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Attachment Theory and
the Adjustment to School for Young Children with Special Needs

Janice Schischka

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing evidence that a positive start to school sets the child up for continued positive educational experiences and future life opportunities (Dockett & Perry, 2007). In an inclusive era, it is important to investigate the processes that promote the success of inclusion. This study set out, first, to explore the factors associated with the transition to school for a heterogeneous sample of young children with special needs. Second, it aimed to examine the association between children’s relationships with parents and their relationships at school as part of their longer term school adjustment. It also set out to explore the patterns of children’s interactions with their chief caregivers. A mixed method design was used, employing three survey-like measures and semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the case studies of seven of the children are described. The participants were 17 children with a variety of special needs, their parents, teachers, teacher aides, and peers.

Several children were determined to be well adjusted on the basis of their relationships, while others were deemed to be less so. In the transition phase, factors that contributed to successful adjustment included high levels of communication and collaboration between families and schools before and after the child’s school entry. Teachers contributed to successful adjustment by using differentiation practices. Child characteristics played a role by influencing patterns of interactions and the nature of relationships between children and other participants. Further, the nature of relationships (whether they were positive or negative) between children and other participants influenced the nature of relationships between families and schools. Finally, the nature of interactions and relationships influenced both the transition and adjustment to school.

No statistically significant associations were found between children’s relationships with parents and their relationships with teachers, teacher aides, or peers. It is likely that the lack of statistically significant associations between the three sets of relationships was due to the insufficient statistical power resulting from the small sample size, rather than to any lack of linkages between these relationships.

These results are discussed in terms of implications for educational practice and for future research directions. Recommendations for practice include high levels of ongoing
communication and collaboration between families, schools, and other professionals before and after school entry. Other suggestions include the drawing up of a national, mandatory policy for the school transition of young atypical children, incorporating the assembling of a collaborative team of personnel, holding transition meetings to which all the stakeholders in the child’s life are invited, and allowing multiple opportunities for the child and their family to visit their new school setting prior to starting. Recommendations for future research include interviewing the target children about their own transition, and making direct observations of the interactions of young children with special needs.
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It is also important to acknowledge and thank those who participated in this study. I am extremely grateful to the families who voluntarily opted to be involved in this research. Many of these families had endured several years of ongoing medical issues and many difficulties associated with their children’s special needs and, yet, were happy to give up their valuable time to participate. These families were able to see the bigger picture, realising that, although this research would not directly benefit their own children, it had
the potential to benefit future generations of young children with special needs and their families. My sincerest thanks to you all.

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