

**Testimony before the Achievement Gap Taskforce:  
“The Importance of Parent-Child Attachment Security for Emerging Literacy Skills”  
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Good morning. I would like to thank you all for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Dr. Daryn David, and I am a licensed clinical psychologist and a postdoctoral fellow at the Yale University Program for Recovery and Community Health. My research background has focused on adult attachment and cognitive functioning. More recently, I have worked on developing supported parenting interventions and policies for mothers diagnosed with mental illnesses. This has included serving on the Parent and Family Policy Workgroup, which is encouraging DMHAS to develop a parenting policy for its clients. Today, I will speak about the importance of secure parent-child attachment relationships for children’s emerging literacy skills.

First, I’d like to clarify how I am using the word “attachment.” In the developmental psychology tradition, the term “attachment” refers to a child’s sense of security and safety in the relationship with a parent or primary caregiver. This sense of safety includes the child’s trust that the caregiver will be available to him if he becomes distressed or needs comfort and care. So when we say that a child is “securely attached,” this means that he is bolstered by the sense that his caregiver will be available when he needs support or reassurance. This trust in the caregiver can in turn help him to venture out and explore his environment in an engaged and confident way, such as by reaching for new toys in the sandbox or playing with new peers. In contrast, a child who is “insecurely attached” will have less trust that the parent will be available in a consistent way. As a result, this child could have more difficulty venturing away from the parent, or may hesitate to go to the parent when he is distressed or scared. Years of attachment research have revealed that secure attachment in childhood is linked to lifelong benefits including better psychosocial adjustment and relationship quality in adulthood.

What, though, does secure attachment have to do with the development of literacy skills in childhood? In general, the importance of caregiver involvement for literacy promotion has been established. We know that in both higher and lower-income families, the frequency with which parents read to their preschool children is directly linked to emerging literacy skills (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). Data also suggest that the motivation first-graders from low income backgrounds exhibit toward reading is related to the positive interactions they experience with caregivers during storybook time at home (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002).

However, what is considered less frequently in discussions about parental contributions to emerging literacy is the importance of the *security* of the parent-child relationship. In other words, though parental involvement itself is important, we should not overlook the contribution of parent-child security for promoting early literacy skills. Several studies speak to this point.

In one study with middle-class families, some children who were insecurely attached as babies attended less readily during a storybook interaction with their mothers at age two than did securely-attached children (Frosch, Cox, & Goldman, 2001). A similar study with higher-SES families indicated that securely-attached children between the ages of 1.5 and 5.5 (years old) were more focused, tried to read more eagerly, and explored books and other reading materials more fully than their insecurely-attached counterparts. Finally, data from both high and low-income samples indicate that securely-attached children are read to more frequently by their mothers than are insecurely-attached children (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988; Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1995).

This last point, that reading frequency is linked to security of attachment, is particularly interesting. It suggests that in addition to focusing on how often parents read to their children, interventions designed to improve childhood literacy should also work to promote security of parent-child attachment. By directly targeting the

quality of the parent-child relationship, such interventions would provide a multi-pronged approach toward improving literacy in early childhood.

It is important to note that attachment security is not in-born, but instead develops over time, through the quality of interaction between the caregiver and the child. When a caregiver is consistently sensitive and responsive to a child's cues for comfort and stimulation, she is helping to foster attachment security in this child. A parent who inconsistently responds to a child's cues or who rejects a child's bids for closeness is not doing all that she can to foster security of attachment.

There are presently several parenting programs in place that work to promote security in the parent-child relationship in low-income families presenting with a range of concerns including substance abuse and/or trauma histories. In Connecticut, interventions such as Minding the Baby and the Mothers and Toddlers Program, both of which are based at Yale University, have shown promise in increasing mothers' sensitivity to their children's emotions and behaviors (Slade et al., 2005; Suchman et al, 2008). Also of note is the Circle of Security parenting intervention. This program's focus on enhancing parents' understanding of their children's attachment behaviors has been linked to improvements in parent-child attachment security (Hoffman et al, 2005). While none of these interventions focuses directly on improving childhood literacy per se, the spirit of this attachment-based work could and should help inform literacy programs in our state.

In conclusion, if our aim is to improve early childhood literacy skills in Connecticut, we need to expand our perspective to include the importance of parent-child attachment security. In practical terms, this means considering how interventions targeting childhood literacy should also incorporate elements designed to improve the security of parent-child relationships.

Thank you for your time today.

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