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## EXPLORING ASSOCIATION BETWEEN ATTACHMENT, EMPATHY AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN\*<sup>1</sup>

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*Present study explores the association between attachment and empathy cognitive component with social competence in peer relationships of children aged 8 to 13 years. Child version of attachment dimensions assessment (ECR-RC), emotion recognition test (RMET) and social competence peer assessment (Guess Who) were filled in by 285 students. The results demonstrate that prosocial competences are attributed to children with higher empathy levels and secure attachment, while children characterized as bullies had more negative model of others and lower emotion recognition ability. Predictive power of investigated phenomena was identified only in older group of children. The recommendations for educational practice were given.*

**KEY WORDS:** Attachment / cognitive component of empathy / social competences / age / educational implications

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to investigate whether and how the attachment style and empathy as ability are associated with social competence represented by the role in the peer relations in the primary school children. The attachment is behavioral system that provides survival in situations of stress and danger (Bowlby, 1969). The parents' adequate, accurate and sensitive reactions become the base for internalized feelings of safety, comfort, possibility for exploration of inner and out world, and developing of the Internal working models of self and others (henceforth IWMs and IWMO) in infants that represent the guidelines for the action in relationship with others (Bowlby, 1973). Positive IWMs indicate that child perceives him/herself as understandable, self-worth and as someone who deserve to be loved. That is an important base for children's representation of self, self-esteem, positive self-evaluation and efficacy which is reflected in their interpersonal relationships trough ought life.

The positive IWMO is related to perception of important others and the whole world as safe, predictable and reachable. It enables child to share his/her needs and mental states with others, to develop close relationships and rely on them and ability to think of others feelings and needs without fear of encountering destructive contents about him/her in others' minds. However, the lack of parental responsiveness and warmth leads to development of negative working models – perceiving self as inadequate, unlovable, difficult to understand and be around, and the others as inaccessible, unpredictable, hostile and/or even danger. During development, described internal models tend to become more stable and complex and can be mentally manipulated, which enables simple short-term forecasting, and reflections on the current, past and future relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

The other phenomena of interest in this study is empathy that is usually defined as “our ability to identify what someone else is thinking and feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion” (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Experiencing empathic relationship in early parent-infant interactions, child will have the opportunity to develop the sense of reciprocity and to learn how to receive and give care, which shape his/her way of interaction with others. The same warm, supportive climate in early relations with parents is precisely the one that creates secure attachment (Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004). Differences in empathy could be affected by attachment security trough emotion regulation, the ability to manage one's own emotion in order to deal with

the situations in productive way. Secure children have better emotion regulation ability that allows them to handle their own emotions and to focus on others (Panfile & Laible, 2012).

If both described psychological phenomena, attachment and empathy, are developed sufficiently well, they can be related to positive socio-emotional outcomes. Secure persons, those having positive Internal working models, are found to feel less stress, loneliness and to have better academic achievement (Moore & Leung, 2002); to be more accepted by peers, have closer and much reliable relationships and higher self-esteem (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005); to have more frequently positive feelings in everyday interaction with people (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Higher capacity to empathize is associated with positive social behaviors (pro-social, assertive, consideration for others), self-concept and ability to analyze the causes of negative emotions (Garaigordobil, 2009) and in caregivers with less stressful and less threatening perception of parenthood, less depression, and higher life satisfaction (Lee, Brennan & Daly, 2001).

On the other hand, attachment and empathy impairments are found to be connected with problems in developing and maintaining relationships with others. Thus, more insecure attachment style (Milojevic, Taubner & Dimitrijevic, in preparation) and lower empathy (Milojevic & Dimitrijevic, 2014) are specific characteristics of incarcerated juvenile offenders, especially those who did the violent crimes. Previous studies have found that people with some of the personality disorders that usually have great impact on personal relationships, such as border-line or antisocial, also have more insecure attachment and lower empathy (Baron-Cohen, 2011).

There have been a number of studies connecting attachment with various aspects of school adjustment. One of those aspects is also relationships with peers. It is argued that children's social competence demonstrated in peer relations is influenced by emotional functioning components such as emotion perception, ability to express and regulate their own emotions and to sympathize and empathize and emotional intelligence (Hubbart & Coie, 1994; Mavroveli, Petrides, Sangareau, & Furnham, 2009). Meta analysis conducted by Schneider, Atkinson and Tardif (2001) exploring studies that identified relations between attachment in relation to parents and peer relations, revealed that the effect size was small to moderate when attachment to mother was observed, while these sizes were higher in middle childhood and adolescence and there was no gender and cultural differences. Children with insecure attachment perceived that they have

less friends in comparison to those with secure who are in general more socially competent, according to their teachers and peers (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Research results indicate that pro-social children show greater levels of empathic awareness in comparison to those that demonstrate aggressive behavior, or are victims of it (Warden & MacKinnon, 2003). It is worth noting that in described study dispositional affective self-reported empathy was measured. Different approach is measuring empathy as ability using tests of emotion knowledge or recognition instead of questionnaires that determine affective aspect of empathy. Although there is a number of research that have demonstrated that social status is associated with emotion understanding (e.g. see Hubbard & Coie, 1994 for review), there are still research that did not identified relation between performance based measure of empathy and acceptance by peer group (Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Ickes, 2009).

#### Rationale

The main goal of this study was to explore whether peer-perceived behaviors and group rolls could be associated with attachment style to both mother and father and capacity to empathize. Unlike some previous studies, we were interested in cognitive aspect of empathy, in other words we wanted to test whether and how ability to recognize emotions can influence peer relations.

In addition to that, the aim was to investigate possible age difference in interrelations of these phenomena. Results from this study can have valuable practical implications for prevention programs that deal with improving peer relations in school aged children.

It is also worth mentioning that present study is a part of the validation process of Serbian translation of some important psychological instruments for children.

Based on previous studies we hypothesized that:

1. Children with lower levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance in relation with both parents will have better peer-rated general social competence, more pro-social and less antisocial nominations. (H1)
2. Children with better emotion recognition ability will have better peer-rated general social competence, more pro-social and less antisocial nominations. (H2)

3. Attachment dimensions will be more predictive of peer relations at older age due to higher stability of internal working models. (H3)

## PRESENT STUDY

### Sample and procedure

The sample of this study consisted of 285 children aged 8 to 13 ( $M = 10.52$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). All students were from four state schools in Belgrade. The sample was divided into two age groups with respect to developmental differences – 8 to 10 year olds (137) and 11 to 13 year olds (148). All schools' headmasters and psychologists received a letter explaining the aims and rationale of the study. Informed consent was obtained from parents, guardians or school psychologist. All participants were given oral and written instructions explaining the procedure for all instruments and they filled out the questionnaires individually. Testing session lasted approximately 45 minutes.

### Instruments

#### The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Revised child version

Self-report questionnaire ECR-RC (Brenning, Soenens, Braet, & Bosmans, 2011) was used for assessing two dimensions of attachment, anxiety and avoidance. Dimension anxiety refers to negative Internal working model of self and avoidance to negative Inter working model of others. Therefore higher scores on dimensions anxiety suggest that child has more negative perception of him/herself, while higher scores on dimension avoidance indicate more negative perception of others. In this study we specifically used child version of this instrument that is modified for middle school children and early adolescents by simplification of the adult version of the instrument (Fraleigh, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The test has two parallel forms for both parents that each consists of 36 items that participants rate on seven point Likert scale. ECR-RC has reached satisfactory level of reliability in present study for both dimensions in relation with mother (anxiety  $\alpha = .803$  ; avoidance  $\alpha = .875$ ) and father (anxiety  $\alpha = .848$  ; avoidance  $\alpha = .866$ ).

### Reading the Mind in the Eyes test – revised version

Reading the Mind in the Eyes test (henceforth RMET) (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001) was used to measure cognitive component of empathy. The test consists of 28 photographs of human eyes and the task is to choose one word that best describes feelings or mental states of persons in the picture between four given. The decision to use this instrument was reached since there was Serbian translation available and it was being validated in the time this study was conducted. However, results later obtained showed that the translation did not have satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's alpha was .558 and .624) (Milojević & Dimitrijević, 2014). Similar results were found for the Italian translation ( $\alpha=.605$  and  $\alpha=.677$ ) while test-retest reliability was satisfactory (Hünefeldt, Laghi, Ortu, & Belardinelli, 2013; Vellante, Baron-Cohen, Melis, Marrone, Petretto, Masala, & Preti, 2012). Nevertheless, RMET is widely used test and one of few that tests ability and does not rely on self reports. RMET in present study showed low reliability in the whole sample ( $\alpha=.488$ ) as well as in younger and older age group (respectively  $\alpha=.534$  and  $\alpha=.443$ ).

### Guess who peer assessment technique

Guess who is a peer assessment technique that is based on unlimited nomination and proportions scores (Coie & Dodge, 1988). In this study we used three prosocial behavioral descriptions (“is sympathetic”, “co-operates” and “is leader”) and one antisocial (“is bully”). Children were asked to nominate all classmates who are portrayed by these descriptions<sup>2</sup>. Obtained rates were later standardized for class. Global social score of social competence was counted by summing up all nominations for pro-social descriptions and subtracting nominations for antisocial description for each participant.

## RESULTS

We will first look into interrelations of investigated variables and then focus on predictive power of attachment and cognitive aspect of empathy for

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<sup>2</sup> The descriptions can be found in Mavroveli et al., 2009.

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peer relations. We will also try to see whether identified relations between variables differ between two age groups.

Descriptive statistics and mutual correlations of all investigated variables are presented in table 1.

Table 1. ECR-RC, RMET and Guess Who descriptives and mutual correlations

	M(SD)	Range	2	3	4	5	6	6.1	6.2	6.3	6.4
1. Anxiety mother	2.13(1.05)	0-6.17	0.60**	0.60**	0.25**	-0.23**	-0.12*	-0.22*	-0.15*	-0.16**	0.06
2. Avoidance mother	1.89 (1.03)	0-6.5		0.28**	0.47**	-0.24**	-0.16**	-0.19**	0.19**	-0.14**	0.55
3. Anxiety father	2.29(1.05)	0-5.94			0.51**	-0.17**	-0.16**	-0.17**	0.13	-0.15**	-0.005
4. Avoidance father	2.32(1.09)	0-6.27				-0.19**	-0.09	-0.09	0.07	-0.06	-0.02
5. RMET	19.02(3.1)	2-26					0.22**	0.22**	-0.17**	0.14**	0.06
6. Global social competence	0.28(2.67)	-8.81-5.2						0.8**	-0.76**	0.76**	0.42**
6.1 Sympathetic	0.08(0.99)	-3.04-2.97							-0.64**	0.49**	0.06
6.2 Bully	-0.09 (0.93)	-1.33-4.58								-0.51	0.04
6.3 Co-operative	0.64 (0.96)	-2.47-2.05									0.1
6.4 Leader	2.13(1.05)	0-6.17									

Note - \*\*p<.01; \*p<.05

Reviewing data presented in the first table it can be observed that all attachment dimensions showed significant negative correlation with emotion recognition task (RMET). Most of correlations between dimensions of attachment and scores on emotion recognition task with aspects of social competence were significant and in expected directions. The only unexpected result was that children with higher level of anxiety in relation with mother also had fewer nominations for being bully.

We also wanted to investigate whether knowing about child's attachment and ability to recognize emotions can predict social behavior. Therefore multiple regressions were performed with attachment dimensions and emotion recognition as predictors and peer nominations as criteria. The results of this analyses are presented in table 2 for the whole sample, ie. in table 3 for two age groups.

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis predicting peer rated social competence from ECR-RC and RMET

Peer nominations	Model	AnM β(t)	AvM β(t)	AnF β(t)	AvF β(t)	RMET β(t)
1. Global social competence	F(5,277)=5.02** ΔR <sup>2</sup> =0.66	0.13(1.32)	-0.19(-2.17)*	0.21(-2.39)*	0.11(1.4)	0.19(3.22)**
2. Sympathetic	F(5,277)=6.19** ΔR <sup>2</sup> =0.84	0.2(2.07)*	-0.26(-2.98)*	-0.26(-2.93)*	0.15(1.85)	0.2(3.34)**
3. Bully	F(5,277)=3.8* ΔR <sup>2</sup> =0.047	-0.07(-0.75)	0.22(2.47)*	0.15(1.67)	-0.12(-1.45)	-0.13(-2.1)*
4. Co-operative	F(5,277)=2.86* ΔR <sup>2</sup> =0.03	0.01(0.09)	-0.11(-1.27)	-0.15(-1.7)	0.09(1.1)	0.11(1.85)
5. Leader	F(5,277)=0.8 ΔR <sup>2</sup> =0.004	0.06(0.66)	0.06(0.69)	-0.02(0.23)	-0.04(-0.51)	0.08(1.37)

Note - \*\*p<.01; \*p<.05; AnM – anxiety mother, AvM – avoidance mother, AnF – anxiety father, AvF – avoidance father

Examining data presented in the second table we can observe that model including attachment dimensions and cognitive aspect of empathy can explain 6,6% of variance in peer rated global social competence. Best positive predictors of peer evaluation of general social skills are anxiety in relation with father and ability to perceive and understand emotions, while avoidance in relation with mother was significant negative predictor. Similar model accounted for 8,4% of variance for nomination “is sympathetic”, while anxiety in relation with mother emerged as significant positive predictor in addition to emotion perception ability, while father anxiety became significant negative predictor next to mother avoidance. Model for nomination “bully”, that explained 4,7% of variance, was somewhat different than previous models, however, in expected manner comprising of avoidance in relation with mother as positive and emotion recognition as negative predictor. Furthermore, 3,2% of variance of nomination “is cooperative” was accounted by Regression model that included attachment dimensions and emotion recognition ability, even though none of them had proved to be significant predictor. There was no significant regression model for nomination “is leader”.

Same model was tested separately in group of eight to ten and eleven to thirteen year olds. This data is presented in table3. It is worth mentioning that the only significant differences between this age groups emerged on variables anxiety in relation with mother ( $F(1,282)=13.32, p<0.001$ ) and avoidance in relation with father ( $F(1,282)=11.96, p=0.001$ ) with younger age group scoring higher on both scales.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis predicting peer rated social competence from ECR-RC and RMET with respect to age

	8-10						11-13					
	Model	AnM (t)	AvM (t)	AnF (t)	AvF (t)	RMET (t)	Model	AnM (t)	AvM (t)	AnF (t)	AvF (t)	RMET (t)
1. Global social competence	F(5,131)=1.5 R <sup>2</sup> =0.02	0.15(1.1)	-0.13(-1.09)	-0.24(-1.85)	0.14(1.29)	0.14(1.53)	F(5,140)=4.24** R <sup>2</sup> =0.1	0.1(0.74)	-0.24(-1.79)	-0.21(-1.64)	0.11(0.84)	0.26(3.25)**
2. Sympathetic	F(5,131)=2.45* R <sup>2</sup> =0.05	0.19(1.42)	-0.17(-1.44)	-0.28(-2.16)*	0.13(1.25)	0.18(2.06)*	F(5,140)=3.94** R <sup>2</sup> =0.09	0.214(1.6)	-0.35(-2.61)	-0.26(-2.1)*	0.19(1.49)	0.23(2.79)*
3. Bully	F(5,131)=1.8 R <sup>2</sup> =0.29	-0.17(-1.25)	0.16(1.36)	0.15(1.14)	-0.07(-0.65)	-0.2(-2.18)*	F(5,140)=2.59* R <sup>2</sup> =0.52	0.03(0.18)	0.25(1.18)	0.13(1.03)	-0.13(-1.01)	-0.07(-0.93)
4. Co-operative	F(5,131)=0.85 R <sup>2</sup> =0.01	-0.02(-0.15)	-0.06(-0.51)	-0.11(-0.85)	0.01(0.12)	0.05(0.57)	F(5,140)=2.5* R <sup>2</sup> =0.05	0.08(0.58)	-0.21(-1.52)	-0.24(-1.87)	0.21(1.6)	0.18(2.22)*
5. Leader	F(5,131)=1.07 R <sup>2</sup> =0.003	0.06(0.45)	0.05(0.39)	-0.11(-0.82)	0.16(1.43)	-0.06(-0.69)	F(5,140)=2.47* R <sup>2</sup> =0.05	0.002(0.02)	0.12(0.88)	0.05(0.36)	-0.21(-1.56)	0.23(2.73)*

Note - \*\* $p<0.01$ ; \* $p<0.05$ ; AnM – anxiety mother, AvM – avoidance mother, AnF – anxiety father, AvF – avoidance father

Data presented in third table suggest that predictive power of attachment and emotion recognition ability changes with age. The only descriptive category that had significant regression model in both age groups was "sympathetic", with father anxiety being negative and emotion recognition ability positive significant predictor in both groups, while mother avoidance was significant predictor only in group of older children. Regression models for all other nominations, including the rate of general social competence were only significant in group of 11 to 13 year olds, with emotion recognition as only significant predictor.

## DISCUSSION

Consistent with first two hypotheses data has shown low but significant associations between dimensions of attachment and empathy on one side and peer rates of social behavior on other.

Week correlations between attachment dimensions and peer assessment of social competence are compatible with findings of previous similar studies (Schneider, Atkinson and Tardif, 2001). One possible explanation of the obtained correlation value could be the fact that we investigated general relations in the classroom. In closer relationships, that are more intimate and that include stronger emotions and trust, attachment needs and behavior are possibly more activated. Therefore, it could be expected that IWM would be strongly connected with roles that children take in close peer relationships. It is worth noting that avoidance dimension in the relationship with father did not have significant association with neither of peer nominations, nor global score of social competence. This finding could be related with previous studies that associate negative IWM of father with more serious antisocial behavior, such as murder or rape (Milojevic, Taubner & Dimitrijevic, in preparation).

It is also noteworthy that both attachment dimensions in relation with both parents were significantly associated with emotion recognition and all correlations were in expected direction. This suggests that children who have more negative image of themselves and/or others are weaker in emotion recognition in comparison to their peers who have more positive IWMs and IWMo. These results, that are theoretically anticipated and in line with previous research (Panfile & Laible, 2012, Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004) provide certain reasons to rely on RMET, which was called into question due to its low reliability.

The regression model on the whole sample indicated that social competence in general, as seen by peers, is connected with positive IWM of mother and IWM of self in relationship with father and with higher cognitive aspect of empathy, hence supporting the first two hypotheses. This suggests that the child's experience in early relations with parents – mother's predictability, availability and security that allowed curiosity and courage to explore the world and relationships with other people in addition to father's sensitive responsiveness and acceptance – led to construction of positive self image. This, along with developed ability of those children to accurately recognize and understand other people's emotions could be jointly connected with greater number of positive peer relations (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, Warden & MacKinnon, 2003). The same explanation could be offered for children who had more nominations for being sympathetic, especially since the model for this nomination was very similar. The only, somewhat surprising difference was anxiety in relation with mother that emerged as significant positive predictor. This positive connection could maybe be understood in terms that children who feel special vulnerability and fear of abandonment due to the feeling that they are not good enough have higher motivation and invest more effort to understand and satisfy other people emotions and needs.

In contrast, children whose results indicated higher avoidance in relation with mother and lower emotion recognition ability were more often nominated by their peers for being bullies. These findings are in line with theoretical assumption that the expectations of other person being threatening, dangerous, unpredictable prevents or distorts the experience of inner world (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008; Bowlby, 1980). The children assessed as bullies can misinterpret other people's fear or sorrow as anger or aggression directed towards them and therefore react violently. This finding can suggest that it is not only question about adequate reaction to other people's emotions (Warden & MacKinnon, 2003) but also inability to recognize them correctly.

The regression models for nominations cooperative and leader did not reached significance. This could imply that these two aspects of social competence are beyond the phenomena we explored, but also that children at tested age have problems operationalizing these roles, specifically they can use various criteria (e.g. grades, physical strength, beauty etc.) and it is not certain from obtained data whether they evaluate these roles positively or negatively. The second assumption can be supported by the fact that the regression models are significant in the group of older children and that children who were nominated had higher scores

on the emotion perception test. These findings suggest that children identify as leaders and cooperative their peers who can understand the needs of others and recognize what is happening in certain relationship.

The third hypothesis that was set with regard to age difference was partially confirmed. Namely, there were more regression models that reached significance in the older age group; this could indicate several possible explanations. First, it could be assumed that the youngest participants of this study were too young for self-report questionnaire, especially for seven point scale. In addition, some of the tests used in this study are still being piloted at this age and their age limit is still being tested. Furthermore, it could be assumed that these results illustrate theoretical expectation that internal working models become more stable during maturation (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008) because of which it is more difficult for very young children to verbalize and clearly differentiate potentially negative or painful aspects of relationship with parents. Another possibility is explanation we already mentioned, that tested social roles are still not fully comprehended by children at this age. This is further supported by the fact that all regression models were significant in the older group. The only social role that younger children seem to differentiate is sympathetic, which could be because of higher chance of encountering with this role in relations with others since it is socially acceptable and appreciated behavior and is highly emphasized and valued during upbringing. In contrast to that, children could be familiar with the concept of being leader and cooperative, but those are not terms that they frequently use, nor have they talked using those terms with others.

The results of this research, which are generally in line with previous studies (such as Hubbard & Coie, 1994), indicate the importance of attachment style and cognitive aspect of empathy for peer relations and could provide us with some specific implications for educational practice and improvement of children's social functioning. Two major recommendations would concern the importance of working with children on developing their ability to correctly identify their own and other people's inner states, as well as developing emotion vocabulary, and also on inclusion of parents in this process. First task could be conducted through programs that include role plays and group discussions about presented emotions and possible resolutions. Those interventions might help children who have weakly developed cognitive component of empathy to develop the sense of different perspectives and to learn concrete steps and social strategies that might help them in ambiguity situations.

On the other hand parents should be educated about how important their relationship with child could be, especially which impact it has in their child's later interactions with others. In addition to this theoretical knowledge, parents should be offered with some practical skills of how to help their children to develop the empathy. This could be also a fruitful ground for psychologists to mediate and work both with parents and with children on their relationship's problems and, indirectly, on their attachment behaviors. This recommendation becomes more important having in mind that studies showed that short treatments aimed at increasing of parental sensitivity are more effective than long programs and deep psychotherapy (Prior & Glaser, 2006).

Presented study, however, has certain limitations. Foremost, the reader should bear in mind that the results presented here are basing on correlation; therefore no conclusions about causality can be made. RMET did not achieve satisfactory level of reliability, despite the fact that it has previously been used in numerous studies. For that reason we cannot be certain that it only measures cognitive aspect of empathy, and further verification is advised.

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## UTVR IVANJE ODNOSA VEZANOSTI I EMPATIJE SA SOCIJALNOM KOMPETENCIJOM ME U DECOM RANOG ŠKOLSKOG UZRASTA

*Ovo istraživanje se bavi povezanošću vezanosti i kognitivne komponente empatije sa socijalnim kompetencama u vršnjačkim odnosima dece uzrasta od 8 do 13 godina. Dečju verziju upitnika za procenu dimenzija vezanosti (ECR-RC), test sposobnosti prepoznavanja lica (RMET) i vršnjačke procene socijalnih kompetenci (Guess who) popunilo je 285 učenika. Rezultati pokazuju da su prosocijalne kompetence pripisivane deci s višom empatijom i sigurnijom vezanošću, dok su kao nasilnici okarakterisana deca s negativnijim modelom drugog i nižom sposobnošću prepoznavanja osećanja. Međutim, prediktivna moć procenjivanih fenomena zavisila je od uzrasta, te je dobijena tek među starijom decom. Na kraju su date smernice za obrazovnu praksu.*

*KLJUČNE REČI: Vezanost / kognitivna komponenta empatije / socijalne kompetence / uzrast / obrazovne implikacije*