

Childhood Emotional Neglect on Adult Attachment Style among Non-Clinical Adults: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Emotional neglect during childhood is a common yet frequently disregarded type of abuse that can have lasting impacts on psychological growth, such as attachment styles in adults. The Aim of the study is to systematically examine the association between childhood emotional neglect and adult attachment styles in non-clinical adult populations. Studies were included if they examined childhood emotions and attachment styles in adulthood within general adult populations, Clinical samples and unrelated findings were excluded. The review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. After eliminating duplicates, 44 records were assessed, and 22 studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Data were extracted and summarized narratively due to the variability in study designs, measures, and statistical methods. The risk of bias was evaluated using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Tools. Out of the 22 studies, 11 were categorized as low risk and 11 as moderate risk of bias, with no studies identified as high risk. The overall certainty of evidence was determined to be moderate. The review reveals that strong correlation between insecure adult attachment styles in the general population and emotional neglect during childhood. Additionally, attachment has been identified as a key mechanism that connects negative mental health outcomes like depression, distress, and interpersonal issues to childhood neglect.

Keywords: Childhood emotional neglect, adult attachment styles, systematic review

Introduction

Childhood is a crucial time for the establishment of psychological, social, and emotional underpinnings. Children's general development and future well-being are greatly influenced by the quality of care they get from their caregivers. Children are more likely to develop good emotional control, high self-esteem, and stable interpersonal connections when they are raised in situations that regularly recognize and support their emotional needs. On the other hand, abuse throughout infancy can interfere with these developmental processes and have long-lasting effects that persist into adulthood (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

One of the most prevalent yet least acknowledged types of child abuse is childhood emotional neglect (CEN). Emotional neglect does not entail overt acts of aggression or injury, in contrast to physical or sexual abuse. Rather, it represents the enduring lack of compassion, support, validation, and emotional

reaction from caretakers. Emotionally neglected children frequently grow up without the emotional support needed to comprehend, communicate, and control their emotions. Emotional neglect often goes unrecognized by families, professionals, and even the persons who suffer it since it is defined by what caregivers fail to deliver rather than by visible detrimental behaviors (Glaser, 2002).

Emotional neglect has substantial effects on psychological development even if it is less obvious than other types of abuse. Children depend on caregivers for mental stability, consolation, and direction in addition to physical safety. One of the most important frameworks for comprehending how early experiences of care influence relationships later on is attachment theory. According to Bowlby (1988), children form internal working models—mental images of themselves, other people, and relationships—as a result of frequent encounters with caregivers. Throughout life, these internal working models direct people's perceptions of emotional support, reactions to stress, and development of intimate relationships. While children exposed to emotionally unavailable or inconsistent caregiving may develop insecure attachment patterns, children whose caregivers are consistently responsive are more likely to establish secure attachment.

Researchers have demonstrated that attachment affects relationships even after childhood, building on Bowlby's findings. In intimate interpersonal connections, adult attachment refers to comparatively steady thought, emotion, and behavior patterns (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

According to Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), those with secure attachment often feel at ease with intimacy and trust, whereas individuals with insecure attachment may feel uncomfortable with proximity, fear rejection, excessive dependency, or emotional retreat. Throughout adulthood, these attachment types have an impact on friendships, romantic relationships, family connections, and general psychological health. Because it directly impacts the emotional bond between caregivers and children, a growing body of research indicates that emotional neglect throughout childhood may be especially significant in the development of insecure attachment. Children who are emotionally neglected have less opportunity to receive continuous emotional validation and reassurance, which are essential for the formation of stable attachment bonds. These early encounters may eventually influence perceptions of one's own deservingness of love and care as well as one's ability to trust others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Emotional neglect throughout childhood has effects that go beyond connection. Emotional neglect has been linked in the past to problems regulating emotions, low self-esteem, poor interpersonal functioning, symptoms of anxiety and depression, and worse overall psychological adjustment (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010).

Neurobiological studies have further suggested that chronic exposure to emotionally neglectful environments may influence brain development and stress-response systems involved in emotional processing and social functioning (Teicher & Samson, 2013).

Therefore, the goal of the current systematic review is to critically synthesize the body of research on the connection between adult attachment style and emotional maltreatment during childhood in non-clinical adults. The review aims to clarify this link and add to the larger body of research on attachment and developmental psychology by concentrating on emotional neglect and non-clinical groups.

Method

Study objective

The primary objective of this systematic review is to synthesize existing empirical evidence on the association between childhood emotional neglect and adult attachment styles in the general adult (non-

clinical) population.

Research Question

How is childhood emotional neglect associated with adult attachment styles in the general adult population?

Methods

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were defined a priori using the Population–Exposure–Outcome (PEO) framework.

Inclusion Criteria

- Only when data related to non-clinical adults were given separately or could be easily extracted were studies with mixed populations taken into consideration.
- Studies that met the eligibility requirements specifically evaluated childhood emotional neglect as a separate concept, either on its own or as a different subscale within more general assessments of child abuse.
- Peer-reviewed journal publications released between 2000 and 2026 were the only ones taken into account.

Exclusion Criteria

- Articles that failed to disclose pertinent results, did not evaluate adult attachment styles, or from which data could not be extracted were excluded.
- Additionally, non-empirical research was not included, including case reports, review articles, editorials, commentary, and methodological papers.

Information Sources

A comprehensive and systematic search strategy was employed to identify all relevant studies examining childhood emotional neglect and adult attachment styles in the general adult population. The database search includes PUBMED. Studies published between 2000 and 2026 were considered eligible, reflecting contemporary conceptualizations and standardized measurements of childhood emotional neglect and attachment theory. The search strategy incorporated combinations of key terms related to childhood emotional neglect, adult attachment styles, and the general adult population.

Selection Process

The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were adhered to during the selection process for this systematic review. Duplicate records were eliminated before screening, and all records found through database searches were put into reference management software. All retrieved records' titles and abstracts are screened to determine their potential eligibility based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria that are pertinent to the research question investigating the relationship between adult attachment styles and childhood emotional neglect in the general adult population.

Quality Assessment

The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Tools were used to evaluate the methodological quality and bias risk of the included studies. Studies were divided into three categories based on the overall evaluation: low risk (good quality), moderate risk, and high risk of bias. The narrative synthesis included the findings of the risk of bias assessment.

Data Synthesis

Since all 23 included studies observed the relationship between adult attachment styles in non-clinical ad-

ult populations and emotional neglect (or related abuse) in childhood, they were all suitable for synthesis. Data, including specifics like sample size, study design, tools utilized, and findings. Meta-analysis was not appropriate and a narrative synthesis approach was employed instead.

Results

Quality Assessment findings

The reviewed studies primarily employed quantitative research designs, with most using cross-sectional approaches, while a few adopted longitudinal designs to better understand the long-term effects of childhood maltreatment on adult attachment (Dion et al., 2019; Widom et al., 2018). The studies included diverse samples such as community adults, college students, older adults, and women, enhancing the applicability of findings across different adult populations (Gomes Jardim et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2022). Childhood maltreatment, including emotional neglect, was commonly assessed using standardized measures such as the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), whereas adult attachment was typically measured using validated self-report attachment scales. Many studies applied advanced statistical techniques, including mediation, moderation, and network analyses, to examine the pathways linking childhood emotional neglect to adult attachment styles and psychosocial outcomes (Höltge et al., 2023; Frowijn et al., 2025).

Table 1: Characteristics of the Included Studies

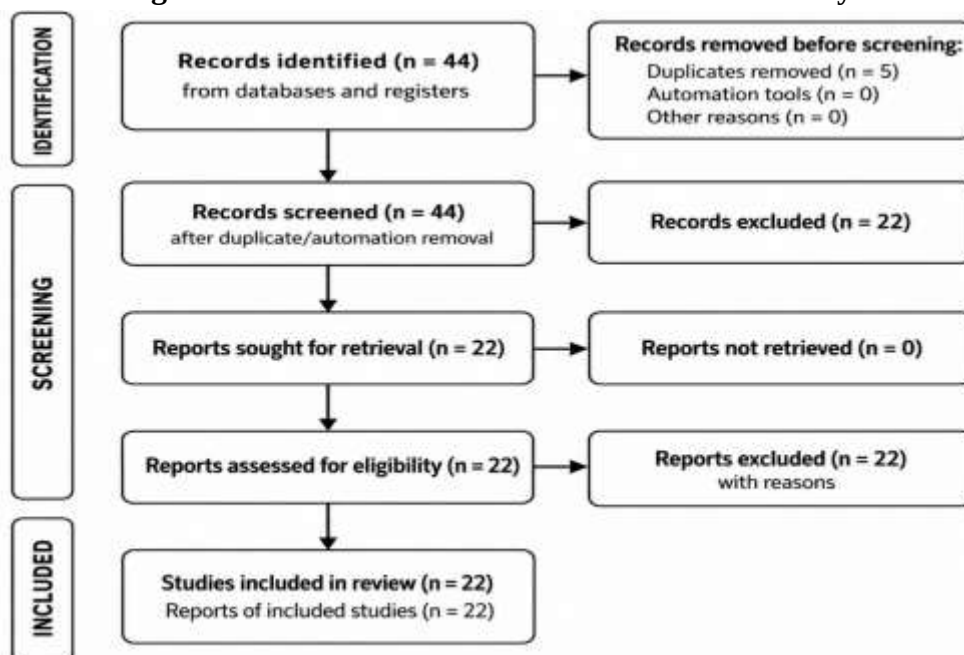
Sl. No.	Author (Year)	Study Design	Sample	Tools	Statistical Tests
1.	Azam et al. (2025)	Cross-sectional secondary data analysis	30,507 partnered adults	Childhood physical abuse and childhood sexual abuse measures; Adult attachment measure; Sexual Satisfaction Scale	Mediation analysis
2.	Shahab et al. (2025)	Prospective cohort (NESDA)	1,850 (published article; not 375)	Structured Childhood Trauma Interview (CTI); Experiences in Close Relationships–Short Version (ECR-S) assessing attachment anxiety and avoidance	Multiple regression analyses
3.	Sullivan et al. (2020)	Cross-sectional	198	Childhood Sexual Abuse History; Adult Attachment Scale (ASQ); Therapeutic Bond measure; Interpersonal Distress measures	Mediation analysis; Regression analysis; Bootstrapped indirect effects.
4.	Jiang et al. (2022)	Cross-sectional	634	Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ); Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised	Moderated mediation analysis; Regression analysis;

				(ECR-R); Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9); Physical Activity questionnaire	
5.	Herpay et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	186	Childhood Trauma Questionnaire; Adult Attachment measure; Temperament and Character Inventory	Logistic regression; Correlation analysis; Multivariable regression.
6.	Reiser et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	205	Childhood Abuse History questionnaire; Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ); Health Anxiety Inventory	Pearson correlations; Hierarchical multiple regression; Mediation analysis.
7.	Bifulco et al. (2006)	Cross-sectional	250	Childhood Trauma Questionnaire/Interview; Adult Attachment Interview (AAI); Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ); Depression and Anxiety scales	Logistic regression; Mediation analysis; Structural Equation/Path analysis.
8.	Ettema & Eshelman (2025)	Cross-sectional	142	Childhood Maltreatment Measure; Adult Attachment Scale; White Bear Suppression Inventory (Thought Suppression Scale)	Mediation analysis
9.	Sirparanta et al. (2025)	Two meta-analyses	1,050	Various validated childhood maltreatment and attachment measures	Random-effects meta-analysis; Heterogeneity statistics (I^2 , Q); Moderator analyses;
10.	Vogel et al. (2025)	Cross-sectional postpartum study	680	Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ); Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS); Adult Attachment measure	Hierarchical multiple regression analyses
11.	Maydom et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional survey with a 7-day daily	481 (243 completed diary phase)	Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF); Experiences in Close Relationships–	Descriptive statistics; Point-biserial correlations; Hierarchical logistic regression;

		diary component		Relationship Structures (ECR-RS); Suicide history questions; Daily Stress Scale; Daily Defeat Scale; Daily Entrapment Scale	Multilevel/Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM-8); Cross-level moderation analyses;
12.	Gomes Jardim et al. (2023)	Cross-sectional	260	Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ); Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ); NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI); MINI Plus	Descriptive statistics; Correlation analyses; Logistic regression
13.	Frowijn et al. (2025)	Cross-sectional	648	Childhood trauma self-report; Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS)	Network analysis; Gaussian Graphical Network estimation; Centrality indices;
14.	Holtge et al. (2023)	Cross-sectional	604	Child Maltreatment Questionnaire; Adult Attachment (Anxiety & Avoidance); Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support	Bayesian Network Analysis; Network estimation;
15.	Dion et al. (2019)	Longitudinal	210	Child Maltreatment Measure; Romantic Attachment Measure; Psychological Adaptation Measures	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM); Longitudinal mediation analysis; Model fit indices (CFI, RMSEA, TLI).
16.	Papalia & Widom (2023/2024)	Prospective cohort	892	Court-documented childhood maltreatment records; Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ); Violent Behaviour Outcomes	Logistic regression; Mediation analysis; Structural Equation Modeling (SEM); Indirect effect estimation.
17.	Lo & Chan (2019)	Meta-analysis	Meta-analysis	Various validated child maltreatment and adult attachment instruments	Random-effects meta-analysis;
18.	Nowalis et al. (2022)	Cross-sectional	203	Child Maltreatment Measure; Adult Attachment	Hierarchical multiple regression; Moderation

				(Anxiety/Avoidance); Depression Measure	analysis; Simple slope analysis.
19.	Widom et al. (2018)	Prospective cohort	908	Court-documented childhood maltreatment; Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ); Mental and Physical Health Measures	Structural Equation Modeling; Mediation analysis; Regression analyses.
20.	Hocking et al. (2016)	Cross- sectional	140	Childhood Maltreatment Measure; Adult Attachment Scale (ASQ); Betrayal Trauma Questionnaire	Regression-based mediation analysis; Bootstrapped indirect effects; Pearson correlations.
21.	Bahmani et al. (2022)	Cross- sectional	400	Child Abuse Questionnaire; Adult Attachment Measure; Parenting Style Questionnaire; Addiction Questionnaire	Pearson correlation; Multiple linear regression; Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).
22.	Boroujerdi et al. (2019)	Case-control	120	Childhood Abuse History Questionnaire; Adult Attachment Measure; Suicide Attempt History	Chi-square tests; Independent samples t- tests; Binary logistic regression.

Figure 1: Shows the PRISMA Flow chart of the study



Themes

Association Between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Adult Attachment Styles

The results of the research included in this systematic review unequivocally demonstrate the high correlation between adult attachment styles and emotional neglect during childhood in the general adult population. Lack of emotional support, affirmation, care, and attention during childhood is referred to as emotional neglect. The findings demonstrate that early emotional experiences still have a major and long-lasting influence on adult relationships and emotional functioning, despite the fact that the participants in the study were not from clinical backgrounds. Similarly, Widom et al. (2018) shown that even among members of the general population, childhood neglect predicts both anxious and avoidant attachment types in adulthood. This result emphasizes that emotional neglect is crucial for comprehending attachment patterns in general populations as well as therapeutic groups.

These results were corroborated by Shahab et al. (2025), who found that one of the best indicators of attachment instability was emotional neglect. According to their research, the chance of having anxious attachment increases when neglect is ongoing or involves both parents. Additionally, Herpay et al. (2024) discovered a positive correlation between emotional neglect and avoidant attachment, supporting the notion that people who experience emotional neglect typically maintain emotional distance in relationships.

Different Attachment Patterns in the General Population

Strong evidence for this association in general adult populations was established by Beltge et al. (2023) and Herpay et al. (2024).

Anxious attachment is also associated with emotional neglect, albeit less frequently. People who experience anxious attachment frequently: A fear of being abandoned, Look for assurance and Experience relationship insecurity. Even in general population samples, Shahab et al. (2025) discovered that anxious attachment is more prevalent when emotional neglect is severe or involves both caregivers. This demonstrates how the degree and setting of neglect affect the formation of attachment.

Additionally, Herpay et al. (2024) discovered that some people exhibit both anxious and avoidant characteristics, suggesting that attachment styles might be complicated and not necessarily well-defined.

Attachment as a Key Process in Understanding Adult Outcomes

Even in non-clinical groups, attachment functions as a crucial process (mediator) connecting childhood emotional maltreatment with adult psychiatric problems, according to a significant finding from the evaluated studies.

This implies that emotional neglect has an impact on how people form attachment types, which in turn have an impact on their relationships and emotional health. According to Gomes Jardim et al. (2023), attachment anxiety explains how mistreatment during childhood causes depression in later life. According to Dion et al. (2019), emerging adults' psychological suffering and childhood maltreatment are linked with attachment anxiety. According to Hocking et al. (2016), the connection between betrayal trauma and childhood maltreatment can be explained by anxious attachment.

According to Reiser et al. (2019), the relationship between health anxiety and childhood abuse can be explained by attachment anxiety. According to Widom et al. (2018), the association between childhood neglect and outcomes related to mental health is mediated by attachment. Papalia and Widom (2024) shown that aggressive behavior in maturity can be explained by attachment insecurity.

Role of Social Support and Personality in the General Population

The review also demonstrates how other elements of daily living, like personality qualities and social support, affect the effects of emotional neglect. According to Béltge et al. (2023), social assistance lessens the detrimental consequences of emotional neglect. Avoidant attachment was less common in people with robust support networks. This implies that having healthy interactions as an adult can lessen the effects of early neglect. Additionally, Gomes Jardim et al. (2023) discovered that this association is influenced by personality factors like neuroticism. Attachment anxiety is influenced by emotional neglect, and this has an impact on mental health and personality.

Variations in Findings

Maydom et al. (2024) discovered that attachment did not significantly alter the association between childhood trauma and suicidality, despite the majority of studies showing a definite relationship. According to Frowijn et al. (2025), there was no significant correlation between intimate partner violence and attachment or childhood trauma. Insecure attachment styles were discovered by Boroujerdi et al. (2019), however there was no discernible connection to suicide attempts.

Impact on Adult Relationships and Well-being

Avoidant attachment sufferers may struggle to communicate their emotions and steer clear of intimate relationships. Anxious attachment disorder sufferers may be highly dependent on others and fear abandonment.

According to Dion et al. (2019), poorer self-esteem and increased discomfort are associated with attachment anxiety. Additionally, Sullivan et al. (2020) discovered that interpersonal problems are a result of insecure attachment. This demonstrates that emotional neglect causes long-term problems with relationships and emotional functioning, even in typical people.

Discussion

Childhood emotional maltreatment has a long-lasting impact on adult attachment styles. Insecure attachment styles in adulthood are caused by a lack of emotional support, care, and responsiveness, which also interferes with the formation of secure relationships (Höltge et al., 2023; Widom et al., 2018). Avoidant attachment, which is typified by emotional detachment, self-reliance, and difficulty with intimacy, is especially linked to emotional neglect. It is sometimes associated with anxious attachment, which is characterized by excessive reassurance-seeking and a fear of abandonment (Widom et al., 2018; Shahab et al., 2025).

The results also imply that emotional neglect in childhood has a significant impact on adult emotional and interpersonal functioning through attachment (Dion et al., 2019; Gomes Jardim et al., 2023; Hocking et al., 2016; Papalia & Widom, 2023). These results can also be influenced by elements like personality traits and social support. Personality traits like neuroticism may make people more susceptible to attachment anxiety, even when social support may lessen attachment insecurity (Gomes Jardim et al., 2023; Höltge et al., 2023). All things considered, the data emphasizes the long-lasting effects of emotional maltreatment throughout childhood on adult attachment and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Insecure adult attachment styles in the general population are significantly correlated with emotional neg-

lect during childhood, according to this systematic research. The results consistently show that emotional neglect plays a role in the emergence of avoidant and anxious attachment styles, which have a detrimental impact on adult relationships, emotional control, and psychological health. Additionally, attachment has been identified as a key mechanism that connects negative mental health outcomes like melancholy, distress, and interpersonal issues with childhood neglect.

Limitations

- Many were cross-sectional, providing data from a single point in time, which prevents establishing causal relationships between childhood emotional neglect and adult attachment styles.
- Due to scarcity of studies done across India which limits the generalizability of the results to the broader non-clinical adult population.
- The studies used different definitions and tools to measure emotional neglect and attachment which limited the comparability.

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