

# Effects of Attachment Relationship on Adolescent Depression

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**Abstract.** Depression is a serious psychological problem, It will hurt the development of the adolescent. Depression can cause negative psychological feelings and can also hurt people's academic life. Depression is more likely to occur in the adolescent population and is growing at a faster rate, with its prevalence reaching 20-40%. In this paper, we investigate the mechanism of parental attachment and peer attachment in adolescents with depression, and suggest the establishment of secure attachment relationships from the perspective of parents and schools, aiming to reduce the occurrence of depression in adolescents by establishing secure attachment relationships.

**Keywords:** Parental Attachment; Peer Attachment; Depression.

## 1. Introduction

The attachment was introduced by the British psychologist Bowlby and originally referred to an emotional connection between mother and child, nurturing and infant, an emotional bond formed by an individual with others of special significance, an emotional bond formed by an individual with others of special significance, providing emotional comfort to the individual [1]. Newborn babies are weak and they need to rely on their nurturers to survive. The attachment formed during infancy is the first way people get in touch with the world, so infancy is a critical period for establishing a sense of security, babies do not have any judgment ability, so they are very dependent on their nurturers, and once they are neglected, they will have fear, which will be suppressed in the subconscious and grow with them. With the development of attachment theory, the study of attachment extends from parents and children to other intimate relationships and is no longer limited to infancy. Thus, adolescents also have attachment relationships. Adolescent attachment is a deep and strong ongoing emotional connection that adolescents establish with their parents, peers, etc. [2]. Adolescence is a critical period of physical and psychological development in which parental attachment changes, such as a decrease in intimate behavior with parents but an increase in verbal and other ideological communication. At the same time, the object and mode of adolescent attachment change, as adolescents begin to move away from the initial object of attachment, parents, and toward peer attachment. However, this change indicates that as adolescents' abilities and autonomy increase, they become less dependent on their parents and more dependent on their peers. Some scholars argue that adolescent peer attachment compensates for the unfulfilled situation between parents and family [3], therefore, the intimate attachment of adolescents shifts from parents to peers and there is a competitive relationship between them, while other scholars argue that the relationship established between adolescents and friends and peers is an extension with parents, family, and they are continuous and mutually relational rather than competitive [4].

Different scholars have explored whether parental attachment or peer attachment is more important for adolescent development. Some scholars have argued that parental attachment has a more profound impact on adolescents; a broken relationship between parents can leave children in a state of chronic depression, and children who witness parental arguments for long periods are more sensitive and suspicious because of the environment, and they may even develop prejudices about marriage and gender. In addition, personality and cognitive outlook will also be affected by parental attachment, if the child is always intimidated, it will form the perception that the world is dangerous, and the impact of a happy family on children is usually positive, children growing up in a happy atmosphere have a positive personality, lively and cheerful, full of confidence, this is because, in the positive, relaxed atmosphere of the family, parents are usually full of love and responsibility, they will establish the right values for their children, and often praise the child. The psychologist William James once said,

"The deepest endowment in human nature is the desire to be appreciated". Parents who praise their children often will give them a sense of worth and will not bury their children's imagination because parents respect their children's ideas. Children will become creative and their potential will be magnified. Thus, Greenberg, Sigel, and LeitchR concluded that both parental and peer attachment are predictors of adolescent well-being in life, but the parental attachment is more significant [5]; Raja, McGee and Stanton concluded that high peer attachment quality does not compensate for low secure attachment with parents [6]; Wilkinson and Walford verified that peer attachment had a non-significant effect on adolescents' adjustment after controlling for the influence of parental attachment [7]. However, a study by Carlo and Raffaelli pointed out that peer attachment has a more important impact on adolescent mental health than parental attachment during adolescence, along with the development of the child [8]. In this paper, peer attachment is expressed as peers will assimilate with each other and will learn some behavioral habits of each other.

In China, most studies support that the quality of peer attachment relationships during adolescence is higher than that of attachment relationships with parents [9]. This contradicts the findings of foreign studies and reflects cultural differences, as adolescents in adolescence are more likely to maintain close relationships with peers to escape from their authoritative and controlling parents. Rebellious adolescents are more likely to seek out peers to talk about their feelings and communicate with. There are differences in peer attachment between boys and girls. The peer attachment of girls is significantly higher than that of boys. Because girls' sense of identity is based more on the relationship of intimacy with others, girls are more likely to gain psychological comfort by confiding in their peers, but boys are more likely to build their self-identity based on their choice of occupation. There are gender differences in peer attachment during adolescence. However, for parental attachment during adolescence, there is no gender difference overall, but there is a gender difference in the communication dimension, with girls placing more emphasis on emotional communication and exchange with their parents. There are regional differences in adolescent peer attachment, with students in urban areas being more likely to trust their peers than students in rural areas. There are also regional differences in parental attachment, with studies confirming that the quality of parental attachment is significantly higher among adolescents in rural areas than in urban areas. This may be because students in rural areas are less stressed, parents give their children more room to develop, and students in rural areas are also more mature than students in urban areas due to factors such as their economic status and are able to establish good relationships with their parents, and understand and trust them. Some studies, on the other hand, prove that in remote areas, where there are more left-behind children, the experience of loneliness in childhood has an impact on adolescence, making them more distant from their parents and making the quality of parental attachment lower for adolescents in rural areas than in urban areas. Due to the specificity of China's national situation, scholars have studied whether parental attachment during adolescence differs in only children, and the results show that there is a significant difference in the communication dimension between only children and non-only children, with only children having higher attachment to their mothers than non-only children have to their mothers. This is because mothers take care of their children, and compared to non-only children, only children can enjoy the exclusive attention and love of their mothers, who can give them complete companionship and care, thus creating a strong bond, and therefore, only children are more willing to trust and attach to their mothers. However, in contrast, more non-only children were significantly higher on the peer communication dimension than only children. This paper conjectures that it may be due to the limited energy of parents that non-only children are unable to communicate with their parents promptly and are therefore willing to turn to their peers and therefore have a better quality of communication with their peers. Whereas, only children are more willing to share as well as discuss with their parents when they encounter things. Moreover, parental attachment and peer attachment in adolescence show different stages of change. Parental attachment tends to decrease while peer attachment tends to increase during the 14-15 years of age. This indicates that students begin to alienate from their parents at the 14-15 years stage when peer attachment plays a complementary role; however, the results of a study by Lijun Chen, Ligu

Cheng, and Youjie Zhong showed that from the age of 16-17 years, both peer attachment and parental attachment produce a decreasing trend [10]. This phase change indicates that when children first enter adolescence, they intentionally avoid parental discipline and are more distant from their parents to show their independence, but actively seek the support of peer attachment relationships, but when peer relationships reach a certain level they are not strengthened, which also proves that parental attachment and peer attachment are in an oscillation period at this stage and adolescents are in the emotional attachment "weaning period", and therefore adolescents' mental health problems are frequent at this stage.

Adolescents are defined by the World Health Organization as adolescents between the ages of 14 and 25, and adolescents are divided into the secondary school period between the ages of 14 and 17, and the university period between the ages of 18 and 25. Based on the above analysis of the characteristics of attachment in adolescence, this paper will elaborate on the influence of attachment on adolescent depression and thus propose relevant strategies to promote adolescent psychological health development.

## 2. The Moderating Role of Adolescent Attachment

The attachment has a crucial influence on adolescent mental health. In this paper, by combing the existing literature, we found that the studies on parental attachment and peer attachment focus on emotional-emotional, externalizing problem behaviors, social interaction ability and academic achievement, among which emotional-emotional includes emotional anxiety and depression, emotional includes subjective well-being, sense of meaning of life, externalizing behaviors include its influence, such as addiction and internet, addiction to cell phone and infractions. In this section, the mechanisms of adolescent attachment influence on depression will be discussed.

Depression is a compound emotional experience. It includes emotions such as sadness, pain, anger, self-guilt, and shame [11]. Adolescent depression is manifested by people who are unsociable, communicative, withdrawn, often focus on the negative side of things or suffer unexpected setbacks, and have symptoms such as insomnia, lack of appetite, depressed mood, extreme fatigue, physiological dysfunction, and dysautonomia. Depression has become a hindrance to adolescent growth. Depression can cause a lack of academic or self-achievement, loss of social support, and affect the development of interpersonal relationships among adolescents. In 2011, Xing Chao used SDS to survey adolescents in Shaoxing, and the results showed that the detection rate of depressive symptoms among adolescents in Shaoxing was 42.0% [12], and in 2020, the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences released The Report on the Development of National Mental Health in China (2019 -2020), the detection rate of adolescent depression was 24.6%, of which the detection rate of major depression was 7.4%, which shows that adolescent depression should draw the attention of society. Factors that cause depression in adolescents include family factors, school factors, and individual factors. That means parenting style, parental attachment, and peer attachment are the driving factors of adolescent depression. The parental attachment has a negative predictive effect on adolescent depression. Yingli Zhang's study demonstrated that the better the quality of parental attachment, the fewer depression adolescents experienced. In the lives of adolescents, mothers stabilize adolescents by caring for and comforting them. Therefore, mothers provide a safe harbor attachment role and provide adolescents with a sense of security, while fathers are adventurous and encourage adolescents to explore unknown phenomena in their lives, encouraging the development of independence and creative personalities. Therefore, there are differences in the effects of paternal attachment and maternal attachment on adolescent depression, as well as differences in the predictive effects of paternal attachment and maternal attachment on adolescent depression. Some studies suggest that the higher the insecure attachment between mother and child, the more likely adolescents are to become depressed, while secure maternal attachment increases adolescents' sense of belonging and thus reduces the probability of having high levels of depression. This means that maternal attachment has a significant predictive effect on depression, due to the

stronger attachment connection of the mother to the adolescent in terms of acceptance and security, and in addition, maternal attachment has an impact on the adolescent's social adjustment through a sense of psychological dominance, which reduces the probability of depression. However, the predictive effect of paternal attachment on depression was not significant. Some studies have concluded that secure paternal attachment is negatively associated with depression in adolescents and that paternal attachment is a negative predictor of depression in adolescents. This is because fathers are more likely than mothers to encourage adolescents to explore unstable and novel environments with autonomy and confidence. Fathers are the bridge that creates a connection between children and the outside world, and for rebellious adolescents, a father's encouragement may allow adolescents to gain more freedom and identity and satisfy adolescents' psychological needs. Paternal attachment influences adolescents' social adjustment through individual resilience and improves adolescents' resilience to frustration, so secure paternal attachment may reduce the occurrence of adolescent depression. Some scholars believe that adolescent depressive symptoms are negatively and significantly correlated with paternal attachment and maternal attachment, that both paternal and maternal attachment are significant predictors of depression, and that arguments, conflicts, and hostile behaviors between fathers and mothers, fathers and adolescents, and mothers and adolescents can reduce the level of maternal and paternal attachment and lead to higher levels of depression. Some scholars exploring the effects of different types of parental attachment on depression have concluded that adolescents with secure attachment types are less likely to suffer from depression, while adolescents with insecure attachment types have the most severe depressive symptoms. Thus good attachment can reduce the occurrence of depression. Parental attachment not only has a direct effect on adolescent depression but can also indirectly affect adolescent depression through other mediating variables. For example, parental attachment can have an indirect effect on adolescent depression through subjective social support and on adolescent depression through psychological quality and psychological resilience.

Furthermore, according to previous literature, adolescents in the rebellious stage are more dependent on their peers and are susceptible to peer emotional affect due to the assimilation effect. For example, if a peer has psychological problems, immature adolescents will be affected by negative emotions when they spend time with him/her. If the peer with whom the adolescent is spending time maintains a positive mindset over time, it will have a positive effect on the adolescent. That is, safe, positive peer relationships can reduce anxiety and depression, whereas negative interactions with peers are more likely to amplify anxiety, depression, or other discomfort caused by conflict, and the stronger the intimate connection, the more profound the emotional experience it brings. Scholars studying the correlation between different types of peer attachment and anxiety and depression in adolescents have found that secure peer attachment is negatively correlated with anxiety and depression, while avoidant and anxious peer attachment is positively correlated with depression and anxiety. Peer attachment also influences depression through mediating variables such as self-esteem and sense of belonging at school.

The previous paper discussed, the effect of parental attachment, and peer attachment on adolescent depression and concluded that secure parental attachment has lower depression and secure peer attachment adolescents have lower anxiety and depression, but is there an interactive effect of parental attachment and peer attachment on depression? Scholars have classified the models of the effects of parental attachment and peer attachment on adolescent depression into the independent-action model and the interaction model. The independent model refers to the independent effect of parental attachment and peer attachment on adolescents' depression, but there is no interaction between them; the interactive model refers to the interactive effect of parental attachment and peer attachment on depression, and the interaction is manifested as enhancement, interference, and buffering. The enhancement effect refers to the fact that parental attachment and peer attachment can promote each other's predictive effects on depression; the interference effect refers to the fact that because adolescents want to gain independence and respect, their level of peer attachment is higher than that of parental attachment, and in this case, peer attachment increases the negative effects of insecure

parental attachment on depression, for example, Chinese families are composed of two or three different generations, and the generations they live in are different. The information that adolescents are exposed to will also differ, and the information that adolescents are exposed to cannot be accepted by their parents promptly, and arguments will occur, and they will consider whether their parents will have angry feelings toward them because of these thoughts, and this argument will lead to adolescents being more willing to share their thoughts with their peers, therefore, the level of parental attachment decreases, but peer attachment relationships rise, and the originally secure type of parental attachment can reduce the depression the onset of depression, but increasingly close peer relationships may lower levels of parental attachment, leading to parental attachment becoming a trigger for depression. The buffering effect refers to the fact that secure peer attachment types can counteract the negative effects of insecure parental attachment on adolescent depression. Currently, more research supports an interactive or indirect effect of parental attachment and peer attachment on adolescent depression, with secure parental attachment supporting adolescents' access to higher levels of peer attachment, resulting in higher emotional adjustment and reduced depression. Parental attachment may also have an indirect effect on adolescent depression through the mediating role of peer attachment.

### **3. Relevant Strategies to Promote Adolescents' Psychological Health Development**

In summary, the effects of peer attachment and parental attachment are crucial. Secure parental attachment is good for adolescents' self-esteem and self-confidence and makes adolescents believe that they can be helped by others in difficult situations, which can make adolescents feel safe and happy, and thus achieve the effect of alleviating adolescents' depression. Therefore, establishing secure and close parental and peer relationships is an effective way to alleviate adolescent depression, which means that having positive and independent personalities around adolescents is a good guide for adolescents. Parents are the first people adolescents imitate in the early stages of personality formation, so they need to be emotionally stable and free from bad habits. Secondly, parents need to pay attention to the material and psychological needs of their children, selectively meet their material needs, and give more understanding and companionship to their children. Parents should learn to communicate with their teenagers at this stage. Parents should give their teenagers independent space at this stage so that they can feel their parents' respect and support, and make their teenagers express their ideas more boldly so that they can trust their parents more and be more willing to share their ideas. By encouraging the correct thoughts and behaviors of adolescents, the adolescents become more confident and reduce the generation of low self-esteem, and establish a good family atmosphere. For some adolescents left behind, parents should pay more attention to their children in daily life, and can communicate with them through video chat, etc. In this way, the adolescents can feel the presence of parental attachment.

As far as the school environment is concerned, negative teacher-student and peer relationships and academic pressure may make adolescents depressed. Among them, peer relationships have a great influence on the depression of secondary school students, therefore, schools should strengthen psychological counseling for secondary school students, teachers should pay attention to the inner developmental changes of adolescents, care about whether students have good peer relationships, intervene appropriately when students with low self-esteem levels and students with a weak sense of belonging at school are found, help children establish secure attachment relationships with their parent peers, encourage secondary school students to communicate with peers, build trust among peers, and avoid peer alienation, thus raising their self-esteem levels and prompting them to develop a positive sense of self, thereby increasing students' sense of belonging and identity to school and helping them alleviate depression.

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