, children are likely to feel secure and confident in their parents’ availability. Thus, parents’ warmth and involvement can protect teens from premature reliance on peers and subsequent problem behavior (Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000). In contrast, lack of parental availability and anxious attachment increase the likelihood that teens will turn prematurely to peers for attachment-related needs. Lack of caregiver monitoring and discipline has been associated with teens’ affiliating with deviant peers and subsequent delinquency (Galambos, Barker, & Almeida, 2003; Gutman & Eccles, 1999).

Peer factors may also contribute to premature reorganization of the attachment hierarchy. Affiliation with deviant peers has been identified as a risk factor for adolescent antisocial behavior. These peer affiliations support the development and maintenance of aggressive, delinquent, and problem behaviors over the course of adolescence (Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000). Different hypotheses about teens’ motivation for affiliating with deviant peers have been posited. Children with histories of aggressive behavior tend to affiliate with peers who share their aggressive tendencies. Several processes evident in deviant peer groups may increase teens’ attempts at forming a peer attachment bond. The attempt to emulate more “mature” behaviors and increased likelihood of sexual involvement may result in increased emotional engagement in a dating relationship. In addition, the general alienation from adult values and increased susceptibility to peer pressure that characterizes deviant peer groups may move teens toward disengagement from parents and premature reliance on peers. Although these factors may incline teens toward viewing their relationship with a peer as a bond, relationships formed in this context are less likely to have the stability or enduring quality that characterizes a committed adult pair-bond.
Ecological or sociocultural factors may also contribute to premature reorganization of teens’ attachment hierarchies. For instance, tracking of students by achievement levels in middle school increases the likelihood that low-achieving students will be grouped together (Dodge & Pettit, 2003). Poor achievement may promote school disengagement, which in turn increases the likelihood that teens will focus on peer relationships and short-term peer status or enhanced maturity that they may perceive as resulting from early sexual relationships. In addition, minority racial status increases the likelihood of deviant peer affiliation and affiliation with deviant peers (McCabe, Hough, Wood, & Yeh, 2001). Poverty may also be associated with reproductive strategies that favor earlier childbearing and place less emphasis on the formation of adult pair-bonds. Although teen pregnancy in Western industrial societies is often associated with a range of adjustment problems, earlier transfer of attachment function may be quite adaptive in cultures characterized by high levels of resource scarcity. These sociocultural factors create different expectations for the transfer of attachment function.

The timing of puberty is an additional factor that may increase the likelihood of premature reorganization of teens’ attachment hierarchies. There is substantial variability in the timing of puberty in both girls and boys. Early puberty, particularly among girls, has been associated with a variety of adjustment difficulties, including teen pregnancy, depression, anxiety, aggression, and substance abuse (Ellis, 2004). The activation of the sexual behavioral system is likely to accelerate peer and romantic involvement, which may increase transfer of attachment functions from parents to peers. Children experiencing early puberty may have difficulty relating to same-age peers and thus move toward affiliation with older peers, often without the self-regulatory capacities that develop during early adolescence. While early puberty is a risk factor for adjustment difficulties, parental involvement and maintenance of parents as primary attachment figures may serve a protective function for early-maturing teens.

While some teens prematurely place peers in their attachment hierarchies, others may inappropriately delay their entry. Delayed reorganization of teens’ attachment hierarchies may be evident in several ways. First, assessments that systematically assess secondary and perhaps tertiary figures can establish norms for when peers enter teens’ attachment hierarchies. Based on such norms, teens who do not show preference for a peer attachment figure when their age-mates do (typically mid- to late adolescence) might be considered delayed in reorganizing their attachment hierarchy. Second, another type of delay could be evident among teens who rely on adults rather than peers for affiliative functions of enjoyable companionship and activities. Teens who are socially isolated from peer relationships may lack the competencies and contextual support provided by peers for forming an enduring peer attachment bond.

Adolescents who delay reorganization of their attachment hierarchies may face several adjustment difficulties. Continued reliance on parents as
primary attachment figures may create tension and conflict in the parent-child relationship. For example, teen mothers who lack romantic partners must often continue to rely on their parents as sources of protection and support. Furthermore, peers who serve as secondary or primary figures often provide support for the transition into adult work roles and greater financial independence from parents. The lack of such relationships may increase the likelihood of continued dependence on parents. Finally, delayed reorganization may be implicated in the development of internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety and depression. These symptoms may make engagement in peer relationships less likely and less rewarding for teens. If left untreated, the pattern of delayed transfer and feelings of depression or anxiety may create a cyclical dynamic that interferes with teen and young adult development.

Summary and Future Directions

The search for an enduring relationship with a peer provides a clear description of the attachment-related task of adolescence. We have argued that this process must be understood as one in which teens must maintain attachments with parents while developing new attachment bonds with peers. Furthermore, this process is best understood as a reorganization of teens’ hierarchies of relationships with multiple attachment figures rather than as one in which peers replace parents as primary figures. Measurement of attachment hierarchies requires differentiating between relationships that serve attachment functions and relationships that become enduring attachment bonds. The focus on attachment bonds requires that researchers shift from criteria of proximity maintenance, safe haven, and secure base functions to criteria that are specific to enduring attachment bonds (rankings of closeness, separation distress, and response to danger). Methods for assessing teens’ attachment hierarchies will make it possible to consider stability and change in attachment bonds with parents and peers over the course of adolescence. By clearly identifying normative trends in how teens reorganize their attachment hierarchies, we can address new questions about deviations from normative trends and how the quality of attachment bonds with parents influences the transfer of attachment functions from parents to peers.

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