


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Attachment Style of Working Mothers and Social Performance and Adjustment of Children in School

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ABSTRACT

This study purposed to investigate the effect of attachment style of working mothers on social performance and adjustment of children in school. For this purpose, a descriptive correlational study conducted. The statistical population of the present study included all second-grade elementary school students in Tehran in the academic year 2025. The sample size in this study was 150 people. Cluster random sampling method used to select the samples. First, one of the districts of Tehran was selected and 15 people were randomly selected from each school. Participants were assessed with attachment style, social performance, and adjustment questionnaires. The findings were analyzed using Pearson coefficient and stepwise regression statistical methods. The results showed that secure and insecure attachment styles together significantly predict 31 percent of children's adjustment. Attachment styles were also able to explain 56 percent of children's social functioning significantly. There was a positive and significant relationship between adjustment and social functioning with secure attachment style, and the relationship between adjustment and social functioning with anxious and avoidant attachment styles was negative and significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that an increase in insecure attachment among employed mothers is associated with a decrease in their children's social adjustment and functioning. Conversely, higher levels of secure attachment in employed mothers are associated with higher levels of social adjustment and functioning in their children.

KEYWORDS

Attachment Style, Adjustment, Social Functioning, School.



Introduction

In the modern world, rapid social transformations and changes in family structure have made it essential to pay attention to the psychological factors influencing children's development (Eilert & Buchheim, 2023). The family, as the first and most fundamental institution, serves as the primary context for a child's growth, preparing them for social interactions and the acceptance of individual responsibilities (Henry, 2022). Within this structure, mothers play a key and irreplaceable role in the upbringing and development of the child, particularly during the early years of life when the child's personality and psyche are being formed (Nili Ahmadabadi et al. 2019). With the increased participation of women in the labor market in recent decades (Jahd et al. 2020), working mothers face a more significant challenge in maintaining a balance between their traditional and occupational roles. This challenge can potentially impact the mother-child relationship and the child's psychological development (Rahmati et al. 2022; Sofii & Behzadpour, 2020).

One of the most important factors influencing a child's mental health and social development is the mother's attachment style. Attachment refers to the deep emotional bond formed between a child and their primary caregiver and lays the foundation for how the child will relate to others in the future (Soltanpour et al., 2024). The mother's attachment style can have a direct impact on the child's social adjustment at school, because early interaction patterns established at home are generalized to educational environments (Laksono et al. 2022). Children with securely attached mothers typically feel more secure, exhibit more positive social interactions, and are less prone to behavioral problems. In contrast, insecure attachment styles (avoidant and anxious) can lead to difficulties in emotion regulation and the child's social relationships (Deneault et al. 2023).

A child's social functioning at school encompasses the ability to communicate effectively with peers, participate in group activities, and manage conflicts (Adhikari, 2022). Although previous studies have indicated a relationship between attachment style and adjustment or behavioral problems (Soltanpour et al., 2024; Yousefi et al., 2023; Rahmati et al., 2022), the specific influence of maternal employment on these relationships and its consequences for children's academic and social adjustment has been less explored. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effect of working mothers' attachment styles on their children's social functioning and adjustment at school.

Method

This research was a correlational study. The statistical population comprised all female students in the upper elementary grades (second period of elementary school) in District 10 of Tehran during the 2025 academic year. Cluster random sampling was employed; accordingly, 15 students were randomly selected from each of the 10 girls' elementary schools in this district, resulting in a total of 150 participants. Inclusion criteria were having a working mother, being female, and having no chronic physical or mental illnesses. Based on the rule of thumb (a minimum of 15 participants per predictor component) and considering 3 components for attachment style, 4 for social functioning, and 1 for adjustment, the minimum required sample size was 120. Ultimately, 150 completed questionnaires were analyzed (Stevens, 2012). Three instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Adult Attachment Inventory (Besharat, 2005):** This 15-item instrument assesses three attachment styles—secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-anxious—using a five-point Likert scale. Besharat (2011) reported its internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.87 to 0.91, and its test-retest reliability ranging from 0.75 to 0.82.
2. **Children's Adjustment Scale (Dokhanchi, 1998):** This 37-item scale measures the child's level of adjustment from the mother's perspective. Higher scores (ranging from 0 to 111) indicate greater adjustment. Dokhanchi (1998) reported its reliability using the split-half method as 0.79 and its criterion validity as 0.81.
3. **Child and Adolescent Social and Adaptive Functioning Scale (CASAFS; Spence et al. 2002):** This 24-item questionnaire assesses social functioning across four domains: school performance, peer relationships, family relationships, and home duties/self-care. Scoring is done on a four-point Likert scale (total score range 24-96), with higher scores indicating better functioning. Spence et al. (2002) confirmed its reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.7. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, employing descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation), Pearson's correlation test, and multiple regression analysis.

Results

Descriptive findings showed that the students' mean age was 12.43 years ($SD = 0.67$). Furthermore, skewness and kurtosis indices for all variables were within the acceptable range (between -2 and +2), indicating a normal distribution of data. There was a significant negative correlation between anxious attachment style and adjustment ($r = -0.53$) and social functioning ($r = -0.64$) ($P < 0.01$).

- There was also a significant negative correlation between avoidant attachment style and adjustment ($r = -0.40$) and social functioning ($r = -0.45$) ($P < 0.01$).
- Conversely, secure attachment style showed a significant positive correlation with adjustment ($r = 0.48$) and social functioning ($r = 0.72$) ($P < 0.01$).

Multiple regression analysis was used to predict adjustment and social functioning based on attachment styles. The assumption of independence of errors was confirmed by the Durbin-Watson test (values between 1.5 and 2.5).

- **Predicting Adjustment:** The regression model was significant ($F = 22.76$, $P < 0.01$), and the three attachment styles collectively explained 31% of the variance in children's adjustment ($R^2 = 0.31$). Based on beta coefficients (β), anxious ($\beta = -0.35$), avoidant ($\beta = -0.18$), and secure ($\beta = 0.21$) attachment styles were the strongest predictors of adjustment, respectively (Table 3).
- **Predicting Social Functioning:** The regression model was also significant, with the three attachment styles explaining 56% of the variance in children's social functioning ($R^2 = 0.56$). In this model, secure attachment style was the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = 0.54$), while anxious ($\beta = -0.28$) and avoidant ($\beta = -0.30$) attachment styles were negative predictors of social functioning (Table 4).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effect of working mothers' attachment styles on their children's social functioning and adjustment at school. The findings demonstrated that the attachment styles of working mothers, particularly the secure style, play a significant role in predicting their children's adjustment and social functioning at school. These results align with previous research findings (Soltanpour et al., 2024; Yousefi et al., 2023; Rahmati et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2023; Agbaria et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2021).

The first finding, that students' adjustment can be predicted based on maternal attachment style, is explained by Bowlby's attachment theory. According to this theory, early experiences with the caregiver lead to the formation of "internal working models" that shape an individual's perception of themselves, others, and relationships. Mothers with secure attachment, by creating a safe and responsive environment, help the child develop a positive image of themselves and others. This, in turn, enhances the child's self-confidence and ability to cope with new challenges in the school environment. Conversely, insecure attachment styles, by fostering a negative or anxiety-laden view of relationships, can predispose the child to adjustment difficulties. This finding is also consistent with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, which links success in the "industry versus inferiority" stage to a foundational sense of security.

The second finding indicated that working mothers' attachment styles also predict children's social functioning. This result can be explained by the theory of intergenerational transmission of attachment. According to this theory, mothers transmit their own attachment style to their child through parenting practices and interaction patterns. A securely attached mother, even with time constraints due to employment, tends to be warm, responsive, and sensitive in her interactions with the child. This teaches the child to trust others, regulate their emotions, and develop social skills such as empathy and cooperation—all essential for successful functioning at school. In contrast, mothers with insecure attachment may exhibit unpredictable, rejecting, or over-controlling behaviors, leading to emotional insecurity in the child and consequently impairing their social relationships. In other words, the quality of the mother-child relationship, not its quantity, is a determining factor in the child's social development.

General Conclusion: This study highlights the fundamental importance of working mothers' attachment styles in shaping their children's adjustment and social functioning within the school environment. The findings emphasize that even with the time limitations imposed by employment, mothers who possess a secure attachment can, through high-quality, responsive interactions, provide a secure environment for their child's emotional and social growth. Therefore, focusing on improving mothers' mental health and attachment styles through educational and counseling programs could be an effective step towards enhancing developmental outcomes for children, especially in families with working mothers.

Limitations and Suggestions: This study faced several limitations, including its correlational design (which limits causal inferences), cross-sectional nature, the sample's age restriction to upper elementary school girls, and its exclusive focus on mothers. For future research, it is recommended that:

1. Longitudinal designs be employed to examine causal relationships.

2. The role of mediating and moderating variables such as parenting style, child temperament, and social support be investigated.
3. Sampling be conducted across different age and gender groups, also considering the role of fathers.
4. Educational interventions aimed at promoting secure attachment in working mothers be developed and their effectiveness on child outcomes be evaluated.

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