

The Impact of Attachment and Parental Conflict on Children's Unconscious Attitudes and Behaviors

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Abstract:

This review explores how attachment relationships and parental conflict influence children's unconscious attitudes and behaviors. Family factors, especially the quality of attachment and the level of parental harmony, play a pivotal role in shaping children's socioemotional and cognitive development, as early family interactions form the basis of internal working models and implicit beliefs. Drawing from developmental psychology and neuroscience, the paper outlines how early caregiver-child dynamics shape implicit cognitive structures, emotional regulation strategies, and behavioral tendencies. Secure attachment fosters adaptive internal working models, whereas insecure attachment and persistent parental conflict increase children's sensitivity to perceived threats and promote maladaptive coping strategies. Empirical findings also reveal that prolonged exposure to high-conflict environments contributes to negative self-narratives, distorted social perception, and long-term neurological changes. Based on these findings, this paper not only identifies the risks associated with insecure attachment and conflict but also offers targeted recommendations to enhance resilience and promote healthy development. This paper aims to integrate existing research, highlight key mechanisms, and propose intervention strategies that address these unconscious patterns at individual, familial, and societal levels.

Keywords: Attachment, Parental Conflict, Unconscious Behavior, Child Development, Internal Working Model

1 Introduction

Early family experiences play a foundational role in shaping their psychological development and behavioral patterns. Among the many factors that

influence this process, attachment relationships and parental conflict stand out as particularly influential, especially in the formation of children's unconscious attitudes and behaviors. A growing body of interdisciplinary research has underscored how these two

factors interact and influence a child's implicit emotional responses, social cognition, and mental health across developmental stages.

Attachment theory, originally proposed by Bowlby, highlights the importance of emotional bonds between children and their primary caregivers [1]. Secure attachments formed through consistent and responsive caregiving help children develop positive internal working models — cognitive frameworks that influence how they perceive themselves and others. These models predominantly function at an unconscious level, guiding emotional responses and social behaviors into adolescence and adulthood [2].

Conversely, persistent parental conflict — especially when marked by hostility, unpredictability, or poor resolution — may expose children to emotional insecurity and chronic stress. Such environmental stressors have been shown to impair children's emotional regulation and heighten their unconscious sensitivity to threat [3]. In high-conflict households, children often internalize blame and develop negative self-narratives such as “I am the one who caused their quarrels,” which may undermine self-esteem, self-worth, and social motivation over time.

Importantly, the effects of attachment and parental conflict often extend beyond conscious awareness. As Bargh and Morsella argue, individuals rely on implicit knowledge and unconscious processes — shaped by early experiences — when making social judgments and emotional responses [4]. These deeply embedded implicit patterns have a significant impact on behavior, especially in stressful or emotionally charged situations.

Given the widespread and long-lasting influence of attachment and family dynamics on children's development, it is crucial to synthesize current findings and understand their psychological mechanisms. The purpose of this review is to examine how attachment relationships and parental conflict affect children's unconscious attitudes and behaviors, and to propose evidence-based strategies for educational, psychological, and family interventions that target these hidden but impactful influences.

2 Core Concept: Building a Basic Theoretical Framework for Research

This study aims to explore how attachment relationships and parental conflicts affect children's unconscious attitudes and behavior patterns. For this reason, it is necessary to first clarify the three core concepts in this article: attachment theory, parental conflict, and unconscious attitude and behavior. These three are interrelated and jointly build a basic framework for analyzing the potential psychological mechanisms in children's development.

2.1 Attachment Theory

The theory of attachment originates from Bowlby's classic views. Its core argument is that the emotional connection between children and primary caregivers plays a key role in the social behavior, emotional regulation and mental health of individuals throughout their lives [1]. The type of attachment is generally divided into secure attachment and insecure attachment and the latter is further subdivided into anxiety, avoidance and chaos.

Children with security attachment usually experience consistent and emotionally responsive care. They are more likely to develop a positive “internal working model”, that is, believing that others are reliable and they are valuable. This model will continue to affect their cognition and response to interpersonal relationships. This model continues to affect their cognitive processes and how they respond to interpersonal relationships, influencing their trust, emotional regulation, and social interactions. On the contrary, the care experience of children with non-safety attachment is often inconsistent or emotional neglect, which leads them to form negative expectations of others and self-worth judgments.

In recent years, Bresson and Shaver have further revealed the deep connection between attachment experience and unconscious psychological mechanisms with the help of “predictive coding” theory [2]. They believe that the brain develops an unconscious prediction model of relationship events based on early attachment experience, which determines how individuals automatically social cues related to emotional security and shapes the potential tendency to respond to threats, trust, intimacy and other dimensions.

2.2 Parental Conflict

Parental conflict is a key variable in the family system. It not only affects the relationship between husband and wife itself, but also indirectly affects children's development through the “spillover mechanism” [3]. When conflicts between parents show characteristics such as hostility, unresolved or high frequency, the family atmosphere will become tense and unpredictable, and children are more likely to develop emotional insecurity in this environment. The research of Platts and others found that the type of attachment of parents is closely related to the way they handle conflicts. Anxious or evasive attachment parents are more likely to have conflicts when facing relationship pressure than to communicate constructively. This unstable model of intimate relationship often affects parent-child interaction through the spread of negative emotions, causing children to experience rejection, indifference or inconsistent reactions in interacting with their parents.

In addition, children who live in high-conflict families for a long time will activate their chronic stress system. This physiological and psychological stress together affects the way they process external stimuli, thus forming a threat-sensitive cognitive structure at the unconscious level, showing non-adaptive behaviors such as aggressive or retreating to social interaction [5].

2.3 Unconscious Attitudes and Behaviors

Bargh and Morsella systematically examine the unconscious psychological process, pointing out that individuals will also make complex social judgments and behavioral reactions without relying on the control of consciousness [4]. They divide unconscious processes into types such as emotional response, goal pursuit and social judgment, and emphasize that most of these processes are based on the implicit knowledge learned from early experience.

The attachment relationship and conflict scenes experienced by children in the family constitute the main input source of their unconscious psychological processing system. For example, a child who has experienced inconsistent care since childhood may form an implicit assumption of “relationship insecurity” and automatically show defensive attack or emotional avoidance in the face of criticism or denial. As pointed out by Greenwald and Banaji, unconscious attitude is a core component of the implicit cognitive structure in an individual’s body [6]. Although it is not easy to perceive, it will significantly affect behavior patterns.

The current cross-study of developmental psychology and neuroscience also shows that the neural response patterns of children’s brains in the early stage of the behavior of those who are plastic. These reactions are gradually through repeated emotional reinforcement and habitual neural activation and become the “default” path in emotional regulation and social interaction in the future [7].

3 The Relationship between Attachment Relationship and Children’s Unconscious Attitude and Behavior

The impact of attachment relationship on children’s unconscious attitudes and behaviors is reflected in the deep shaping of social information processing methods, emotional regulation strategies and stress response systems. Through a longitudinal study, Waters, Ruiz and Roisman found that the type of attachment in childhood can significantly predict the emotional response pattern in adulthood [8]. Specifically, safe attachments are more emotionally stable and socially adaptable in adulthood, while unsafe attachments are more likely to show emotional avoidance,

anxiety response and high sensitivity to negative information. This difference is not entirely the result of conscious decision-making, but reflects the unconscious emotional template built by the early parent-child relationship.

The study of Iqbal focuses on the adolescent stage and finds that attachment types affect their automated reaction behavior through emotional regulation mediation [9]. Safely attached teenagers are more likely to identify and actively regulate their emotions at the unconscious level, while anxious or avoidant teenagers are likely to show automatic behavioral reactions such as attack, defense and retreat in the face of social conflicts. These behavior patterns are internalized into an “unconscious expected reaction” in their own experience.

In addition, Gross and Thompson pointed out that the early development of emotional regulation is deeply influenced by attachment relationships [10]. Whether children can learn to identify and regulate emotions through caregivers determines whether they can automatically adopt adaptive strategies in stressful situations in the future. Positive attachment helps to form an “automatic positive adjustment mode”, while negative attachment tends to form non-adaptive strategies such as inhibition, denial or externalization.

Bargh and Morsella proposed that early attachment experience not only affects behavioral results, but also has a deeper effect on the goal setting and motivation activation system [4]. For example, anxious attachment children often unconsciously show sensitivity and avoidance to failure when facing tasks. This is not out of clear judgment, but from the defense mechanism triggered by potential relationship uncertainty.

In the field of education and clinical practice, these unconscious reaction patterns are often manifested as behavioral problems that are difficult for teachers to explain, such as excessive obedience, avoidance of eye contact, aggressive behavior. Behind these behaviors may be deep attachment damage and unmet emotional needs. The Situational Priming Model also shows that some clues in the environment (such as authoritative voices and social stress) will activate the automatic reaction patterns related to the individual’s early attachment, making the behavior appear a highly consistent “unconscious recurrence”.

Tottenham comprehensively researched developmental neuroscience and pointed out how early relationship experience affects the development of the amygdala, prefrontal cortex and other areas of the brain, thus regulating the automation of emotional response and the speed of social evaluation [7]. The development of these nervous systems provides a biological basis for the formation of unconscious behavior, and further confirms the far-reaching impact of attachment on children’s potential psychological

mechanisms.

4 The Impact of Parental Conflict on Children's Unconscious Attitudes and Behaviors

Family is the first place for early socialization of children, and the quality of parental relations has a profound impact on children's psychological development. In recent years, a large quantity of studies have pointed out that hostile conflicts between parents not only undermine children's emotional stability at the dominant level, but also deeply shape their behavior patterns, self-awareness and neural structure through unconscious mechanisms. Platts pointed out that ongoing family conflicts would weaken children's emotional security, which will activate automated psychological defense mechanisms [3]. These mechanisms include "attack-retreat cycle", emotional depression and continuous stress activation, which are children trying the instinctive reaction developed to family instability.

In an environment full of hostility and uncertainty, children are prone to high sensitivity to threatening clues. They habitually scan the potential dangers in the external environment and overinterpret neutral or vague social stimuli. For example, Houlthberg conducted a study with a sample of 186 children (approximately equal gender distribution), aged between 8 and 12 years [11]. They found that children who had been exposed to prolonged parental conflict were more likely to interpret ambiguous social or physical contact — such as a classmate bumping into them — as aggressive behavior. This heightened sensitivity to perceived threats may stem from adaptive responses developed in high-conflict family environments.

This misjudgment is not based on a conscious judgment, but a conditioned reflex reaction mechanism rooted in it. As a result, they may show disproportionate defensive reactions in school or peer interactions, or even evolve into aggressive behaviors, which seem to be problem, but are essentially a self-protection mechanism.

What is more complicated is that children not only make immediate emotional and behavioral responses to parental conflicts, but are also more likely to internalize this interaction pattern into a basic template for interpersonal communication [12]. Because children's social cognitive ability is not fully developed, they often regard the way of communication between parents as a normal way of interpersonal interaction. This "normalization" of the conflict may lead to a similar mode of hostility and defense when they establish intimate relationships in the future. This process mostly occurs unconsciously, manifested in reactive control, emotional manipulation, violent commu-

nication or avoidance in intimate relationships. It is worth noting that this repetition does not come from active selection, but comes from the automatic reproduction of the relationship processing mode by the deep psychological structure formed in childhood.

In addition, children often lack sufficient emotional recognition and regulation ability in the face of parental conflicts. It is difficult for them to separate from external situations and carry out causal reasoning or social attribution. On the contrary, they are more likely to adopt the method of "self-attribution" to regard parental discord as the result of their own lack of being good or not being loved. This internalization process will lead individuals to form continuous negative self-narratives, such as "I do not deserve to be loved" and "I am the one who caused their quarrels." These negative beliefs, in turn, affect the development of their self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and social motivation.

Once solidified, this negative characterization will become a part of an individual's personality structure, affecting their self-acceptance in adulthood, the stability of intimate relationships and sensitivity to social evaluation.

Neuroscience research provides a solid neurological foundation for these psychological mechanisms. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) research by Martin shows that children who experience a high level of parental conflict in early adolescence have significantly enhanced neural connections between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex [13]. The amygdala is the core region of the brain that deals with fear and threatening stimuli, while the prefrontal cortex is responsible for emotional suppression and cognitive regulation. When the linkage between the two is enhanced, it shows that the emotional response system is more easily driven by environmental stimuli, and it is more difficult for individuals to regulate negative emotions. This abnormal strengthening of the neural pathway leads to children's tendency to respond to social stimuli in an emotional and impulsive way, and lack of reflection and flexibility. This structural neurological change shows that the influence of the family environment is not only at the psychological level, but also penetrates more deeply into the structure and function of the individual brain, laying the "hardware" foundation for the subsequent emotional response pattern.

In addition, some studies have further pointed out that changes in such neural connection patterns not only affect immediate emotional responses, but also are highly related to the "automatic processing pathway" of individuals under stress situations. For example, when faced with interpersonal conflicts, these children are more likely to enter an "emotional hijacking" state, that is, prefrontal dysfunction, resulting in the direct dominant behavior of the

emotional system. This phenomenon explains why many teenagers who experience high family conflicts often get out of control, radical or retreat in the face of challenging situations. This automated response mechanism may not only limits their social adaptability, but also increases their risk of developing psychological disorders.

In conclusion, the hostile conflict between parents deeply affects the unconscious psychological structure of children through a series of mutually nested psychological and physiological mechanisms. This influence is reflected not only in the individual's interpretation of external stimuli, but also in the process of constructing self-worth. More importantly, these mechanisms are often spanning and continuous, posing a potential threat to the intimacy, social interaction and mental health of individuals in adulthood. Therefore, understanding and intervening in the unconscious response mechanism formed by children in conflict families is the key link in children's mental health support and family intervention.

5 Discussion and Implications

This review aims to integrate the current research results on the impact of attachment and parental conflicts on children's unconscious attitudes and behaviors, and on this basis, put forward preliminary suggestions on educational intervention and psychological services. By analyzing the existing literature, it can be found that the academic community has reached a certain degree of consensus on the influence mechanism of parental conflict and attachment relationship, but there are still differences and controversies in the scope of influence, regulatory factors and the path of intervention.

First of all, it is generally believed that a stable and safe attachment relationship is the psychological basis of children's emotional regulation, social cognition and behavioral regulation [1]. Children who form a safe attachment to their parents usually have strong emotional recognition and expression ability, and can rely on internal resources to adjust when dealing with setbacks. Children who grow up in avoidance or anxiety attachment relationships are more likely to show non-adaptive behaviors such as evasion, aggression or overdependence in stressful situations. Secondly, for the impact path of parental conflict, researchers generally emphasize its long-term shaping effect on children's "unconscious processing system" [3,13]. Even if children do not show significant behavioral abnormalities on the surface, their subconscious has internalized distorted perceptions of emotional expression, interpersonal interaction and self-worth. For example, the cognitive framework that "parental conflicts are caused by me" often comes from the child's underdeveloped causal

reasoning ability, and then evolves into a negative belief system.

However, there are also certain differences in conclusion of prior studies. Some studies (e.g. Antonelli) emphasize that the role of early biological indicators and genetic susceptibility in children's response to family stress cannot be ignored [14]. For example, chronic stress exposure to pregnant women during the fetus will affect the development of the infant's nervous system through changes in cortisol levels, making it more likely to react violently to environmental conflicts. This reminds the authors that when understanding the impact of parental conflicts, researchers need to take into account the comprehensive perspective of the trinity of "social-psychological-biological".

In the cultural dimension, the acceptance of conflict expression by different social cultures also affects children's perception and reaction. For example, in a collectivist culture, parents may be more inclined to suppress conflict than express it directly. This "cold violence" form of family environment may also cause children's emotional chaos and self-denial. In addition, the gender, age and regulating role of siblings of children are also important factors worthy of further discussion.

Based on the above findings, the education and psychological service system should start to build an intervention system from the following aspects:

About early identification mechanism establishment, schools should work closely with families, establish a communication mechanism between teachers, psychological counselors and parents, and identify student groups that may be affected by family conflicts through behavioral observation, emotional questionnaires, peer monitoring. About maintenance education of safe attachment, educational institutions can help parents establish a positive attachment relationship with their children and repair or avoid attachment damage through emotional recognition training, parent-child interaction course and parental emotional management workshops.

For the exploration of intervention paths at the unconscious level, in addition to traditional cognitive behavior intervention, it is recommended to introduce intervention methods for implicit cognitive structures such as mindfulness training, game therapy and narrative therapy. These methods can help children identify and reconstruct their deep negative self-pictures and rebuild positive self-awareness; also helps children enhance their sense of happiness and conduct normal social activities.

4. For family system intervention and social support, Parental conflicts are not only individual problems, but also the root of the family system and social background. Therefore, educators should advocate "family-based" psy-

chological services, such as family counseling and parental education, and improve the family's resistance through community support networks.

In short, the impact of attachment relationship and parental conflict on children not only involves behavioral characterization, but also rooted in the deep unconscious mechanism. Therefore, the intervention strategy needs to go beyond the superficial symptoms and go deep into its psychological structure and development background in order to achieve real support and change.

6 Conclusion

Children's psychological development is not only the process of their own growth, but also more deeply reflects the interaction between the family structure and the parent-child relationship. This study discusses the impact of attachment and parental conflict on children's unconscious attitudes and behaviors. Combining existing theoretical and empirical studies, it reveals the far-reaching role of the two in the construction of children's psychological mechanisms.

First of all, a safe attachment relationship can provide emotional shelter for children, making them more adaptable in the face of external challenges. Insecure attachment is easy to induce anxiety, avoidance, self-denial and other maladaptive emotional patterns, which lay the foundation for later psychological disorders for subsequent psychological disorders.

Secondly, the long-term impact of parental conflicts not only is reflected in children's emotional fluctuations and behavioral abnormalities, but also more deeply shapes their unconscious information processing model and social cognitive framework. Continuous family conflicts can lead children to develop excessive defense, aggressive reactions and negative self-characterization. Once these psychological mechanisms are internalized, they may have a lasting impact on their intimate relationships, social adaptability and mental health.

More importantly, this article emphasizes the practical application of this research topic. In the field of education, teachers and school administrators need to have a sensitive awareness of identifying and supporting such children; in the field of mental health, professionals should build a more comprehensive intervention strategy, paying attention to both the change of explicit behavior and the emotional and cognitive repair at the unconscious level; and at the family and social levels, policymakers Community workers should also provide institutional support to improve the emotional regulation and parent ability of the family as a whole.

In a word, children's psychological mindset is complex

and sensitive. It is not only shaped by the current education style, but also deeply influenced by the long-term dynamics of family relationships. Future research should further explore the interaction mechanism between different types of attachment and conflict, and expand the intervention path, so that the theoretical results can truly serve the healthy development and happy growth of children.

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