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

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for the degree of
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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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Rationale.....	1
1.2 Thesis organisation.....	4
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	6
2.1 Background theory.....	6
2.2 Attachment theory.....	8
2.2.1 Development of attachment theory and attachment classifications.....	8
2.2.2 Attachment in older children (three to five year olds).....	12
2.2.3 Attachment in children with special needs.....	13
2.2.4 Children's strategies for interacting with their chief caregivers.....	19
2.2.5 Summary.....	20
2.3 The adjustment to school.....	21
2.3.1 The transition to school.....	22
2.3.2 The transition to school for children with special needs.....	23
2.3.3 Inter-personal relationships, family factors and the adjustment to school.....	28
2.3.4 Relationships with teachers.....	30
2.3.5 Teachers' attitudes to the inclusion of children with special needs.....	34
2.3.6 Relationships with peers.....	35
2.3.7 Peer relationships of children with special needs.....	37
2.3.8 The association between parent-child relationships, teacher-child relationships, and peer-child relationships.....	39
2.3.9 Summary.....	41
2.4 Child characteristics.....	43
2.5 Summary and conclusion.....	44
2.6 The research questions.....	45
CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY.....	47
3.1 Participants.....	47
3.1.1 Characteristics of sample.....	49
3.2 Procedure.....	55
3.3 Instruments.....	58
3.3.1 Assessing children's attachment relationships with parents.....	58
3.3.2 Assessing children's relationships with teachers/teacher aides.....	60
3.3.3 Assessing children's relationships with peers.....	61
3.3.4 Parental/teacher/teacher aide interviews.....	63
3.4 Data Scoring and Coding.....	64
3.4.1 Attachment Q-set.....	64
3.4.2 Student-Teacher Relationship Scale.....	65
3.4.3 Peer sociometric measure.....	66
3.4.4 Interviews.....	67
3.5 Data analysis.....	67

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS ...	68
4.1 What are the strategies that children with special needs and their caregivers use when interacting with each other?	68
4.1.1 Child strategies	71
4.1.2 Parent strategies	75
4.1.3 Teacher strategies	78
4.1.4 Use of the senses	82
4.1.5 Summary and conclusions	85
4.2 What is the relationship between children's attachment security at home with parents and their relationships at school with teachers, teacher aides, and peers during the first year of formal schooling in a sample of young children with special needs?	88
4.2.1 Children's attachment security with parents	88
4.2.2 Children's relationships with teachers and teacher aides	93
4.2.3 Children's relationships with peers	99
4.2.4 The association between relationships	105
4.2.5 Summary and conclusions	109
4.3 How was the transition to school process conducted for a sample of young children with special needs?	113
4.3.1 Children's early childhood education experiences	114
4.3.2 Fears and concerns of parents and teachers prior to school	116
4.3.3 The preparation for school	119
4.3.4 The children's first day at school	124
4.3.5 Problems encountered by families and teachers after children started	125
4.3.6 Parents' and teachers' perspectives on teacher aide support	129
4.3.7 Any ongoing concerns or issues for families	131
4.3.8 Communication, cooperation, and collaboration between families and schools	132
4.3.9 Adaptations to classroom environment or to curriculum/programme	137
4.3.10 Teacher expectations of child's behaviour and learning	139
4.3.11 Summary	141
4.4 Overall conclusion	144
CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: CASE STUDIES	148
5.1 Seth	148
5.2 Hollie	154
5.3 Chelsea	159
5.4 Jacob	165
5.5 Callum	172
5.6 Riley	178
5.7 Liam	185
5.8 Summary and conclusion	191
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION	195
6.1 Summary of key findings	195
6.2 Implications for practice	201
6.3 Future research directions	205
6.4 Conclusion	208
APPENDICES	211
REFERENCES	238

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Characteristics of target participants, Including Demographic Details and School Information.	51
Table 4.1 Attachment Q-Set security and dependency scores for a sample of young children with special needs	89
Table 4.2 Parent-child relationship clusters based on AQS security scores in a sample of young children with special needs.	90
Table 4.3 Teacher-child relationship clusters of low, medium, and high concern in a sample of young children with special needs.....	97
Table 4.4 Liking Z scores and number of positive nominations received by each child in a sample of young children with special needs.	100
Table 4.5 Peer relationship clusters based on liking Z scores in a sample of young children with special needs.	101

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 6.1. A model representing the processes involved in the adjustment to school for young children with special needs.	196
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