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# The Relationships Between Maternal Anxiously Attached Feelings Towards The Child, Parenting Stress, and Negative Parenting in China

**Abstract:** This research aims to explore the associations of maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the child, parenting stress, and negative parenting among Chinese mothers with school-aged children. 105 Chinese mothers participated in it. The study utilized the modified anxious attachment subscale in Experiences in Close Relationships Scale, the Parenting Stress Index, and the subscale of authoritarian parenting in The Short Version of Parenting Style and Dimension Questionnaire. It found that parenting stress played a mediator role in the relationship between parents' anxiously attached feelings towards a child and negative parenting. These results highlight the importance of intervention programs aiming for parenting stress management.

**Keywords:** *Chinese context, Maternal attachment, parenting stress, parenting behaviors*

## INTRODUCTION

Generally, according to the impacts of parenting behaviors on children's development, parenting style could be divided into negative and positive parenting (Dallaire et al., 2006; DeKlyen et al., 1998). DeKlyen and her colleagues (1998) noted that positive parenting refers to the parenting which promotes children's cognitive and affective development (e.g. the development of the abilities related to emotional regulation), and negative parenting refers to parenting which increases the risks of children's problems (e.g. depression and anxiety). Psychologists summarized that positive parenting includes responsive and supportive parenting, such as sensitivity to children's emotions, warm response, acceptance, and scaffolding, while negative parenting includes insensitive, cool, harsh, and hostile parenting (Dallaire et al., 2006; Deater-Deckard, 1998; DeKlyen et al., 1998).

Negative parenting behaviors are harmful to the offspring's development. Previous empirical research showed that, in the infant stage, insensitive and unresponsive parenting hinders the infant's emotional development (Propper & Moore, 2006). Also, for toddlers, dysfunctional parenting behaviors raise the parent-child conflicts and child's problematic behaviors (Morawska & Sanders, 2007). Additionally, for adolescents, too strict parenting and too much psychological control from parents will possibly lead to adolescents' emotional problems, such as stress and depression (Finkenauer et al., 2005).

It is worth noticing that parents' attachment pattern impacts parenting behaviors. According to the theory of attachment, individuals develop the representation of attachment to others based on personal interaction histories with others, especially, with the primary caregivers. Such representations are named internal working models (IWMs) (Bretherton, 1990; Main et al., 1985). Under the context of the interactions with significant others, human beings gradually develop the IWMs since the infant stage, which will influence affective cognition towards others in the future, as well as the emotional reaction and other behaviors in interpersonal relationships (Bolwby, 1969; Cassidy, 1994; Cooke et al., 2019; Schank, 1983). Thus, theoretically, for parents, their internal attachment patterns affect parenting behaviors towards the children in the parent-child relationship. And this process makes the possible transmission of attachment happen (Sierau et al., 2013). There were ample pieces of evidence indicating that maternal insecure attachment is related to negative parenting (Jones et al., 2014; Riva Crugnola et al., 2013, 2018; Safyer et al., 2019). And, anxious attachment as a typical type of insecure attachment, has associations with negative parenting. For instance, female adults' anxious attachment enlarges their distress and dysfunction of emotional regulation when facing infants' negative emotions (Ma et al., 2017), which is potentially harmful to infants' development of psychological functions (Van Ee et al., 2012). Also, anxious attachment relates to inconsistent or ambivalent maternal caregiving (Wearden et al., 2008).

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The traditional attachment theory developed in the western context, just emphasizes attachment from the perspective of offspring. In detail, the traditional theory only underscores children's attachment towards parents or other primary caregivers in caregiver-child relationships. For extending the theory, some psychologists suggested that in parent-child relationships, parents can have an attachment towards their children too (Fuller, 1990; Shin & Kim, 2007). Especially, in the perspective of sociologists, in the typical eastern Asian areas, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, it is the cultural phenomenon that parents and the children are attached reciprocally (Li & Yang, 2006).

Parental attachment towards the child is a very controversial definition. Bowlby only pointed out offspring's attachment to their caregiver because, in his opinion, the caregiver is responsible for a child's security and other support, which are significantly related to a child's life quality and well-being. However, the child is not responsible for the parent's well-being.

Bowlby's theory was rooted in the west, eastern attachment theory could be different. In fact, in the east Asian area, the mainstream family values are based on Confucianism, which suggests the basic unit in society is relationships, instead of an individual. In family relationships, a father is responsible for family incomes and plays the role of the ruler while a mother is responsible for raising children and taking care of parents. When the children become adults and get married, the children should repeat the roles of their parents (Kim & Park, 2000). That means, in the East-Asian area, children are potentially responsible for the caregivers' sense of security in the future and adults are currently responsible for their parents' security and well-being. Therefore, especially in the eastern context, it is necessary to investigate parental attached feelings towards their children.

As a supplement for the traditional attachment theory, a researcher continued to develop the Maternal Attachment Inventory to investigate mothers' attachment patterns to the child (Müller, 1994). According to Müller's original theory, maternal attachment can be measured by mothers' feelings towards babies directly. But in other contexts, such as Korea, it was found that it would be better to estimate the maternal attachment through the following aspects: maternal feelings of affections during the time spent with baby, relaxed feelings during the mother-baby interaction, and maternal understanding of the baby (Shin & Kim, 2007). However, this instrument only applies to mother-infant relationships and the related researches are scarce. But still, it has been shown that such an attached feeling impacts maternal parenting behaviors during children's infant stage (Britton et al., 2001; Tilokskulchai et al., 2002). Also, a study showed that it affects emotions of infants' mothers during the parenting process: extremely high attached feelings are related to their negative emotions, such as anxiety and stress (Allison et al., 2011). Nonetheless, mothers' attachment towards older-child-related questions remains unclear.

It has been known for a long time that parenting stress impacts parenting negatively. In other words, parenting

stress leads to negative parenting. Deater-Deckard's theory (1998) pointed out that parenting stress could lead to a child's problem through negative parenting. Moreover, a new model suggested that parenting stress is highly correlated to parental anxiety and parental depression, and the stress eventually causes some parenting dysfunction, including inadequate self-regulation, insufficient emotional support/acceptance, and less compassion for children (Fernandes et al., 2021). Even, Lerardi and her colleagues argued that stressful conditions can also strengthen parental anxiety and depression in turn, which possibly decrease the quality of parent-child interaction (Lerardi et al., 2019). There were some empirical researches that demonstrated that parents who have parenting stress because of their "difficult" children, which means children are moody and lack emotional regulation, are also less warm and responsive towards children in parent-child interaction (Crawford & Manassis, 2001; Karrass et al., 2003).

Due to the lack of research about caregivers' attached feelings towards older offspring and the lack of evidence about correlations of the caregivers' attached feelings towards the child, parenting stress, and parenting, this study aimed to probe the associations of maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the school-age child, parenting stress, and negative parenting. Because a number of findings suggested parent's emotional problems and some certain personalities cause negative parenting indirectly through parenting stress (Camisasca et al., 2014; Miller & Gondoli, 2017; Pereira et al., 2012), we formulated the hypothesis that parenting stress plays the role of mediator between the relationship between maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the child and negative parenting.

## METHOD

### Participants

Four first-grade classes located in four different districts were selected randomly in Sichuan Province. I contacted the teachers of the four classes in the beginning. And the teachers invited the parents belonging to their classes to participate respectively. All participants should be female and played the role of primary caregivers during the survey time. Finally, 119 mothers participated in and 105 effective responses were included in this research because there were 14 cases having missing values. Participants were required to complete three questionnaires as following based on the situation of their 105 children. The reason to select participants in Sichuan was, compared to the east area of China, Sichuan as a west province preserves more Chinese traditional characteristics and people there keep more typical Chinese thinking (Wu, 2011).

## MEASUREMENTS

### Attached Feelings towards Child

The subscale of Anxious Attachment in the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR-S) was adopted to measure maternal anxiously attached feelings towards

the children. Original ECR-S was designed to measure adults' attachment in the experience with a romantic partner (Brennan et al., 1998). As it's been verified it is suitable to modify the items to measure subjects' specific attachment towards a certain group of people (such as adolescents' attachment towards their parents) based on previous research (Brenning et al., 2011), in this research, we modified each item for the purpose of measuring parent's attached feelings towards child. For example, the item of "I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like" was revised into "I find that my child(ren) don't want to get as close as I would like". The scale was a 7-point Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree").

### Parenting Stress

I utilized the subscale about "difficult interaction" of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) to evaluate parents' stress. In detail, the subscale is aimed to investigate parents' stress caused by the problems in the process of parent-child interaction. This 5-point Likert scale in which 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree" was confirmed to have good reliability and validity before (Diaz-Herrero et al., 2011; Haskett et al., 2006).

### Negative Parenting Behaviors

In this study, I used the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire – Short Version (PSDQ) to assess parenting. I selected the dimension of the "authoritarian parenting" subscale to examine negative parenting, which was an idea agreed by some psychologists previously (Martins et al., 2018; Oliveira et al., 2018). Authoritarian parenting includes corporal punishment, too much psychological control, and hostility. It is a 5-point subscale from 1 ("I never do that") to 5 ("I always do that").

### Additional variables

Additionally, the demographic questions about age, level of education, family structure, and child's gender and age were required answered by participating mothers.

## RESULTS

These 105 participants reported regarding 59 boys and 46 girls. The descriptive statistics are seen in Table 1.

Before investigating the relationships of maternal anxiously attached feelings, parenting stress and their negative parenting, the validity tests were done for the three measurements. For the measurement of maternal anxiously attached feelings, the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) suggested nine items (see Appendix) shall be kept as their factor loadings were above 0.5 (Maskey et al., 2018). The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) demonstrated the 9-item had a good model fit (chi-square/df=40.4/27<5; CFI=0.95>0.9; SRMR=0.06<0.08), which meant the good construct-validity. I only used CFI and SRMR to describe the model fit because when the sample size was between 100 and 200, CFI and SRMR are better model fit indexes compared to TLI and RMSEA (Maydeu-Olivares et al., 2018). Likewise, 7-item parenting stress instrument was confirmed according to PCA and it reached a good model fit (chi-square/df=38.9/14; CFI=0.91; SRMR=0.06). Also, PCA kept ten items in authoritarian parenting, and the 10-item structure was acceptable (chi-square/df=132/35; CFI=0.82; SRMR=0.07).

Next, the total score of each measurement was calculated. Before conducting a regression model, I did the Pearson correlation to examine the associations between each variable (see Table 2) based on the sum of scores of measurements. Then, this study adopted stepwise procedures to construct hierarchical-regression models

**Table 1.** The descriptive statistics of demographic information and total scores on three scales

Variables	N	Mean(SD)	Max	Min
<b>Socio-demographic variables</b>				
Mother's age	105	31.81(5.08)	48	22
Children's age	105	6.77(0.59)	6	8
Children's gender (male)%	59	56.2%		
Mother's education(=1)%	6	5.7%		
Mother's education(=2)%	70	66.7%		
Mother's education(=3)%	23	21.9%		
Mother's education(=4)%	6	5.7%		
Family structure(=1)%	95	90.5%		
Family structure(=2)%	4	3.8%		
Family structure(=3)%	6	5.7%		
<b>Key variables</b>				
Attached feelings	105	67.35(18.56)	120	20
Parenting stress	105	30.32(7.08)	56	15
Negative parenting	105	31.18(9.06)	60	12

Note: About mother's education level, "1" referred the "primary school education level", "2" means "middle school level", "3" means "high school level", "4" means "university bachelor level", and "5" referred "postgraduate level" but no participant reached this level. About family structure, "1" means "complete family", "2" means "one-parent family", "3" means "reorganized family".

**Table 2.** The correlation matrix describing the associations between each variable

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>1. children age</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>2. children gender</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>3. mothers' age</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>4. family structure</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>5. mothers' education</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>6. attached feelings</b>	-0.01	0.03	0.16	0.05	0.01	-	-	-
<b>7. parenting stress</b>	0.12	-0.05	0.28**	0.07	0.03	0.36**	-	-
<b>8. negative parenting</b>	0.06	0.05	0.09	-0.02	0.13	0.34**	0.47**	-

Note:  $p^{**} < 0.01$ ;  $p^* < 0.05$

(see Table 3). In Model 1, all demographic variables were included because it was necessary to control the influences of demographic background on parenting behaviors in the beginning. In Model 2, the variable of “maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the child” was added additionally. Finally, Model 3 involved one more variable: parenting stress.

According to Table 3, it was obvious to notice that after adding the variable of “parenting stress”, the margin effect of “maternal anxious attachment” decreased from 0.33 to 0.20. This finding suggested the possible mediator role of parenting stress. Thus, subsequently, the standardized mediation model was conducted. It proved that maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the child impacted negative parenting through parenting stress partially (see Figure 1). The total effect of maternal anxious feelings on negative parenting was 0.34 and the indirect effect was 0.14.

## DISCUSSIONS

This research discovered that mothers with anxiously attached feelings towards their children were more likely to report higher parenting stress. Also, parenting stress was found to link to negative parenting. The mediation analysis findings showed that parenting stress mediated the relation

of maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the child and negative parenting, which is consistent with the original assumption.

The outcomes of this study echo Francis's theory (1999). Based on his animal behavioral model, he pointed out that a caregiver's early experience can impact parenting through parenting stress. Moreover, scientists came up with a similar theory for human beings too (Bretherton, 1990; Main et al., 1985). As described in the internal working model theory, maternal attachment reflects the mother's experience of interaction with significant others in childhood. The mediation model in this research is the line with previous theories.

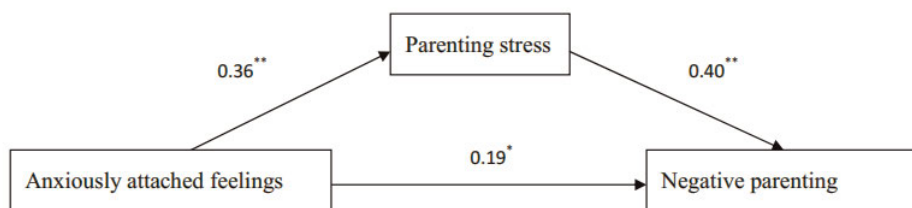
Besides, the results repeat the previous opinions from empirical studies that demonstrated parent's emotional problems, such as depression and anxiety, exacerbate parenting stress (Huizink et al., 2017; Misri et al., 2010; Rezendes & Scarpa, 2011). As parent's anxiously attached feelings towards the child is a type of representation of anxiety in the parent-child relationship, combing the Deater-Deckard's theory (1998), which remarked that parenting stress leads to negative parenting and eventually causes child's problematic behaviors, it's plausible that the influence of parents' anxiously attached feelings towards the child on negative parenting is mediated by parenting stress.

**Table 3.** Hierarchical regression models predicting negative parenting by demographic variables, maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the child, and parenting stress

Variables	Model 1 std.β	Model 2 std.β	Model 3 std.β
Mother's age			0.04
Mother's education		0.05	0.11
Family structure	0.10	0.14	-0.06
Child's age	0.14	-0.06	0.03
Child's gender	-0.05	0.08	0.05
Anxiously attached feelings	0.08	0.04	0.20*
Parenting stress	0.05	0.33**	0.41**
	0.04	0.14	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>			0.28

Note:  $p^{**} < 0.01$ ;  $p^* < 0.05$

Figure 1. The standardized mediation analysis model



Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

This research firstly demonstrates the associations of maternal anxiously attached feelings toward the child, parenting stress, and negative parenting. Additionally, the finding of the mediator role of parenting stress highlights the importance of intervention programs that aim to manage mothers' stress and parenting stress. Nonetheless, there are some limitations in this study. First, the sample size was not abundant enough and we hence could not use the latent-variable-model. But, compared to a mediation model with only observed variables, the model calculated by the latent estimating method decreases error (Neale et al., 2005). Second, the sample was selected from the South-West region of China, which is much more traditional and less international than eastern China. There may be differences between parenting behaviors among parents crossing regions. It is worth deepening the research by the comparison of western and eastern China. Also, as social changes and economical development of China, more and more fathers play the role of primary caregiver in a family. It would be interesting to investigate fathers' parenting in China in the future.

This preliminary study suggests further network analysis and cross-cultural study. As manifested by the results, there's a mediation effect of parenting stress between maternal anxiously attached feelings towards the child and negative parenting. However, maternal attachment towards the child is a controversial idea as mentioned in the introduction part. In Chinese society which is rooted in Confucius' philosophy, promoting the development of children is a part of parents' career or investment while very few western parents would think so (Zhang, 2014). Thus, the anxiously bonded feeling of a parent in China reflects the anxious type of attachment towards children, and implies the child occupies a big part portion of the parent's spiritual life, which will lead to parenting stress and eventually cause the negative parenting (e.g., too much psychological control). However, the anxiously attached feelings of the western parents may only reflect their psychological anxiety, which was proven can impact parenting behaviors negatively and directly (Drake & Ginsburg, 2011; Turner et al., 2003). Thus, the network analysis is valuable to be conducted to see if in Chinese culture maternal attached feelings towards a child belong to the same cluster in mothers' general attachment, and to see if in western cultural context maternal attached feelings towards the child and their general attachment are in two clusters.

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## APPENDIX

**Maternal attachment** (note: the bolded items are those I adopted in this study)

1. I am afraid my child does not love me
2. I often worry about the parent-child relationship between me and my child
- 3. I am worried that my child cares less about me than I care about my child**
- 4. I am worried about losing my child**
5. I hope my child loves me as strongly as I love my child
6. I often want to blend in with my child, and this thought sometimes scares the child
- 7. I am afraid of life without my child**
8. My psychological needs that I want to be very close to my child can sometimes scare my child
- 9. I need to confirm to my child that he (she) loves me**
10. Sometimes I feel that I am forcing my child to show more love to me
11. I don't always worry about my children not loving me anymore (R)
- 12. If I can't feel the child's love for me, I will be depressed or angry**
- 13. I feel that the child is not as close to me as I expected**
- 14. When I am not in a close parent-child relationship, I feel anxious and uneasy**
- 15. If my child does not stay with me as much as I expected, I will feel disappointed**
- 16. I feel frustrated if I need a child by my side but he (she) is not there**
17. I feel very bad when my child does not appreciate me/my value.
18. When my child does not spend enough time with me, I will do the same to him/her in turn

**Parenting stress** (note: the bolded items are those I adopted in this study)

- 1. My child rarely does anything for me**
- 2. The child does not like me, or the child is not so close to me as my expectation**
- 3. Compared with my expectation, the child smiles less at me in the real life**
- 4. I am not appreciated by my child even I contribute to him/her**
- 5. My children does not laugh much during play**
- 6. My child does not learn things as fast as other children**
- 7. The child doesn't laugh as much as other children**
8. Compared with my expectations, my child can do less in real life
9. It often takes a long time for my child to adapt to new things
10. I consider myself a capable parent (R)
11. I look forward to getting closer to my child
12. My child does things that annoy me or make me angry

**Authoritarian parenting** (note: the bolded items are those I adopted in this study)

- 1. I use physical punishment to discipline my children**
2. When my child asked "Why should I listen to you", my reply was "Because I am your parent, so you have to listen to me"
- 3. when my child is disobedient, I will spank him/her**
- 4. I will deprive the child of some of the rights as punishment, and I will not explain why**
- 5. When the child makes a mistake, I will yell at him/her loudly**
- 6. I will be angry at my child**
- 7. When the child is disobedient, I will catch the child and keep him (her) from moving**
8. I promote children's progress through blame and criticism
- 9. I use threats as punishment, and I will not tell my children the reason for threats**
- 10. I will punish my child by hanging the child aside, and will not tell him (her) the reason for doing so**
- 11. When my child does not meet my expectations, I will blame or criticize him/her**
- 12. When my child makes a mistake, I will slap him (her)**