

Research Paper

Childhood Attachment and Its Influence on Adult Relationships; Examining the Role of Emotional Regulation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between childhood attachment, emotional regulation, and adult relationships. Using data collected from 90 participants, Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations among all three variables. Childhood attachment was strongly correlated with both emotional regulation ($r = .600, p < .01$) and adult relationships ($r = .730, p < .01$), while emotional regulation also showed a strong correlation with adult relationships ($r = .666, p < .01$). These findings support the theory that secure attachment in childhood plays a vital role in shaping emotional coping mechanisms, which in turn influence the quality of adult interpersonal relationships. The study highlights the importance of early emotional support and suggests that fostering secure attachments in childhood may lead to healthier relationships in adulthood. Limitations include the use of self-reported data and a relatively small sample size. Implications point toward the value of early intervention, emotional skills training, and attachment-based therapeutic practices.

Keywords: *Childhood Attachment, Influence, Adult Relationships, Emotional Regulation*

Attachment theory, originally proposed by John Bowlby (1969), posits that early interactions with primary caregivers form the basis for an individual's internal working model, influencing how they perceive themselves and others in relationships. These early attachment experiences—classified typically as secure, anxious, avoidant, or disorganized (Ainsworth et al., 1978)—serve as a foundation for the development of social, emotional, and relational competencies. Over time, these attachment styles persist into adulthood, shaping the way individuals form and maintain intimate relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Research has consistently demonstrated that securely attached children tend to develop into adults who are comfortable with intimacy, trust, and emotional closeness, whereas insecure

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attachment styles are often associated with relational difficulties, such as fear of abandonment, emotional withdrawal, or dependency (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Adult romantic relationships, in particular, are influenced by early attachment experiences, as they activate similar affective and cognitive systems related to closeness, security, and dependency.

A critical mediator in the pathway from childhood attachment to adult relational patterns is emotional regulation—the ability to modulate emotional responses in ways that are adaptive and contextually appropriate (Gross, 1998). Secure attachment fosters healthy emotional regulation through responsive caregiving and consistent emotional feedback in early years (Thompson, 1994). Conversely, children with inconsistent or neglectful caregiving may develop maladaptive regulation strategies, such as suppression or rumination, which can hinder intimacy and conflict resolution in adult relationships (Cassidy, 1994).

The present study seeks to explore the interplay between childhood attachment and adult romantic relationships, with a particular focus on the mediating role of emotional regulation. Understanding this relationship is crucial, as it can inform interventions aimed at improving relational functioning and emotional well-being across the lifespan. Furthermore, in a rapidly changing social environment marked by increased relational stressors, a deeper understanding of these foundational psychological processes is essential for promoting healthier interpersonal dynamics.

Human relationships are fundamentally shaped by early life experiences, particularly those rooted in the attachment bond between a child and their caregiver. According to Bowlby's (1969, 1982) attachment theory, the quality of caregiving in childhood gives rise to internal working models that guide expectations and behaviors in future social interactions. These early bonds, whether secure or insecure, lay the foundation for how individuals approach emotional intimacy, trust, and dependence in adult relationships.

Securely attached children, who experience consistent responsiveness and emotional attunement from caregivers, often develop into adults who exhibit greater relational satisfaction, stability, and emotional openness (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). In contrast, insecure attachment styles—namely anxious and avoidant types—are associated with difficulties in adult romantic and interpersonal functioning, including fear of rejection, emotional suppression, and hypervigilance to relational threats (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

One of the key psychological mechanisms linking childhood attachment to adult relational behavior is emotional regulation, defined as the processes through which individuals influence the experience and expression of emotions (Gross & Thompson, 2007). The ability to regulate emotions is not innate; rather, it develops through early relational experiences. Caregivers who are emotionally available and responsive help children learn to manage distress, delay gratification, and cope with emotional challenges, which later enables healthier regulation strategies in adulthood (Morris et al., 2007).

Disruptions in early attachment can impair the development of effective emotional regulation skills. Anxiously attached individuals may exhibit heightened emotional reactivity and poor distress tolerance, while avoidantly attached individuals may rely on

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emotional suppression or disengagement, both of which can hinder relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; English & John, 2013).

This study aims to investigate how attachment patterns formed in childhood influence adult romantic relationships, with a specific focus on the mediating role of emotional regulation. By examining these relationships, we hope to provide insights into the developmental origins of relational functioning and contribute to psychological models that inform both preventative and therapeutic practice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Bowlby (1969) proposed that early attachment experiences with caregivers form internal working models that shape future relationship expectations and behaviors.

Reference: Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.

2. Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified three major attachment styles in infants—secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant—which influence later emotional and relational outcomes.

Reference: Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment*. Erlbaum.

3. Hazan and Shaver (1987) showed that romantic relationships in adulthood mirror childhood attachment styles, supporting the extension of attachment theory into adult life.

Reference: Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(3), 511–524.

4. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) argued that secure attachment in adults is linked to higher trust, better emotional regulation, and greater relationship satisfaction.

Reference: Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change*. Guilford Press.

5. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a four-category model of adult attachment that includes secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful types.

Reference: Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(2), 226–244.

6. Gross (1998) defined emotion regulation as the process of monitoring and modifying emotional responses, which is strongly shaped by early caregiver interactions.

Reference: Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3), 271–299.

7. Thompson (1994) highlighted that secure early attachments promote effective emotional regulation, which supports healthy social and romantic functioning in adulthood.

Reference: Thompson, R. A. (1994). Emotion regulation: A theme in search of definition. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 59(2–3), 25–52.

8. Cassidy (1994) emphasized that the ability to regulate emotions is learned through attachment experiences and becomes a key component of adult relationships.

Reference: Cassidy, J. (1994). Emotion regulation: Influences of attachment relationships. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 59(2–3), 228–249.

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9. Feeney and Noller (1990) found that adult attachment styles significantly affect how individuals perceive and respond to relationship conflicts.

Reference: Feeney, J. A., & Noller, P. (1990). Attachment style as a predictor of adult romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(2), 281–291.

10. Shaver and Mikulincer (2002) linked insecure attachment with maladaptive regulation strategies like suppression (avoidant) and hyperactivation (anxious).

Reference: Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2002). Attachment-related psychodynamics. *Attachment & Human Development*, 4(2), 133–161.

11. Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg (2003) suggested that insecurely attached individuals have more difficulty managing negative emotions, which affects relationship satisfaction.

Reference: Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., & Pereg, D. (2003). Attachment theory and affect regulation. *Motivation and Emotion*, 27(2), 77–102.

12. Gross and John (2003) developed the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) and found that reappraisal leads to better outcomes than suppression in relationships.

Reference: Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in emotion regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348–362.

13. English and John (2013) reported that emotional suppression reduces authenticity and closeness in romantic relationships.

Reference: English, T., & John, O. P. (2013). Understanding the social effects of emotion regulation. *Emotion*, 13(2), 314–329.

14. Simpson and Rholes (2012) found that securely attached individuals are better at offering and receiving emotional support in times of stress.

Reference: Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (2012). Adult attachment orientations, stress, and romantic relationships. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 45, 279–328.

15. Cicchetti and Toth (2009) emphasized the importance of studying emotional regulation within a developmental framework, showing how early disruptions can impact adult outcomes.

Reference: Cicchetti, D., & Toth, S. L. (2009). A developmental psychopathology perspective on adolescence. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 77(6), 1047–1055.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, proposed by John Bowlby (1969, 1988), emphasizes the evolutionary and biological need of infants to form close emotional bonds with caregivers for survival and security. These early bonds shape a child's internal working models—mental representations of the self, others, and relationships—which influence how they perceive and engage in future interpersonal connections (Bretherton, 1992).

2. Classification of Attachment Styles

Building on Bowlby's work, Mary Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified three main attachment styles through her Strange Situation Procedure:

- **Secure Attachment:** Characterized by comfort with intimacy and trust in others.

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- Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment: Marked by fear of abandonment and clinginess.
- Avoidant Attachment: Involves emotional distance and discomfort with closeness.

Later, Main and Solomon (1990) introduced a Disorganized Attachment category, typically observed in children who have experienced trauma or inconsistent caregiving.

3. Attachment in Adulthood

Attachment patterns developed in childhood often persist into adulthood and influence romantic and close interpersonal relationships. According to Hazan and Shaver (1987), adult romantic bonds reflect similar dynamics to early caregiver-child relationships. Adults with secure attachment are more likely to enjoy stable, trusting relationships. In contrast, insecure attachment is associated with fear of intimacy, poor conflict resolution, and emotional instability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

4. Emotional Regulation Theory

Emotion regulation refers to the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional responses in a goal-directed manner (Gross, 1998). The development of emotional regulation is highly influenced by early attachment relationships. Caregivers who are responsive and consistent help children develop effective strategies to manage stress and emotional arousal (Thompson, 1994).

5. The Role of Attachment in Emotion Regulation

Attachment theory and emotion regulation are deeply interconnected. Securely attached individuals generally use adaptive strategies such as emotional expression and cognitive reappraisal. Anxiously attached individuals often exhibit hyperactivating strategies, like rumination and emotional amplification, while avoidant individuals tend to suppress or deny emotions (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003).

6. Adult Attachment Theory and Relationship Functioning

Adult Attachment Theory, as expanded by Shaver and Mikulincer (2002), outlines how internal working models influence relational behaviors in adulthood. These include trust, dependency, and the ability to manage emotional closeness and conflict. Individuals with secure attachment show higher emotional intelligence and relational satisfaction, while insecurely attached individuals struggle with vulnerability, responsiveness, and intimacy.

7. Developmental Psychopathology Perspective

This research is also informed by a developmental psychopathology framework, which emphasizes how early developmental processes influence later emotional and relational outcomes. Poor attachment and emotion regulation are associated with increased risk for interpersonal dysfunction, mood disorders, and low relational satisfaction in adulthood (Cicchetti & Toth, 2009)

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To examine the relationship between childhood attachment styles and adult romantic relationship satisfaction, and to explore the mediating role of emotional regulation in this relationship.

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Objectives

1. To assess the association between childhood attachment styles and adult romantic relationship satisfaction.
2. To evaluate the relationship between childhood attachment styles and emotional regulation strategies.
3. To examine the relationship between emotional regulation strategies and romantic relationship satisfaction.
4. To determine whether emotional regulation mediates the relationship between childhood attachment styles and adult romantic relationship satisfaction.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is a significant relationship between childhood attachment styles and adult romantic relationship satisfaction.
- **H2:** There is a significant relationship between childhood attachment styles and emotional regulation strategies.
- **H3:** There is a significant relationship between emotional regulation strategies and adult romantic relationship satisfaction.
- **H4:** Emotional regulation significantly mediates the relationship between childhood attachment styles and adult romantic relationship satisfaction.

Research Design

This study used a quantitative research design. It was done to find out if there is a relationship between childhood attachment, emotional regulation, and adult romantic relationships.

Tools Used

1. Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)
2. Inventory of Parents and Peer Attachment -Revised

Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to select participants. A total of 90 young adults (ages 20–30) took part in the study.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Age between 20 and 30 years
2. Currently or previously in a romantic relationship
3. Able to understand English

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Severe mental health problems
2. Incomplete responded confidential.

Procedure

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were asked to give their consent. The data was collected from 90 young adults using both online (Google Forms) and offline (printed) questionnaires. Each participant was given clear instructions and asked to complete the questions Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), and Inventory of Parents and Peer Attachment -Revised. It took about 15–20 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

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Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed all ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Before data collection, approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, and their informed consent was taken. They were told that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without any penalty. The information collected was kept confidential and anonymous, and was used only for academic and research purposes. No harm was caused to any participant.

Statistical Analysis

Correlations

	Childhood Attachment	Emotional Regulation	Adult Relationships
Childhood Attachment	1.000	.600** (.000)	.730** (.000)
Emotional Regulation	.600** (.000)	1.000	.666** (.000)
Adult Relationships	.730** (.000)	.666** (.000)	1.000

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between childhood attachment, emotional regulation, and adult relationships among 90 participants.

- A moderate positive correlation was found between childhood attachment and emotional regulation ($r = .600, p < .01$).
- A strong positive correlation was observed between childhood attachment and adult relationships ($r = .730, p < .01$).
- Emotional regulation also showed a moderate to strong positive correlation with adult relationships ($r = .666, p < .01$).

All correlations were statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), indicating a meaningful association between early attachment experiences, emotion regulation ability, and relationship quality in adulthood.

DISCUSSION

The correlation analysis reveals significant positive relationships among childhood attachment, emotional regulation, and adult relationships in a sample of 90 participants.

- Childhood Attachment and Emotional Regulation showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = .600, p < .01$), indicating that individuals with secure childhood attachments tend to develop stronger emotional regulation skills.
- Childhood Attachment and Adult Relationships had a strong positive correlation ($r = .730, p < .01$), suggesting that secure attachment in early life plays a key role in forming healthy and stable adult relationships.
- Emotional Regulation and Adult Relationships were also positively correlated ($r = .666, p < .01$), implying that those who can manage emotions effectively are more likely to maintain positive interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

These results support attachment theory, which suggests that early bonding experiences influence emotional functioning and relationship patterns later in life. Emotional regulation

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appears to act as a bridge linking childhood attachment experiences to adult relational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of childhood attachment in shaping adult relational outcomes. The significant positive correlations indicate that individuals with secure childhood attachments are more likely to develop strong emotional regulation skills, which in turn contribute to healthier and more satisfying adult relationships. Emotional regulation appears to serve as a key mechanism through which early attachment experiences influence later interpersonal functioning. This underscores the importance of early caregiving environments and emotional support in childhood for long-term emotional and relational well-being. Overall, the study supports attachment theory and suggests that promoting secure attachments and emotional regulation in early life may have lasting positive effects on individuals' ability to form and maintain meaningful adult relationships.

Limitations and Implications

Limitations

1. The study used self-reported answers, which might not always be accurate or honest.
2. It was a one-time survey, so we can't say for sure what causes what.
3. The sample size is small (90 people) and may not represent everyone.
4. The questions used may be too simple to fully understand complex feelings and relationships.

Implications

1. Parents and teachers should help children build secure bonds from an early age.
2. Counselors and therapists can use this study to help adults improve their relationships.
3. Schools and colleges can teach emotional control and relationship skills.
4. Future studies can include more people and follow them over time for better results.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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