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## The role of Maternal Attachment Styles in Predicting the Parent-Child Relationship and Anxiety Disorders in Children

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### Abstract

The present study was conducted to assess the role of maternal attachment styles in predicting anxiety disorders in children. The present correlational study was conducted on 300 mothers and primary school students in Tehran selected through multistage random cluster sampling. The data collection tools used included the Adult Attachment Scale and Spence Children's Anxiety Scale. The data obtained were then analyzed using the multivariate regression, the multivariate analysis of variance and the Pearson Correlation test. The results obtained showed that attachment styles predict anxiety disorders. There was a negative relationship between the secure attachment style and children's anxiety and a positive relationship between the insecure attachment style and anxiety disorders. Problems in separation, the lack of tolerance for turmoil and the tendency to believe that events are out of one's own control are mechanisms that explain the relationship between attachment styles and anxiety. Anxiety disorders associated with the parent-child interactions can be reduced through identifying the attachment style with the parents as a factor associated with children's anxiety.

Keywords: Attachment styles, anxiety disorders,

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## 1. Introduction

Anxiety disorders are among the most common emotional-psychiatric disorders in children and adolescents. According to epidemiological studies, about 8% to 12% of children and 5% to 10% of adolescents experience one of the diagnostic criteria for anxiety disorders to the extent of disrupted normal life and daily functions (Spence, 2003). In children and adolescents, anxiety disorders may appear in the form of separation anxiety, social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder, panic with or without agoraphobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and other specific phobias. Evidence suggests that childhood anxiety disorders are not a fleeting phenomenon and may cause numerous future problems if left untreated to persist into adolescence and adulthood (Hudson & Rapee, 2003; Bernstein, 2005). Attachment styles comprise a factor affecting children's anxiety. Within its theoretical framework, the term attachment is used to indicate emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes that are involved in the development and maintenance of social intimacy. From childhood until old age, individuals try to survive for the final goal of establishing intimacy. But every individual has a different attachment style that is indicative of his personal differences affected by the perception he has of his own and others' beliefs (Bowlby, 1969 ;Picardi et al., 2013). The theory of attachment and personal relationships affected by early experiences in development and its relationship with later personality development. According to Bowlby's theory of clinical activities, a growing infant passes through stages of growing attachment to those caring for him, in particular, his mother. Attachment also contains the concept of parent-child relationship. The parent-child relationship may be defined as a set of attitudes experienced in an emotional environment with the behaviors projected by the parents (both purposive behaviors such as raising the child and non-purposive behaviors such as gestures and changes in the tone of voice) that predict the parent-child relationship (Picardi et al., 2013). Bowlby (1969) proposed a consistent model of the emotional bond between the mother and the child and argued that the bond provides a protective action. In other words, the child's attachment to the mother and the associated behavioral mechanisms protect the immature child and increase his chance of survival. To establish this emotional bond, the mother responds to the child's messages and signals and attends to his distress. In their research, Lorentz & Harlow (1986, as cited in Catanzaro & Wei, 2010) revealed that the mother/caregiver-child relationship is not necessarily based on feeding. Attachment behaviors exist in the child from birth, gain variety and extend to certain figures over time and persist throughout life to then emerge in various forms (Cherry et al., 2013). In their study, Brumariu & Kerns (2010) reported a relationship between the mother-child attachment style and different anxiety disorders. This relationship was also demonstrated in other studies (Picardi et al., 2013; Esbjorn et al., 2012). A study conducted by Catherine et al. (2012) showed that the insecure attachment style is associated with greater anxiety responses. This process predicts long-term anxiety disorders in the individual. In another study, Jinyao et al. (2012) reported a significant relationship between symptoms of anxiety disorders and attachment styles and also showed that people with insecure attachment styles present greater symptoms of anxiety disorders (Jinyao et al., 2012; Carnes, 2012). Several studies have emphasized the crucial role of the caregiver-child relationship in the child's future adult relationships (Bennett, 2006; Cornell & Hamrin, 2008; as cited in Cherry et al. 2013). The secure attachment style predicts normal and high-level child-parent relationships. The results obtained by Raikes & Thompson (2008) showed that the quality of the attachment style predicts the child's future problem-solving abilities, the child-parent relationship and the child's feelings of loneliness and anxiety. While previous studies have mostly focused on the relationship between the insecure attachment style and symptoms of anxiety disorders, the present study investigates the relationship between a variety of attachment styles and anxiety disorders.

## 2. Methods

The present descriptive correlational study was conducted on a statistical population consisting of all the students visiting psychiatric clinics in Tehran. A total of 300 samples were assessed. The

permission and letter of introduction required for conducting the field study were obtained from the research deputy of the university and presented to the Ministry of Education. Arrangements were made with the intended schools and their heads and their parents' associations to facilitate the participation of both the mothers and the students in the research. Participants were selected through random sampling and were then briefed on the study objectives, asked to submit their written consent for participation and given questionnaires to fill out.

## Tools

*The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS) by Collins & Read (1990):* Participants' attachment style was determined using the RAAS. This scale was first designed by Collins and Read in 1990 and was then revised in 1996. It involves a self-assessment of relationship-building skills and a self-description of the individual's means of forming close attachments and contains 18 items scored based on a 5-point Likert scale (from "not my style at all" given a score of 1 to "totally my style" given a score of 5). The analysis of the factors led to the identification of 3 subscales containing 6 items. The test-retest reliability of the scale was reported as 0.68 for the subscale of closeness, as 0.71 for the subscale of dependence and as 0.52 for the subscale of anxiety. Collins & Read showed that Closeness (C), Dependence (D) and Anxiety (A) were stable during intervals of two and even eight months. In Iran, the test-retest reliability of this tool has been reported as 0.95 on a sample of 100 with a one-month interval. The test-retest correlation coefficient was reported as 0.57 for closeness, as 0.47 for dependence and as 0.75 for anxiety, revealing anxiety to be the most reliable subscale (Hamidi, Shareh & Hodjat, 2015). The test-retest reliability of the entire scale was reported as 0.95 with a one-month interval. The present study found the internal consistency or reliability of the scale as 0.74 for the secure attachment style, as 0.55 for the avoidant attachment style and as 0.39 for the ambivalent attachment style.

*Spence Children's Anxiety Scale:* This scales contains 45 items. A total of 38 of the scale items are scored and the remaining 6 (items number 11, 17, 26, 31, 38 and 43) are not, due to being positive questions. This scale also contains an open question for 8-15 year-old children to answer descriptively. The overall score is calculated by adding up the subscale scores. Previous studies have shown favorable psychometric properties for this scale. Various countries, including the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and the UK, have used this scale and have also reported its validity and reliability to be high (Spence et al., 2003).

## 3. Results

**Table 1: The mean and standard deviation of the study variables**

	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Agoraphobia	300	2.21	2.01
Separation anxiety	300	2.82	1.75
Physical panic	300	4.91	2.14
Social phobia	300	4.28	2.48
Obsessive-compulsive disorder	300	4.25	2.35
Generalized anxiety	300	5.06	2.41
Anxiety disorders	300	23.42	9.65
Secure attachment	300	13.07	1.82
Avoidant attachment	300	12.23	2.04
Ambivalent attachment	300	12.91	3.31

According to table 1, the parent-child relationship has the highest mean score (74) and agoraphobia the lowest (2.21). The parent-child relationship has the highest standard deviation (13.49) and separation anxiety the lowest (1.75).

**Table 2: The standardized and non-standardized regression coefficients for attachment styles in predicting separation anxiety**

	Non-Standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	SE	Beta	T	Sig
Secure Attachment					
Avoidant Attachment	-0.13	-0.30	-0.02	0.45	0.65
Ambivalent Attachment	0.36	0.28	0.07	1.28	0.04
Personality Traits	0.39	0.17	0.13	2.25	0.02
	0.07	0.06	0.06	1.09	0.27

According to table 2, the regression coefficients obtained for ambivalent (0.02) and avoidant (0.04) attachment styles predict anxiety disorders.

**Table 3: The Pearson correlation coefficients for the parent-child attachment style and anxiety disorders**

		Secure Attachment	Avoidant Attachment	Ambivalent Attachment	Parent-Child	Anxiety Disorders
Secure Attachment	P	1	-0.04	0.07	0.04	-0.01
	Significance		0.47	0.21	0.48	0.77
Avoidant Attachment	P		1	0.22**	0.05	0.38*
	Significance			0.000	0.32	0.04
Ambivalent Attachment	P			1	1	0.11
	Significance				0.15	0.26
Anxiety Disorders	P					1
	Significance					

Table 3 shows a positive relationship between avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles and anxiety disorders ( $P < 0.05$ ) and also between avoidant attachment and ambivalent attachment styles themselves ( $P < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4: The multivariate regression analysis for attachment styles in predicting anxiety disorders**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Squares	f	Sig
Regression	571.14	3	190.38	2.06	0.04
Remainder	27113.57	294	92.22		
Total	27684.72	297			

According to table 4, attachment styles predict anxiety disorders.

**Table 5: The standardized and non-standardized regression coefficients for attachment styles in predicting obsessive-compulsive anxiety disorder**

	Non-Standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
	B	SE	Beta	T (P)
Secure Attachment	-0.12	0.30	-0.02	-0.40
Avoidant Attachment	0.37	0.28	0.07	0.68
Ambivalent Attachment	0.04	0.17	0.13	1.31
				0.03
				2.31
				0.02

According to table 5, the regression coefficients obtained for avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles predict anxiety disorders.

#### 4. Conclusion

The results of the present study showed that attachment styles are predictors of anxiety disorders, which is consistent with the results obtained by Jinyao et al. (2012), Catherine et al. (2012), Picardi et al. (2013), Ferdinand (2007) and Cornell & Hamrin (2008). Studies have shown a negative relationship between the secure attachment style and separation anxiety (as an anxiety disorder); that is, improving secure attachment decreases separation anxiety. Moreover, there is a positive relationship between the avoidant attachment style and separation anxiety; that is, improving avoidant attachment increases separation anxiety and vice versa (Picardi et al., 2013). The secure attachment style indicates a close relationship and an emotional bond between the child and a particular person and shows that the child trusts in the availability, responsiveness and welcoming attitude of his source of attachment. This attachment style enables the child to feel confident about the stability of his environment and makes him more resilient toward anxiety. Studies have shown that children with secure attachment styles have sensitive parents who give them unconditional care, help them be inquisitive and respond to their needs (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010). In contrast, avoidant children tend to avoid and ignore their source of attachment in the attempt to abate potential conflicts with them. They do not regard their attachment relationships as important. Most children in this group are not

disturbed by strangers and are not cautious or are very little cautious. In the tests, when the mother left their vicinity, these children either carried on playing or at least did not jump to quitting the game and simply did not wait for the mother to come back. They avoided the mother when they saw her again, and if she embraced them, they restlessly slipped out of her embrace. As a result of their experiences during the process of growing up, these children establish a stable emotional bond and attachment with their caregiver and can resort to an internal re-enactment of this attachment and bond in the caregiver's absence in order to make themselves feel safe and secure. This internal re-enactment involves expectations, beliefs and feelings that have formed in the child during his childhood through the responsiveness of his caregiver and that emerge through the individual's beliefs about himself, others and the society in future close relationships. Under these conditions, the individual perceives himself as a person who is worthy of love and respect and is reliable and trustworthy to others. His perception of the society provides him with the assumption of a reliable and principled world. This healthy internal re-enactment provides him with a safe foothold for those times when he is away from his source of attachment and reduces his separation anxiety. Gradually, this internal re-enactment becomes an integral part of his personality that acts as a real internal model of attachment or a series of expectations about the availability of his attachment sources and potential protection in the face of pressure and disappointment. This mental image has the potential to guide all of the child's future close relationships from childhood to adulthood. In general, studies reveal a relationship between attachment styles and anxiety (Esbjorn et al., 2012). Problems in separation, the lack of tolerance for turmoil and the tendency to believe that events are out of one's own control are mechanisms that explain the relationship between attachment styles and anxiety.

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