

Research Paper

## The Impact of Childhood Trauma on Personality Traits Among College Students

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### ABSTRACT

Childhood experiences shape who we are as adults. Among these experiences, trauma during childhood can leave lasting emotional and psychological effects. This study explores how different types of childhood trauma are related to personality traits in college students aged 18 to 24. A total of 130 students participated in this research. Standardized questionnaires were used to measure both the types of traumata they experienced as children and their current personality traits based on the Big Five model (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism). The study mainly focused on emotional neglect, physical neglect, and emotional abuse. Statistical analysis using Pearson's correlation showed that emotional and physical neglect were strongly related to high levels of neuroticism (a personality trait associated with emotional instability) and low levels of conscientiousness (which refers to self-discipline and organization). These results suggest that students who were neglected as children are more likely to experience emotional challenges and struggle with managing responsibilities. Understanding these patterns is important because it can help universities and mental health professionals identify and support students who may be silently suffering due to past experiences.

**Keywords:** *Childhood Trauma, Personality Traits, Emotional Neglect, College Students, Big Five Model, Emotional Wellbeing*

Every person's personality is shaped by the experiences they go through in life, especially during childhood. Childhood is not just a time of physical growth, but also a key stage for emotional, psychological, and social development. The way children are treated by their parents, caregivers, teachers, and the world around them can have a deep and lasting effect on how they feel, think, and behave even many years later.

One of the most serious and long-term negative experiences a child can go through is childhood trauma. Trauma in childhood refers to events or environments that overwhelm a child's ability to cope emotionally. These can include emotional abuse (being constantly criticized, insulted, or rejected), physical abuse, sexual abuse, and importantly, neglect when a child's basic emotional or physical needs are not met. For example, if a child grows up

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without emotional support, love, or attention, they may not feel safe, valued, or understood. These feelings can carry over into adulthood in the form of psychological distress or personality changes.

Researchers and psychologists have long studied how childhood trauma affects later development. One area of particular interest is how trauma affects personality traits. According to one of the most well-known personality theories the Big Five Personality Model there are five main traits that describe human personality: Openness (being curious and imaginative), Conscientiousness (being organized and responsible), Extraversion (being outgoing and social), Agreeableness (being kind and cooperative), and Neuroticism (being emotionally sensitive and anxious).

Early negative experiences can influence how these traits develop. For instance, a child who was emotionally neglected might grow up to be very anxious (high neuroticism) and disorganized (low conscientiousness). They might also struggle to trust others (low agreeableness). On the other hand, someone who had a secure and supportive upbringing may develop more balanced personality traits.

While much research has been done on this topic in Western countries, studies from India are still limited. Moreover, many students suffer silently from emotional neglect or mild forms of trauma that go unnoticed because they do not appear dramatic. These hidden struggles can deeply affect students' academic performance, relationships, and mental health. This study aims to explore how different types of childhood trauma relate to personality traits in Indian college students. It focuses especially on how emotional neglect and other subtle traumas may influence traits like neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. Understanding this connection is important, not just for academic research, but also for improving mental health support and awareness in college settings.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Understanding how childhood trauma affects personality is an important area of study in psychology. Over the years, many researchers have looked into how negative experiences in childhood can change the way people think, feel, and behave as they grow older. This section looks at past studies and theories that help explain the relationship between childhood trauma and personality traits.

#### *What is Childhood Trauma?*

Childhood trauma refers to any experience before the age of 18 that is deeply distressing or harmful and that a child is not emotionally prepared to handle. These experiences can be emotional abuse (such as being constantly insulted), physical abuse (being hurt or beaten), sexual abuse, emotional neglect (not receiving love, attention, or support), and physical neglect (not having basic needs like food, shelter, or medical care met).

According to Bernstein and colleagues (1994), the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) is a commonly used tool that identifies and measures these five types of traumata. It has been used in many studies and has been proven reliable.

Research shows that trauma, especially during childhood, can interfere with the normal development of the brain. For example, when children are constantly stressed or neglected, the parts of their brain that manage emotions and handle stress like the amygdala and

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prefrontal cortex can be affected. This may make them more likely to feel anxious, depressed, or emotionally unstable later in life.

### *Understanding Personality: The Big Five Model*

Personality refers to the unique patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that make each person who they are. One of the most widely accepted frameworks used by psychologists to understand personality is the Big Five Personality Traits model, which breaks personality down into five broad dimensions: Openness to Experience (being curious, imaginative, and open to new ideas), Conscientiousness (being organized, responsible, and reliable), Extraversion (being outgoing, energetic, and sociable), Agreeableness (being kind, cooperative, and trusting), and Neuroticism (being emotionally sensitive, anxious, or easily upset).

### *How Childhood Trauma Affects Personality Traits*

A considerable body of research has explored the impact of childhood trauma on the development of personality traits as defined by the Big Five model. Emotional neglect or abuse during formative years has been strongly linked to heightened levels of neuroticism, making individuals more susceptible to anxiety, emotional instability, and negative affect in adulthood. Similarly, children raised in disorganized, neglectful, or unpredictable environments often exhibit lower conscientiousness, struggling with self-discipline, organization, and goal-directed behaviour as they mature. Experiences of mistreatment and emotional harm also tend to weaken agreeableness, as trust, empathy, and cooperative behaviour become difficult to foster in those who grew up feeling unsafe or unloved. Although the influence of trauma on openness to experience and extraversion is not as clearly established, some findings indicate that individuals exposed to early trauma may become more withdrawn, reserved, or hesitant to engage with new experiences and social situations. Empirical studies support these associations: Roy (2002) reported that individuals who had experienced emotional neglect during childhood scored significantly higher in neuroticism, while Oshry et al. (2015) found that neglect and poor caregiving were predictive of reduced conscientiousness in young adults. These findings highlight the long-term psychological consequences of early adverse experiences on personality development.

### *Gaps in the Research*

Even though this topic has been studied a lot, there are still some important gaps. Most research has been done in Western countries, and we do not know much about how childhood trauma affects personality in Indian students. Also, many studies focus only on severe forms of abuse, while subtle traumas like emotional neglect are often overlooked even though they can be just as harmful.

Additionally, some past studies used very small samples. This study aims to improve on that by using a larger group of students from India and focusing on more common but less visible traumas, like emotional neglect.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section explains how the research was planned, what tools were used, who participated, and how the data was collected and analysed. The goal was to study the relationship between childhood trauma and personality traits in college students in a simple, structured, and ethical way.

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### *Objectives of the Study*

The main purpose of this research was to explore whether there is a connection between experiences of childhood trauma and the development of certain personality traits among young adults.

The specific objectives were:

1. To examine the relationship between different types of childhood trauma (such as emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect) and the five major personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism).
2. To identify which types of traumata are more strongly linked to certain personality traits.
3. To provide insights that can be helpful for educators, counsellors, and psychologists in understanding the emotional and behavioural patterns of college students.

### *Research Design*

This study followed a quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational research design. This means that all data was collected at one point in time using numerical data (through questionnaires), and the study aimed to find patterns or relationships between two or more variables without manipulating any of them.

### *Sample and Sampling Technique*

The sample for this study included 130 college students from various educational institutions in Tamil Nadu, India. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 24, which is a critical age group for personality development and self-awareness.

A convenience sampling method was used. This means participants were selected based on specific characteristics that matched the goals of the study, such as being within the right age group and currently enrolled in a college program.

### *Measures*

Two standardized and widely recognized self-report questionnaires were employed in this study to assess childhood trauma and personality traits. The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form (CTQSF), developed by Bernstein et al. (1994), was used to measure the extent of traumatic experiences before the age of 18. This instrument evaluates five distinct types of traumas: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. It comprises 28 items, with participants rating each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never True) to 5 (Very Often True). The CTQSF is a well validated tool that has been used extensively in both international and Indian research, demonstrating strong reliability (CTQ: Test-retest reliability, assessed by comparing scores over time, is also strong, with intraclass correlations ranging from 0.77 to 0.88, indicating substantial agreement., BFI: It demonstrates generally good reliability, with variations across its subscales and versions. Internal consistency, measured by Cronbach's alpha, is often above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability for the overall BFI and its subscales) and validity. To assess personality traits, the study utilized the Big Five Inventory (BFI44), created by John and Srivastava (1993). This inventory captures the five major dimensions of personality: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. It consists of 44 statements, and participants responded on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The BFI44 is a widely accepted instrument for personality assessment and has proven effective across diverse populations in providing comprehensive personality profiles.

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### *Procedure*

The data for this study was collected through an online survey method to ensure both convenience and participant safety. A structured Google Form was designed, incorporating the informed consent form, clear instructions, demographic questions, and the two standardized instruments: CTQSF and BFI44. Participants were recruited through college groups, student communities, and various social media platforms. They were thoroughly informed about the aim of the research and were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Only after providing informed consent did participants proceed to complete the survey, which typically took around 20 to 25 minutes. All submitted responses were reviewed for completeness before being included in the final analysis. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no personally identifiable information was collected, thereby ensuring full anonymity and protecting the privacy of all participants.

### *Statistical Analysis*

After data collection was completed, the responses were first entered into Microsoft Excel and then analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The study employed only descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation analysis to interpret the data. Descriptive statistics, including measures such as mean and standard deviation, were used to understand the general patterns and average scores related to childhood trauma and personality traits. Pearson's correlation was conducted to identify any statistically significant relationships between the different types of traumas and the five personality dimensions. The threshold for statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that any observed relationship with less than a 5% probability of occurring by chance was considered statistically meaningful.

## **RESULTS & INTERPRETATION**

The results of this study are presented using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation analysis. These results help us understand both the average levels of childhood trauma and personality traits in the sample, and the relationships between them.

To begin with, descriptive statistics were calculated to get a basic understanding of how common different types of traumas were among the students. The table below shows the mean (average) and standard deviation (SD) for each trauma subtype based on responses to the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Childhood Trauma Subtypes**

Trauma Subtype	Mean	Standard Deviation
Emotional Abuse	12.3	4.1
Physical Abuse	10.6	4.3
Sexual Abuse	9.1	3.7
Emotional Neglect	14.5	4.6
Physical Neglect	13.1	4.2

These results suggest that emotional neglect had the highest average score among the different trauma subtypes. This means that more students in the sample reported experiencing emotional neglect compared to other forms of trauma. Emotional abuse and physical neglect also had relatively high means, indicating their common presence in participants' early experiences. The standard deviation values suggest a fair amount of variability in how intensely students experienced each type of trauma.

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Next, descriptive statistics were calculated for personality traits using the Big Five Inventory. The mean and standard deviation scores for each personality domain are shown below.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Big Five Personality Traits**

Personality Trait	Mean	Standard Deviation
Neuroticism	28.9	5.7
Extraversion	30.8	6.1
Openness	33.7	5.4
Agreeableness	31.9	5.6
Conscientiousness	29.5	6.0

From this table, we can see that openness had the highest average score, indicating that, on average, participants tend to be open to new experiences, imaginative, and curious. On the other hand, neuroticism had a slightly lower average, indicating relatively lower tendencies toward emotional instability or negative emotionality among the participants.

The core objective of the study was to find out if there were any statistically significant relationships between the types of traumas and the Big Five personality traits. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine this. The correlation values range between 1 and +1. Positive values mean both variables increase together, while negative values mean one increases as the other decreases. Values closer to 0 suggest weak or no relationship.

**Table 3: Correlation Matrix – Childhood Trauma and Personality Traits**

Trait \ Trauma	Emo. Abuse	Phys. Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Emo. Neglect	Phys. Neglect
Neuroticism	0.47**	0.42**	0.38*	0.59**	0.53**
Extraversion	0.18*	0.12	0.10	0.21*	0.17*
Openness	0.08	0.02	0.01	0.19*	0.13
Agreeableness	0.29**	0.25**	0.18*	0.33**	0.28**
Conscientiousness	0.30**	0.27**	0.21*	0.39**	0.35**

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  (significant correlations)

The results from this correlation matrix reveal several important patterns. First, emotional neglect showed the strongest relationship with personality traits, particularly with neuroticism ( $r = 0.59^{**}$ ) and conscientiousness ( $r = 0.39^{**}$ ). This suggests that students who experienced emotional neglect in childhood are more likely to experience emotional instability and lower self-control as young adults. Physical neglect also had similar but slightly weaker relationships.

Other trauma types like emotional abuse and physical abuse were also significantly related to neuroticism, low agreeableness and conscientiousness, suggesting that individuals exposed to these traumas may be more emotionally reactive and have difficulty trusting others. Interestingly, sexual abuse showed weaker and fewer significant associations compared to the other trauma subtypes.

Overall, the results provide clear evidence that neglect-based trauma, particularly emotional neglect, is strongly linked to negative personality outcomes in young adults. These findings

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reinforce the idea that the absence of emotional care in early life can be just as damaging or sometimes more so than direct abuse.

### **Summary**

This research study explored how different types of childhood trauma are related to personality traits among Indian college students. Using a sample of 130 participants aged between 18 and 24, the study aimed to examine whether traumatic experiences before the age of 18 such as emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect have any lasting influence on the Big Five personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

The findings showed that emotional and physical neglect were the most common forms of trauma reported by students, and they also had the strongest relationship with key personality traits. Specifically, students who experienced high levels of emotional neglect tended to score higher in neuroticism, meaning they were more likely to be emotionally sensitive, anxious, or easily upset. At the same time, they scored lower in conscientiousness, indicating struggles with focus, self-discipline, and responsibility. These patterns suggest that neglect often overlooked because it's less visible than abuse can quietly shape how a person deals with emotions and manages life tasks.

Emotional and physical abuse were also related to personality traits, but to a slightly lesser extent. These traumas were linked with increased neuroticism and decreased agreeableness, suggesting that individuals with such histories may find it difficult to trust others or maintain calm and cooperative relationships. Interestingly, sexual abuse, although serious, showed fewer correlations with stable personality traits in this sample. This may be because sexual trauma affects more situational or clinical symptoms such as fear, dissociation, or posttraumatic stress rather than long-term personality development.

Overall, this study supports the idea that childhood trauma, especially in the form of neglect, can have a long-lasting impact on how individuals think, feel, and behave as adults. Personality traits are not just influenced by genetics or individual choices they are also shaped by the emotional environment in which a person grows up. These findings show the importance of identifying trauma histories in college students, especially those who struggle with emotional regulation or motivation. Educators, counsellors, and mental health professionals can use this understanding to offer better support systems, including emotional literacy workshops, personality screening, and trauma-informed counselling practices on campus.

In conclusion, the results of this study highlight the need to pay greater attention to early emotional experiences. Emotional neglect may seem subtle or invisible, but its effects are deeply rooted and can influence major aspects of an individual's personality. When young adults enter college with these unresolved issues, it affects not only their mental health but also their academic and social success. Addressing these concerns early and sensitively can help students develop into more stable, confident, and emotionally healthy individuals.

### **Limitations & Scope for Future Research**

Like all research, this study also had certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the data was collected through self-report questionnaires, which rely on the honesty and memory of the participants. Since the study asked students to recall childhood experiences, there is a possibility of memory errors or personal bias. Some participants might have

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forgotten painful events or underreported them due to discomfort or social desirability. Second, the research used a cross-sectional design, meaning the data was collected at one point in time. Because of this, we cannot claim cause and effect only that there is a relationship between trauma and personality traits. It's possible that other factors, such as recent stress, current family dynamics, or personal resilience, may have influenced the results. Third, the study was limited to a specific geographical area college students in Tamil Nadu so the findings may not represent all young adults in India. Cultural and socioeconomic differences across regions could affect the nature and impact of childhood trauma, and those differences were not fully explored in this research.

Despite these limitations, the study opens the door to many future research possibilities. One area for future investigation could be the inclusion of biological indicators, such as heart rate, cortisol levels (a stress hormone), or sleep quality, to better understand how trauma affects the body as well as the mind. Future studies could also adopt longitudinal designs, where participants are followed over several years to see how their personality changes over time in relation to past trauma. It would also be helpful to explore protective factors, such as social support, mindfulness, or emotional intelligence, which might reduce the negative impact of trauma. Finally, researchers could look more closely at differences across gender, caste, religion, and socioeconomic status to better understand how different backgrounds shape the trauma experience and its effects on personality. These future directions would add depth and cultural richness to the field of trauma psychology in India.

### ***Implications***

The findings of this study have meaningful implications for students, educators, counsellors, and mental health professionals. One of the most important takeaways is that childhood neglect, especially emotional neglect, can quietly shape a student's personality in ways that are not always visible or easy to detect. A student who appears disorganized, unmotivated, or emotionally sensitive may actually be struggling with unresolved emotional wounds from early life. Understanding this connection between early trauma and personality development can help colleges and universities design more compassionate and informed approaches to student support.

Mental health counsellors, for instance, can use trauma-informed approaches to assess not only the current symptoms but also the developmental roots of a student's emotional difficulties. Recognizing patterns in personality like high neuroticism or low conscientiousness can help identify students who might benefit from more personalized interventions. For academic institutions, these results highlight the need for greater awareness around emotional neglect, which is often ignored because it does not leave physical scars. Training workshops for faculty and student leaders can help create a more emotionally sensitive environment that notices when a student may be silently struggling. On a broader level, this research encourages society to treat emotional neglect as a serious developmental risk, just like abuse, and integrate this awareness into health education, parenting practices, and school counselling systems.

### ***Recommendations***

Based on the findings, several practical steps are recommended for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. First, colleges and universities should develop programs that focus on emotional skill building for students. Workshops on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and stress management can help students who may have grown up without proper emotional guidance. Second, screening tools for trauma and personality

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traits could be introduced during orientation or counselling sessions to identify students who may benefit from early support. These screenings should be confidential and voluntary, but they could play a key role in connecting students to the help they need.

For mental health professionals, it is recommended to design therapy sessions that specifically address neglect-based trauma, especially for students who score high in neuroticism or low in conscientiousness. Evidence based approaches like schema therapy and trauma-informed CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) may be particularly helpful. Counsellors should be trained to recognize personality related signs of trauma that do not always appear as anxiety or depression but may still be rooted in painful past experiences. Lastly, policymakers and education boards should consider recognizing emotional neglect as a form of developmental harm. Including this understanding in teacher training, mental health awareness campaigns, and curriculum planning can help build a more emotionally supportive educational environment for all students.

### CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how childhood trauma, especially emotional and physical neglect, influences the personality traits of college students. The findings make it clear that early negative experiences do not just fade away with time they can shape the very foundation of who we become. Students who faced emotional neglect in their early years were more likely to be emotionally unstable (high neuroticism) and less organized or focused (low conscientiousness). Even though these traits are often seen as personality flaws, they may actually be the result of unmet emotional needs in childhood.

Importantly, the study sheds light on the quiet and invisible damage that emotional neglect can cause. Unlike physical abuse, emotional neglect often goes unnoticed by families, teachers, and even the individuals themselves. However, its effects are just as deep and long-lasting. This research reminds us that personality traits are not just inherited or fixed they are also shaped by the emotional environments we grow up in. Understanding this helps us respond more compassionately to students who are struggling, not by blaming their behaviour, but by supporting their healing.

In conclusion, childhood trauma especially neglects not something that belongs only to the past. Its effects live on in the emotional patterns, habits, and challenges that many young adults carry into their college years and beyond. Recognizing, validating, and addressing these impacts is not just important for mental health professionals, but for everyone involved in student growth teachers, parents, friends, and the students themselves.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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