



# Russian Orphans: Links between Their Wellbeing and Supportive Relationships



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## Introduction

- Recent changes in Russia have brought political, economic, and social upheavals. This has had devastating effects for many Russian families. More than 700,000 Russian children are currently in orphanages.
- Studies of children in long-term institutional care have documented widespread socio-emotional and behavioral problems (Hodges & Tizard, 1989) and attachment disturbances (Zeanah, 2000).
- As adults, ex-orphans are likely to experience significantly higher rates of emotional distress, problems with forming intimate relationships, parenting difficulties (Quinton et al., 1984), and chronic, stress-related illnesses (Sigal et al., 2003).
- Institution-reared children and adults experience significantly more psychological problems than comparison groups but they are not a homogenous group; some do well while others fall in the moderate ranges of psychological health. While a host of factors influence a child's well-being, many theorists argue that a supportive relationship at some point in development is crucial for resiliency to adversity (Rutter et al., 1990).

### Questions:

- Are orphans able to feel close to and seek support from others? If so, who?
- What impact do orphans' attachments have on their emotional wellbeing and sense of self?

## Method

- 42 orphans, ages 7-13 yrs (mean= 10.5 yrs), from 4 orphanages, 50% girls
- Each child drew 3 pictures:
  - Self
  - Self with best friend from the orphanage
  - Self with "dear" one(s) (i.e., people the children felt strong affection for and deemed important)
- Drawings were scored on 7 scales: vitality/creativity, pride/happiness, vulnerability, emotional distance/isolation, tension/anger, bizarreness/dissociation, global pathology. (Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997). Reliability scores ranged from .81 to .99.
- The 7 drawing scales were collapsed into 1 'emotional disturbance' rating to derive 3 drawing scores for each child: self drawing disturbances, friend drawing disturbances, and dear one drawing disturbances.
- Interview. Children were engaged in discussion about who they drew. Children were asked how much contact they had (0= less than 6 times a year, 1= at least once a month, 2= everyday) and whether they would confide troubles or negative feelings to those drawn (0= does not confide, 1= confides).
- Self-report depression & aggression questionnaire (Capaldi & Rothbart, 1992) was read out loud to the orphans by a native Russian speaker.



## Results

- Children drew family members (33 children) or friends (8 children) as their dear ones. Only 1 child drew an orphanage caregiver.
- 20 of the 33 children that drew family as dear ones had some amount of contact with them. Of the 20, 70% were adult relatives, 30% were siblings in the same orphanage.
- Children who did not report having someone they could confide in were more likely to show emotional disturbances in their drawings and to have higher levels of depression and aggression. [See Table 1]
- Emotional disturbances in drawings were significantly linked to higher rates of depression and a tendency towards higher rates of aggression. [See Table 1]
- Orphans with more frequent contact with those dear to them were less likely to be depressed, aggressive, and to show emotional disturbances in their drawings. [See Table 1]
- T-test analysis demonstrate that orphans showed more disturbances in their drawings of themselves with dear ones ( $t(42) = 2.26, p < .05$ ) or friends ( $t(41) = 2.24, p < .05$ ) than in their drawings of themselves alone.
- Gender differences emerged suggesting that girls were more likely than boys to report confiding in those dear to them. Girls also exhibited significantly fewer emotional disturbances in their drawings and reported lower levels of aggression. [See Table 2]

## Discussion

- Feeling close to and supported by at least one person appears to bolster orphans' sense of self and wellbeing. Orphans who felt they had one person to confide in were less likely to feel depressed or behave aggressively and their drawings of themselves and others showed fewer emotional disturbances.
- For many of these children, representations of relationships were associated with decreases in comfort. Drawings of themselves with friends or family were characterized by more negative and fewer positive emotions than drawings only of themselves.
- At least at this age, girls were more likely than boys to form a supportive relationship, to be less aggressive, and to express more positive emotion about themselves and others.
- In these orphanages, caregivers or teachers were not taking on roles that would facilitate close, supportive relationships with the children. Rather, children looked to their relationships with their family and friends to define their sense of self-worth and wellbeing.
- Contact with family members appears to bear tremendous influence on how the children feel and think about themselves. In their interviews, children expressed that any contact with family was desired and communicated self-denigration and dejection when contact was not occurring.
- Many orphans in this sample expressed feeling very attached to friends and family members. Facilitating meaningful contact with the children's relatives and friends may help children achieve and maintain supportive relationships and assist with maneuvering through and coping with life stresses.

Table 1: Association between Assessments of Relational Closeness and Wellbeing

	Confiding in friend	Confiding in dear ones	Amount of contact with dear ones	Self drawing disturbances	Friend drawing disturbances	Dear one drawing disturbances	Depression	Aggression
Confiding in friend	1							
Confiding in dear ones	.24	1						
Amount of contact with dear ones	-.05	.32*	1					
Self drawing disturbances	-.33*	-.17	-.37*	1				
Friend drawing disturbances	-.41**	-.39**	-.40**	.65**	1			
Dear one drawing disturbances	-.27	-.43**	-.19	.52**	.62**	1		
Depression	-.22	-.15	-.33*	.34*	.40*	.37*	1	
Aggression	-.09	-.45**	-.07	.11	.23	.31	.08	1

Means Table

	Mean	SD	Range
Self drawing disturbances	24.51	8.92	34
Friend drawing disturbances	31.57	10.35	42
Dear one drawings disturbances	31.91	9.10	38
Depression	2.37	1.01	4
Aggression	2.16	.79	3

Table 2: Correlations with Gender

	Confiding in dear ones	Aggression	Self drawing disturbances	Friend drawing disturbances	Dear one drawing disturbances
Gender	.45**	-.342*	-.355*	-.424**	-.364*

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