

Role of Parent-Child Relationship in Coping Styles of Emerging Adults

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Abstract

The emerging adult stage of life is a period of transition where the individuals have to cope with new way of teaching–learning process, new associates, and new atmosphere. The coping style they use will determine how effectively they face life challenges and future life. Previous literature has stressed the significance of parent-child attachment on overall wellbeing of children and adults. The present study focused on association of parent-child attachment on coping styles among emerging adults. For this, data on parent-child relationship and coping styles were collected using standardized tools - The adult scale of parent attachment (short-form) and coping inventory for stressful situations (CISS) questionnaire - from 284 emerging adults studying in colleges in Salem, Tamil Nadu. IBM SPSS version 25 was used to analyse the data. Correlational analysis revealed relationship between the study variables, Step-wise regression showed the influence of different types of relationship with either mother or father on three coping styles – task oriented coping, emotion oriented coping and avoidant coping. Implication and limitations of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Parent-child attachment, parent-child relationship, emerging adults, task coping, avoidant coping, emotion coping

Attachment is the psychological bond developed by children with their parents or caregivers (Bowlby, 1997) Attachment plays a significant role throughout lifespan. In determining a child's future social and emotional development, a parent's position as an attachment figure is among the most crucial. Disruption in the attachment with the parents/ caretakers can have a devastating effect on the child's future life. Attachment has a beneficial effect on neurological, physiological and psychosocial development of children (Howe, 2011)

Adult's perception of their attachment with their parents as a child influences how they feel about the demands and pressures of interpersonal relationships, regulation of emotion, coping strategies, stress, social skills, emotional intelligence, mental health, emotional competence (van Ijzendoorn, 2023; Cooke et al., 2019; Hertsgaard, 1995; Howe, 201; Mortazavizadeh et al., 2022), cognitive, social and emotional functioning, risk behaviours, social and coping skills (Moretti & Peled, 2004). A study among college students revealed that parental attachment influenced social adaptation (Yin et al., 2021). Through impacting children's motivation, attention and self-concept, parents' attachment can predict children's academic achievement (Wang, 2021). The early attachment with parent is so important that Riva Crugnola (2021) reported that insecure attachment with parents cause psychopathological problems. Literature specifically shows that secure attachment with mother is positively and significantly related to emotional competence (Stefanovic-Stanojevic et al., 2015). The safe attachment with mother seems to play a major role in enhancing the coping styles of children (Crowell & Feldman, 1988)

Coping is the ability to mobilize thoughts and behaviours to manage stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). It is a stable attribute of an individual that governs his/her behaviour in response to stress. Right from childhood days children learn from parents the ways to approaches challenges in life. Apart from modelling their parents, how safe/ unsafe the child feels with the parents determine how they face the world in the later years of age.

Arnett (2000) proposed a new stage of life called the emerging adult that extends from adolescence to young adulthood, ie. from age 18 to 25 years of age. This stage is identified as a period of identity exploration and instability by Arnett. Having children, secure work, and long-term relationships—all of which used to be attained nearly immediately following adolescence—now tend to happen around age thirty because of social and economic changes that increased the years and accessibility of studies and dependence on parents (Arnett, 2015). Research shows that adults' perceived levels of attachment have an impact on their growth and

adjustment during times of transition (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Emerging adult stage is the stage when the adult is entering into the college life which is a huge transition that the emerging adult faces. The emerging adult has to cope with new way of teaching–learning process, new associates, and new atmosphere. Healthy parent-child attachment may have an impact on emerging adults' developmental goals like acquiring autonomy, being able to manage conflicts that result from independence, and exploring one's identity (Bloom, 1980). In this context, the researcher wants to know if the parent-child attachment determines the type of coping strategy the emerging adult applies. Hence the present study.

Previous literature has shown the role of parents' attachment in prosocial behaviour, secure peer attachment, internalizing symptomatology, emotion regulation, psychological wellbeing (Carlo et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2017; McGinley & Evans, 2020; Brumariu, 2015; Athira Aneesh et al., 2023). It is also found that a satisfactory parental communication with adolescents is significant factor that prevents delinquency in adolescents (Moitra & Mukherjee, 2012). Literature shows the significant role of parental attachment through adolescent's self-control in preventing vulnerable young players from engaging in excessive gaming behaviour (Malik, Nanda, & Kumra, 2020).

Greenberger, and McLaughlin (1998) reported that perceived early secure attachment were positively related to support seeking and active problem solving among late adolescents. Children with higher attachment security used successful constructive coping techniques than those with who did not show higher attachment security (Saija et al., 2022). Since the emerging adults have crossed the adolescence stage, the society treats them as adults and offers no support in coping with the developmental tasks (Arnett, 2016). The life of emerging adults is constantly altering as a result of their active involvement in identity exploration. These alterations can negatively impact their other aspects of their life like relationships, educational and career goals. If the emerging adults do not receive a guiding hand in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and handling the problems they encounter, it may affect their mental health. Here the role of emerging adult's attachment as children with their parents may play a pivotal role in using the adaptive coping style. The current study focuses on the influence of different types of parental attachment on the coping mechanisms emerging adults employ to deal with life's challenges. On the basis of the previous literature, the following hypotheses were framed.

H1: There will be a significant correlation between parent-child attachment and emerging adults' coping styles.

H2: the coping styles emerging adult's use will be significantly influenced by their perceived attachment with their parents.

Method

Research Design

A correlational research design was adapted to study the relationship among the study variables in emerging adults. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires. A pilot study was done to re-establish the reliability of the questionnaires.

Participants

College students of 18 to 25 years were the focus of this research. 500 college students from a colleges in Salem were approached to collect the data. 300 students who agreed to participate in the survey were given the questionnaire along with the instruction. Out of 300, only 284 data were used for analysis as the incomplete data were removed. The aim of the study was briefed to the participants. Among the participants 50.7% were males and 49.3% were females. As per the place of residence 34.1 were from rural, 37.6% from semi-urban area and 28.2% from urban area. In terms of monthly income, 50.7% of the participants' family had a monthly income of below twenty five thousand, 25.3% of the participants belonged to an income group of 25,000 to 50,000 per month, 14.4% to 50,000 to 1,00,000 per month and 9.5% belong to above 1,00,000 income group. In terms of type of family, 69.7% were from nuclear family and 30.2% were from joint family. 81.3% of the participants' fathers were employed and 18.7% of the participants' fathers were not employed. 42.2% of participants' mothers were employed and 57.7% of participants' mothers were not employed. These data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of emerging adults (N=284)

Description of characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	144	50.7
	Female	140	49.3
Place of Residence	Rural	97	34.1

	Semi-urban	107	37.6
	Urban	80	28.2
	Below 25K	144	50.7
Monthly income of the family	25K TO 50K	72	25.3
	50K to 1L	41	14.4
	Above 1L	27	9.5
Type of family	Nuclear	198	69.7
	Joint	86	30.2
Working status of father	Employed	231	81.3
	Unemployed	53	18.7
Working status of mother	Employed	120	42.2
	Unemployed	164	57.7

Measures

Two self-report questionnaires including socio-demographic data sheet were used to collect the data.

The Adult Scale of Parent Attachment (Short-Form) - ASPA-SF (Michael & Snow, 2019): The adult scale of parent attachment (short-form) was used to measure the parent-child relationships as perceived by adults of age 17 to 59 years. It is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 40 items that analyses people's opinions of relating styles based on their interactions with both parental figures when they were children. Two items from the scale are "I had my mother with me when I was upset", "I got frustrated when my father left me alone". The scale measures five types of parental attachment namely, safe, dependent, parentified, fearful and distant. The participant has to respond on a five point scale that ranges from 'Constantly' (5) to 'Never' (1). The scale had good psychometric properties. For the present study reliability was re-established using Cronbach's alpha. The alpha value for mother scale was .64 and for father scale was .78.

Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) questionnaire (Endler & Parker, 1990): This scale consists of 21 items with a 5-point Likert scale response type. Two items from the scale is given here, "I become very upset", "I visit a friend". Here the participants have to mark the coping styles they use in challenging situations. The scale had good

psychometric properties. In the present study the reliability of the scale was re-established using Cronbach's alpha and it was found to be .75, indicating a good reliability.

Statistical Analysis

As a primary analysis, frequency, percentage analysis, mean and standard deviation were used. To assess the relationship between the study variables, Pearson correlation was used. To study the impact of the parent attachment with coping styles, stepwise regression was used. IBM SPSS version 25 was used to carry out the analysis.

Results

The table 2 shows that there is a significant positive correlation between task coping and parentified attachment with the mother, $r(df) = .231, p < 0.01$, and parentified attachment with the father, $r(282) = .127, p < 0.05$; and safe attachment with the father, $r(282) = .153, p < 0.01$. Further task coping was negatively correlated with distant attachment with the father, $r(282) = -.106, p < 0.05$. Weak correlations were observed in all the above relationship.

The emotion coping had a significant positive correlation with the dependent attachment with the mother, $r(282) = .119, p < 0.05$; parentified attachment with the mother, $r(282) = .113, p < 0.05$; fearful attachment with the mother, $r(282) = .205, p < 0.01$; and fearful attachment with the father, $r(282) = .138, p < 0.01$; distant attachment with the mother, $r(282) = .294, p < 0.01$; and fearful attachment with father, $r(282) = .260, p < 0.01$.

A significant positive correlation was found between dependent attachment with mother and avoidant coping style, $r(282) = .152, p < 0.01$. The correlation coefficient of parentified attachment with mother with avoidance coping style showed a significant positive correlation, $r(282) = .173, p < 0.01$.

There was a significant positive correlation between fearful attachment with the mother and avoidant coping style, $r(282) = .112, p < 0.05$. Distant attachment with the mother also showed a significant correlation with avoidant coping style, $r(282) = .192, p < 0.01$. The safe attachment with the father showed a significant positive correlation with avoidant coping, $r(282) = .138, p < 0.05$.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14
1(MS)	13.49	3.14	1												
2(MD)	12.40	2.97	.26**	1											
3(MP)	14.11	2.76	.34**	.31**	1										
4(MF)	10.82	3.20	.17**	.44**	.12*	1									
5(MA)	11.46	3.11	.03	.33**	.14**	.43**	1								
6(FS)	12.55	3.61	.33**	.21**	.14**	.01	.05	1							
7(FD)	11.99	3.54	.12*	.36**	.13*	.17**	.21**	.49**	1						
8(FP)	13.15	3.25	.23**	.23**	.33**	.14**	.11*	.59**	.55**	1					
9(FF)	11.35	3.45	.08	.25**	.16**	.42**	.31**	.38**	.61**	.54**	1				
10(FA)	11.29	3.57	.02	.06	.11*	.25**	.41**	.15**	.21**	.19**	.41**	1			
12(TC)	19.72	4.63	.09	.09	.23**	.07	-.01	.15**	-.04	.13*	-.03	-.11*	1		
13(EC)	18.26	4.71	.07	.12*	.11*	.21**	.29**	-.03	.06	-.06	.14**	.26**	.13*	1	
14(AC)	19.60	5.05	.02	.15**	.17**	.11*	.19**	.14*	-.01	.05	.01	.08	.45**	.245**	1

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation of the Study Variables

Note: MS-Mother safe, MD-Mother dependent, MP-Mother parentified, MF-Mother fearful, MA-Mother avoidant, FD-Father dependent, FP-Father parentified, FF-Father fearful, FA-Father avoidant, TC-Task coping, EC-Emotion Avoidance coping,

Table 3

Regression Coefficient of Parent-Child Attachment on Task Coping

Variables	B	SE	t	P	95%CI
Constant	14.976	1.689	8.868	.000	[11.65, 8.30]
Mother_Parentified	.392	.096	4.069	.000	[-.20, .58]
Father_Distant	-.172	.075	-2.281	.023	[-.32, -.02]
Father_Safe	.269	.084	3.207	.001	[-.10, .43]
Father_Dependent	-.185	.086	-2.148	.033	[-.35, -.01]

Note. CI = Confidence Interval

The above table 3 shows the impact of mother-child and father-child attachment on tasking coping among emerging adults. The R² value of .10 revealed that the predictors explained 10% variance in the outcome variable with F (4, 283) = 8.20, p < .000. The findings revealed that

parentified attachment with mother and safe attachment with father positively predicted task coping ($\beta = .23, p < .000$; $\beta = .21, p < .001$) whereas distant and dependent attachment with father negatively predicted task coping ($\beta = -.13, p < .02$; $\beta = -.14, p < .03$).

Table 4

Regression Coefficient of Parent-Child Attachment on Emotion Coping

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	95%CI
Constant	11.883	1.719	6.913	.000	[8.499, 15.26]
Mother Distant	.241	.107	2.251	.025	[.030, .45]
Father_Distant	.174	.090	1.931	.054	[-.003, .35]
Father	-.347	.118	-2.951	.003	[-.578, -.11]
Parentified					
PCR	.051	.026	1.991	.047	[.001, .10]

Note. CI = Confidence Interval

The above table 4 shows the impact of mother-child and father –child attachment types on emotion coping among emerging adults. The R^2 value of .14 revealed that the predictors explained 14% variance in the outcome variable with $F(4, 283) = 11.04, p < .000$. The findings revealed that distant attachment with mother positively predicted emotion coping ($\beta = .16, p < .02$) and parentified attachment with father negatively predicted emotion coping ($\beta = -.24, p < .003$) Whereas distant attachment with father did not predict emotion coping ($\beta = .13, p < .05$).

Table 5

Regression Coefficient of Parent-Child Attachment on Avoidance Coping

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	95%CI
Constant	12.56	1.75	7.15	.000	[9.11, 16.02]
Mother Distant	.27	.09	2.98	.004	[.09, .46]
Mother Parentified	.27	.11	2.55	.011	[.06, .48]

Note. CI = Confidence Interval

Table 5 shows the impact of mother-child and father–child attachment types on avoidance coping among emerging adults. The R^2 value of .06 revealed that the predictors explained 6% variance in the outcome variable with $F(2, 283) = 8.78, p < .000$. The findings revealed that distant and parentified attachment with mother positively predicted avoidance coping ($\beta = .17, p < .004$; $\beta = .15, p < .011$).

Discussion

Coping is defined as the thoughts and actions that are used to manage the demands of stressful situations. Coping occurs in the context of external or internal life changes that are perceived to be stressful. Even in the presence of similar stressors, not everyone utilises the same coping mechanisms; people have different coping mechanisms or favour using some coping mechanisms over others (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004) The coping styles focused in this research include task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping, avoidant coping.

The task-oriented coping has been positively predicted by parentified attachment with mother, and safe attachment with father, and is negatively predicted by distant and dependent attachment with father. This shows that safe attachment with father and a feeling of being important to parents determine adaptive coping styles like problem-focused or task-oriented coping. A child having a safe and comfortable relationship with his or her father may have experienced confidence and support. This positive attachment with parents lay the foundation for safe feeling and confidence to face the world in future. A study conducted by Love and Kurpius (2022), also supports these findings, wherein the authors found that there is a relationship between attachment to parents, and friends with coping behaviors of emerging adults. The participants of their study reported that stronger attachment to their mother and to friends predicted more positive problem-focused or task-oriented coping. Another study conducted by Blomgren et al. (2016) found that perceived support from others and secure attachment to parents, or caregivers, prompted help-seeking, and inner resources, which would prompt the use of problem-focused coping. Further, those experienced secure attachment do not avoid conflict (Moretti & Peled, 2004). Emerging adults who experience helplessness, uncertainty and anger towards parents especially father have less chance of using task-oriented coping.

In parentified relationship with parents, a child is expected to behave as a parent, and thus the child practices many strategies to survive. This often leads the child to perfectionism, people-pleasing, anxiety, the need to solve everyone's problems, enmeshment, no boundaries, an inability to meet their own needs, insecure attachment styles, and more. Since these children will be trying to be perfect, they will be very careful about any step they are taking to solve any problem, so chances are more that they will follow a problem-oriented or task-focused coping against any stressor (Pomerance, 2020).

The distant attachment with mother positively predicts emotional coping. When experiencing a distant attachment with the mother, the child may feel disappointed in the availability and support of the mother. As emerging adults, they dislike being close and prefer being independent in their relationship. Upon encountering stressful situation, they try to change their emotional reaction to the situation. Though this strategy seems beneficial in the beginning, in long run it might lead to negative results like anxiety and depression or increase their feeling of stress. This kind of behavioral pattern is always focused on reducing the stress, over long term this can increase stress and produce negative outcomes like anxiety and depression.

In parentified relationship, a child is expected to behave like a parent or as a sibling to their own parents. Parentification can affect a child's attachment style by a feeling that their needs are unmet and they are responsible for the members of the family and, create trouble regulating their emotions. In contradiction, the findings of this study reveal that parentified attachment with the father negatively predicts the child's emotional coping style, which shows that there might be other factors that researchers need to explore. A study conducted by Blomgren et al. (2016) showed that most of the relationship between late adolescents' attachment to parents and their coping style is mediated by individual differences in time perspective.

Emerging adults who had distant or avoidant attachment do not experience appropriate responses to their needs from their parents. These children may disconnect from their own needs and feelings by self-soothe and strive to be physically and emotionally independent. This pattern of attachment will continue in adulthood also, while making the interpersonal relationships difficult as a result of being very independent and unlikely to receive support and help from others. This character may also reflect in their coping styles, as they try to deny, minimize, or otherwise directly avoid any stressful demands (Penley et al., 2002), thus the more a child has distant attachment to parents, the chances are more that the child may develop maladaptive styles of coping like avoidant coping.

Individuals in parentified attachment with mother, take care of their mother by giving emotional support and assuming all functional responsibilities. As they take the role of a care taker in the young age, during emerging adult they may be modelling the behaviour of their mother and thereby avoiding to face challenging situations, thus supporting Marsac et al's

(2014) model, which suggests that parent coping assistance may also influence child's coping style.

Conclusion

The present study has identified association between perceived parenting attachment and coping styles among emerging adults. Task coping among emerging adolescents were positively predicted by parentified attachment with mother and safe attachment with father whereas it was negatively predicted by distant and dependent attachment with father. Emerging adults who had distant attachment with mother used more of emotion coping. Parentified attachment with father among emerging adults reduced their emotion coping style. A surprising result found was distant and parentified attachment with mother positively predicted avoidance way of coping with challenges. Modelling the stress coping behaviour of the parents may be reason for this.

Limitations and Recommendations

Quoting the limitations of the study helps to improve it in future research. In this study, two types of avoidant coping, namely social and distracted were not studied separately. Future studies can consider this in their study. Being a self-reported scale, there are chances of social desirability that cannot be curtailed. As the method used is cross-sectional, generalization of findings is limited.

Future studies can focus on other moderating or mediating factors that influence the association between parent-child attachment and coping styles.

Implication

The study emphasized the significance of parent-child relationship in using the coping strategies among emerging adults. Today most of the family are dual earner family type. Parents focus more on their career advancement, and fail to spend quality time with their children especially at early stages when their presence and guidance are at most important. Having known this parents can be given training stressing the importance of their role and effective parenting skills.

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