Research on child-mother attachment relationships has revealed well-documented benefits of attachment security for children’s development (Thompson, 2016).

Particularly, maternal sensitivity seems to play a pivotal role in predicting security, with the sensitivity-security link found across a variety of cultures and contexts (Posada et al., 2016).

Although some studies of child-father attachment relationships exist (e.g., Lucassen et al., 2011), research on the topic is scant, focusing on infancy using the Strange Situation Procedure. We know little about these relationships beyond infancy, in the settings where the relationships are forged (e.g., home), and in different cultural contexts.

Further study of these relationships in early childhood is warranted and serve as an important initial step in exploring the significance of child-father attachment for other developmental outcomes, e.g., socioemotional competence (Verschueren & Marceno, 1999).

We present results from an ongoing cross-cultural study, with samples from Peru and the US, of the associations between paternal sensitivity and preschoolers’ security in naturalistic settings.

**Research Questions**

1. Is paternal sensitivity associated with children’s attachment security during the preschool years?
2. If so, can this association also be found in a sample outside of the US?

**Introduction**

Results from an ongoing cross-cultural examination of the sensitivity-security link during the preschool years demonstrate greater levels of attachment security in the park. The cross-cultural presence of the sensitivity-security link in this study demonstrates that when fathers are sensitive during their interactions with their preschoolers and serve as a secure base for their children to explore from, children demonstrate greater levels of attachment security.

The sensitivity-security association existed in both the home setting and park setting in the US. Interestingly, fathers showed higher levels of sensitivity at the park; perhaps less structure in this context affords fathers with greater opportunities to provide secure base support as children navigate their surroundings.

Together, our findings extend current research on the importance of studying child-father attachment relationships in preschool-aged children, in order to better understand the role the sensitivity-security link plays in children’s developmental outcomes. Finally, the findings provide support for the cross-cultural significance of child-father attachment relationships.

**Participants**

**United States**

Participants included 40 father-child dyads (55% girls). Children and fathers were predominantly non-Hispanic Caucasian (57.5% and 67.5%, respectively), and mean annual household income was $51,190 (SD = 28.85). Children were on average 29 months of age (SD = 4.54).

**Peru**

83 father-child dyads (48% girls) participated. All individuals were of Peruvian nationality, from primarily Middle (31.3%) and Lower Middle (30.1%) class. Children were approximately 56 months of age (SD = 9.6).

See Table 1 for additional demographics.

**Measures**

During each visit, observers reported on children’s Attachment Security using the Attachment Q-Set (Waters, 1995) and on Paternal Sensitivity using the Parental Behavior for Preschoolers Q-Set (Posada et al., 1998).

**Procedures**

US dyads were visited once at home and once at a playground, while dyads in Peru were visited once in the home.

In the US, each visit had at least one independent observer reporting on child and father behavior; 43% of the visits had two independent observers of child behavior and 29% of visits had two independent observers of father behavior. Mean interrater reliability for security and sensitivity was .76 and .88, respectively.

In Peru, all visits had two independent observers of child behavior and two independent observers of paternal behavior. Mean interrater reliability for security and sensitivity was .85 and .90, respectively.

**Results**

**Table 1.** Demographic and Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

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<th>US M (SD)</th>
<th>Peru M (SD)</th>
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| Child age 
<sup>a</sup> | 28.95 (4.54) | 36.78 (5.49) |
| Child gender %
<sup>b</sup> | 55% | 48.2% |
| Paternal age | 32.85 (5.42) | 36.78 (5.49) |
| Paternal education | 16.57 (2.54) | 14.9 (2.98) |
| Security at home | .38 (.21) | .31 (.24) |
| Sensitivity at home | .68 (.09) | .52 (.26) |
| Security at park | .39 (.13) | — |
| Sensitivity at park | .75 (.06) | — |

Note: *Child age in months, *Gender in percent female, *Paternal education in years.

**US**

In the US, child gender was found to be a significant covariate of fathers’ sensitivity, with fathers of girls having higher sensitivity scores than fathers of boys, r = .33, p = .04. In addition, paternal education was positively correlated with sensitivity, r = .32, p = .04. Thus, these variables were controlled for in analyses.

**Peru**

Paternal sensitivity was found to be positively associated with paternal education (r = .34, p = .002) and age (r = -.20, p = .07), and negatively associated with child age (r = -.22, p = .05). After controlling for these variables, the partial correlation between sensitivity and security was r = .48, p < .001.

**Discussion**

The cross-cultural presence of the sensitivity-security link in this study demonstrates that when fathers are sensitive during their interactions with their preschoolers and serve as a secure base for their children to explore from, children demonstrate greater levels of attachment security.

The sensitivity-security association existed in both the home setting and park setting in the US. Interestingly, fathers showed higher levels of sensitivity at the park; perhaps less structure in this context affords fathers with greater opportunities to provide secure base support as children navigate their surroundings.

Together, our findings extend current research on the importance of studying child-father attachment relationships in preschool-aged children, in order to better understand the role the sensitivity-security link plays in children’s developmental outcomes. Finally, the findings provide support for the cross-cultural significance of child-father attachment relationships.