

Maternal Attachment & Family Relations in Court-Involved Youth

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Family attachment patterns, potentially disrupted by traumatic childhood experiences, could serve as a potential explanation for the development of antisocial behavior. The current study examined associations between self-reported maternal attachment styles and family relations, as measured by childhood trauma and family discord, in a sample of adjudicated adolescents with illegal sexual behavior (AISB).

There is a strong link between maternal overcontrol, hostility, and rejection and later antisocial behavior, including juvenile delinquency (Schroeder & Mowen, 2014). AISB reports higher rates of traumatic child abuse experiences, indifferent paternal caregiving styles, and more insecure attachment styles (Yoder et al., 2017). Psychological distress is experienced by a significant number of justice-involved youth with parenting styles and exposure to violence in the home both influencing this relationship (Jaggers et al., 2021). AISB have reported issues with disrupted parental communication and family separation, as well as experiences in family-specific emotional abuse and neglect above and beyond their peers (Seto & Lalumiere, 2010).

Data was collected from a pretreatment evaluation of male youth (n=529) adjudicated in a court-mandated residential treatment program for illegal sexual behavior. Ages ranged from 12-21 with an average of 15.65 and modal grade of nine. Attachment styles were measured using the Measure of Parenting Styles (MOPS), a 30-item measure used to perceive parenting styles using three subscales: indifference, abuse, and overcontrol (Parker et al., 1997). Responses are scored on a 4-point scale from 0 to 3. A higher score is indicative of a higher use of that parenting style/behavior. This study utilized

only the maternal scales to isolate the impacts of maternal vs. paternal differences. The Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI), a 160 item self-reported inventory format with 31 scales measuring various personality styles and clinical syndromes frequently encountered among adolescents in clinical settings (Millon et al., 1993).

Linear regression was used to determine if maternal indifference, abuse, and/or overcontrol could predict self-reported abuse and family discord. For family discord, a measurement of family conflict and indirect trauma exposure, the overall model was significant, $F(3, 528) = 8.08$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .04$. The maternal indifference scale ($t = 2.77$, $p = .006$) carried all the variance in the overall attachment model with the abuse ($t = 0.67$, $p = .501$) and over-control ($t = 0.88$, $p = .380$) scales not registering as significant predictors. For the child abuse scale, a measurement of more direct trauma exposure, the overall model was significant, $F(3, 528) = 23.44$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .12$. The indifference ($t = 3.04$, $p = .003$) and abuse ($t = 3.13$, $p = .002$) scales carried significant variance in the overall attachment model, with the over-control ($t = 0.91$, $p = .365$) scale not registering as a significant predictor.

Because the maternal indifference scale was a significant predictor in both family relations models, the statistical relationship has been visually depicted in Figures 1 and 2. For both family discord and childhood abuse, as maternal indifference increased so did the youth's self-report of negative family experiences.

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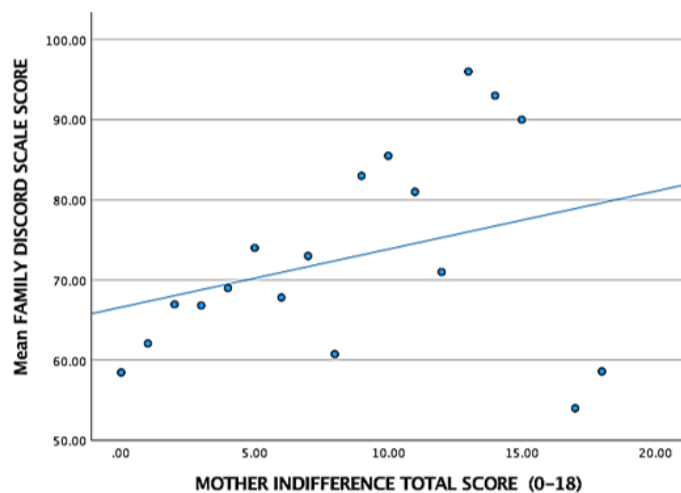


Fig. 1 Scatter Plot of Family Discord Scale by Mother Indifference Total Score.

A similar relationship was found between self-reported child abuse and maternal indifference. Overall, results indicated a significant positive association between self-reported childhood trauma or family discord and maternal attachment patterns.

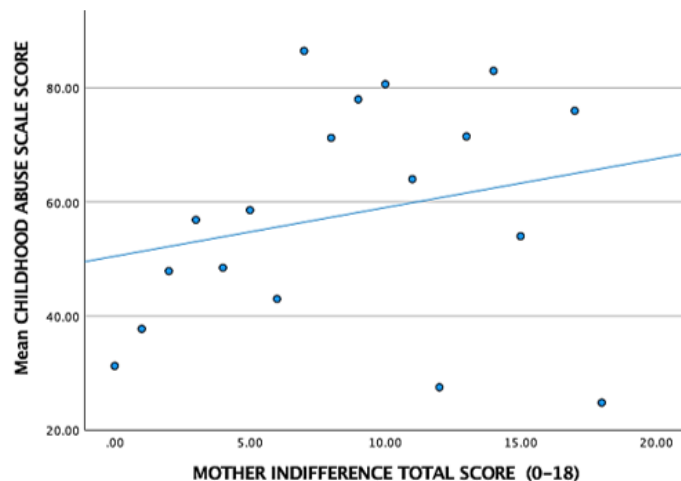


Fig. 2 Scatter Plot of Childhood Abuse Scale by Mother Indifference Total Score.

These results support previous findings on attachment styles and family relationships. A hostile, indifferent, or fearful maternal attachment can result in behaviors that represent attention seeking, intimacy avoidance, or anxious attachment styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This can lead to social and behavioral problems in adolescence, when youth begin modeling the social attachment patterns taught to them during

childhood. Often those who experience unhealthy maternal attachment styles had a mother figure who experienced depression or victimization (Schmidt et al., 2021). Witnessing a parent struggle with severe mental illness within the home early in life may lead to an increased risk of emotional and behavioral issues later (Kitzmann et al., 2003). This could imply that another focus for clinicians could be mental health services for mothers of these youth.

The clinical implications of these results suggest male adolescents may experience negative parenting styles differently when analyzed separately from maternal behaviors. This study highlights the need for assessments of parenting styles which parcels out negative experiences from mothers vs. fathers separately, rather than simply asking about their parents collectively. In addition to this, it is clear that mental health services which focus on family attachment styles could improve the therapeutic process, but adequate assessment tools are needed. This data was cross-sectional in nature; therefore, no causal links can be made between parenting styles of family relations. Future studies should investigate longitudinal trends for causal links, as well as paternal attachments styles for similar or unique patterns.

Statement of Research Advisor

The Juvenile Delinquency Lab is supported by a more than 20-year public-public partnership with the Alabama Department of Youth Services. Jackie's project used archival data from the life of the program. This original research was a course credit final project and has been presented locally at the Auburn University student research symposium and regionally at the Southeastern Psychological Association in New Orleans, LA.

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Kelli R. Thompson is an Assistant Research Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences. Her lab specializes in applied clinical research and she is particularly committed to undergraduate mentoring. She is an alumna from Auburn and has a Master of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary and a doctoral degree from the University of New Orleans. Her lab teaches the importance of science and civic engagement through creative scholarship such as this.

Authors Biography



Jackie Sandell is a senior year student graduating Magna Cum Laude in Spring 2023 with a B.A. in Psychology from Auburn University. She was involved in Dr. Kelli Thompson's Juvenile Delinquency Lab and has collected data to assist with numerous research projects in addition to her own, especially those with a focus on parenting styles. Her future goal is to receive a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. Her interests include forensic psychology, recidivism risk, and the assessment and treatment of illegal sexual behavior.