

Relationship Between Parent-Child Attachment Style and Emotional Regulation in Young Adults

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Dihantar: xxx / Diterima: December 17, 2025
Received date: yyy / Accepted date: 30 December 2025

Abstrak: Kajian kuantitatif ini meneliti hubungan antara gaya perapatan ibu bapa-anak dan strategi pengawalan emosi dalam kalangan dewasa awal di Malaysia. Seramai 105 orang responden terlibat, dengan pengalaman perapatan semasa zaman kanak-kanak diukur menggunakan *Parental Bonding Instrument* (PBI), manakala strategi pengawalan emosi semasa dinilai melalui *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ) yang memfokuskan kepada penilaian semula kognitif dan penindasan ekspresi emosi. Analisis korelasi Pearson dan ANOVA satu hala telah dijalankan menggunakan SPSS Versi 29. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa dimensi penjagaan ibu bapa, khususnya penjagaan bapa, mempunyai hubungan signifikan dengan penggunaan penilaian semula kognitif, manakala penjagaan ibu menunjukkan hubungan negatif yang signifikan dengan penindasan emosi. Tiada hubungan signifikan ditemui antara dimensi perlindungan berlebihan dan pengawalan emosi. Keputusan ANOVA turut menunjukkan perbezaan signifikan dalam skor penilaian semula kognitif antara gaya perapatan bagi kedua-dua ibu bapa, dengan gaya perapatan selamat dikaitkan dengan penggunaan strategi tersebut yang lebih tinggi, namun tiada perbezaan signifikan ditemui bagi penindasan emosi. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini menekankan kepentingan perapatan awal ibu bapa dalam pembentukan pengawalan emosi yang adaptif semasa dewasa awal.

Kata kunci: perapatan ibu bapa-anak; pengawalan emosi; penilaian semula kognitif; penindasan ekspresi emosi; dewasa awal

Abstract: This quantitative study examined the relationship between parent-child attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies among young adults in Malaysia. A total of 105 respondents participated, with childhood attachment experiences assessed using the *Parental Bonding Instrument* (PBI) and current emotion regulation strategies measured using the *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ), focusing on cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Pearson correlation and one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 29. The findings revealed that parental care, particularly paternal care, was significantly associated with greater use of cognitive reappraisal, whereas maternal care showed a significant negative relationship with expressive suppression. No significant associations were found between overprotection and emotion regulation strategies. ANOVA results further indicated significant differences in cognitive reappraisal scores across attachment styles for both parents, with secure attachment associated with greater use of this strategy. In contrast, no significant differences were observed for expressive suppression. Overall, the study underscores the importance of early parental attachment, especially caregiving, in shaping adaptive emotion regulation strategies during young adulthood.

Keywords: parent-child attachment; emotion regulation; cognitive reappraisal; expressive suppression; young adults

Introduction

Attachment style refers to how individuals typically experience emotions and connect with others in close relationships, shaped by early interactions with parents or primary caregivers. These early relational patterns often persist in adulthood and influence how individuals form, sustain, and regulate intimacy in later relationships. Literature generally identifies four attachment styles: secure, avoidant, anxious/ambivalent, and disorganized. Secure attachment usually develops in caregiving environments that are consistent, warm, and emotionally responsive. Avoidant attachment, by contrast, is often associated with caregiving that is emotionally distant, leading individuals to minimize emotional expression and avoid closeness with others. A strong need for reassurance characterizes anxious attachment, increased concern about rejection, and fear of abandonment, often associated with inconsistent caregiving experiences. Disorganized attachment reflects a lack of a clear relational strategy, where individuals may crave closeness but also feel fear or discomfort in intimate relationships—patterns often rooted in early experiences of neglect or abuse.

These styles significantly influence a person's ability to regulate emotions throughout their life, encouraging interest in individual differences and their impact on emotion-regulation strategies.

The ability to regulate emotions is essential during young adulthood, typically defined as ages 18-25 or up to 40, a stage characterized by significant life changes, such as academic transitions, career development, and the formation of intimate relationships. Effective emotional regulation skills during this period are crucial for navigating complex social and emotional challenges and are associated with resilience and psychological well-being.

Theoretical Framework: Attachment Theory and Parental Bonding

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) suggests that the quality of early parent-child interactions shapes a person's lasting internal models of self and others. These models influence how people seek closeness, respond to distress, and handle relationships throughout their lives. The most common patterns include secure, avoidant, and anxious attachment styles

(Huang, 2024; Mandriota, 2021). The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) measures these experiences using two main bipolar dimensions retrospectively.

1. Parental Care: Reflects high warmth, emotional closeness, and affection, which corresponds to the foundations of secure attachment (Henschel et al., 2020).
2. Parental Overprotection: Characterized by excessive control, intrusion, and discouraging independence, which often contributes to the development of insecure attachment styles (Hoenicka et al., 2022).

Specifically, the combination of High Care and Low Overprotection is associated with an Optimal Parenting Pattern, conceptually similar to a Secure Attachment style. It offers the secure base necessary for the child to explore the world and develop competence (Parker et al., 1979).

Emotional Regulation Strategies: Reappraisal and Suppression

Emotional Regulation involves the cognitive and behavioral strategies people use to manage the intensity, duration, and nature of their emotions (Rolston & Llyod-Richardson, 2017). Researchers mainly divide these strategies into two main categories:

1. Cognitive Reappraisal is an antecedent-focused approach, meaning it is used before the emotional response fully develops. It involves changing how a person interprets a situation that triggers an emotion to influence their feelings about it (Wang & Yin, 2023). Reappraisal is typically seen as an adaptive method associated with increased psychological flexibility and better positive outcomes (Gross & John, 2003).
2. Expressive suppression is a response-focused strategy that occurs after an emotion arises, involving the inhibition or concealment of emotional expressions (Sikka et al., 2022). It is generally viewed as maladaptive because it demands considerable cognitive effort and is associated with negative outcomes, including poorer memory, diminished social functioning, and heightened physiological arousal (Gross & John, 2003).

Linking Parental Bonding to Emotional Regulation Outcomes

The established literature suggests a strong predictive link between the quality of parental bonding and the habitual use of these two strategies:

Care and Reappraisal: Research consistently indicates that high levels of Parental Care—such as warmth and responsiveness—are positively linked to the use of cognitive reappraisal (Aznar & Battams, 2022; Boullion et al., 2023; Singh & Sharma, 2024). Growing up in a caring and validating environment helps children understand that emotions are natural and manageable, encouraging the development of flexible, adaptive coping strategies in adulthood (Waffa & Pitigala, 2024).

Insecurity and suppression: On the other hand, people with insecure attachment styles—often due to inadequate or inconsistent parenting—are more likely to use expressive suppression. This coping strategy helps them avoid rejection or conflict, particularly in relationships in which expressing emotions has previously been discouraged or overlooked.

Cultural Moderation: Research shows that suppression is not just a psychological issue but is also shaped by cultural norms. In collectivist cultures like Malaysia, which emphasize social harmony and respect for hierarchy (Sumari et al., 2019), suppressing negative emotions is often a socially accepted display rule. As a result, high levels of suppression may be

seen in collectivist groups regardless of their parental bond quality, a factor that needs empirical testing in this Malaysian-focused study (Klein et al., 2024; Liw et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

Although emotional regulation in young adulthood is recognized as important, most research has focused on children and adolescents, leaving uncertainties about its role in young adults. Additionally, while Malaysia's culture highlights collectivist family ties and strong parent-child relationships, studies within this cultural context are limited. These limits understanding of how attachment styles influence emotional regulation among Malaysian young adults, as many previous reviews concentrate on Western populations. Therefore, this study seeks to address these knowledge gaps.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study examines how various aspects of parenting and attachment relate to emotion regulation among young adults. It specifically looks at three areas: parental care, parental overprotection, and attachment style.

In the first focus area, parental care, the study examines whether the manner in which parents express warmth and affection relates to how young adults regulate their emotions—specifically, through cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. The goal is to examine how parental care affects these two emotion-regulation strategies in young adults.

The second focus, parental overprotection, examines whether parental overprotection is associated with how young adults manage their emotions. The goal here is to understand whether higher levels of parental control or protection affect the use of *reappraisal* and *suppression* as emotional coping strategies.

Finally, the study investigates whether young adults with varying attachment styles differ in their emotion regulation strategies. The goal is to compare reappraisal and suppression scores among attachment styles influenced by parental bonding.

Methodology Research Design

This study used a quantitative method. A correlational design was employed to explore the relationship between parental care/overprotection and emotional regulation. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was performed to compare emotional regulation across different attachment styles.

Participants

The target population for this quantitative study was young adults, defined as individuals aged 18-25. A sample of 105 respondents was successfully recruited, consisting of 26 males and 79 females, from various states across Malaysia. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, mainly recruited via social media platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, which enabled broad reach among the geographically diverse target population.

Instruments

Two primary instruments were used to collect data on the variables of interest: the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ).

Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI)

The PBI, developed by Parker, Tupling, and Brown in 1979, was

used to retrospectively assess participants' perceptions of their parents' bonding styles during the first 12 years of life. The instrument consists of 50 items (25 for the mother and 25 for the father) and uses a 4-point Likert scale. The PBI assesses two primary dimensions: Parental Care (reflecting warmth and affection) and Parental Overprotection (reflecting controlling and restrictive behavior). For analysis, the combined scores from these two dimensions were conceptually linked to classical attachment theory, allowing participants to be categorized into four attachment styles (e.g., Optimal Parenting was treated as Secure Attachment). The internal consistency of the Malay version of the PBI has been demonstrated in prior research among Malaysian youths, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.75 to 0.85.

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

Emotional regulation strategies were measured using the ERQ, developed by Gross and John in 2003. This questionnaire comprises 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale and assesses two main subscales: Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression. The ERQ assesses participants' current emotional states and their typical emotion regulation strategies at their current age. The instrument has consistently demonstrated good internal consistency in previous studies, with reported Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding $\alpha = 0.70$ for both the reappraisal and suppression subscales.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Data were collected via online methods (primarily Google Forms) and in person. All responses were then imported into IBM SPSS Version 29 for analysis. To meet the research goals, two key statistical tests were conducted.

1. Pearson Correlation: This analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the continuous variables of the parental bonding subscales (Care and Overprotection) and the two emotional regulation strategies.
2. One-Way ANOVA: This test was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores for cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression across the four distinct parenting/attachment style categories, into which participants were grouped based on established PBI cutoff scores.

Results

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Parental Bonding and Emotion Regulation Variables (N = 105)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Mother Care	25.97	7.55
Mother Overprotection	16.34	6.07
Father Care	23.42	7.59
Father Overprotection	15.34	6.01
Cognitive Reappraisal	31.80	7.11
Expressive Suppression	18.72	5.02

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for parental bonding and emotion regulation variables among 105 young adults. The mean scores indicate that participants generally perceived maternal care (M = 25.97, SD = 7.55) as higher than paternal care (M = 23.42, SD = 7.59). Both parents were viewed as moderately overprotective, with slightly lower

scores for fathers (M = 15.34, SD = 6.01) than for mothers (M = 16.34, SD = 6.07). Concerning emotion regulation, participants reported more frequent use of cognitive reappraisal (M = 31.80, SD = 7.11) than expressive suppression (M = 18.72, SD = 5.02), indicating a preference for adaptive regulation strategies. Overall, the results demonstrate moderate variability across measures, reflecting individual differences in perceived parenting experiences and emotional regulation tendencies.

Pearson Correlation Results

Table 2
Pearson Correlations Between Parental Bonding and Emotion Regulation Strategies (N = 105)

Variable	Reappraisal (r)	p	Suppression (r)	p
Mother Care	0.17	0.088	-0.25	0.011*
Father Care	0.22*	0.026*	-0.13	0.193
Mother Overprotection	-0.16	0.095	0.07	0.456
Father Overprotection	-0.03	0.746	0.12	0.240

Note. r = Pearson correlation coefficient. p values marked with * indicate statistical significance at $p < .05$.

Parental Care and Emotional Regulation

The analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between Father Care and the use of Cognitive Reappraisal ($r = .218$, $p = .026$). This finding suggests that higher levels of paternal warmth and affection are associated with a greater tendency among young adults to use this adaptive emotion-regulation strategy.

Conversely, Maternal Care showed a statistically significant negative correlation with Expressive Suppression ($r = -0.248$, $p = 0.011$). This inverse relationship indicates that young adults who perceive their mothers as highly caring and supportive are less likely to rely on the maladaptive strategy of expressive suppression.

Parental Overprotection and Emotional Regulation

The findings regarding parental overprotection indicated no significant links. Neither Mother Overprotection nor Father Overprotection correlated with Cognitive Reappraisal or Expressive Suppression. This implies that the controlling or restrictive parenting style, as measured by the PBI, does not seem to predict these two emotional regulation strategies in this sample significantly.

One-Way ANOVA Results

Table 3
One-Way ANOVA Results for Emotion Regulation Across Attachment Styles (N = 105)

Dependent Variable	Source of Variation	F(3, 101)	p	Significant Difference	Highest Mean Group (M, SD)
Cognitive Reappraisal	Mother Attachment Style	2.97	.035*	Yes	Secure (34.85, 6.66)
	Father Attachment Style	2.71	.049*	Yes	Secure (34.00, 6.76)
Expressive Suppression	Mother Attachment Style	1.44	.235	No	—
	Father Attachment Style	0.91	.439	No	—

Note. F = Fisher's F-ratio; p = probability value; $p < .05$

indicates statistical significance.

The one-way ANOVA indicated that emotion regulation strategies vary depending on parental attachment style. For cognitive reappraisal, there were significant differences across attachment groups for both mothers, $F(3, 101) = 2.97, p = .035$, and fathers, $F(3, 101) = 2.71, p = .049$. Participants with a secure (optimal) attachment to their parents scored higher on reappraisal (Mother: $M = 34.85, SD = 6.66$; Father: $M = 34.00, SD = 6.76$), suggesting that strong parental bonds are associated with greater use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies.

In contrast, there were no significant differences in expressive suppression scores for either mothers, $F(3, 101) = 1.44, p = .235$, or fathers, $F(3, 101) = 0.91, p = .439$. This indicates that suppression—a less adaptive strategy—may not be heavily affected by parental attachment patterns.

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to examine the relationship between retrospectively reported parental bonding (care and overprotection) and current emotional regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) among young adults in Malaysia. The results offer valuable insights into how early family dynamics influence later emotional skills.

The Role of Parental Care in Adaptive Regulation

The results strongly suggest that parental care, particularly father care ($r = .218, p = .026$), is significantly and positively associated with the use of cognitive reappraisal. In contrast, maternal care is significantly negatively associated with expressive suppression ($r = -.248, p = .011$).

Support for Cognitive Reappraisal

The positive connection between parental care (warmth, affection, and responsiveness) and reappraisal supports attachment theory, which suggests that a secure base encourages the development of self-efficacy and resilience (Cooke et al., 2019). When parents model and validate emotions, the child learns that feelings are manageable, leading to the use of proactive, adaptive strategies like reappraisal (Azar & Battams, 2022). This aligns with research indicating that a warm and supportive parent-child relationship promotes better coping skills and socioemotional adjustment in young adults (Boullion et al., 2023; Santrock, 2024).

Support for Expressive Suppression

The significant negative correlation between maternal care and suppression is noteworthy. Suppression is a maladaptive strategy associated with negative psychological outcomes (Gross & John, 2003). This finding suggests that a nurturing environment provided by the mother decreases the likelihood that the child will hide or inhibit emotional expression, thereby reducing the tendency to suppress emotions in adulthood. Conversely, Singh and Sharma (2024) and Henschel et al. (2020) emphasized that individuals with insecure attachment, often resulting from low or inconsistent care, are more likely to rely on suppression to avoid conflict or rejection.

Non-Significance of Parental Overprotection

Consistent with previous studies, the level of parental overprotection from both parents was not related to either cognitive reappraisal or expressive suppression. This finding indicates that although controlling behavior might influence other areas (e.g., independence or self-esteem), it may not be a

key factor in determining an individual's preference for reappraisal or suppression in everyday emotional regulation.

Secure Attachment Predicts Reappraisal

The one-way ANOVA results showed a significant difference in reappraisal scores among the four PBI-derived attachment styles for both mothers ($F(3, 101) = 2.972, p = .035$) and fathers ($F(3, 101) = 2.705, p = .049$). The main finding is that young adults classified with Secure Attachment (Optimal Parenting: high care, low overprotection) consistently reported the highest average scores for cognitive reappraisal. This supports the idea that security in early bonding serves as a protective factor, giving individuals the emotional skills needed for adaptive regulation later in life (Waffa & Pitigala, 2024). A secure bond creates internal working models of the self as competent and worthy of support, enabling flexible and healthy emotional processing (Henschel et al., 2020).

The Influence of Culture on Expressive Suppression

Importantly, the ANOVA revealed no significant differences in expressive suppression across the attachment style groups. This contrasts with the reappraisal findings and suggests that the tendency to suppress emotions may be less influenced by early parent-child relationships and more affected by other widespread factors (Matthews et al., 2021). In Malaysia, a country known for its strong collectivist culture that emphasizes social harmony and respect for hierarchy, these values are highly appreciated (Sumari et al., 2019). Suppression, often used to maintain face or prevent social disruption, is frequently subtly supported or implicitly normalized in collectivist societies, regardless of the quality of the parent-child relationship (Klein et al., 2024; Liw et al., 2022). Therefore, although a secure bond can promote reappraisal, the cultural context may still favor suppression as an acceptable means of expressing emotions (Chen et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of understanding emotional regulation within its specific cultural setting.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few limitations. First, it used self-report questionnaires, which rely on participants' honesty and accuracy in describing themselves. Some may have responded based on what they thought was expected rather than what was true, potentially introducing bias. Future studies could include interviews, observations, or parent reports to provide a more comprehensive view.

Second, the sample size was relatively small and may not be representative of all Malaysian young adults. Individuals from different backgrounds or regions may have different experiences with parenting and emotions. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of the results.

Additionally, future studies could employ longitudinal or cross-cultural designs to examine how parenting and emotion regulation evolve over time and across cultural contexts. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews, could also offer richer insights into how young adults manage their emotions in relation to their upbringing.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings indicate that secure parental attachment, particularly paternal warmth and care, plays a crucial role in promoting adaptive emotional regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, among young adults. However, expressive

suppression seems to be influenced by broader cultural and individual factors beyond parental attachment. This indicates that while early bonding experiences shape core emotional skills, cultural norms and personal differences continue to affect how emotions are managed in adulthood. Despite some limitations, this study provides valuable insights and establishes a foundation for future research on the complex relationship between family dynamics, culture, and emotion regulation.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to all participants who generously contributed their time and experiences to this study. Their willingness to participate and provide honest responses made this research possible. No external funding was received for this study.

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