



**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT,
ATTACHMENT STYLES AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION AMONG YOUNG
ADULTS**

¹**Aditi Padmanabhan**, Bachelors in Arts, Applied Psychology

Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Noida, India

aditi.padmanabhan25@gmail.com

²**Dr Vibha Yadava**, Associate Professor

Amity Institute of Applied Science, Noida, India

ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to explore the relationship between childhood maltreatment, attachment styles and emotional regulation among young adults. This study investigated the connections between negative childhood experiences and maltreatment in the form of emotional abuse and neglect, attachment styles and emotional regulation among young people (18–25 years old). The results revealed a substantial positive association between (a) emotional abuse and avoidant attachment and anxious attachment, suggesting that higher levels emotional abuse is associated with increased tendency to form avoidant and anxious attachment styles (b) between avoidant attachment and emotional suppression indicating increased tendency to develop negative emotional regulation strategies. Additionally, a strong inverse relationship

was found between emotional neglect and cognitive reappraisal, indicating that emotionally neglected people were less likely to use cognitive reappraisal as a positive emotion regulation technique. Although not statistically significant, negative associations were found between anxious attachment and emotional neglect and emotional suppression as well as cognitive reappraisal, suggesting the need for additional research. The research's further ramifications are examined.

Key words: *childhood maltreatment, emotional regulation, attachment styles, young adult*

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a period meant to be a foundation upon which a healthy, secure individual is built. Thus, childhood maltreatment can have lasting impact on one's social, emotional, physical and behavioural aspects of life. The World Health Organization defines child maltreatment as "all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power." This umbrella term encompasses a range of negative experiences that inflict physical, emotional, or sexual harm on a child, or the failure to provide for their basic needs.

Approximately 40 million children under 15 years of age are victims of abuse and neglect and in need of health and social assistance. The repercussions of such experiences can be far-reaching, impacting a child's physical and mental well-being for years to come. Childhood maltreatment is not a monolithic entity. It manifests in a multitude of ways, each with its own devastating impact. Understanding these different types is crucial for identification, intervention, and ultimately, prevention.

- **Physical Abuse:** This refers to the deliberate use of physical force to cause a child harm or pain. Biting, burning, shaking, hitting, and kicking are a few examples. In addition to long-term impacts on a child's physical development and health, physical abuse can have immediate repercussions such as injuries. It's difficult to say where abuse and corporal punishment end. Rib fractures have been found to be the most common physical injury linked to abuse.
- **Sexual Abuse:** This includes any sexual activity in which a child participates, provided that the child is either much younger than the offender or incapable of giving informed consent. It can manifest itself in a number of ways, such as rape, incest, molestation, and exposure to porn. In addition to causing severe psychological damage, sexual abuse raises the risk of STDs and unintended pregnancies.
- **Emotional Abuse:** Emotional abuse is a sneaky kind of abuse where a child is repeatedly humiliated, belittled, or terrorized. Name-calling, threats, insults, withholding affection, and isolating a child are a few examples of this. A child's self-esteem can be damaged by emotional abuse, which can make it harder for them to trust people, build healthy relationships, and control their emotions.
- **Neglect:** When a child's basic physical, emotional, medical, or educational needs are not met by a parent or other caregiver, it is referred to as neglect. Children who are neglected may go without food, poor housing, health care, or emotional support. Neglect can have equally dire repercussions as abuse, including emotional instability, physical health issues, and delays in development. Neglect is the most common form of child abuse among the various categories.

It is important to recognize that maltreatment can exist on a spectrum of severity. The context, frequency, and duration of the maltreatment all play a crucial role in determining the impact on the child.

Attachment Styles

The early years of life are a critical period for establishing secure and healthy attachment patterns. These patterns, formed primarily through interactions with caregivers, shape an individual's capacity for intimacy, trust, and emotional regulation throughout life. However, for children who experience maltreatment, this crucial foundation can be fractured, leading to the development of insecure attachment styles.

John Bowlby initiated the study of attachment in the 1950s by closely observing the interactions between infants and their caretakers who noted a behavioural shift in infants when they were taken away from their caregivers, which he linked to the formation of attachment bonds between the two parties. According to his attachment theory, an individual's internal working model of attachment is shaped by the quality of their early relationships with caregivers and acts as a template for future relationships and leads to the development of attachment behaviour. Bowlby went on to suggest a relationship between these early attachment characteristics and a person's internal working models, or the mental images that new-borns will use to communicate with all other significant people in the future.

Bowlby's work prompted Mary Ainsworth to conceptualize attachment classifications in her own way based on her laboratory experiment called the Strange situation. These patterns of attachment behaviour were categorized as; Secure, Anxious Avoidant, and Ambivalent or Resistant. Specifically, positive outcomes throughout an individual's life are associated with Secure Attachment. During infancy, infants displaying secure attachment utilize their caregivers as a safe haven for exploration, show signs of distress when taken from them, and extend a warm welcome back when they are reunited. Both the ambivalent or resistant pattern of attachment and the anxious avoidant pattern are regarded as insecure attachment styles and are associated with more unfavourable results. When an infant with anxious avoidant

attachment is taken from their caregivers, they act apathetically and disregard them when they are returned.

Secure attachment, characterized by trust, a sense of safety, and the ability to seek comfort from caregivers, fosters emotional well-being and healthy social development. Conversely, insecure attachment styles, formed through experiences of inconsistent or unavailable caregivers, are associated with a range of negative outcomes.

Emotional Regulation

The amount of research on emotion regulation has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. The research strengthens the notion that effective emotional regulation plays a crucial role in healthy adaptation, particularly in areas like social relationships and emotional well-being (Gross, 2001, 2007). Expressive suppression, or trying to prevent or minimize ongoing emotion-expressive behaviour, and cognitive reappraisal, or trying to reframe the situation in order to change its emotional impact and meaning, are the two emotion regulation strategies that have received the most attention (Gross, 1998).

Research on how emotions change over time suggests that reappraisal and suppression have different main effects at different stages of the emotion-generating process (Gross, 2001; Gross & John, 2003). Therefore, one could anticipate that it would alter the emotional response's whole temporal trajectory. When an emotion has already begun and the response tendencies have fully developed, suppression is a response-focused tactic that steps in. Therefore, it stands to reason that repeated efforts to control emotional reactions as they arise would be necessary, demanding the person's resources.

The fundamental difference between reappraisal and suppression accounts for the prediction that the two strategies should have different effects on different domains of psychological functioning, such as affect, cognition, and social interaction. Experimental

results supported this theoretical prediction by demonstrating that reappraisal reduces behavioural and subjective indicators of negative emotion while having no negative effects on memory or emotional responsiveness in social situations. On the other hand, suppression has no effect on the experience of negative emotion but decreases behavioural responses and increases sympathetic activation of the cardiovascular and electrophysiological systems. When combined, these results imply that suppression usually has less negative effects than reappraisal (Gross, 1998, 2001).

Rationale of the Study

Attachment has been linked to childhood experiences and relationships for a long time. People who experienced inconsistent caregiving as children are more likely to employ a vague or distracted approach. Because of the inconsistent treatment they experienced as children, they now find it challenging to anticipate the reactions of others when they require safety and comfort and struggle to effectively respond to others. Trauma is the most damaging element in an attachment relationship (Fonagy, 2010). In the event that parents are unable to assist their children in managing their anxieties, the development of the brain will be delayed. Furthermore, rather than creating a safe haven in their minds, children who witness traumatic events involving their parents are likely to create mental images of them that are angry and frightening, causing them to feel pain and sadness all the time. Thus, it can be seen that there is clear evidence showing the relationship between negative childhood experiences and adult attachment styles.

James Gross, Stanford University emotion researcher, proposed the Process Model of Emotional Regulation which holds that emotions are modifiable and that the final emotional response is determined by the modulation. Understanding this model is crucial in the basic premise of how Emotional Regulation factors into the adult attachment orientation. Bowlby's

attachment theory also focuses on the impact of childhood experiences with primary caregivers on critical concurrent and future emotional regulation. While secure people are expected to cope with distress through co-regulation or adaptive coping, insecurely attached encompassing anxious and avoidant attachment styles have more difficulty with emotional expression and have reduced chances of learning appropriate strategies, resorting to emotional suppression as a major maladaptive strategy. Similarly, looking from a cognitive perspective, childhood maltreatment can negatively influence cognitive processes essential for emotion regulation. Individuals with a history of maltreatment may develop negative beliefs about themselves and the world, leading to distorted interpretations of events and increased emotional distress, leading to reliance on maladaptive strategies like substance abuse or self-harm to manage difficult emotions. Thus, understanding the underlying relationship between these factors can be a monumental step in forming interventions aimed at uplifting and empowering people with such experiences to lead a healthier and positive life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Heshmati et al. (2022) studied the role of emotional suppression in understanding the relationship between childhood maltreatment (CM), attachment styles and romantic breakup grief severity among Iranian college students. Structural equation modelling showed that individuals with higher CM levels also had higher levels of romantic breakup grief. The degree of grief following a romantic breakup was significantly and directly impacted by attachment closeness. However, a positive correlation was observed between higher levels of attachment anxiety and romantic breakup grief. Bootstrapping results suggest that by repressing emotions, CM may lessen the intensity of grief after a romantic breakup. Furthermore, closeness and attachment anxiety had indirect effects on the intensity of grief after a romantic breakup through emotional repression.

Riggs (2019) reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature regarding the normative development of the attachment system from infancy through adulthood in order to address deviations from the normal developmental pathways that result from emotionally abusive parenting. A theoretical framework, based on attachment theory, is introduced to explain how adult romantic relationships develop maladaptive interaction patterns. As per the model, emotional abuse during early childhood leads to insecure attachment, which in turn hinders emotional regulation, creates unfavourable perceptions of oneself and others that support unhealthy coping strategies, interferes with social functioning and the formation of strong adult attachments, worsens mental health conditions, and ultimately influences romantic relationships.

Lowell et al. (2015) examined the role of attachment in the relationship between child maltreatment and later emotional and behavioural functioning among undergraduate students aged 18 years and above. Self-report questionnaires were used to collect data and regression analysis was done to obtain results. It was discovered that there was a positive correlation between fearful, preoccupied, and dismissive attachment styles and the subdimensions of childhood trauma that dealt with physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as well as physical and emotional neglect.

Oshri et al. (2014) studied the relationship among various maltreatments types and risk behaviours along with the underlying role of attachment styles and emotional dysregulation among 361 undergraduate students. The results showed that a range of risk behaviours, anxiety and avoidant attachment styles, and emotion dysregulation were all associated with emotional and sexual abuse. Impulsivity demonstrated the strongest indirect relationship between risky behaviours and child maltreatment among the emotion regulation dimensions. The findings

bolster a cross-sectional relationship through attachment styles and emotion regulation between risk behaviour outcomes and child maltreatment.

Bradbury and Shaffer (2012) examined “the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult romantic relationship satisfaction and the mediating role of emotional dysregulation among young adults currently involved in a romantic relationship”. It was discovered that general difficulties controlling emotions acted as a mediator in the relationship between emotional maltreatment in childhood and satisfaction in romantic relationships. Multiple mediator analyses, after controlling for other emotion regulation problems, showed that this relationship was uniquely mediated by nonacceptance of emotional responses, impulse control issues, and emotional ambiguity.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

The aim is to explore the relationship between childhood maltreatment, attachment styles and emotional regulation among young adults.

Research Objectives

- To examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment and attachment styles.
- To examine the relationship between attachment styles and emotional regulation.
- To examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment and emotional regulation.

Hypothesis

- There will be a significant relationship between childhood maltreatment and attachment styles.
- There will be a significant relationship between attachment styles and emotional regulation.
- There will be a significant relationship between emotional regulation and childhood maltreatment.

Sampling technique

A convenient sampling technique is employed so as to recruit participants from different settings and online forums to investigate the relationship between childhood maltreatment, attachment styles and emotional regulation.

Sample size

The study collected data from approximately 100 individuals aged between 18 to 26 in order to explore the relationship between childhood maltreatment, attachment style and emotional regulation within the age group of young adults.

Measures

The following tools have been used-

- **Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-SF:** The 28 items in this Bernstein and Fink measure are rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with five items for each maltreatment scale and three items for the minimization/denial scale. The questionnaire demonstrated strong internal consistency and test-retest reliability, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.79 to 0.94. In a prior study, this measure also demonstrated strong discriminant validity with verbal intelligence and social desirability measures, as well as high face validity and good convergent validity with the Childhood Trauma Interview.
- **Adult Attachment Scale Revised:** The Revised Adult Attachment Scale was developed by Collins to evaluate individual differences in attachment style. This 18-item scale measures attachment across three dimensions- Close, Depend and Anxiety and has an alternative scoring of two dimensions- Anxious and Avoidant. Dimensions had good reliability with Cronbach's alpha above 0.75 for each dimension. It has good convergent validity of 0.92 with the State Adult Attachment Scale and exhibits good internal consistency across all the dimensions.
- **Emotional Regulation Questionnaire:** Gross and John formulated the questionnaire in 2003. Ten items on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 to 7 are intended to assess respondents' propensity to control their emotions in two ways: (1) Expressive Suppression and (2) Cognitive Reappraisal. The total and subscale ERQ scores' satisfactory Cronbach's alpha (0.73 0.82) indicates the validity of the ERQ as a reliable measure of emotion regulation.

RESULT**Table 1**

Pearson product correlation between attachment styles and emotional regulation and childhood maltreatment

		Childhood maltreatment		Emotional regulation	
		Emotional neglect	Emotional abuse	Cognitive reappraisal	Emotional suppression
Attachment style	Avoidant	0.254	0.352	0.011	0.254
	Anxious	0.173	0.297	-0.161	0.131

Table 2

Pearson Product Correlation between emotional regulation and childhood maltreatment and attachment styles

		Childhood maltreatment		Attachment style	
		Emotional neglect	Emotional abuse	Avoidant	Anxious
Emotional regulation	Cognitive reappraisal	-0.229	-0.046	0.011	-0.161
	Emotional suppression	-0.164	-0.040	0.254	0.131

Table 3

Pearson Product Correlation between childhood maltreatment and attachment styles and emotional regulation

		Emotional regulation		Attachment style	
		Cognitive appraisal	Emotional suppression	Avoidant	Anxious
Childhood maltreatment	Emotional neglect	-0.229	-0.164	0.254	0.173
	Emotional abuse	-0.046	-0.040	0.352	0.297

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to study how our childhood experiences influence our emotional regulation and adult attachment styles as an adult. Emotional regulation, attachment styles, and childhood maltreatment have all been extensively researched and are crucial to our personal growth but their relationship has not been explored. Childhood maltreatment refers to a range of adverse experiences that a person has while still in their childhood, such as physical, emotional, sexual neglect and abuse. Such experiences can impact a child's physical and mental well-being for years to come, with lasting consequences. Thus, understanding the underlying principles and long term consequences of such experiences is a crucial aspect of psychological development. A child's early years are crucial for developing safe and sound attachment styles. But this vital foundation can be broken for kids who are abused, which can result in the emergence of insecure attachment patterns. Attachment is not only limited to our

romantic life, but also describes our relationship with everyone we interact and form a bond with. Similarly, emotional regulation refers to one's ability to respond effectively to the stressors and situations and develop healthy coping strategies.. Emotional suppression and cognitive reappraisal are two well-studied methods. While cognitive reappraisal is regarded as a positive and healthy coping strategy, emotional suppression is associated with maladaptive coping techniques leading to poor emotional expression. Experiencing negative childhood experiences can inhibit the development of healthy regulation strategies leading to poor psychological development and health.

Thus, by understanding the dynamic of these three variables, each of which have a lasting and significant impact on various aspects of our life, we can improve the current standing of individuals suffering from these experiences as well as form improved intervention plans for future scenarios.

The research findings align with the hypotheses proposed regarding the relationship between childhood maltreatment, emotional regulation and attachment styles. The analysis supports ***hypothesis 1***, indicating a significant positive relationship between emotional abuse and avoidant attachment style as well as anxious attachment style. Similarly, a significant positive relationship between avoidant attachment and emotional neglect is observed. This indicates that increase in emotional abuse and neglect is accompanied by an increase in avoidant attachment style which entails developing a distant and wary emotional connection with others. As shown by Erzokan (2016), emotional neglect along with physical and sexual abuse is linked to development of dismissive and preoccupied attachment style, a form of avoidant attachment.

Conversely, while ***hypothesis 2*** suggested a significant relationship between attachment styles and emotional regulation, a significant positive relationship can be seen

between avoidant attachment and emotional suppression whereas a modest negative correlation is seen between anxious attachment and cognitive reappraisal of, lacking statistical significance. This indicates that there is a significant tendency for people to develop emotional suppression as a regulation strategy in case of avoidant attachment style, although, the tendency for people to have cognitive appraisal as a regulation strategy might diminish in case of anxious attachment, but the evidence is not strong. Study by Bigdeli et al. (2010) supported this idea by discovering that there is a significant and detrimental correlation between fearful, preoccupied attachment (type of avoidant attachment) with emotional suppression and well-being.

The analysis supports ***hypothesis 3*** as there is a significant negative correlation between emotional neglect and cognitive reappraisal indicating that people who have experienced emotional neglect in their childhood have a decreased tendency to adopt cognitive reappraisal as an emotion regulation strategy. While a modest negative correlation was found between emotional neglect and emotional suppression as well, it was not statistically significant. Study by Berzenski et al. (2018) supported the assumption as his findings revealed a significant indirect relationship between emotional neglect and social relationship through the mediating role of antecedent focused regulation techniques i.e., cognitive reappraisal.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study aimed to explore the relationship between childhood maltreatment in terms of emotional abuse and emotional neglect, attachment styles and emotional regulation. The study revealed significant positive correlation between emotional abuse and avoidant attachment style as well as anxious attachment style, underscoring the impact of childhood emotional maltreatment on different adult attachment styles. The study

also found a strong positive correlation between emotional suppression and avoidant attachment, demonstrating the influence of attachment style on the techniques used by an individual to regulate their emotions. A significant negative correlation between emotional neglect and cognitive reappraisal was observed, showing that people who have experienced emotional neglect in their childhood have a decreased tendency to adopt positive emotion regulation strategy such as cognitive reappraisal. There were modest negative correlation between anxious attachment and cognitive reappraisal and emotional neglect and emotional suppression indicating the need for further exploration into the nuances of emotional regulation strategies and its expression. Accordingly, implications of the study were discussed which involved exploring the intervention plans and further scope of the study. This will help identify the gaps in research and how they can be improved so as to form effective intervention strategies.

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, M., & Bowlby, J. (1991). An ethological approach to personality development. *American Psychologist*, 46(4), 333-341.
- Ainsworth, M., Blehar, M., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation. Oxford England: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development. London, England: Routledge.
- Bradbury, L. L., & Shaffer, A. (2012). Emotion dysregulation mediates the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and young adult romantic relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 21(5), 497-515.
- Capaldo, M., & Perrella, R. (2018). Child maltreatment: an attachment theory perspective. *Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 6(1).
- Gross, J.J. (1998). Antecedent- and response-focused emotion regulation: Divergent consequences for experience, expression, and physiology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 224–237.
- Gross, J.J. (Ed.) (2007). Handbook of emotion regulation. New York: Guilford.
- Gross, J.J., & John, O.P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 348–362.
- Heshmati, R., Zemestani, M., & Vujanovic, A. (2022). Associations of childhood maltreatment and attachment styles with romantic breakup grief severity: The role of emotional suppression. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 37(13-14), NP11883-NP11904.

- Lowell, A., Renk, K., & Adgate, A. H. (2014). The role of attachment in the relationship between child maltreatment and later emotional and behavioural functioning. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(9), 1436-1449.
- Nazir, A., Omer, F., & Baseer, A. (2023). Emotional Abuse, Emotional Regulation and Mental Health in Young Adults. *Human Nature Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 122-134.
- Oshri, A., Sutton, T. E., Clay-Warner, J., & Miller, J. D. (2015). Child maltreatment types and risk behaviors: Associations with attachment style and emotion regulation dimensions. *Personality and Individual differences*, 73, 127-133.
- Riggs, S. A. (2019). Childhood emotional abuse and the attachment system across the life cycle: What theory and research tell us. In *The effect of childhood emotional maltreatment on later intimate relationships* (pp. 5-51). Routledge.