

# Comparison of attachment styles and social development in children of one- and multiple-child families in Isfahan

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Received for publication: 04 January 2014.

Accepted for publication: 30 March 2014.

## Abstract

This descriptive study of the causal type was conducted with the purpose of investigating and comparing attachment styles in students of one-child and multiple-child families studying in guidance schools in Esfahan. The sample population included all guidance-school-level students of the city of Esfahan in the school year 2012-2013 selected using the multi-stage sampling method. First, the educational districts 3 and 4 were selected at random from among school districts in the city. After listing the public and non-profit private schools of these two districts, eight schools were randomly selected. The study sample consisted of 90 students of each group who were selected at random from among students of these eight schools. The members of the study sample responded to questionnaires on Hazan and Shaver attachment styles. The data collected were analyzed using the software spss16 and employing the two-way variance analysis method. Results obtained showed that there were no significant differences in any of the attachment styles (secure, ambivalent, and avoidant) between the two groups of children belonging to one-child and multiple-child families. These results also indicated that there were no significant differences between the two sexes with respect to any of the variables of the study either.

**Keywords:** Attachment style, one-child families, multi-child families.

## Introduction

In today's complicated world, various factors such as parents' employment, differences between

husband and wife, and the existence of problems have reduced parents' interest in establishing closer relationships with their children, and this has resulted in parents having less opportunities to interact with their children and less inclination to have more than one child. In other words, the one-child family phenomenon has become more common than it was in the past. The lack of a brother or sister for the only child in the family, and his/her being the sole contender, affect the different dimensions of the individual development of the children of one-child families. Many studies have demonstrated that the behavior and development of a child are influenced by the positive quality of the emotional relationships of the parents, and are particularly affected by the behavior the child observes in the mother (Ahmadi and Banijamal, 2006). The way the mother behaves towards her child causes the development of the attachment style of the child, and this attachment style plays a substantial role in the child's future social development (Safaei et al. 2011). It appears that the initial attachment style of the child is related to the development of social skills of the child in later years.

After birth, the human child has an innate inclination to be attached to adult care. Bowlby (1969) has argued that children who have not received sufficient care will suffer from their unsatisfied innate need for attachment (Peeterson and Seligman, 2004). Attachment refers to deep and stable relationships that are established between a child and the caregiver in the first year of the child's life. This attachment deeply influences all aspects of a child's life such as his/her mind, body, emotions, communications, and values. In other words, attachment is

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a two-way process of emotional relationships that affects the psychological, physical, and cognitive development of a child and is considered a foundation for the trust or distrust of the child and for the way the child will establish relationships throughout his/her life. If this attachment process is disrupted, the child may fail in forming a secure basis needed for his/her mental health in adulthood (Hinshaw et al., 1999). The following three styles of attachment have been distinguished from each other. In secure attachment, people can easily establish close relationships with others and feel comfortable in leaning on others and in permitting others to lean on them, and do not feel anxious that others might leave them or get intimate with them. In avoidant insecure attachment, people feel uncomfortable with others and cannot trust those who try to get close to them. In ambivalent anxious-avoidant attachment, people feel others do not like them and are always anxious that others will leave them (Collins and Read, 1994) and, when the source of attachment is not trustworthy, accessible, and responsive, they feel stress and will not develop secure attachment (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005). Research carried out has shown that people with insecure attachment, compared to those with secure attachment, exhibit greater despair, anger, and behavioral problems. Besharat et al. (2003) studied the relationship between attachment styles and interpersonal problems in Tehran University students. The results they obtained showed that students with secure attachment, compared with testees having insecure attachment, confronted fewer interpersonal problems; and that, students with avoidant-insecure attachment faced fewer problems than those having ambivalent insecure attachment. Vafaeyan (2006) did research with the purpose of studying the relationship between social skills and attachment styles in adolescents and demonstrated that there was a significant relationship between the social skills and attachment styles of adolescents. There were significant differences between adolescent boys and girls with respect to both of the two variables of social skills and attachment styles. Besharat et al. (2003) studied and compared attachment styles in patients afflicted with depression or anxiety disorder and in normal people. The results they obtained revealed that the dominant attachment style was avoidant in depressed patients, ambivalent in anxious people, and secure in normal persons. Their results suggested that disorders

in attachment style influenced failure in emotional adjustment. Bar-on and Parker (2000) studied the relationship between attachment styles and emotional intelligence in children and showed that children with secure attachment could express themselves emotionally, had better understanding of emotions, and, compared to children having insecure attachment, were more capable in adjusting their emotions. Zimmermann et al. (2001) discovered in their research that people with insecure attachment reported despair, hopelessness, and anger more frequently than those having secure attachment, and that disorganized behavior was observed less often in people with secure attachment. Çiztürk and Mutlu (2010) studied the relationship between attachment, psychological welfare, happiness, and social anxiety in students and demonstrated that there was a significant relationship between attachment style and psychological welfare and satisfaction with relationships. Ghobari Bonab and Haddadi Koohsar (2011) studied the relationship between emotional intelligence and attachment styles in adolescent delinquents and showed that attachment styles in these adolescents had the ability to predict emotional intelligence. Their results also indicated that adolescent delinquents with insecure attachment styles had lower emotional intelligence than adolescents who had secure attachment styles. Ogelman and Seven (2012) researched the relationship between attachment styles and relationships prep school children had with their peers and showed there was a significant relationship between attachment style and relationships with peers, and that the attachment style indicated the capability of predicting the relationships these children had with their peers in this age group.

Social behavior of those five-year old children who had secure attachments at 15 months of age was studied in a research and it was found that these children had a social leadership role. In general, research has consistently confirmed that secure attachment has multi-dimensional benefits. Persons with secure attachment have positive relationships with their parents, teachers, and peers. All predictors of general adaptation and of the quality of social functions among them are stronger than they are in people who do not have secure attachment. Secure attachment to caregivers in the first year of life provides a solid foundation for adjustment and exploration, for hope for the future, and for inclination to turn to others and trust them in times of need (Walters, 1992).

Therefore, given the background of research carried out, the type of the treatment a child receives from the parents, especially from the mother, plays a basic role in the formation of the style of attachment of the child. The ways parents establish relationships with and their children in one-child families are different from those in multi-child families. On the other hand, the emotional dependence of children to their parents is much stronger in one-child families (Pickheart, 2011). Hence, the attachment style of children to their parents seems to be affected by the family environment and by the number of children in the family. Therefore, this research was intended to find answers to this question: how do the attachment styles of adolescents in one-child families differ from those in multi-child families? In this regard, the hypotheses of this research are as follows. First, there are differences between guidance school students of one-child and multi-child families in the city of Esfahan regarding their attachment styles. Second, there are differences between guidance school students of one-child and multiple-child families in the city of Esfahan concerning their ambivalent insecure attachment styles. Third, there are differences between guidance school students of one-child and multiple-child families in the city of Esfahan in relation to their avoidant insecure attachment styles. Fourth, there are differences between average scores made by boys and girls studying in guidance schools in the city of Esfahan in attachment styles (secure, ambivalent insecure, and ambivalent avoidant).

## Methodology

Type of research, sample, and sampling method: this descriptive research is of the causal-comparative or causality after the fact type. The statistical universe in our research consisted of all guidance school students of the city of Esfahan in the school year 2012-2013. The multistep random sampling method was used in this study. Educational districts 3 and 4 were randomly selected from among the educational districts of the city of Esfahan. A list of all public and private non-profit guidance schools in these two districts was then drawn up and eight schools (four from each district) were randomly selected from the list. After preliminary execution of the tools using Cochran's formula, the sample volume containing 90 students for each of the two groups of students from one-child and from

multi-child families was obtained. We then visited the schools where these students were studying and, from the lists of students, several students from one-child and multiple-child families were randomly selected as the research sample and the research tool was completed by them. It must be mentioned that each 90-member group consisted of 45 girl and 45 boy students. The economic-social feature was controlled for because well-off families lived where one of the selected districts was located and families from the lower classes lived in the other district.

The research tool: An adult attachment scale questionnaire was used to assess attachment of members of the sample in our research. This questionnaire was designed by Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1990) and includes 15 questions. Respondents rate the questionnaire in a likert five-options spectrum. The option "Never" receives the score of zero, and the option "almost always" the score of five. In this questionnaire, the respondent is asked to choose the options that best describe their communication style, and it has the three subscales of secure, avoidant insecure, and ambivalent insecure attachment; and five questions measure one of the subscales and the score of each subscale is the average of the scores of the related five questions. Hazan and Shaver obtained the reliability of retest of 0.81 for the time interval of one week to four years of the adult attachment scale questionnaire and the reliability of 0.78 using Cronbach alpha method. In Iran, the retest reliability obtained for two four-week intervals was more than 0.83. The reliability calculated using Cronbach alpha method in the normal population was 0.7, which shows the questionnaire enjoyed good internal consistency in the Iranian sample (Besharat, 2000). Mohammadi (2005) also obtained the reliability of 0.84 for secure attachment, and the reliability of 0.78 for ambivalent insecure attachment. Subsequently, this questionnaire has been widely used in internal research and its validity and reliability have been confirmed. In our research too, the reliability obtained using Cronbach alpha for secure, avoidant insecure, and ambivalent attachments were 0.637, 0.631, and 0.633, respectively.

## Results

In Table 1, the means and the standard deviations of the variables of the research are presented separately for the two groups of students from one-child and from multi-child families.

**Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the scores of the variables of the research presented separately for the two groups and the two genders**

Groups/variables/ index		Secure at- tachment style	Avoidant attachment style	Ambivalent attachment style
Students from multi- child families	Mean	19.07	13.26	14.34
	Standard deviation	3.37	3.41	4.15
Students from one- child families	Mean	18.79	12.39	13.66
	Standard deviation	4.12	3.65	4.05
Girls	Mean	18.65	12.52	14.08
	Standard deviation	3.56	3.46	3.87
Boys	Mean	19.21	13.13	3.91
	Standard deviation	3.94	3.63	4.34

Based on Table 1, the mean secure attachment of students from one-child families is 18.79, and that of students from multi-child families 19.07. The means for the avoidant attachment style in students from one- and multi-child families were 13.26 and 12.39, respectively. As for the variable of the ambivalent attachment style too, the means for these two groups

were 14.34 and 13.66, respectively. The means of secure attachment style for the boys was 18.65, and for the girls 19.21. The means of avoidant attachment style for the boys and girls too were 12.52 and 13.13, respectively. As for the ambivalent attachment style variable too, the means for the two groups were 14.08 and 13.91, respectively.

Table 2 presents the results of the two-way analysis of the variance for the comparison of secure attachment in students from one- and multi-child families and for the boy and girl students who took part in the study.

According to the results listed in Table 2, the main effect of one-child – multi-child families was not significant: the significance obtained was 0.324, which is greater than 0.05. In other words, the two groups were not significantly different with respect to the secure attachment variable. The extent of influence of the factor of one-child-multiple-child families on the variable of secure attachment was 0.006; that is, only 0.6 percent of the total variance, or individual differences, in the variable of secure attachment are explained by the factor of one-child- multi-child families (and this is a low and insignificant value). Therefore, the first hypothesis is rejected. The main effect of gender obtained was not significant either: it was 0.608, which is greater than the 0.05 level. The extent of the effect of this factor on the variable of secure attachment was 0.001(or close to 0.01 percent), which is a low and insignificant value. Therefore, the second hypothesis of the research is also rejected. The interaction between the one- child-multiple-child and the gender factors was not significant either: its significance was 0.344, which is greater than the 0.05 level.

**Table 2. Results of the two-way analysis of the variance of the variable of secure attachment**

Source of change	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean squares	F	Significance	Effect size	Power of the test
Corrected model	30.444	3	10.148	0.714	0.545	0.012	0.2
Constant number	64524.8	1	64524.8	451.1	0.001	0.963	1.000
One-child, multiple-child families	13.998	1	13.998	0.977	0.324	0.006	0.166
Gender	3.756	1	3.756	0.264	0.608	0.001	0.08
One-child, multi-child families gender	12.8	1	12.8	0.901	0.344	0.005	0.157
Error	2500.756	176	14.209				
Total	67056.000	180					
Corrected total	2531.2	179					

**Table 3. Results of the two-way analysis of the variance of the variable of Ambivalent Insecure attachment**

Source of change	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean squares	F	Significance	Effect size	Power of the test
Corrected model	44.133	3	14.711	0.871	0.457	0.015	0.238
Constant number	35280.000	1	35280.000	208.8	0.001	0.922	1.000
One-child, multiple-child families	21.356	1	21.356	1.264	0.262	0.007	0.201
Gender	1.422	1	1.422	0.084	0.722	0.001	0.06
One-child, multiple-child families x gender	21.356	1	21.356	1.264	0.262	0.007	0.201
Error	2973.867	176	16.897				
Total	38298.000	180					
Corrected total	3018.000	179					

In Table 3, results of the two-way analysis of the variance of comparison of ambivalent insecure attachment in the two groups of students from one-child and from multiple-child families and between the boys and girls who took part in the research are presented.

Based on the results in Table 3, the main effect of one-child – multiple-child was not significant: its significance was 0.262, which is more than 0.05. In other words, the two groups were not significantly different with respect to the variable of ambivalent insecure attachment. The extent of the effect of the factor of one-child-multiple-child on the variable of ambivalent insecure attachment is 0.007; that is, only 0.7 percent of the total variance or individual differences in the variable of ambivalent insecure attachment can be explained by the one-child-multiple-child factor (which is a low and insignificant value). Therefore, the third

hypothesis of the research is rejected. The main effect of gender was not significant either: its significance was 0.722, which is more than the 0.05 level. The extent of the effect of this factor on the variable of ambivalent insecure attachment is 0.001, or close to 0.01 percent, which is a low and insignificant value. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis of the research is rejected as well. The interaction between one-child – multiple-child and gender was not significant either: its significance was 0.262, which is greater than the 0.05 level.

In Table 4, results of the two-way analysis of the variance of the comparison of avoidant insecure attachment between the two groups of students from one- and multiple- child families and between the boy and girl students who took part in the research are shown.

**Table 4. Results of the two-way analysis of the variance of the variable of avoidant insecure attachment**

Source of change	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean squares	F	Significance	Effect size	Power of the test
Corrected model	91.917	3	30.539	2.477	0.063	0.041	0.08+
Constant number	29619.339	1	29619.339	240.2	0.001	0.932	1.000
One-child, multiple-child	34.672	1	34.672	2.812	0.095	0.016	0.385
Gender	16.806	1	16.806	1.363	0.245	0.008	0.213
One-child, multiple-child x gender	40.139	1	40.139	3.255	0.073	0.018	0.434
Error	2170.044	176					
Total	31881.000	180					
Corrected total	2261.661	179					



Based on results presented in Table 4, the main effect of one-child-multiple-child was not significant: its significance was 0.095, which is more than 0.05. In other words, the two groups were not significantly different with respect to the variable of avoidant insecure attachment. The extent of the effect of one-child-multiple-child on the variable of avoidant insecure attachment is 0.016; that is, only 1.6 percent of the total variance or individual differences in the variable of avoidant insecure attachment are explained by the one-child-multiple-child factor, which is a low and insignificant value. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis of the research is rejected. The main effect of gender was not significant either: its significance was 0.07, which is greater than 0.05. The extent of the effect of this factor on the variable of avoidant insecure attachment is 0.008 or only close to 0.08 percent (which is a low and insignificant value). Therefore, the sixth hypothesis of the research is rejected as well. The interaction between the one-child-multiple-child and gender was not significant either: its significance is 0.073, which is more than the 0.05 level.

## Discussion and conclusions

In Bowlby's opinion, the relationships between a child and his/her caregivers (mother or mother substitute) in the early years of the life of the child result in the formation of special psychological patterns that form the foundation of interpersonal relationships in adulthood (Bowlby, 1980). Attachment is a special emotional relationship that requires exchange of pleasure, care, and comfort. Results of our research showed that these two groups of students from one- and multi-child families are not significantly different with respect to the three attachment styles.

Investigation and comparison of attachment styles in various groups have been carried out in studies including those conducted by Besharat et al. (2013), Zimmermann et al. (2001), Ghobari Bonab and Haddadi Koohsar (2011). However, no other studies have dealt with the question of differences between attachment styles of children from one- and multi-child families.

Bowlby's research showed that attachment is the relationship, and the stable psychological bond, between two persons, and that attachment styles influence the normal and abnormal features of interpersonal relationships (Feeney et al., 1999). Therefore, attachment takes shape at childhood and the

presence of a brother or sister is not of much importance in its formation. When a child is born, it is after satisfying its basic needs. Later on, when the child grows and searches for a secure relationship with its caregiver, it has no view concerning the presence of a brother or sister or of a rival for receiving the care of the parents. Therefore, being a child of a one-child or a multi-child family does not play a major role in the formation or in changes in attachment styles.

Other results obtained in this research, which are inconsistent with those found by Vafaeeyan (2006), indicated that attachment styles in girls and boys are not significantly different from each other.

In explaining these results, it can be said that the lack of differences in the attachment styles of boys and girls indicates, besides the biological genuineness of attachment, the decisive role of early childhood (the stage when there are no distinctions in sexual roles), and the continuance and stability of attachment styles. In other words, when attachment is taking shape, the child has no clear view regarding gender, and the quality of the relationship with the caregiver parent is more important than the fact that the child is a boy or a girl.

Given the importance of, and the increase in, the number of one-child families in the society, it is suggested that future researchers conduct this study using other samples and students from other levels of education (elementary and high school students) and compare the results they obtain with those found in our research. We also suggest that future researchers compare other variables such as quality of relationships with parents, parent-child relationships, emotional intelligence, etc., in the two groups of children (students) from one-child and from multi-child families. Moreover, it is suggested that a study be carried out to compare the variables in our study with respect to the order in which children are born in families.

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