Building Connections in Classrooms Using the Circle of Security Intervention

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Overview of Attachment

Attachment formation is an event that occurs between children and their caregivers. While all children naturally form attachments, the security of attachments may vary depending on the quality of care a child receives (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In secure attachment relationships, the caregiver serves as a secure base from which the child can safely explore their environment to support their development and learning (Bowlby, 1988). Secure attachment relationships also lay the foundation for relationships children will experience throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1988), so children who experience secure attachment early in life are better able to find security in their future relationships. Children who do not receive adequate care, however, form insecure attachments, putting them at an increased risk for behavioral and social-emotional difficulties throughout their lifespan (Balbernie, 2013).

While attachment and related psychological outcomes have been well-studied within the context of primary caregiving relationships with parents, educational staff also serve as important caregivers and potential attachment figures during early childhood. Children who experience insecure attachment to their preschool teachers may be less likely to engage spontaneously in learning opportunities presented in the classroom, potentially impacting their school-readiness and contributing to future learning difficulty (Commodari, 2013). Thus, interventions focused on attachment security can potentially improve outcomes across a variety of domains.

Overview of Circle of Security

The Circle of Security (CoS) intervention utilizes a reflective caregiving model and is rooted in attachment theory. The focus of this intervention is to support secure attachments between children and their caregivers by improving caregiver reflective capacity. Specifically, CoS aims to improve caregiver reflective capacity when confronted with challenging behaviors from the child (The Circle of Security International, 2019). The CoS model utilizes caregiver wisdom and couples it with education and guidance to assist caregivers in increasing awareness of the feelings and behaviors that are activated within themselves in response to a child’s behavior. This increases a caregiver’s ability to choose a response to the behavior that is more adaptive, thereby increasing the security of the attachment relationship.

In essence, children communicate their needs through behavior, so when a child’s underlying need is met, behaviors begin to diminish. Attempts to manage or meet a need can look different depending on which need is unmet. Caregivers are tasked with identifying what a child is attempting to communicate through behavior, and all caregivers will have areas of relative strength and weakness in doing so depending on their personal experiences. CoS increases the caregiver’s ability to interpret children’s behavior, identify children’s needs, manage their own reactions, and respond in a manner that effectively meets that need. Overall, CoS focuses on creating positive growth for children by first eliciting positive growth in the caregiver. When caregivers participate in this intervention, they change feelings and patterns of thinking in addition to changing behaviors. Ultimately, this will translate into changes in attachment and the parent-child relationship (The Circle of Security, 2019).

CoS Implementation

The CoS intervention is completed across eight weekly sessions, which may be completed in an individual or group setting. There are manualized activities with accompanying video, as well as caregiver handouts and homework associated with each week of the intervention. The intervention begins by introducing the program and attachment theory. The caregivers work on identifying where their child is on the circle and identifying the child’s needs. Weeks three and four are devoted to more work on identifying needs based on behavior. During this time, the caregiver also begins to work on how to meet the child’s needs, identifying which needs are already comfortable addressing, and understanding which needs they may be less comfortable with based on their past experiences. Starting in week five, the caregiver works on identifying and interpreting child miscues, reflecting on recognition of caregiver discomfort, and addressing what that discomfort means. Week six focuses on an examination of what a child’s circle looks like with limited caregiver availability. Next, caregivers learn how to mend and re-enter the when the caregiver and/or child is upset. During the final week, participants summarize what they’ve learned (The Circle of Security International, 2019).

CoS Research Outcomes

Research of the CoS program found a statistically significant change in attachment style post-intervention (Hoffman et al., 2006). This study used parents or primary caregivers whose children were enrolled in Head Start programs. Each caregiver-child dyad was evaluated pre- and post-intervention. This evaluation included the use of the Strange Situation Procedure, a standardized and theoretically founded protocol. Trained coders reviewed each video and classified each dyad as secure, insecure, and/or disorganized/insecure. Results indicate significant shifts in the percentage of dyads that were classified as disorganized and/or insecure. Pre-intervention, 60% of dyads were classified as having a disorganized attachment style whereas post-intervention only 25% of dyads were classified as disorganized. Similarly, pre-intervention, 80% of dyads were classified as having an insecure attachment style. This decreased to 46% post-intervention (Hoffman et al., 2006).

Future Directions for Classroom-Based Application

Circle of Security has primarily focused on parent-child dyads; however, alternative applications have recently been developed to address educator-child dyads. Many childcare providers and early childhood educators are aware of the importance of a secure attachment, but they typically do not have guidance on how to foster secure attachments with the children in their classrooms. Therefore, Circle of Security Child Care (CoS-C), may be a very useful tool in early learning settings. This adaptation is meant to specifically improve teacher ability to cultivate secure relationships with children, help overcome child barriers to engagement in secure attachments, and create secure classrooms, which will ultimately lead to increases in cooperative classroom behavior and potentially increased school achievement (Cooper et al., 2017).

The adaptation of CoS to classrooms positions school psychologists as optimal providers to facilitate this intervention. The CoS-C program operates through three components: teaching the theory of attachment to educators, developing strategies to identify children who would benefit/writing an action plan, and creating classrooms where relationships can be formed (Cooper et al., 2017). School psychologists in early childhood settings are well-suited to provide the CoS-C intervention given their knowledge of attachment, consultation, and best practices.