

# Relationship between Attachment Styles and Delinquent Behaviour among Adolescents in Foster Care Centers in Nairobi Kenya

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**Abstract:-** The purpose of this study was to examine attachment styles and delinquent behaviours of children brought up in foster care centers in Njiru Ward, Kasarani Sub-County, Nairobi County, Kenya. The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the attachment styles and delinquent behavior patterns among foster children in Njiru Ward? What is the relationship between attachment styles and delinquency among foster children in Njiru Ward, Kasarani Sub-County? This study was informed by the Attachment Theory, Sub-culture and differential opportunity theories. A descriptive cross-sectional survey research design was used in this study. The target population included 19 foster care centers in Njiru Ward, with a total population of 1,117 and a sample of 336 (318 children, caretakers, and 6 directors) was selected for the study. Proportionate random sampling technique was used to select the children whereas purposive sampling was used for selecting the caretakers and directors in the foster care centers. The data was collected using questionnaires. Quantitative and qualitative approaches of analysis were used in the study. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in analysing quantitative data. The study established that there was a statistical significant relationship between attachment styles and delinquent behaviour among children in foster homes in Njiru Ward. The study recommends assessment of attachment styles in children with delinquent problems to aid in understanding and establishing holistic correctional measures.

**Key Words:** Attachment, Delinquency, Foster care centers

## I. INTRODUCTION

Attachment is the emotional bonding with someone that endures across time and space. The attachment of children with their primary caregivers begins since birth. Attachment styles include Secure, resistant and avoidant (McLeod, 2018). Secure attachment where the caregivers are able to respond to the children's needs appropriately allow the children to feel secure and comfort. This secure attachment with the caregivers also serves as a secure base for the child to explore the world around them (Choon, Hasbullah, Ahmad, & Ling, 2013). However, during adolescence, the attachment figures may shift to other figures which are non-caretakers such as peers (Hoeve et al., 2012). Peer attachment is also an important aspect as the positive support and care from the peers encourage adolescents to face challenges better. However, if the adolescents are attached to delinquent peers, they are more likely to be involved in delinquent behaviours (Daigle, Cullen & Wright, 2007).

Despite the shift in attachment figures, the parent-child attachment still impacts the child as it persists throughout the lifetime.

Children who experience secure attachment with the caregivers and peers result in positive outcomes such as higher self-esteem, better academic achievement, better emotional regulation and higher social competence (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). In contrast, children who experience poor attachment with their caregivers and friends are more likely to result in negative outcome such as behavioural problems and delinquency (Elgar, Knight, Worrall & Sherman, 2003).

Juvenile delinquency is a growing concern globally and many young offenders are often victims with intricate needs. Children involved in antisocial or criminal behaviours require public health interventions and a balance between their welfare and models of justice. However, in the world today, there are inadequate legal frameworks and a lack of specialized professionals that address these needs (Young, Greer, & Church, 2017). These observations demonstrate that despite juvenile delinquencies being on the increase, there is a dire need for legal frameworks to be put in place not only for the court systems but also the operations of the foster care centres where some of the children are raised in.

Globally, studies have revealed that children in foster care are at increased risk for developing social-emotional and behavioural problems partly due to possible abuse and neglect before they are introduced to alternative care. Research conducted in Norway by (Jacobsen, Bergsund, Wentzel-Larsen, Smith, and Moe (2020) shows that the children who do not live with their biological parents have more internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behaviour at different ages than those living with their biological parents. Jacobsen et al (2020) further reported that such children also risk psychiatric problems through childhood and adolescence and become more vulnerable to adverse developmental challenges.

As of 2018, there were more than 680,000 children in the US who spent time in foster care. Some of the major reasons included neglect (62%), parent substance abuse (36%), parent inability to cope with parenting (14%), or physical abuse (13%) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). In Northern and Western Europe, as well as in North America,

there have been efforts to reduce the number of children institutions and adopt an alternative family and other community-based care (Chege & Ucembe, 2020).

Children in foster care are disproportionately more represented as chronic offenders through their adolescence and adulthood compared to the general population (Yang, McCuish, & Corrado, 2020). However, the nature of this correlation has remained theoretically studied and examined, particularly concerning the moderating factors that affect the delinquent behaviours of children in foster care. In a study comprising of 678 young offenders in New York, Yang et al (2020) concluded that a history of foster care largely increases the chances of children committing chronic offenses and that the relationship does not depend on negative self-identity, parental maltreatment, or substance use. Therefore, there is a greater need to support children in foster care as they transit to adulthood with proper attachment, regardless of their constant exposure to various negative situations in their lives.

In South Africa, children in foster care tend to display more problematic behaviours compared to the general population of other children which in turn negatively impacts the wellbeing of the foster parents or caregivers (Ntshongwana & Pius, 2018). A study carried out by Berens and Nelson (2015) over eight years showed that there was a negative impact of institutionalization on children's health, development and life chances.

In Kenya, an increasing number of children grow up in situations that demand alternative care, with over 3 million being categorized as orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) (Waweru, Tucholski, Kisasa, Mwarari, Nyagah, & Churu, 2020). In Nairobi, the rapid growth of child institutionalization has been a result of unsustainable urbanization due to unrelenting rural-urban migration accentuating poverty levels in Kenya's capital (Chege & Ucembe, 2020). Among these children, foster care often becomes a viable alternative to care and protect OVPs in dysfunctional settings that would expose them to potential risks to their development and wellbeing. Although Article 18 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that parents or legal guardians have sole responsibility for child upbringings and development, there are situations that parents often find themselves unable to meet the obligations (Petrowski, Cappa, & Gross, 2017). In these situations where children are rendered without proper parental protection and care, alternative care becomes necessary. However, although such care is embedded in robust international and local legal frameworks, the implementation of good practices in caring for vulnerable children is wanting.

Magai, Malik and Koot (2018) have studied emotional and behavioural problems (EBPs) among children in Central Kenya regions such as Nyeri and Kiambu and found that the problem is highly prevalent among Kenyan children and

adolescents in part due to poor attachment, control, and monitoring. Although the national government has in recent times expressed its interest in implementing the care reforms such as de-institutionalization, the national child protection system has remained dependent on child institutionalization (Chege & Ucembe, 2020).

According to the data obtained from the Children's Welfare Social Office (2022) in Njiru Ward, there are over nineteen foster care centers that have been established. This could imply that there are so many children in the region that have been abandoned and therefore seeking shelter in the homes. Additionally, there is a high rate of population increase which may be attributed to the increased rural-urban migration in search of greener pastures. However, the opposite has been experienced and therefore contributing to a high rate of households living in poor conditions and increased crime (Yegon, 2019). Moreover, cases of adolescents engaging in crime and unethical behaviours has been witnessed in the area and this has raised a lot of concern among the community members in the ward. Such prevailing conditions have created a need for this study to be conducted. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate attachment styles in foster care centers, how they affect the delinquent behaviours of children in foster care, and the best practices that can be adopted to care for and protect vulnerable children.

## II. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive cross-sectional survey research design was used in this study. The main feature of this design is to describe specific characteristics of a large group of persons, objects or institutions without influencing them (Kothari 2004). This study was carried out among foster care homes in Njiru Ward. It is one of the five wards in Kasarani constituency in Nairobi County (see Appendix VI). The reason as to why the researcher selected this ward is based on the increasing cases of criminal activities and delinquent behaviours being conducted by the young adults in the area. This has raised lots of concerns which the researcher seeks to investigate the cause behind it. The target population of this study comprised of 19 foster care centers in Njiru Ward (See Appendix V for the names of the foster care centers), 1060 children in those centers (age 7 to 18 years), care takers (house fathers and mothers) (38) and directors (19). In total, the target population was 1,117.

In the case of this study, at least 30% of the total population was selected as a representable sample of the study. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) agreed that 30% of a target population is a representable sample. Previous studies such as that by Rotich and Kiprop (2017) and Mfaeka (2021) also used a sample size which represented 30% of its target population and found it to be effective. As such, the sample size was 318 foster care children, 12 care takers, and 6 directors. In total, the sample size was three hundred and thirty six respondents (n=336).

Table 1 Summary of the Sample Size

Category	Target Population	Sample Size (30%)
Foster Care Homes	19	6
Foster Care Children (7-18 Years)	1060	318
Care Takers		
- House Fathers	19	6
- House Mothers	19	6
Foster Care Home Directors	19	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,117</b>	<b>336</b>

The questionnaire was used to collect data from the foster care children. The questionnaire was organized according to different sections. The first section focused on the demographic information of the respondents while the other sections were organized according to the objectives of the study. It needs to be noted that for the attachment styles, items from the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) by Hazen and Shaver (1987) was adopted whereas for the delinquency behaviour, items in the NYS Delinquency Scale by Craig A. Anderson (2006) was adopted.

III. RESULTS

This study sought to find out the attachment styles among foster children in Njiru Ward, Kasarani Sub-County, Nairobi County, Kenya. In order to answer this question, the children were given some statements and asked to indicate their extent of agreement or disagreement.

Figure 2: Types of Attachment among Foster Children



As shown in Figure 2, over 53.2% of the children who participated in the study had insecure attachment styles. On the other hand, only 46.7% of the children had secure attachment styles. This implies that majority of the children in the foster homes have insecure attachment styles and hence may display some antisocial behavior. In line with this observation, a previous study carried out by Holen (2020) showed majority of the children in foster care centers often demonstrated anti-social behaviours and attachment issues. This was due to the negative experiences they had in the past. However, a study by Sheinbaum, et al. (2015) which looked at how adult attachment types are manifested in day-to-day life among young adults in

Spain showed that 57.8% of the subjects had secure attachment, 22.3 % had anxious attachment, and 19.9 % had avoidant attachment.

Table 3 Prevalence of Delinquency

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overt Delinquency	325	1.00	5.00	3.0638	1.27595
Covert Delinquency	325	1.00	5.00	3.1869	1.23869
Valid N (listwise)	325				

As shown in the Table 3, most of the children engaged in covert delinquency as compared to the overt delinquency. This means that they are involved in non-aggressive acts. In order to find out the different delinquent behaviors among the children, the respondents were provided with some statements on delinquent behavior and asked to give their responses.

Correlations between Attachment Styles and Delinquent Behavior

Correlations were conducted to establish the level of associations between attachment styles and delinquent behavior among the children in foster homes. The results obtained are as presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Correlations between Attachment Styles and Delinquent Behaviour

		Secure Attachment	Insecure Attachment	Overt Delinquency	Covert Delinquency
Secure Attachment	Pearson Correlation	1	. <sup>a</sup>	.123	.138
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.	.145	.100
	N	142	0	142	142
Insecure Attachment	Pearson Correlation	. <sup>a</sup>	1	.222**	.218**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.		.003	.003
	N	0	183	183	183
Overt Delinquency	Pearson Correlation	.123	.222**	1	.841**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.145	.003		.000
	N	142	183	325	325
Covert Delinquency	Pearson Correlation	.138	.218**	.841**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.100	.003	.000	
	N	142	183	325	325
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					
<sup>a</sup> . Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.					

The study found a positive and significant correlation between insecure attachment styles and delinquent behavior (r= 0.222, p<0.05 for covert delinquency and r=0.218, p<0.05 for covert delinquency. This implies that children who are securely attached are more likely to engage in delinquency compared to those securely attached. However, the secure attachment style has a positive but insignificant correlation with the delinquent behaviors.

## IV. DISCUSSION

Our findings were found to be consistent with those of Yilmaz and Tras (2019) which showed that there was a positive correlation between delinquent behaviours of adolescents and preoccupied style, which is a sub-dimension of attachment styles. The study also showed that there is a significant negative correlation between delinquent behaviours and rational problem-solving sub-dimension. Other findings indicated that secure attachment had an insignificant correlation to delinquent behaviour as reported by our study (Garba, 2019). This study examined the relationship between fosterage and attachment styles and found no significant correlation between fosterage and secure attachment style. On the contrary, a study by West, et al,(2020) established that parenting styles adopted by foster parents contributed to positive secure attachment styles among the children in the foster homes. Therefore the behaviour of these adolescents was dependent on the carers and attachment styles they received. A study by Thorberg and Lyver, (2010) reported that frequent interactions with emotionally sensitive, understanding and responsive attachment figures developed their secure attachment styles, which contributed to positive internal working models and successful copying mechanisms for dealing with stress.

A study done by West, et al,(2020) on attachment in family foster homes had similar findings and revealed that the children in foster homes showed antisocial behaviours and attachment issues resulting from the negative experiences they had in their pasts, for instance in their childhoods. In addition, Borhani,(2013),Molnar, et al,(2010) and Thorberg and Lyver,(2010), established that the increased likelihood of children developing insecure attachment styles were as a result of inconsistent and unresponsive attachment figures, which was manifested by dysfunctional behaviour and emotional patterns. In another supporting study, Mikulincer & Shaver (2013) discovered that the insecurely attached adolescents frequently employed maximising strategies like active engagement through intrusive behavior. On the contrary ,the study by Escobar, et al ,(2014), comparing the non-adopted and adopted adolescents, found no significant relationship between the two in terms of behavioral problems and was supported by a meta-analysis done by Bimmel, et al ,(2003) which did not find more emotional behavioral problems in adolescents adopted at older age.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study established that attachment styles contribute to behaviour of adolescents in foster care homes. The study therefore recommends holistic formative assessment of children entry behaviour during admission in foster homes. This will help provide a database of information that correctional experts may use while caring for these children. It is evident that attachment formation which begins early in life has significant influence on children behaviour later in life. The study also recommend parental educational programmes to enlighten parents on the importance of attachment on the children general development.

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