



Early Trauma: Understanding Attachments in Relationships

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Abstract: Early adverse experiences such as neglect, abuse, or household dysfunction can shape the way individuals form emotional bonds in adulthood. The current study explored the relationship between early adversity and adult attachment among young adults aged 17–28 years. A quantitative research design was employed using standardized scales to assess both childhood trauma and adult attachment patterns. Results revealed that childhood trauma was significantly and positively correlated with close attachment styles ($r = 0.36$, $p < .01$) and anxiety attachment styles ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$) but not significantly related to dependent attachment styles. These findings indicate that individuals with higher levels of early adversity tend to develop anxious or conflicted attachment patterns in adulthood. The study suggests that incorporating trauma-informed counseling and preventive mental health interventions may help individuals with a history of adversity develop more secure and adaptive attachment relationships.

Keywords: *Early Adversity, Childhood Trauma, Adult Attachment, Young Adults, Emotional Development*

1. Introduction

Early life experiences play a crucial role in shaping emotional development, self-concept, and interpersonal relationships. When individuals experience adverse events during childhood, such as neglect, abuse, or household dysfunction, these experiences can have long-lasting effects on their emotional regulation, stress response, and attachment patterns in adulthood. The study of

early adversity and adult attachment is therefore vital in understanding how past experiences influence the ability to form and maintain meaningful bonds later in life.

Attachment theory, proposed by John Bowlby (1969), emphasizes that the quality of early relationships with caregivers forms the foundation for future attachment behaviors. According to the theory, consistent and nurturing caregiving leads to the development of secure attachment, promoting trust, emotional security, and healthy interpersonal relationships. In contrast, neglectful or inconsistent caregiving can result in insecure attachment styles such as avoidant or anxious attachment, which may persist into adulthood and affect intimacy, dependence, and emotional closeness (Ainsworth, 1989).

Research has shown that early adverse experiences can disrupt normal emotional and psychological development. Exposure to neglect, abuse, or prolonged stress can impair emotion regulation and increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and relational difficulties. Studies by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) and Riggs (2010) indicate that individuals who experience higher levels of childhood trauma are more likely to develop insecure attachment patterns in adulthood. Furthermore, Teicher et al. (2016) suggest that chronic childhood trauma can alter brain structures related to emotion and memory, reinforcing maladaptive attachment tendencies.

1.2 Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma refers to distressing or harmful experiences that occur during early developmental years, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence. Such experiences can undermine a child's sense of safety and stability, resulting in persistent fear, low self-worth, and emotional dysregulation. Prolonged exposure to trauma may also alter the brain's stress response, leading to difficulties in forming secure attachments and trusting others later in life. Over time, unresolved trauma can interfere with emotional growth and increase the risk of developing anxious or avoidant attachment patterns in adulthood.

1.3 Adult Attachment

Adult attachment refers to the emotional bonds and relational patterns individuals form in close relationships, often reflecting their early caregiving experiences. Securely attached adults tend to express emotions openly, trust others, and maintain balanced relationships. In contrast, individuals with insecure attachment may struggle with fear of abandonment, dependency issues, or emotional withdrawal. Understanding adult attachment is crucial for recognizing how early

adversity continues to influence relational functioning, emotional well-being, and interpersonal trust throughout life.

The present study therefore aims to examine the impact of early adversity on adult attachment patterns among young adults aged 17–28 years. Understanding this link may promote greater awareness and support the development of trauma-informed interventions that encourage emotional resilience and secure relational bonds in adulthood.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

The sample consisted of young adults aged 17–28 years. Participants were selected through a convenience sampling method. The total sample size included individuals who voluntarily participated in the study after being informed about its purpose. All participants provided consent before filling out the questionnaire.

2.2 Measures

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ): The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire was developed by Bernstein and Fink (1998) to measure experiences of early adversity among the sample. The self-report scale consists of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Never True (1)* to *Very Often True (5)*.

Adult Attachment Scale (AAS): The Adult Attachment Scale was developed by Collins and Read (1990) to assess patterns of adult attachment among participants. The scale includes 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Not at all characteristics of me (1)* to *Very characteristic of me (5)*. The scale measures three dimensions: *Close*, *Depend*, and *Anxiety*.

2.3 Procedure

Data was collected online through a Google Form. Participants were provided with a brief description of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. The form included demographic questions (age and gender) and standardized items from both the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and the Adult Attachment Scale. The Google Form link was shared via WhatsApp and email to reach potential participants. After collecting responses, data was compiled for analysis to examine the relationship between early adversity and adult attachment.

3. Results

Table 1: *N, Standard Deviation, Maximum and Minimum*

	Close Attachment Styles	Depend Attachment Styles	Anxiety Attachment Style	Childhood Trauma
N	50	50	50	50
Standard Deviation	2.35	2.94	5.19	9.35
Minimum	8.00	9.00	5.00	22
Maximum	17.0	22.0	25.0	58

Table 2: *Correlation between Attachment Styles and Childhood Trauma*

	Close Attachment Styles	Depend Attachment Styles	Anxiety Attachment Style	Childhood Trauma
Close Attachment Styles	—			
Depend Attachment Styles	0.356*	—		
Anxiety Attachment Style	0.300*	0.404**	—	
Childhood Trauma	0.367**	0.273	0.489***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

4. Discussion of Results

The results found that childhood trauma is positively significantly related with close attachment styles ($r=0.36$, $p < .01$) and with anxiety attachment style ($r=0.48$, $p < .001$). However, childhood trauma is not significantly related to dependent attachment style. The findings of the present study revealed a significant positive relationship between childhood trauma and certain dimensions of adult attachment. Specifically, childhood trauma showed a significant positive correlation with *close attachment* ($r = 0.36$, $p < .01$) and *anxious attachment* ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$). However, no significant relationship was found between childhood trauma and *depend attachment* style.

The positive association between childhood trauma and anxious attachment suggests that individuals who experienced higher levels of early adversity tend to develop heightened sensitivity to rejection and insecurity in close relationships. This aligns with Bowlby's (1969) attachment

theory, which posits that inconsistent or neglectful caregiving during childhood can result in anxiety and fear of abandonment in adult relationships. Individuals with traumatic childhood experiences may therefore display excessive worry about being unloved or rejected, reflecting the anxious attachment pattern described by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016).

The significant correlation between childhood trauma and close attachment may indicate that some individuals with adverse early experiences still seek closeness and emotional intimacy as a compensatory coping mechanism. This could represent an attempt to restore a sense of security that was absent in early relationships. Alternatively, it may reflect ambivalent behaviors—where individuals desire closeness but simultaneously experience fear of loss or betrayal.

In contrast, the non-significant relationship between childhood trauma and dependent attachment suggests that traumatic early experiences do not necessarily diminish one's willingness to rely on others. It is possible that some young adults, despite experiencing adversity, develop resilience or adaptive attachment strategies through supportive relationships later in life. These findings echo research by Riggs (2010), who highlighted that the effects of early trauma on attachment may be moderated by later social support and emotional healing.

Overall, these results underscore the enduring influence of early adverse experiences on emotional functioning and attachment development. They emphasize the need for trauma-informed counseling and intervention programs, particularly for young adults, to foster healthier attachment behaviors, emotional regulation, and relationship satisfaction.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined the impact of early adversity on adult attachment among young adults aged 17–28 years. The results indicated that childhood trauma is significantly associated with anxious and close attachment patterns, while no significant relationship was observed with dependent attachment style. These findings suggest that early adverse experiences can contribute to insecurity and emotional sensitivity in adult relationships. However, the absence of a link with dependence may reflect the role of resilience and later positive social experiences. Overall, the study highlights the long-term influence of childhood trauma on attachment development and emphasizes the importance of early intervention and trauma-informed support to promote secure and healthy relational patterns in adulthood. Future research can further explore gender

differences, cultural influences, and protective factors that may buffer the effects of early adversity on adult attachment.

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