

Impact of parenting styles on the quality of college students' romantic relationships and social anxiety through attachment styles

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Abstract. This paper looks at how different parenting styles affect college students' romantic relationships and social anxiety. It uses ideas from attachment theory to explain why some students feel safe and confident in relationships, while others feel nervous or avoid closeness. When parents are warm and supportive, students are more likely to develop secure attachment, which leads to better relationships and less anxiety. But when parents are too strict, distant, or not involved, students may develop insecure attachment and face more problems in love and social situations. The paper also talks about culture and gender differences, and suggests that with the right support, these patterns can change. This information can help families, teachers, and counselors better support students' emotional health.

Keywords: Attachment theory, Safe and confident, insecurely attached

1. introduction

The way parents raise their children can have lasting effects. One of the most important outcomes is how children develop attachment styles. These styles shape how people feel, trust, and behave in close relationships as they grow up. In college, romantic relationships and social anxiety become a big part of students' lives. These experiences can affect their mood, well-being, and also how they treat people in the future (Irfan et al., 2023).

Many researchers have found that parenting styles influence how children relate to others. Warm and supportive parents usually help their children develop secure attachments, while strict or distant parents may lead to insecure attachments (Fan, 2023; Wu, 2023). These patterns may persist into adulthood and affect how individuals handle closeness, trust, and emotional connection (Fang, 2024). Some people become overly anxious in relationships, while others attempt to maintain distance.

Attachment theory helps explain this process. It shows how early relationships with parents or caregivers shape how individuals view themselves and how they expect others to treat them (Bosmans et al., 2020). People with secure attachment usually feel safe and comfortable with emotional closeness. However, individuals with anxious or avoidant styles may fear abandonment or feel uneasy when becoming too close. These feelings can lead to difficulties in relationships or increased nervousness in social settings (Zhang, 2022; Liu, 2023).

This article explores how parenting styles affect the quality of romantic relationships and levels of social anxiety among college students. Attachment style serves as a key link between early experiences and later relational outcomes. It helps explain why some students feel secure in romantic relationships, while others experience anxiety or loneliness. The aim is to better understand how early family environments shape emotional development and relationship patterns in young adulthood. By analyzing previous research, scholars can identify strategies to better support students. Additionally, the findings may offer insights for schools and counselors to help students build healthy relationships and cope with social stress (Ilyas & Khan, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

2. Core Concept Explanations

2.1. Parenting styles

Parenting styles describe the ways in which parents raise their children. There are four commonly recognized types. The first is authoritative parenting, where parents are both warm and firm. They

respond to the child's needs while still maintaining clear rules. This is often considered the most effective style. The second is authoritarian parenting, in which parents are highly strict and demand obedience, often without showing emotional warmth. Children raised in such environments may feel afraid or unheard. The third type is permissive parenting. These parents are very affectionate but set few rules, which can lead to problems with self-control. Finally, neglectful parenting occurs when parents are largely uninvolved. They provide neither emotional warmth nor clear structure, which can result in poor emotional and behavioral development.

Each parenting style influences a child's emotions, behaviors, and relationships later in life. For instance, children raised by authoritative parents often become more confident and emotionally stable. In contrast, those raised in authoritarian or neglectful households may develop feelings of insecurity or anxiety.

2.2. Attachment styles

Attachment styles refer to the ways individuals connect with others, based on the quality of care they received from early caregivers. When caregivers are consistently loving and dependable, children are likely to develop secure attachment, feeling safe in close relationships and comfortable with emotional intimacy.

In contrast, if a child receives affection inconsistently or is sometimes ignored, they may develop anxious attachment. These individuals often worry that their partners do not love them enough, feel insecure, seek frequent reassurance, and fear abandonment.

Avoidant attachment develops when a caregiver is emotionally cold or rejecting. Individuals with this attachment style tend to distrust others and avoid closeness. Although they may appear highly independent, they often struggle with emotional intimacy and suppress their feelings.

These attachment styles originate in early childhood but frequently reappear in later relationships, including friendships and romantic partnerships—especially during college years, a period when many individuals begin forming serious emotional connections.

2.3. Romantic relationship quality and social anxiety

Romantic relationship quality means how healthy and satisfying a romantic relationship is. It includes trust, closeness, communication, and feeling supported. In college, many students start dating more seriously, so learning to build a healthy relationship is important.

Social anxiety means feeling nervous or scared in social situations, like meeting new people or talking in groups. A person with high social anxiety may avoid parties, class discussions, or even relationships. It can make college life harder.

Both of these things matter during college because this is a key time for emotional and personal growth. Students are learning how to be independent, connect with others, and manage emotions. Good relationships help with happiness and success. But if someone has anxious or avoidant attachment, they may struggle with trust, communication, or feel more anxious socially.

Attachment styles link all these parts together. A student with secure attachment often has better romantic experiences and less social anxiety. But those with insecure attachment may face more challenges. That is why understanding parenting and attachment is helpful—it shows how early life still affects individuals now.

3. Impact of parenting styles

Parents' ways of raising their children have a significant impact on how children form attachment styles. These attachment styles affect how people experience emotions, develop trust, and engage in behaviors in romantic relationships when they grow up. Many studies have shown that the emotional environment that parents create—whether warm or cold—can leave an enduring psychological impact on how people act in relationships.

There are several types of parenting styles. According to Fan (2023), the main ones are

authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Authoritative parents are both emotionally supportive and behaviorally firm. They set clear rules and provide emotional support. Authoritarian parents focus more on control and obedience, but they may not show warmth or care. Permissive parents are kind but do not set enough rules or establish consistent boundaries. Neglectful parents are not very involved at all and do not give much care or guidance. These styles affect whether children feel safe and connected (secure attachment) or unsure and anxious (insecure attachment).

Attachment theory explains how early relationships with parents shape how individuals see themselves and others (Bosmans et al., 2020). If a child feels cared for and safe, they usually grow up with a secure attachment style. They trust others and are comfortable with being close. But if a child grows up with parents who are cold, confusing, or not present, they may develop anxious or avoidant attachment. This means they may exhibit heightened anxiety about their partner or try to withdraw from emotional closeness. These patterns often persist into adulthood.

Research supports this connection. Wu Siyao (2023), in a cross-sectional study, examined 300 Chinese college students and found that strict and controlling mothers often had children with anxious attachment. These students were more likely to report lower levels of satisfaction in romantic relationships. They often worried about abandonment by partners, needed constant attention, and showed strong jealousy. These behaviors sometimes pushed their partners away, which made their fears worse. Wu used a tool called the Experience in Close Relationships Scale (ECR), which includes anxiety and avoidance dimensions, to measure attachment and how it affects love relationships.

Another study by Fang Xinyu (2024) examined the role of fathers. He found that when fathers were emotionally distant or not present, their children were more likely to have avoidant attachment. These students avoided closeness, found it hard to express feelings, and often pulled away during conflicts. Individuals with avoidant attachment may appear self-reliant, but they actually hide their feelings and avoid emotional connection. Liu Xiaoyun (2023) also said that people who grew up with neglectful parenting might take care of themselves well but have difficulty expressing emotional vulnerability.

A larger study by Zhang Yuan (2022) looked at many research reports on Chinese college students. She found that children with overprotective parents were statistically more predisposed to insecure attachment, which made their romantic relationships less happy. In contrast, students raised by authoritative parents were more likely to have secure attachment. These students trusted their partners more, communicated better, and handled emotions with greater emotional regulation. They were better at solving problems and providing emotional and instrumental support in their relationships.

Attachment style also affects how people see and understand their partner's actions. For example, a person with anxious attachment might think a late reply to a text means their partner does not care. This can cause a big emotional reaction. A person with avoidant attachment might feel emotionally overwhelmed or distant from emotional support and might pull away. These misunderstandings can lead to more problems if both people do not understand each other's attachment needs.

Cultural context also plays a moderating role in parenting and attachment styles. In Western cultures, independence is seen as a sign of health. But in countries like China, being close to parents is normal. So high parental involvement may not always cause problems. Fan (2023) says that in China, "soft control" parenting—defined as a highly involved but emotionally supportive style without harsh discipline—can still lead to secure attachment, especially when there is open and reciprocal parent-child communication. This shows that culture affects how parenting and attachment work.

It is also important to know that attachment styles can change. People can learn to act differently in relationships. For example, people with anxious attachment can learn to calm themselves and ask for support in healthy ways. People with avoidant attachment can practice sharing their feelings and being emotionally open. One helpful therapy is Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), which is based on attachment theory. It helps people understand how their attachment style affects their actions and teaches them how to connect with others in a safe way.

In short, there is a well-documented association between parenting style, attachment style, and

romantic relationship quality. Authoritative parenting usually leads to secure attachment, which helps people have stable and happy relationships. But authoritarian and neglectful parenting are more likely to lead to insecure attachment, which can cause problems like clinginess, emotional distance, or fear of rejection. These behaviors can make communication and emotional connection more difficult. Understanding this process can help families and schools give better support, especially for college students who are learning how to build healthy relationships.

4. Impact on social anxiety

Parenting styles do not just affect romantic involvement and social functioning. One common issue for college students is social anxiety. This means persistent fear of social evaluation and interpersonal interactions, especially when around others. Many studies show that the way parents raise their children can affect their social anxiety later on, and this is often connected to their attachment style.

If parents are warm, supportive, and stable—this is called authoritative parenting—children usually grow up with secure attachment. These individuals tend to feel safe with others and more confident in social situations. But when parents are too strict, cold, or not very present, children may end up with insecure attachment. This can be anxious (worrying that people will leave them) or avoidant (not wanting to get close to others). Both of these styles make social life more stressful, especially in college.

In a study by Irfan et al. (2023), students with anxious attachment said they felt more anxious in social settings. They feared being judged, avoided speaking in groups, and worried excessively about what others thought. Students with avoidant attachment were not as expressive, but also felt uncomfortable in groups. They preferred to stay quiet and alone, instead of asking for help or joining others.

Ilyas and Khan (2023) reviewed many studies about parenting and social anxiety in Asian youth. They found that children with harsh or strict parents were more likely to become socially anxious. These children did not learn how to trust others or communicate well. When they entered college, they still carried these fears with them. Students with insecure attachment demonstrated difficulty in initiating and maintaining peer relationships, talking in class, or even starting casual conversations. Some even reported experiencing somatic symptoms such as nausea or dizziness when speaking in public.

Another study by Liu (2023) showed that a warm and caring family can make students more confident. These students, who often had secure attachment, felt less anxious and were more open in social settings. But when the family did not communicate much or felt emotionally cold, students developed anxious attachment. They often felt lonely, nervous, and did not want to talk in groups. These students were also more likely to think others were judging them even when they were not.

Zhang et al. (2023) also explored this connection. They found that students with anxious attachment felt very stressed before social events. Some even chose to skip them altogether. On the other hand, securely attached students had better coping skills and were more relaxed in social situations. They were also more likely to ask for help and express their feelings when things became difficult.

Bosmans et al. (2020) explained all this with a theory called “attachment learning.” They said people learn how to behave in relationships based on how their parents treated them. If a parent was kind and listened, the child would feel others are safe. But if the parent was cold or unpredictable, the child may believe people cannot be trusted. These beliefs do not simply go away. They follow individuals into adulthood and affect how they handle social life. For example, someone who had a distant parent might feel awkward even saying hi to a classmate.

There might also be differences between boys and girls. Fan (2023) found that girls were more likely to become anxious if their parents were too critical or protective. Boys, on the other hand, showed avoidant attachment more often, especially if their fathers were emotionally distant. This shows that both parents have a role, but it affects sons and daughters in different ways. In some

families, the same parenting behavior may be understood very differently depending on gender.

But these studies are not perfect. Most of them used self-report surveys, so students wrote what they remembered or felt—which might not always be accurate. Also, much of the research was done on college students, so it is not clear if these findings apply to younger children or older adults. And since many studies only looked at one point in time, it is difficult to say for sure whether negative parenting causes social anxiety or whether other factors were involved. People also have other experiences in life that shape how they behave socially.

Still, one idea is clear across all these studies: parenting matters, and it shapes social anxiety through attachment. Supportive parenting often leads to secure attachment and less social anxiety. But if parents are distant, strict, or uninvolved, children may grow up with insecure attachment and more fears in social life.

These findings are informative and practically applicable for counselors, teachers, and parents. College counselors can help students understand how their early experiences affect their current social life. Social workshops might also help students with insecure attachment feel more confident. And for parents, this research is a reminder that their support truly makes a difference—even years later. It is never too late to work on improving emotional bonds within the family.

To sum up, there is a strong connection between parenting style and social anxiety. The attachment style that forms during childhood is often the key link. Supportive parenting leads to more secure children who feel safer in social life. But harsh or neglectful parenting can lead to more anxiety and fear of others. Understanding this can help schools and families support students better, both emotionally and socially.

5. Discussion and Suggestions

According to the studies reviewed above, it is evident that there are indeed some obvious connections between parenting style, attachment style, quality of intimate relationships, and social anxiety. Since childhood, parents' parenting style will affect what kind of attachment type their children will form, and this attachment style will continue to affect their romantic relationships and feelings when getting along with others in college, especially in terms of social anxiety.

Authoritative parenting, which combines warmth with clear boundaries, tends to promote secure attachment in children. They are usually more secure in love, can trust others, and are less likely to be socially nervous. But if a person grows up in a neglectful or overly strict family environment, they are more likely to develop anxious or avoidant attachment, which may manifest in love as distrust, fear of rejection, or reluctance to get too close to others.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the view of attachment theory. In other words, the interaction with parents in childhood truly has a profound impact on a person's emotional development. However, many studies are still concentrated in Western countries, so researchers believe future studies could examine whether family education methods in different cultures (such as those in Asia) have similar effects on attachment styles.

From the perspective of practical application, these research results are actually valuable for family education and mental health support. It is recommended that parents try to learn more about how to find a balance between "gentleness" and "norms," which is more likely to help children establish a safe emotional model. For universities, psychological counseling centers can also provide more personalized support services based on students' attachment types. For example, students with anxious attachment may need more counseling on emotional regulation and self-worth enhancement, while students with avoidant attachment can gradually practice trusting others and allowing close relationships to enter their lives.

In terms of future research directions, it is suggested to conduct long-term follow-up research, from childhood to adulthood, in order to more clearly determine whether there is a causal relationship between these variables. In addition, the sample should also be more diverse. Many studies are now mainly conducted among college students. Future research could examine whether people of different

ages and cultural backgrounds experience similar situations.

Another point that has been overlooked is that many studies focus on the mother's parenting style. In fact, the role of the father is also very important, especially in terms of attachment formation and emotional expression. Researchers also suggest examining gender differences more deeply in the future—for example, the same parenting style may have different effects on boys and girls.

In addition, most studies were completed through questionnaires, which are convenient but also somewhat subjective. In the future, it is worth considering combining interviews, observations, or experiments to make the results more comprehensive.

6. Conclusion

This paper looked at how parenting styles influence college students' romantic relationship quality and social anxiety through attachment styles. From what this study found, children who grow up with positive parenting—especially the authoritative style—are more likely to develop secure attachment. This helps them have healthier romantic relationships and lower levels of social anxiety. In contrast, negative parenting styles like authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful may lead to insecure attachment, which makes it harder for students to trust others or feel relaxed in social situations.

These results remind people how important early family life is, even years later. It is hoped that parents, teachers, and counselors can understand that what happens in childhood does not just disappear—it can follow a person into college and even adult life. If people can understand this better, then maybe they can give more helpful support to students.

To sum up, parenting styles don't only affect children's behavior when they are young—they can still shape how someone feels, thinks, and connects with others later in life. So, it really matters to improve family education, raise awareness about emotional development, and provide the right kind of help to students based on their different attachment needs. If people do that, it could really help more young people feel safe, confident, and supported as they grow.

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