

## Mother Attachment and the Antisocial Behavior of Male Adolescents in Tehran, Iran

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### Abstract

This study aimed to examine the relationship between mother attachment and the antisocial behavior of male adolescents using a sample of 395 adolescents (i.e., 13 to 18 years old) in Tehran, Iran. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) modified version of the Antisocial Behavior Scale (Dekovic, 1999) were utilized in measuring mother attachment and antisocial behavior, respectively. Results of the current study indicated a significant and negative correlation between mother attachment and antisocial behavior. The findings of this study have important implications that address the relationship between mother attachment and the antisocial behavior of male adolescents.

**Keywords:** mother attachment, antisocial behavior, adolescents

### 1. Introduction

Antisocial behavior pertains to actions resulting from the inability of individuals to respect the rights of others (Fortin, 2003). It creates several problems for adolescents, their family, and the society. Antisocial behavior belongs to the fundamental sources of developmental risks in adolescence (Bonino et al., 2005), which may continue into adulthood (Patterson, 1992). Antisocial behaviors include assault, vandalism, arson, theft, crime, and other delinquent acts that do not conform to social norms. Antisocial behaviors are often used analogously to describe behaviors that violate social norms or the rights of fellow humans (Park, Lee, Sun, Vazsonyi, & Bolland, 2010, p. 409). Farrington (2005) categorized antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence into behavioral disorders, impulsiveness, stealing, vandalism, physical and psychological aggression, bullying, running away from home, and truancy. Adolescents accounted for 0.49% of the total number of prisoners in Iran in 2009, and the proportion increased to 4.33% in 2010 (Iran's statistics, 2010). To minimize the antisocial behaviors of adolescents, the Iranian government has devised and employed several measures, including the establishment and administration of juvenile justice, remand homes, security and law enforcement agency, and promulgation of juvenile laws and courts (Mohammadiasl, 2006). Mohammadiasl (2006) reported that approximately 28,000 children and adolescents were sent to correction and rehabilitation centers, which has become a concern in Iranian society.

Adolescents may be involved in all of the aforementioned types of antisocial behaviors. However, the developmentally conditioned type of antisocial behavior is assumed to be the most prevalent (Moffitt, 2003; Farrington, 2005). This assumption is supported by the fact that antisocial behavior during adolescence is characterized by specific expressions, such as conduct problems (e.g., lying, truancy, and staying out after dark without permission), physical fighting (fistfight), damage of public or private property, and shoplifting (Silbereisen & Noack, 1988; Smart et al., 2004; Bonino et al., 2005). Moffitt (1993) indicated that antisocial behavior may contribute to school failures, impairments in socio-emotional development, peer rejection, delinquency, and adult crimes. According to Patterson (1992), antisocial behavior appears to be a developmental trait that begins early in life and often continues during adolescence and adulthood. He further emphasized that if antisocial behaviors begin at an early age, the persistence of these behaviors can be differentiated by the age of the antisocial behavior onset. Behavior

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disorders have two broad dimensions, namely, internalizing and externalizing behavior. Internalizing behavior is directed inward and involves behavioral deficits, such as isolation, withdrawal, and depression. Externalizing behaviors are behaviors such as disturbing others, verbal and physical aggression, and acts of violence. In this study, antisocial behaviors refer to a set of behaviors that is against any established rules or norms. Examples are vandalism (e.g., writing on desks and chairs, breaking down branches of trees and grass and bus seats, and cutting public phone) and cultural misconduct (e.g., getting warnings from school officials and police for violating the Islamic dress code and getting warnings from school officials for violating school rules).

Adolescents encounter several challenges, but the resolution of these challenges can be influential on their subsequent improvements. One of the key challenges is renegotiating their position within the family while maintaining a warm and supportive relationship with their parents (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000). A main factor that determines a successful resolution of this task is the quality of the attachment of the adolescents to their parents.

Attachment pertains to the fondness tie between an individual and an attachment symbol, such as parents. Such links may be mutual between two adults. However, the bond between a child and parents is based on the former's need for safety, security, and protection. Kenny and Rice (1995) considered attachment bond as a "resource factor" that helps people establish other relational support systems. They added that the bond is shown as a factor in the evolution of coping skills, which are essential for controlling developmental challenges among adolescents. Mashhadi et al. (2009) studied the attachment between 60 deviant male and female adolescents (i.e., aged 13 to 18 years) in Tehran, Iran. They revealed that strong, appropriate, and friendly relationships in the family result in secure attachments among family members. By contrast, inappropriate and insecure attachment becomes unsafe. Consequently, the tendency of adolescents to commit deviant acts decreases when parental attachment is extremely high. The responsiveness of parents is the key element in establishing a secure attachment (Mashhadi et al., 2009). Moreover, Mashhadi et al. revealed that the difference in attachment between girls and boys is attributed to the various approaches toward genders that a family employs. Hence, parental attachment seems to play a continuing role in the life of an adolescent.

Previous research suggested that being male was the strongest predictor of delinquency, and it carried a strong association with delinquent peers. Differences in the expectations of socialization between genders may help explain this finding because the strength of positive self-image was also found to be a factor in delinquency. Several researchers (Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, Silva & Stanton, 1996; Sohrabi & Hassani, 2007) indicated that age and gender have a long-term negative effect on the antisocial behavior of adolescents. Compared with females, males may perform distinct risky actions and antisocial behaviors. In addition, more boys than girls commit antisocial behaviors (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Lacourse, Nagin, Vitaro, Cote, Arseneault, & Tremblay, 2006). This observation may be attributed to the fact that boys generally have more power than girls, which may explain the higher incidence of delinquency and crime among boys than girls. Moreover, boys are monitored less than girls. Hence, the risks of diversion or criminal acts that result in the higher incidence of behavioral innovations are greater (Golchin, 2008). The effects of age and gender of adolescents on antisocial behavior have generally been studied in western countries (Park, Lee, Sun, Vazsonyi, & Bolland, 2010). However, similar studies in the Iranian context are scarce. The results of previous research demonstrated a significant relationship between mother attachment and the antisocial behavior of adolescents. Therefore, this study examined the relationship between mother attachment and the antisocial behavior of male adolescents.

## 2. Method

### ➤ Participants

A total of 395 male and female adolescents were recruited from daily secondary and high schools in Tehran, Iran using cluster sampling. The participants were between 13 and 18 years old, with the mean age of 15 years (SD=1.44).

### ➤ Measures

**Parental attachment:** The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used to measure parental attachment, including the degree of mutual trust, quality of communication, and amount of anger and alienation. The scale has 25 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Almost Never or Never True” to “Almost Always or Always True.” The total scores ranged from 25 to 125, with higher scores indicating a higher level of attachment. The IPPA is scored by reverse-scoring the negatively worded items (i.e., 3 and 9 in parent trust, 6 and 14 in parent communication, and 5 in peer trust), and then summing the response values in each section. The reliability assessment of the IPPA in this study yielded an alpha coefficient of 0.89 for father, 0.89 for mother, and 0.86 for peer.

**Antisocial behavior:** Antisocial behavior was assessed using the Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire (Dekovic, 1999). The scale has 18 items focusing on minor acts, such as truancy and using public transportation without paying, as well as serious deviant acts, such as beating someone on purpose or intentionally setting fires. The adolescents were asked to indicate how frequently they commit such acts within the past last 12 months: 0=never, 1=once, 2 = two or three times, 3 = four to 10 times, and 4 = more than 10 times. The study was conducted in Iran. Thus, the following three items were deleted: using soft drugs (e.g., cannabis), using hard drugs (e.g., heroin, cocaine, LSD, and speed), and being drunk. Seven items were added to the questionnaire, namely, skipped school without a good excuse, stole little things worth less than five dollars, watched pornography, trespassed on people’s property, wore clothes against school policy, argued with a teacher or the school principal, and fought with classmates or other students in school. Seven items based on previous studies and current discipline principles in Iran were added to this questionnaire. The total scale ranged from 0 to 88, with higher scores indicating a high level of antisocial behavior. The antisocial behavior questionnaire has an overall alpha 0.94 for the total scale (Dekovic et al., 2004). The reliability assessment of the antisocial behavior scale in the present study yielded an alpha coefficient of 0.79.

### ➤ Procedure

The study was approved by the Tehran Department of Education. To select the respondents, a list of students with discipline problems was obtained from the school counselor. All of the students in the list participated in the survey.

#### 2.4 Statistical Analysis

A descriptive statistical analysis (i.e., frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviations) was conducted to describe the variables of the study. Pearson’s product–moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the direction and strength (negative or positive) of the linear relationship between mother attachment and the antisocial behavior of male adolescents.

## 3. Results

As shown in Table 1, the measures used in this study demonstrated acceptable reliabilities ranging from 0.79 to 0.93. The skewness and kurtosis values of the study variables were between -2 and +2; therefore, the assumption of normality has not been violated. Based on exploratory data analysis, the distribution of scores for antisocial behavior was slightly and positively skewed (0.324), and that for parental attachment was slightly and negatively skewed (-0.041), the variables of which were within acceptable limits and imminent to normal distribution.

**Table 1: Assessment of Normality for Study Variables**

Instruments	Mean	5% trimmed mean	Skewness	Kurtosis
Antisocial Behavior	.98	.97	.324	-.145
Mother Attachment	3.42	3.41	-.041	.688

As shown in Table 2, the obtained mean for mother attachment was 3.42. Based on this mean score, 55.7% of the respondents were from families with a high level of mother attachment, whereas 44.3% of the respondents reported a low level of mother attachment. Therefore, the majority of the respondents exhibited a high level of maternal attachment.

**Table 2: Levels of attachment with mother among surveyed families**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low attachment	171	43.3	44.3	44.3
High attachment	215	54.4	55.7	100.0
Total	386	97.7	100.0	
Missing	9	2.3		
Total	395	100.0		

Table 3 shows a significant negative correlation between mother attachment and antisocial behavior ( $r = -0.34, p < 0.01$ ). Thus, a higher level of mother attachment may induce a lower level of antisocial adolescent behavior. These findings are similar to those of previous studies (Marcus & Betzer, 1996; Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Laibel, Carlo, & Rafaelli, 2000; Buist et al., 2004; Wampler & Downs, 2010); that is, adolescents with a high quality of attachment to their mothers demonstrate less problem behavior later in life. Relationships with mothers may diminish the tendency of adolescents to act out and break the rules. Moreover, if adolescents experience a negative relationship with their parents, which is characterized by alienation and lack of communication and trust, they are more likely to demonstrate such dissatisfaction through aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Laible et al., 2000). Ishak et al. (2010) reported that mothers are understanding, compassionate, and attentive to adolescents. Mothers are also empathetic and thoughtful listeners. Thus, adolescents feel comfortable discussing personal issues with their mothers than with their fathers.

**Table 3: Relationship between the Mother Attachment and Antisocial Behavior**

Variables	Antisocial behavior ( <i>r</i> )
Mother attachment	-.34**

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined mother attachment and the antisocial behavior of adolescents in Tehran, Iran. This study found a significant relationship between mother attachment and the antisocial behavior of adolescents. Hence, adolescents with poor quality of mother attachment tend to exhibit a higher level of antisocial behavior.

The findings of this study fill the existing gap regarding this social issue in Iran. The study contributed to the existing literature in terms of understanding the psychological developmental stage and family context as an important factor for the development of adolescents. The findings from this study will be useful for school and educational counselors in understanding the needs of adolescents from unhealthy families. Moreover, the information from this study is important for educators in understanding factors that may critically influence the development of antisocial behavior among adolescents. The results suggest that mothers play a unique and important role in the antisocial behavior of adolescents. Therefore, parents should be conscious of and sensitive toward how antisocial behaviors affect adolescents. The current findings suggest that having a healthy family and experiencing high levels of warmth from family members

may have beneficial effects on adolescents in families with a low level of warmth and supervision. Therefore, programs whose components focus on promoting a healthy family and improving the quality of parenting should be implemented.

This study has several limitations. One is the sample. The respondents in this study were adolescents in Tehran, Iran. Therefore, the results are not generalizable. Another limitation is that this study is cross-sectional. Thus, the long-term effect of family functioning and parental attachment on the behavior problems of adolescents cannot be examined.

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