

## Cross-College Childhood and Youth Research Seminar Series



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## Assessing Attachment in Children and Young People

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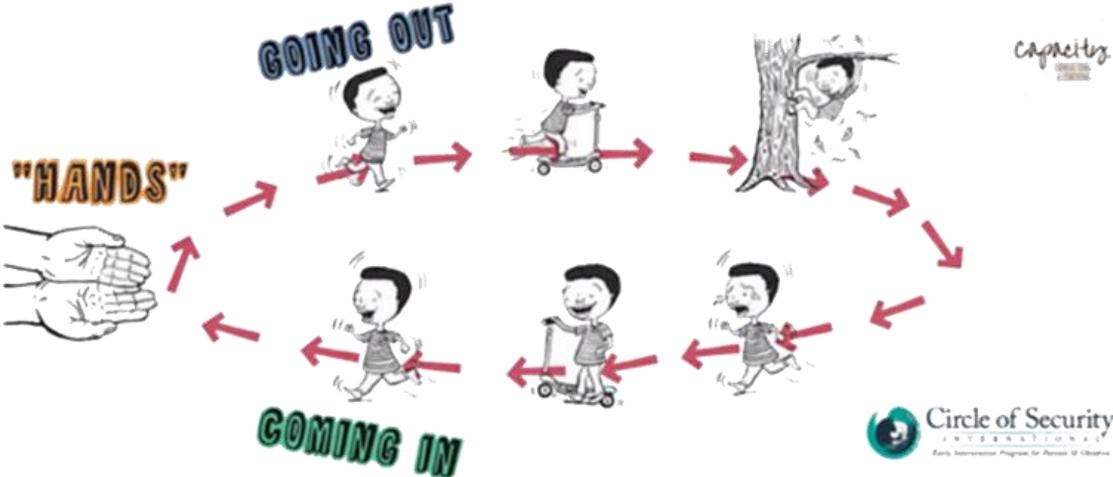


*“We are storytelling creatures, and as children we acquire language to tell those stories that we have inside us.”*

***Jerome Bruner***

# We are all born in early interactions

## Circle of Security® Parent Attending To The Child's Needs

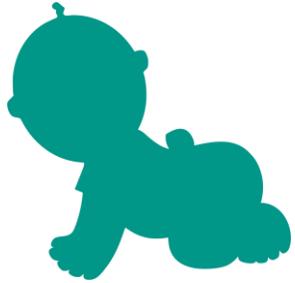


# Why attachment matters?

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- Emotion regulation
- Trust
- Identity development
- Learning
- Socialisation

# Mental representations of attachment: the Secure Base Script Knowledge



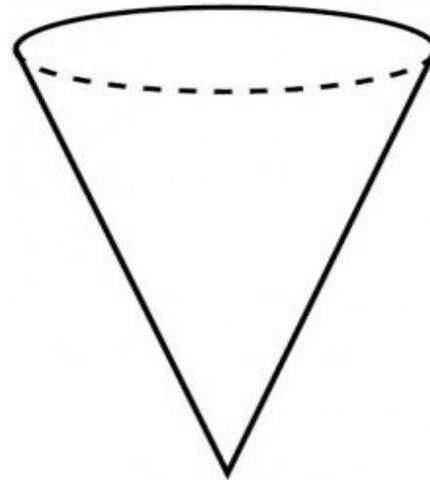
Early generalized  
sensorimotor experiences

*When I cry, my mother usually comforts me.*

What usually happens  
“core representation”  
(generalized)

Contributing factors:  
Age  
Experience  
Socialization process  
Culture  
**Language**

More Complexity  
More Elaboration



Episodic Memory

**Context-** If I cry as I have scratched my knee my mum comforts me **but** if I cry as I am starting a temper tantrum she doesn't.

**Attachment figures-** If I cry as I have scratched my knee my mum comforts me **but** my father doesn't.

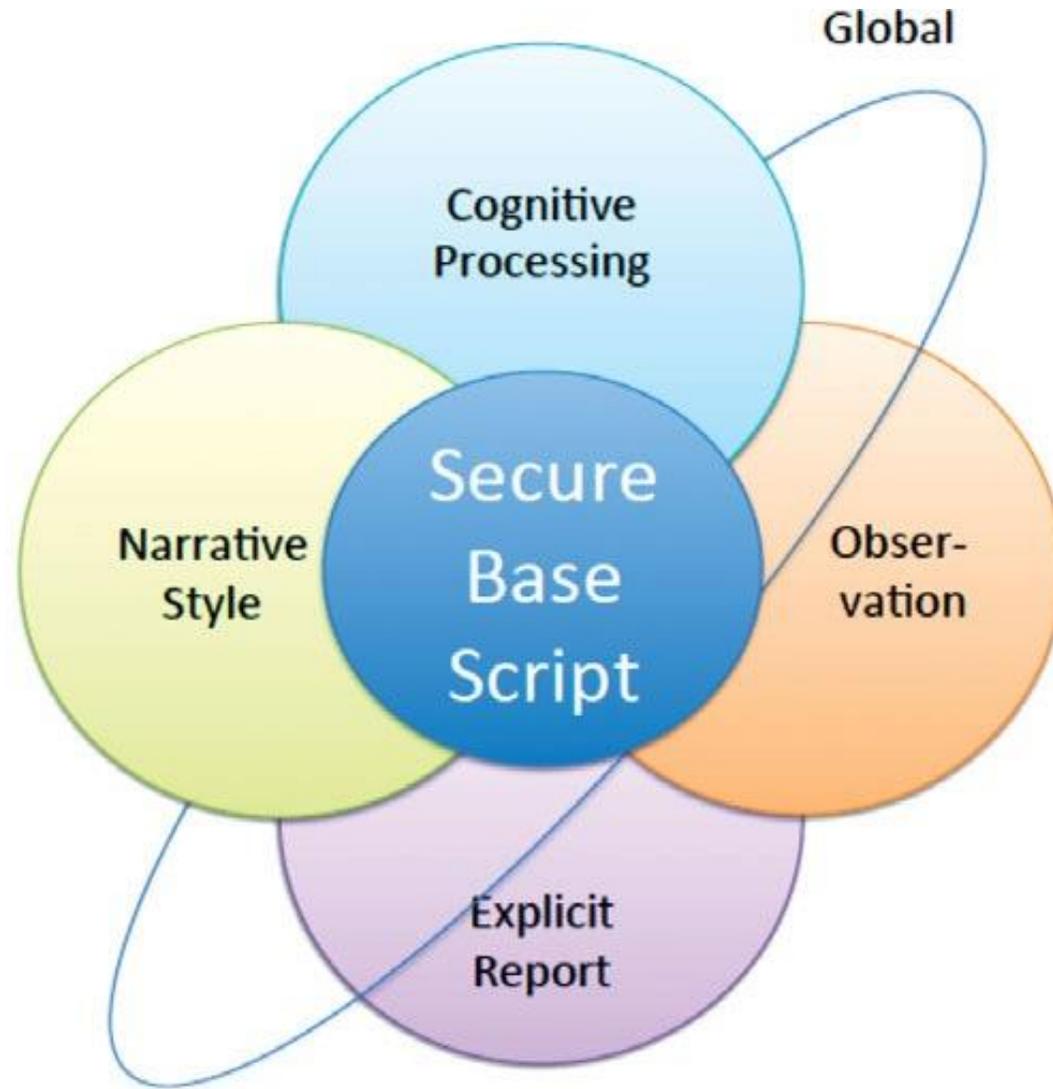


# The “building blocks” of attachment representations: the Internal Working Models (IWMs)

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- They reflect the caregiver’s response to the child’s needs and the child’s attachment behaviors.
- They are non-conscious, habitual, and incorporates “procedural knowledge”.
- They are based on *snapshots of specific events* whose affects is averaged.
- Once they are established, they largely operate on an *unconscious basis* and guide the perception of the world and future events. These are incorporated in previous knowledge.
- IWMs allow stability and coherence of a person’s experience over time but they may also be *subject to potential distortion* if conditions change (e. g. critical life events).



## Some considerations on the assessment of attachment

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- There is no “gold standard” with which to compare assessment measures beyond infancy.
- Need to define the behaviors related to the attachment system in ***middle childhood*** and ***early adolescence*** to support measures development and implementation.
- ***A multi-method approach***- both conscious and unconscious aspects of attachment.

### Relationship specific

#### Model of Measurement Approaches to Attachment in Middle Childhood

Bosmans, G., & Kerns, K. A. (2015). Attachment in middle childhood: Progress and prospects. In G. Bosmans & K. A. Kerns (Eds.), *Attachment in middle childhood: Theoretical advances and new directions in an emerging field*. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 148, 1–14.



# Issues of measuring attachment in middle childhood and adolescence

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- Concordance vs. discordance of attachment representations (double security)
- Attachment stability over time
- Is attachment distributed categorically or continuously?

# Assessing attachment to mother and father

## The study

- During transition to middle childhood, the exploratory— rather than the caregiving—system becomes increasingly important for the child’s further development.
- The child’s explorative behavior may be particularly encouraged within the attachment relationship with the father (Bretherton 2010; Kerns et al. 2015).
- Yet, the few studies that included a ***father*** character in story stems have focused on adoptive families (Barone and Lionetti 2011), single parent (Bernier and Miljkovitch 2009; Miljkovitch et al. 2012), and post-divorce families (Page and Bretherton 2001); only one study concerned attachment representations to mother and father, respectively, in children living with two parents (Portu-Zapirain 2013).
- **Aim 1-** to investigate ***concordance of attachment representations*** at a time around the transition from early to middle childhood (age 6).
- **Aim 2-** to assess ***convergence*** between dichotomous (secure/insecure) classifications obtained with the MCAST and SBST and continuous scores.

# Sample and procedure

120 first grade children  
(61 male and 59 female;  
 $M_{Age} = 76.4$  months or 6 years and  
4-months-old,  $SD = 4.06$ ) were  
assessed at age 6 twice (3 months  
interval)



75 children (32 male and 42  
female;  $M_{Age} = 91.1$  months or 7  
years and 7-months-old,  $SD = 11.43$ )



MCAST (Green et al., 2000)



12 months later

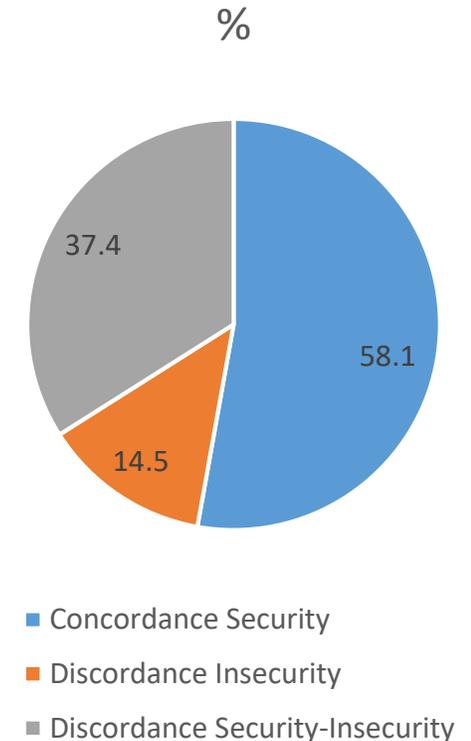
## A. Robin's Math Test

Robin	sad	study plan
math test	mother/father	study together
unprepared	talk	feel better
many mistakes	help	sleep

(SBST, Psouni & Apetroaia, 2012, 2014)

# Results

- **Significant concordance** was found for the two-way classification (Cohen's  $k = .32$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), with 58.1 % of children ( $n = 68$ ) showing representations of secure attachment to both parents (59 % concordance in Fox et al. 1991; 62 % in Van IJzendoorn and De Wolff 1997; 65 % in Diener et al. 2008) and 14.5 % ( $n = 17$ ) showing representations of insecure attachment to both parents.
- **On categorical level- no categorical convergence** between 2-way attachment **mother** (MCAST: Secure vs. Insecure) and scripted secure base knowledge (SBST: high vs. low scriptedness) ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = .94$ ,  $p = .33$ , *ns*); 2-way attachment **father** (MCAST) and SBST ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.67$ ,  $p < .05$ , Cohen's  $k = .19$ ).
- Consistent with that, children **securely attached to father (MCAST)** received significantly **higher scores in SBST** about a year later ( $F(1,72) = 3.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ ), controlling for verbal IQ.
- **On continuous level-** convergence between the MCAST SBS compound and SBST scriptedness scores was found for **father** ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not mother ( $r = .16$ ,  $p > .05$ ), controlling for verbal IQ.



# What do these results mean?

- **Concordance** in the quality of attachment representations to mother and father (Diener et al. 2008; Fox et al. 1991; Monteiro et al. 2008; Steele et al. 1996; Van IJzendoorn and De Wolff 1997; Veríssimo et al. 2011).
- **Partial convergence** of attachment representations using the two narrative-based methods as **categorical and continuous analysis** indicated *concordance* between *attachment to father assessed by the MCAST and the SBST*.
- Findings not replicated concerning attachment to mother. When assessing the relation between attachment security by MCAST-mother (but not father) and SBST, there is a risk that their concordance is confounded by the shared variance with verbal abilities, becoming non-significant when verbal ability is controlled for.

# Attachment to mother and father in dolls story completion- a closer look at the structure

1. Secure attachment

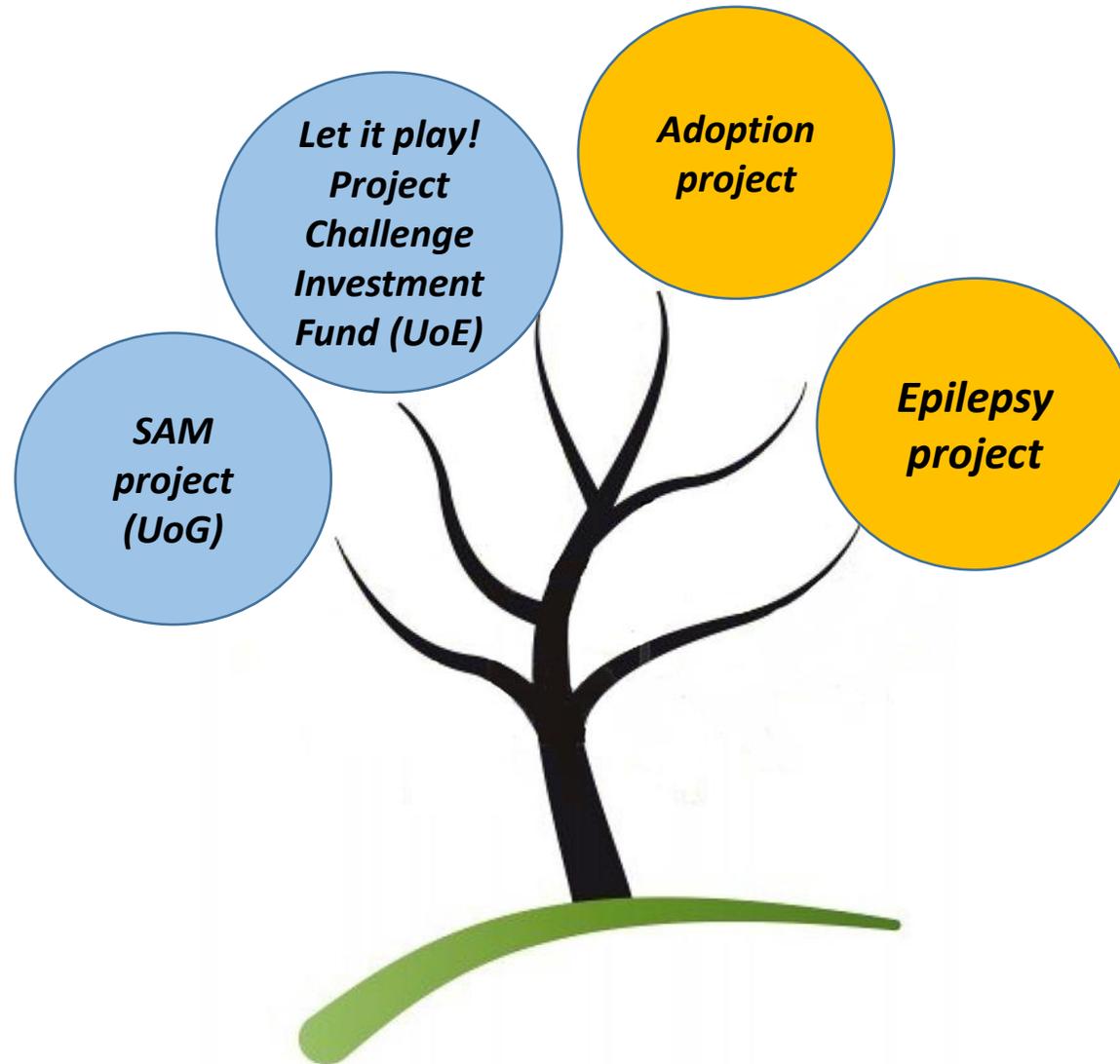
2. Intrusive and conflictual behaviors  
bizarre themes (F) and reversal (M)

3. Disorganized (M)  
and self-care strategies (F)

- First two factors in line with Green et al., (2000) and Barone & Lionetti's study (2012) using mother doll.
- Third factor not in line with previous studies: in Barone and Lionetti (2012) *child engagement* (arousal, engagement, and assuagement), whereas in Green et al. (2000) *anger and conflict behavior*.



More research...



# Future directions

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- Including attachment assessment in a broader assessment and monitor it over time.
- Not rely only on attachment categories but on continuous scores.
- What is the contribution of ***attachment to father*** in the development of attachment representations in children and adolescents?

