



## Evaluating the Relationship between Maternal Attachment Styles and Children's Separation Anxiety Level: The Mediating Role of Mothers' Maternal Early Maladaptive Schemas

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### Abstract

**Background:** This study was aimed to evaluate the relationship between maternal attachment style and early maladaptive schemas and the separation anxiety level of children aged 3 to 6 years in the city of Mashhad.

**Methods:** The research sample consisted of 300 mothers with children aged 3 to 6 years who were selected from kindergartens in Mashhad (Iran) by random clustered sampling method. We used Hazan and Shaver's adult attachment questionnaire, young schemas questionnaire - short form, and the separation anxiety questionnaire (parents' form) to collect the data. We also used the correlation coefficient and the path analysis model to examine and test the research hypotheses. Data analysis was performed using SPSS-20 and Amos 20 software.

**Results:** The results showed that ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles are mediated by the emotional deprivation, abandonment, dependence, and social isolation schemas and predict separation anxiety.

**Conclusions:** Therefore, among the early maladaptive schemas, emotional deprivation, abandonment, dependence, and social isolation play a mediating role concerning the attachment styles and separation anxiety, which can be used in the design of treatment plans.

**Keywords:** Separation anxiety, Early maladaptive schemas, Attachment styles, Mothers.

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## Introduction

The main characteristic of separation anxiety disorder (SAD) is excessive and unrealistic fear of separation from the attachment figure. SAD is the first and the most common anxiety disorder in children, which average age of onset is at age seven<sup>1</sup> with a prevalence rate of approximately 4%.<sup>2</sup> SAD is a risk factor for comorbidity with other mood and anxiety disorders in childhood<sup>3</sup> as well as causing mental disorders in adulthood.<sup>4</sup> The diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder in childhood is associated with the increased internalization problems, physiological arousal in separation situations, educational problems, school phobia, and problems in the family functioning in managing the child's anxiety.<sup>5</sup> Studies have indicated the impact of childhood attachment relationships and childhood care approaches on the

development of anxiety and anxiety disorders.<sup>6</sup> The existence of insecure relationships attachment to caregivers in childhood increases the risk of developing childhood anxiety disorders, particularly separation anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

Attachment styles play a key role in regulating emotions, including negative emotions and the level of psychological distress experienced in stressful situations.<sup>8</sup> Bowlby has also suggested that children are exposed to psychological pathology when they have a negative representation of themselves or others. These representations of oneself and others may be related to cognitive schemas that organize experience and behavior. The attachment style may act as a conceptual bridge and link the experiences of early communication with the evolution of schemas.<sup>9</sup> Early maladaptive schemas are self-harming emotional and cognitive patterns in an individual, which are formed in the mind at the beginning of growth and development and repeated in the course of life.<sup>10</sup> Various early maladaptive schemas create particular vulnerability for a variety of psychological distresses and personality pathology.<sup>11,12</sup> There is also a significant association between early maladaptive schemas and children's separation anxiety.<sup>13-16</sup>

Attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas of mothers can affect the children's separation anxiety. It is important to study this issue since, first of all, attachment styles can affect the formation and growth of capabilities related to defense mechanisms since childhood.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, attachment representations can be conceptualized as cognitive schemas for relationships, which have been formed in response to experiences with childhood caregivers.<sup>18</sup> Due to the effects of separation anxiety on psychosocial development and different aspects of children's psychological life, it seems crucially important to examine the factors influencing separation anxiety. Therefore, the researchers in this study decided to evaluate the relationship between the mother's attachment styles with the mediation of the mother's early maladaptive schemas and the separation anxiety of children aged 3-6 years.

## Materials and Methods

The present study was descriptive-correlational research conducted by the path analysis method. The study's statistical population included all mothers with children aged 3 to 6 years in the city of Mashhad whose children had been enrolled in

kindergartens in the academic year of 2019-2020. We selected 300 mothers from them using the cluster sampling method to be studied. Among seven districts of Mashhad, randomly selected one kindergarten from each district to participate the mothers in the project. Aimed at observing moral principles, a meeting was held with the presence of mothers of the children, was provided some information regarding the treatment process, and questionnaires were given to be completed. The study inclusion criteria for mothers were as follows: mothers of children aged 3 to 6 years, children with a normal IQ, absence of a visible specific disease or apparent disorder, and presence of the child in the kindergarten during the research conduction.

The instruments of the present study included demographic information questionnaire, separation anxiety scale (parent form), Hazen and Shiver adult attachment scale and young early maladaptive schemas scale (short form).

Demographic information questionnaire: Using this questionnaire, we obtained information on mothers and children regarding age and education level.

Separation anxiety scale (parent form): Hahn, Hajinlian, Eisen, Winder & Pincus (2003) developed the separation anxiety scale (parent-child version). This scale has 34 items, measuring specific dimensions of childhood anxiety separation based on the diagnostic criteria of DSM-4. The four main dimensions of this tool are fear of being left alone, fear of abandonment, fear of physical illness, and worry about dangerous events. Moreover, the separation anxiety measurement scale includes two research subscales of the frequency of dangerous events and the indicator of security signs. Previous studies have calculated the internal consistency coefficient and the retest coefficient as 0.91 and 0.83, respectively, and reported good validity for this scale.<sup>19,20</sup> The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the total score and subscales were obtained as 0.82, 0.90, 0.93, 0.94, and 0.83, respectively.<sup>21</sup>

Hazen and Shiver adult attachment scale: This scale developed by using Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment test materials and has been normalized in students.<sup>22</sup> This questionnaire has three subscales of secure attachment style, avoidant attachment style, and ambivalent attachment style. Hazan and Shaver<sup>23</sup> obtained the re-test reliability of this scale as 0.81 and its reliability based on Cronbach's alpha as 0.87. In Iran, Pakdaman<sup>24</sup> has examined the validity and reliability of this questionnaire and reported them satisfactory. The items are rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale are graded using six options (1=entirely untrue of me, 6=describes me perfectly).

Schemas questionnaire (short form) (YSQ-SF; Young & Brown, 1999): this scale is a 75 items self-report questionnaire and designed to assess 15 early maladaptive schemas. Items are answered on a six-point scale from completely untrue of me to describe me perfectly.

Waller, Meyer, & Ohanian<sup>25</sup> examined the validity and reliability of the short and long forms of this questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha was reported 0.964 and greater than 0.80 for the total score of the questionnaire. Many studies support the validity and reliability of the YSQ\_SF questionnaire.<sup>26,27</sup> The

validity and reliability of YSQ-SF have been also investigated in Iran by Divandari,<sup>28</sup> and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient has been obtained as 0.94 for the total score and its reliability has been reported to be appropriate.

Following the data collection, we used descriptive statistical methods (such as mean, standard deviation), and inferential statistical methods (Pearson correlation and path analysis) to analyze the data. We also employed the bootstrapping method to examine the indirect effect. The data analysis was performed using SPSS and Amos (Ver. 21) software.

## Results

The study participants included 300 mothers with children suffering from a separation anxiety disorder. The average age of the studied mothers was 35.17 with a standard deviation of 5.44. Also, the minimum and maximum ages of the mothers studied were 23 and 52, respectively. The majority of mothers had a bachelor's degree (37.33%). The mean and standard deviation of children's age was 4.16 years and 0.79, respectively. The mean, standard deviation, and the correlation coefficient matrix of the research variables is presented in table 1.

As can be seen in table 1, there is a positive and significant correlation between early maladaptive schemas and children's separation anxiety (Pvalue<0.01, r=0.311). There is also a significant relationship between the anxiety separation in children with avoidant attachment style (Pvalue<0.01, r=-0.195) and mothers' ambivalent attachment style (Pvalue<0.01, r=0.327). No significant correlation was found between secure attachment style and separation anxiety.

The Durbin-Watson Index is used to examine the independence error assumption of predictive and criterion variables. The Durbin-Watson index is in the mentioned range (Durbin-Watson index=0.34). Also, to examine the collinearity of variables, we need to consider two indicators of tolerance and variance inflation factor values. As can be seen in table 2, the tolerance and variance inflation indices have gained the required quorum. Therefore, we can suggest that the assumptions of collinearity and independence error of the variables have been observed and are established. Therefore, we used the path analysis method to evaluate the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and attachment styles with the children's separation anxiety. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test also showed that the distribution of research data is normal (Pvalue>0.05).

Figure 1 shows the path analysis diagram of the proposed model and table 5 provides the fit indices of the final model in the studied sample.

Table 3 indicates that the fit indices of the final model, including the Chi-squared index ( $\chi^2=14.59$ ), relative Chi-squared index ( $\chi^2/df=2.91$ ), goodness of fit index (GFI=0.98), adaptive goodness of fit index (AGFI=0.92), comparative fit index (CFI=0.97), increase fitness index (IFI=0.98), Tucker-Lewis fit index (TLI=0.91), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.08), suggest an optimal fit of the

final model. All the paths were significant. Therefore, the model in figure 1 has a good fit.

We used the Bootstrap method to determine whether early maladaptive schemas play a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and the child’s separation anxiety with 2000 sampling to determine the mediating effects. The direct and mediating effects of each of the model paths are given in tables 4 and 5. In this model, the direct paths were statistically significant.

As shown in table 5, the schema abandonment was found to significantly mediate the relation between ambivalent attachment and separation anxiety [95% CI (0.02–0.16)]. The schemas emotional deprivation [95% CI (0.02–0.17)], social isolation [95% CI (0.02–0.15)], and dependence [95% CI (0.02–0.18)] significantly mediated the relation between ambivalent attachment and separation anxiety. The schemas abandonment [95% CI (0.15– -0.006)] and social isolation [95% CI (-0.04– -0.06)] also significantly mediated the relation between avoidant attachment and separation anxiety.

**Table 1. The mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient matrix between the variables**

Variable	Separation anxiety (total score)	Fear of loneliness	Fear of abandonment	Fear of physical illnesses	Worry about dangerous accidents	List of safety signs	Frequency of dangerous accidents
1. secure attachment style	-0.057	-0.026	-0.058	-0.023	-0.047	-0.06	**0.171
2. Avoidance attachment style	0.195**	**0.19	**0.134	0.057	0.062	**0.194	*0.115
3. Ambivalent attachment style	**0.327	*0.126	**0.201	**0.221	**0.256	**0.199	**0.291
4. Early maladaptive schemas (total score)	**0.311	**0.176	**0.201	**0.221	**0.256	**0.199	**0.291
5. Emotional deprivation	**0.393	**0.215	**0.264	**0.307	**0.368	**0.236	**0.323
6. Abandonment	**0.419	**0.28	**0.321	**0.307	**0.366	**0.241	**0.305
7. Distrust	*0.140	0.097	0.056	0.09	0.082	*0.117	*0.134
8. Social isolation	0.105	0.108	**0.132	0.09	**0.117	0.051	0.027
9. Defect/shame	0.055	0.06	0.082	0.04	0.012	0.026	0.063
10. Failure	*0.138	**0.141	0.102	*0.122	0.087	0.071	0.076
11. Dependence	**0.386	**0.259	**0.27	**0.222	**0.252	**0.288	**0.326
12. Vulnerability	**0.228	*0.125	*0.127	**0.231	**0.159	*0.146	*0.205
13. Entanglement	**0.155	*0.126	0.057	*0.147	*0.131	0.081	*0.135
14. Obedience	0.110	0.097	0.107	0.087	0.025	0.06	0.098
15. Sacrifice	0.102	0.014	0.057	0.042	**0.149	0.069	*0.116
16. Emotional inhibition	**0.162	0.086	**0.162	**0.158	0.087	0.104	0.106
17. Strict criteria	0.09	0.032	0.07	0.024	**0.174	0.034	**0.178
18. Merit	*0.121	0.058	0.078	0.026	*0.119	0.082	*0.148
19. Self-control	*0.215	0.086	0.074	**0.149	*0.147	**0.183	**0.263

\* Pvalue<0.05, \*\* Pvalue< 0.01

**Table 2. The descriptive indicators of variables and path analysis assumptions**

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	Variance inflation factor (VIF)	Durbin-Watson test
Safe attachment	15.90	4.35	-0.99	1.74	0.82	1.20	
Avoidance attachment	11.04	4.26	-0.12	-0.33	0.79	1.26	
Ambivalent attachment	12.50	4.37	0.02	-0.53	0.54	1.83	
Emotional deprivation	9.04	5.39	1.31	1.16	0.56	1.77	
Abandonment	12	6.03	1.03	0.27	0.54	1.85	
Distrust	8.61	4.74	1.02	1.96	0.52	1.92	
Social isolation	6.83	3.05	1.50	1.96	0.44	2.22	
Defect/shame	5.82	1.75	0.76	1.86	0.42	2.36	
Failure	8.25	4.52	1.32	1.95	0.42	2.35	
Dependence	7.02	3.28	1.61	1.59	0.44	2.25	0.34
Vulnerability	11.37	5.12	0.90	0.65	0.64	1.54	
Entanglement	7.89	4.45	1.46	1.97	0.58	1.72	
Obedience	9.92	4.18	0.98	1.15	0.49	2	
Sacrifice	17.21	3.62	-0.42	0.21	0.52	1.90	
Emotional inhibition	9.29	5.24	1.07	1.60	0.52	1.90	
Strict criteria	15.78	6.27	-0.18	0.01	0.50	1.98	
Merit	12.24	5.39	0.59	0.77	0.49	2.03	
Self-control	10.50	5.50	0.62	0.79	0.63	1.58	
Children’s separation anxiety	52.93	13.43	-0.34	1.35	-	-	

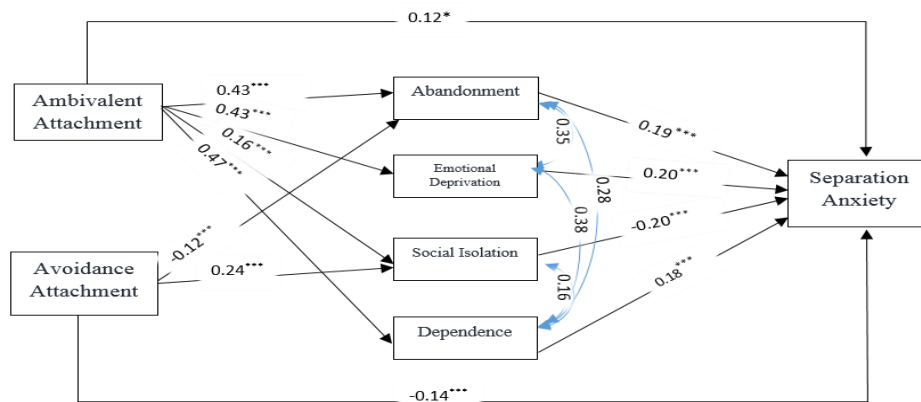


Figure 1. The output model of the mediating role of early maladaptive schemas in the relationship between the mother’s attachment styles and the child’s separation anxiety. Note. All paths have standard coefficients and are significant at\*\*\* Pvalue< 0.001 and \*Pvalue<0.05

Table 3. The fit indicators

Fitting index	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	NFI
Acceptable values			$\leq 2$	$\leq 0.08$	$\leq 0.9$	$\leq 0.9$	$\leq 0.9$	$\leq 0.9$	$\leq 0.9$	$\leq 0.9$
The value obtained	14.59	5	2.91	0.08	0.98	0.92	0.98	0.91	0.97	0.97

Table 4. The measurement parameters of the direct relationships in the final model

Paths	Non-standard estimation	Standard estimation	Standard error(SE)	T statistics	p
Ambivalent attachment to abandonment	0.6	0.43	0.07	8.49	0.001
Ambivalent attachment to emotional deprivation	0.53	0.43	0.06	8.29	0.001
Ambivalent attachment to social isolation	0.11	0.47	0.03	3.02	0.003
Ambivalent attachment to dependence	0.35	0.16	0.03	9.40	0.001
Avoidant attachment to social isolation	0.17	0.24	0.03	4.57	0.001
Avoidant attachment to dependence	0.17	0.12	0.06	2.60	0.009
Ambivalent attachment to separation anxiety	0.36	0.13	0.17	2.08	0.03
Avoidant attachment to separation anxiety	0.47	0.14	0.15	3.03	0.002
Abandonment schema to separation anxiety	0.42	0.19	0.12	3.34	0.001
Social isolation schema to separation anxiety	0.92	0.20	0.22	4.14	0.001
Emotional inhibition schema to separation anxiety	0.51	0.20	0.14	3.49	0.001
Dependence schema to separation anxiety	0.78	0.18	0.24	3.14	0.002

Table 5. The Bootstrapping results for testing indirect relationships in the final model

Paths	Estimate	Confidence interval lower limit	Confidence interval upper limit	p
Ambivalent attachment to separation anxiety mediated by abandonment schema	0.086	0.02	0.16	0.001
Ambivalent attachment to separation anxiety mediated by emotional deprivation schema	0.086	0.02	0.17	0.001
Ambivalent attachment to separation anxiety mediated by social isolation schema	0.035	0.02	0.15	0.001
Ambivalent attachment to separation anxiety mediated by dependence schema	0.089	0.02	0.18	0.001
Avoidant attachment to separation anxiety mediated by abandonment schema	0.022	0.15	0.006	0.001
Avoidant attachment to separation anxiety mediated by social isolation schema	0.051	0.04	0.06	0.001

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the mediating role of early maladaptive schemas in the relationship between attachment styles and separation anxiety. The first finding of the study suggested a significant correlation between the mother’s avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles and the child’s separation anxiety. This finding is consistent with the research results of Manicavasagar et al.<sup>29</sup> and Naibi et al.<sup>30</sup>

The mother-child relationship is essential for a child's mental health. Anxiety and psychological disorders in

individual and social contexts have resulted from the child's deprivation of maternal care or the instability of the child's relationship with the attachment figure.<sup>31</sup> Child's anxiety disorders are determined based on attachment disorders and the mother's attachment style has a significant effect on the child's separation anxiety. If the mother acts as a secure and facilitating base in the formation of mother-child attachment relationships, can affect all other relationships based on the experiences of initial attachment which leads to regulating the emotions, self-control, and problem-solving skills in the child. The parents with a secure attachment style have reasonable requests for maturity from their child and implement these

demands by setting limits and insisting that the child follow them. They show intimacy and attention, encourage children to participate in decision making.

Children with insecure attachment styles have lower psychological, social, and emotional adjustment and suffer more from psychological distress.<sup>32</sup> In Winnicott's theory, the child's innate potential is answered through the mother. Maternal responses should be good enough so that the baby can respond with real experienced emotions. When the child looks at the mother's face, s/he can see himself/herself and his/her feelings in the mother's reflection. If the object (mother) is unable to meet the child's needs, the child will not be able to recognize himself in the mother's disturbing responses.

The second finding of the present study showed a positive and significant correlation between the mother's early maladaptive schemas and child's separation anxiety. This result was consistent with the research findings of.<sup>33-37</sup>

To explain the result, we can say that mothers who have an emotional deprivation schema believe that their desires and need for emotional support are not sufficiently satisfied by others. These deprivations include deprivation of affection, deprivation of empathy, and deprivation of support. Mothers with an abandonment schema have instability or mistrust in receiving love and communicating with others so that they feel that the important people in their lives cannot give the necessary emotional support and encouragement to them since these people are emotionally unstable, unpredictable, unreliable, and irregular.

Mothers with distrust schema believe that others will hurt them, are misbehaving, deceitful and profiteering, and may create grounds for separation. Mothers with the social isolation schema isolate themselves from the world and are different from others or they may not relate to a specific group. This schema often leads to serious defects in feelings of pleasure, relaxation, and a sense of worthiness, progress, or satisfying relationships and is usually reflected in the form of perfectionism.<sup>38</sup>

When parents, and especially mothers, suffer from early maladaptive schemas and are involved in negative thoughts, children will be anxious and are afraid of being separated and abandoned by their caregivers. Hence, the children who have mothers with early maladaptive schemas learn these schemas from their mothers in the process of social learning.

Based on the final finding of the study, there is a relationship between the mother's attachment styles and anxiety separation with the mediation of the mother's early maladaptive schemas. The results of a path analysis revealed that the model has an optimal fit. Also, ambivalent attachment style can predict separation anxiety through the mediation of emotional deprivation, dependency, abandonment, and social isolation schemas. Also, the avoidant attachment style can predict separation anxiety through the mediation of abandonment and social isolation schemas.

Bowlby believes that anxiety and depression conditions occur during adulthood as well as psychological traumas, which significantly and systematically are related to states of anxiety, frustration, and the lack of attachment described in

childhood.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the existence of a relationship between attachment style and maladaptive schemas of the mother with the separation anxiety disorder can be a sign that the child's regulation, perception, and expressing emotions is highly affected by the mother's way of regulating emotions.

The results of this study generally showed that several factors affect the children's separation anxiety, including the mother's early maladaptive schemas and attachment styles. The mother's early maladaptive schemas appear to be an important factor in the development of separation anxiety disorder in children, which can make children prone to all kinds of mental and personality disorders in adulthood.

Some of the study limitations can be mentioned as follows. Limiting the tools and methods of the study to quantitative research methods and not using qualitative and combined methods are among such limitations. The questionnaire is one of the self-reporting tools that people may be biased while answering its questions and may seek to poorly or strongly evaluate the category or structure in question. In this study, it was not possible to control all the research variables such as responding accuracy and bias rates when answering questions, etc. Limiting the research to children aged 3 to 6 prevents the generalization of findings to other populations.

According to the research findings, providing medical services and training to mothers aimed at promoting the level of self-awareness and improving ways to interact with the environment, and taking corrective action to change their maladaptive schemas can be an effective measure. To increase the credibility and generalizability of the present study results, we suggest that similar research will be conducted in other cities and other age groups of children. Also, to achieve more convincing results and almost away from biases and mental perceptions of the research sample, we recommend using a combination of quantitative and qualitative (unstructured or open interviews) methods and experimental studies in future research. In this study, fathers couldn't participate in the process. The role of the father is also expected to be considered in future research. Other researchers are encouraged to identify and evaluate other factors affecting the studied structures in this study in future research.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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