

# Childhood Abuse and Attachment Styles of Adolescents

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** The fact that emotional and social experiences in early childhood period within the family influence the experiences in adolescence and adulthood (communication skills, interpersonal relations) is not a new case. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the relationship between childhood abuse and attachment styles.

**Method.** The sample of this study consists of 490 freshmen studying at different faculties of Selcuk University. In this study, while collecting necessary data, *Relationships Scale Questionnaire* and *Childhood Trauma Scale*. In order to establish a positive or negative relationship between the childhood abuse experiences of adolescents and the attachment styles, Pearson Product- Moment Correlation Technique is applied.

**Results.** When the findings are taken into consideration, it is observed that there is a negative significant relationship between secure attachment style and emotional abuse ( $p<0.05$ ); a positive significant relationship between preoccupied attachment style and physical abuse ( $p<0.01$ ) and a positive significant relationship between dismissing attachment style and emotional abuse ( $p<0.05$ ) as well as a positive significant relationship fearful attachment style and physical abuse ( $p<0.05$ ). Studies carried out highlight that traumas experienced during the childhood develop insecure attachment style. Individuals exposed to abuse in their families, especially the ones exposed to emotional and physical abuse, cannot develop a secure attachment style is coherent with the main assumption of attachment theory.

**Key Words:** Childhood abuse, attachment, attachment styles, adolescence

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# Las experiencias de abuso y los tipos de apego de los adolescentes

## Resumen

**Introducción.** Las experiencias de abuso en el período de la infancia afectan al desarrollo posterior socio-emocional. Durante estas experiencias de abuso, su relación con los cuidadores primarios está sufriendo y se transfieren a las relaciones íntimas en el futuro. Por esta razón, el propósito de la investigación es examinar la relación entre las experiencias de los adolescentes de abuso en el período de la infancia y los tipos de apego adolescente.

**Método.** Los datos de la investigación se recogen a través del Cuestionario de las Escalas de Relación y la Escala de las Experiencias de Trauma de Infancia sobre los estudiantes en el primer año de primer año de las diversas facultades de la Universidad de Selçuk (Turkía), cumplimentados por 490 estudiantes. Para el cálculo de la correlación positiva o negativa entre las experiencias de abuso en los adolescentes y los tipos de apego, se utilizó la técnica de coeficiente de correlación de Pearson.

**Los resultados.** Una vez que los resultados de investigación se analizaron, se encontró que hay una relación negativa significativa entre el tipo de apego seguro y el abuso emocional ( $p < 0,05$ ), una relación positiva significativa entre el apego obsesivo y el abuso físico ( $p < 0,01$ ), una relación positiva significativa entre el apego indiferente y el abuso emocional ( $p < 0,05$ ), una relación positiva significativa entre el apego temeroso y el abuso físico.

**Discusión y conclusiones.** Se revela que hay una correlación entre las experiencias de abuso de los adolescentes en el período de infancia y los tipos de apego. La teoría del apego que establece que las experiencias positivas en la primera infancia desarrollarían un apego seguro parece coherente con los resultados obtenidos.

**Palabras clave.** El abuso infantil, el apego, los tipos de apego, la adolescencia.

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## Introduction

Childhood abuse is defined as any kind of activity generally setting out to children aged under 18 actively and destroying their physical, emotional, mental and social development. On the other hand, neglect is applied for situations in which essential needs of children such as nutrition, nursing and education, are not satisfied (Zeytinoğlu, 1989). While the abuse case is classified in various ways, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect are among the classifications observed mostly (Tyler, Allison & Winsler, 2006; Bernstein & Fink, 1998; Kara, Biçer, & Gökalp, 2004).

Even though the physical abuse is regarded as physical impairment of children by individuals obliged to look after them; i.e. their somatic disintegration, it is defined as the “*injury of children without any accident*” in the widest sense (Kara et al., 2004; Polat, 2001; Taner and Gökler, 2004). Emotional abuse defines the situation in which children are deprived of necessary care, affection and nursing and therefore damaged psychologically (Turhan, Sangün & İnandı, 2008). Emotional abuse include denial, humiliation, swearing, leaving alone, isolation, separation, startling, intimidation, threatening, not fulfilling the emotional needs, expecting over-age responsibilities, fraternal discrimination, not appreciating, underestimating, abasement, sarcastic speech, nicknaming, over-suppression and authority, dependency and overprotecting (Kara et al.,2004; Tell, Pavkov, Hecker & Fontaine, 2006; Topbaş, 2004). These kinds of behaviors have the potential of damaging and damage the mental, emotional or physical mechanism of the child now or in future (Polat, 2001). Sexual abuse is defined in such a way that the child is exposed to sexual interaction by a person, at least 4 years older, through forcefully or convincingly for sexual pleasure. Violation of child against his/her will, tampering the sexual organs, use of vulgarism, making child watch pornographic materials, exhibitionism are regarded among the sexual abuse behaviors (SHÇEK, 2009).

The fact that emotional and social experiences in early childhood period within the family influence the experiences in adolescence and adulthood (communication skills, interpersonal relations) is not a new case (Elliott, Cunningham, Linder, Colangelo, Gross, 2005). The relationship between the children and primary nurses are damaged by the traumas children experience, which leads to socio-behavioral problems in their subsequent experiences (McCloskey et al., 1995; cited in Cindy, Todd, Moylan, Tajima, Klika, Herrenkohl, and Rus-

so, 2010). Therefore, children experience many problems in their close relationships (Oakley-Browne, Joyce, Wells, Bushnell, Hornblow, 1995).

Bowlby refers the affection formed between primary nurses and the child at early ages as attachment (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). Attachment is defined as a strong desire to establish contact or affinity with a person when one is afraid, tired or ill. If an individual doesn't feel any threat or leave the attachment figure, the behavior of attachment cannot be activated. The major assumption of the attachment is that a human-being born immature cannot survive without nursing and protection of an adult. Therefore, the maintenance of the close relationship between babies and their nurses paves the way for the safe development of babies. Children develop internal working model through past attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1980, 1982). Internal working models (mental models) arrange the comprehension manner of an individual towards the world and himself; therefore direct his/her behaviors. Mental models launch as a function of the attachment relationship and become a part of personality or internal working models. These models acquired during the early experiences play important roles in children's future relationships, expectations and ways of perception. Bowlby state that mental representations remain life-long stable and determine the characteristics of interpersonal relationships at every period (Bowlby, 1980).

Mary Ainsworth launched the first studies on attachment through the examination on the babies' attachment to their mothers and their reactions to isolation from their mothers. As a result of the studies, babies were classified into three groups: secure, avoidant, anxious/ambivalent (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). Hazan and Shaver (1987) classify the adult attachment classification within the framework of Ainsworth's triple attachment style as follows: secure attachment, avoidant attachment and resistant attachment.

Instead of a triple attachment, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) present a four-categorized attachment model. They make a classification in terms of relationships based on positive (affirmative) and negative (unfavorable) views on self and others. Individuals with affirmative views on themselves and others are secure. (1) Secure –attached person considers that he /she is worth being loved and others are generally adaptive and supportive. Secure individuals are generally happy in their relationships and have the sense of being approved by others (Rholes and Simpson, 1998). Kobak and Sceery (1988) state that secure individuals have a flexible ego and more secure within the social contexts (Collins and Read, 1990). (2)

Preoccupied- attached person has negative views on himself/herself, but positive views on others. While he/she thinks he/she isn't worth being loved, he/she finds others worth –loving. Individuals with this style of attachment make efforts to find personal sufficiency and worthiness in their close relationships. Individuals with an preoccupied attachment style are eager to establish close relationships due to their fear of being abandoned (Pietromonaco and Barrett, 2000) and also dependent on others (Collins and Read, 1990). (3) Dismissing-attached person has an affirmative ego model; but negative ego model on others; attaches too importance to self-determination. Individuals with this style of attachment avoid close relationships; preserve (maintain) their senses of self-determination and being injured and protects themselves against disappointment. According to Bartholomew, negligent individuals have the sense of self-determination and high level of self-respect at the expense of being deprived of affection. As they don't trust others, they have difficulty in opening themselves to others (Bartholomew and Horowiitz, 1991). (4) Fearful is the model against which both models have negative approaches (Pietromonaco and Barrett, 2000). It is the very opposite of secure attachment style. A person doesn't deem himself / herself worthy of others love and support; regards others as nugatory and insecure. This style implies the efforts of protecting himself/herself against being rejected and injured by keeping away from others (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

### *Objetives and hypothesis*

In the light of the above mentioned literature screening and theoretical explanations, it is considered that the negative experiences of individuals during the childhood are associated with the attachment styles today. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the relationship between childhood abuse and attachment styles. In this context, there is a negative and significant relationship between childhood abuse experiences and the secure attachment style but there is a positive and significant relationship with the preoccupied, fearful and dismissing attachment styles.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sample of this study consists of 490 freshmen studying at different faculties of Selcuk University (Faculty of Medical Sciences, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Technical Education, Faculty of Communication, Faculty of Architecture and Engineering, Faculty of Eco-

nomics and Administrative Sciences, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Literature) of Turkey. The sample of this study is chosen randomly among the students studying at the above-mentioned faculties.

### *Measures*

*Childhood Trauma Scale.* Prepared by Bernstein and his friends (1994), validity and reliability of the scale was carried out with a substance dependent group and it has been determined that this scale comprises 4 subscales of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and physical neglect. In this study, Cronbach alpha coefficient was found between 0.79 and 0.94 and therefore high validity and reliability was attributed (Aslan & Alparslan, 1999). Turkish adaptability of the scale was realized by Aslan & Alparslan (1999). Test reliability of the scale in validity and reliability trials was 0.96. Turkish adaptability of the scale consists of three subscales (physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse). Valuation of the scale is realized with 1-5 item likert scale type evaluation, corresponding to the answers “never”, “seldom”, “sometimes”, “often” and “very often”.

*Relationships Scales Questionnaire (RSQ).* The RSQ developed by Giffin and Bartholomew (1994) and adapted to Turkish participants by Sümer and Güngör (1999). The RSQ is 17 items likert type scale measure four different attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful). The reliability coefficient of the scale were calculated by the retest method and varied between .54 and .78. The parallel form validity of this scale was tested with the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and the correlation coefficients varied between .49 and .61 (Sümer and Güngör, 1999).

### *Procedure*

Childhood Trauma Scale and Relationships Scale Questionnaire were applied to various parts of Selçuk University. The research is survey model. The study group is composed of 490 voluntary students randomly chosen among students.

### *Data analysis*

The assessment of data acquired by means of the scales applied within the framework of the study is performed through SPSS 15.00 Package Program. Consequently, within the scope of study pattern, “childhood abuse” is assumed as the independent variable and “attachment styles” as dependent variables”. In order to establish a positive or negative relation-

ship between the childhood abuse of adolescents and the attachment styles, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Technique is applied. Pearson correlation coefficient is a technique that determines the strength that was calculated for two variables and direction (Büyüköztürk, 2007).

## Results

Results on the relationship between childhood abuse experiences and attachment styles are introduced below.

**Table 1. Correlation Between Childhood Abuse and Attachment Styles in Adolescence**

	Physical Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Sexual Abuse
Secure	-.045	-.091(*)	.077
Preoccupied	.126(**)	.079	.035
Dismissing	.053	.095(*)	-.034
Fearful	.098(*)	.082	.020

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

When the table is taken into consideration, it is found that there is a negative significant relationship between secure attachment style and emotional abuse ( $p < 0.05$ ); a positive significant relationship between preoccupied attachment style and physical abuse ( $p < 0.01$ ) and a positive significant relationship between dismissing attachment style and emotional abuse ( $p < 0.05$ ) as well as a positive significant relationship fearful attachment style and physical abuse ( $p < 0.05$ ). No relationship between attachment styles and other types of abuse is detected.

## Discussion and Conclusion

It is observed that abuse experiences in early childhood have negative effects on individuals' close relationships. Various studies seem to be in support of this proposition. Studies carried out highlight that traumas experienced during the childhood develop insecure attachment style (Crittenden and Ainsworth, 1989; Lisak, 1994; Morton and Browne, 1998; cited in Cindy, Todd, Moylan, Tajima, Klika, Herrenkohl and Russo, 2010; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Harbison, 1994; Wark, Kruczek and Boley, 2003).



When the findings are taken into consideration, it is observed that there is a negative significant relationship between safe attachment style and emotional abuse ( $p < 0.05$ ); a positive significant relationship between obsessive attachment style and physical abuse ( $p < 0.01$ ) and a positive significant relationship between negligent attachment style and emotional abuse ( $p < 0.05$ ) as well as a positive significant relationship frightening attachment style and physical abuse ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Previous studies indicated that children experiencing physical abuse and being neglected had the characteristics of avoidant attachment style (Egeland and Sroufe, 1981); furthermore children being neglected developed an avoidant/ambivalent attachment style (Finzi, Ram, Har-Even, Shnit and Weizman, 2001). Many studies carried out on adolescents further proved that traumas experienced during the childhood developed an avoidant attachment style (Gauthier, Stollak, Messé, Aronoff, 1996) and an obsessive attachment style (Deniz, 2006); such children received little support from their families and therefore developed less attachment behavior (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks & Semel, 2002).

The attachment theory is taken into consideration on the basis of the physical contact on the child by his/her mother (Hortaçsu, 2003), sensitivity (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978), adaption (Posado, Carbonell, Alzate and Plata, 2004) and affection. The mother meets the physical needs of her child, develops appropriate reactions in accordance with the development periods of the child; if she becomes a secure installation, the child attaches her in a secure way. Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Ainsworth (1978) indicate that if such needs aren't satisfied and the mother isn't sufficiently concerned, then the secure attachment style cannot be acquired (Karen, 1990). Child abuse includes all types of actions or inactions carried out by adults like parents or nurses, regarded by social rules and professional individuals as inappropriate or damaging and preventing or limiting the child development. As a result of these actions or inactions, it is discussed that the child is damaged in terms of physical, spiritual, sexual or social aspects and also his/her health and security is at risk (Taner & Gökler, 2004; Tıraşçı & Gönen, 2007; Tyler at al., 2006). When the above-mentioned findings are taken into consideration, the fact that individuals exposed to abuse in their families, especially the ones exposed to emotional and physical abuse, cannot develop a secure attachment style is coherent with the main assumption of attachment theory. Although the positive is an ego model within the dismissing model, the negative is represented by the others model (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Hazan and Shaver (1987) discuss that the internal working models of

individuals with avoidant attachment style are full of suspicion; such people aren't so trusted by others; they are inclined to be extremely fragile or to be disappointed as well as their expectations aren't satisfied by other individuals. These individuals expect that their relationships are full of emotional descents and ascents (Collins and Read, 1990). Individuals with avoidant attachment style consider that their mothers are cold-hearted, nugatory and not honest; while their fathers are not honest and incoherent (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). The avoidant attachment style is mostly related to the negative experiences on maternity (Mikulineer and Florian, 1999). The insufficiency of love and nursing of mothers during the childhood leads to this situation. Furthermore, It care and nursing shown by the mother at her own will; not at the child's will, may influence the child's negative assessment on his/her mother. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) divide the avoidant attachment style into two groups: fearful avoidant and dismissing avoidant. Fearful-avoidant individuals are afraid of being injured or rejected by their partners; therefore they are inclined to abstain themselves from relationships, while dismissing avoidant individuals abstain themselves in order to protect their defensive emotions, self-confidence and independency (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew and Shaver, 1998). Preoccupied individuals don't find others secure; their self-trust level is also low (Simpson, 1990); therefore are afraid of being rejected (Cooper, Shaver and Collins, 1998). The relationships of such individuals with their parents are not analyzed. They consider that as their parents don't exhibit enough affection, their attachment requirements aren't fully satisfied. They make efforts to reach others in order to satisfy their attachment requirements and can be rather self-assertive within this context. It isn't so easy to guess the parental reactions of such individuals. Such parents can be sometimes so warm-hearted and sometimes so nugatory and constraint towards their children (Crain, 1992). The childhoods of preoccupied adults angry at their parents are classified as concerned/indecisive (Rholes and Simpson, 1998). The abuse leads to the preoccupied attachment of the individual when he/she is abused by close individuals and the attachment behavior increases at stressful situations for the individual; since the basis of a secure attachment also includes the development of a rupture behavior at any appropriate time. A child abused and reared at a traumatic atmosphere mayn't develop a good rupture behavior (Deniz, 2006). The child may develop insecure attachment styles when his/her physical needs aren't satisfied, expecting for affection, care and sensitivity, on top of it, he/she is tumbled physically and exposed to violation, being insulted as well as not respected.

### *Suggestions*

When we examine the literature, we can observe that early childhood experiences are influential on the subsequent experiences of individuals. Especially, the experiences of children with their primary nurses and their families are of great importance in terms individual development. Families, including the main nurses should be informed about the child-rearing. Furthermore, other variables should be considered and examined when scientific studies are carried out. This study was conducted on adolescents; it can be supported by new studies that can be conducted on children.

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