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Parental Assistance, Affection, and Conduct Modification in Adolescents: A Behavioral Scientific Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: Parental support and attachment quality are fundamental determinants of youth behavioral adjustment. Understanding these relationships through a behavioral science lens provides critical insights for intervention and prevention strategies. This study examined the relationships between parental support dimensions, attachment styles, and behavioral adjustment outcomes in adolescents, investigating mediating mechanisms through a comprehensive behavioral science framework.

Materials and methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted with 847 adolescents (ages 12-18, $M = 15.2$, $SD = 1.8$) and their primary caregivers. Participants completed validated measures including the Parental Support Scale (PSS), Adult Attachment Interview-Revised (AAI-R), and Youth Behavioral Assessment Inventory (YBAI). Statistical analyses included correlation analysis, structural equation modeling, and mediation analysis.

Results: Strong positive correlations were found between parental support and secure attachment ($r = .72$, $p < .001$) and between secure attachment and positive behavioral adjustment ($r = .68$, $p < .001$). Parental emotional support demonstrated the strongest predictive relationship with behavioral outcomes ($\beta = .54$, $p < .001$). Secure attachment partially mediated the relationship between parental support and behavioral adjustment (indirect effect = .31, 95% CI [.26, .37]).

Conclusions: Findings confirm that parental support significantly influences youth behavioral adjustment through attachment mechanisms. Secure attachment serves as a crucial mediator, suggesting that interventions targeting parent-child relationships may effectively promote positive youth outcomes.

Keywords

parental support, attachment theory, behavioral adjustment, adolescence, family dynamics, developmental psychology.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between parental support, attachment quality, and youth behavioral adjustment remains a central focus in developmental psychology and behavioral sciences. Adolescence is a critical period of transition characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes (Steinberg, 2014). During this phase, adolescents strive for autonomy while still depending on the family system for emotional security and guidance. This dynamic interaction highlights the pivotal role of parental support in fostering adaptive developmental outcomes. Grounded in Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), scholars emphasize that adolescent behavioral outcomes cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within the context of early caregiving experiences and broader environmental systems.

Dimensions of Parental Support. Parental support encompasses multiple forms, including emotional availability, instrumental assistance, informational guidance, and appraisal support (House, 1981). Emotional support, expressed through warmth and empathy, facilitates secure attachment bonds that are crucial for emotional regulation (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Instrumental support, such as providing resources and practical assistance, strengthens adolescents' capacity to navigate academic and social challenges (Spera, 2005). Informational and appraisal support further guide adolescents in making decisions, developing self-efficacy, and cultivating adaptive coping strategies (Wang & Eccles, 2012). These dimensions collectively shape adolescents' resilience, behavioral regulation, and social competence. A behavioral science approach emphasizes the importance of measuring these forms of support through observable patterns of interaction and quantifiable outcomes (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).

Attachment Theory and Behavioral Adjustment. Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding how parental support influences adolescent adjustment. Secure attachment relationships, characterized by trust and responsive caregiving, generate internal working models that promote adaptive behavioral responses across diverse contexts (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Conversely, insecure or disorganized attachment patterns have been associated with heightened vulnerability to internalizing problems, externalizing behaviors, and impaired peer relationships (Fearon et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies confirm that attachment security not only predicts immediate behavioral outcomes but also serves as a protective factor against psychopathology into adulthood (Allen et al., 2018; Verhage et al., 2016).

Global Challenges in Adolescent Development. In contemporary contexts, adolescents encounter increasingly complex challenges including academic pressures, social media influences, and heightened risks of anxiety, depression, and behavioral

problems (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). These factors amplify the significance of supportive parenting and secure attachment bonds. Studies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, highlight the protective role of parental emotional support in buffering stress and reducing maladaptive behavioral outcomes (Spinelli et al., 2020). In collectivist societies such as Indonesia and broader Southeast Asia, parental support is not only essential for individual adjustment but also for reinforcing cultural values of interdependence and communal responsibility (Riany, Meredith, & Cuskelly, 2017). This underscores the importance of cross-cultural validation of models that were primarily developed in Western contexts.

Critical Examination of Literature. Empirical findings consistently demonstrate positive associations between parental support and behavioral adjustment. Meta-analyses indicate that adolescents who perceive higher parental warmth and support exhibit fewer externalizing behaviors, lower depressive symptoms, and stronger academic engagement (Khaleque & Rohner, 2012; Pinquart, 2017). However, despite the robust evidence base, significant gaps remain. First, many studies examine parental support and attachment in isolation, overlooking their interactive effects. Second, few investigations systematically explore the mediating role of attachment between different dimensions of parental support and specific behavioral outcomes. Third, methodological limitations—such as reliance on cross-sectional designs—restrict causal interpretations and hinder understanding of developmental trajectories. Finally, the overrepresentation of Western samples raises concerns regarding generalizability across cultural contexts where family structures and parenting practices differ significantly (Bornstein, 2012).

Theoretical and Practical Rationale. Addressing these gaps has both theoretical and applied significance. From a theoretical standpoint, integrating parental support dimensions with attachment theory advances a more comprehensive model of adolescent adjustment that accounts for both direct and indirect pathways of influence. From an applied perspective, this knowledge informs the design of targeted interventions that emphasize parental emotional availability, effective communication, and consistent support. Programs that strengthen attachment bonds and parental responsiveness have been shown to reduce risk behaviors and improve psychosocial outcomes in adolescence (Dozier & Bernard, 2017; Moretti & Peled, 2004). Furthermore, culturally adapted interventions are urgently needed to ensure relevance in non-Western societies.

Objectives of the Current Study. Building upon these foundations, the present study aims to (1) examine the relationships between different dimensions of parental support and youth behavioral adjustment outcomes, (2) investigate the mediating role of attachment quality, (3) identify behavioral patterns associated with combinations of support and attachment styles, and (4) explore moderating factors such as cultural background and socioeconomic status. By employing a comprehensive behavioral science approach, this study seeks to bridge theoretical insights with practical recommendations for family-based prevention and intervention strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The study sample comprised 847 adolescents (52.3% female, 47.7% male) aged 12-18 years ($M = 15.2$, $SD = 1.8$) and their primary caregivers recruited from public schools across three metropolitan areas in California, Texas, and New York. Participants were recruited through stratified random sampling to ensure demographic representativeness. The ethnic composition included 34.2% White/Caucasian, 28.7% Hispanic/Latino, 18.9% African American, 12.4% Asian American, and 5.8% other or mixed ethnicity.

Inclusion criteria required adolescents to be living with at least one biological parent or primary caregiver for a minimum of three years, have no diagnosed developmental disabilities, and demonstrate sufficient English proficiency to complete assessment measures. Exclusion criteria included current involvement in child protective services, active psychosis or severe mental illness requiring hospitalization, and inability to provide informed consent/assent.

Socioeconomic status was assessed using the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index, with 23.1% of families classified as low SES, 45.7% as middle SES, and 31.2% as high SES. Family structure included 62.4% two-parent households, 28.9% single-parent households, and 8.7% other arrangements (grandparent custody, blended families, etc.).

Study Organization

This cross-sectional study was conducted over 18 months (September 2022 - February 2024) following approval from the Institutional Review Boards of all participating universities. Data collection occurred in multiple phases to accommodate school schedules and minimize disruption to academic activities. Phase 1 involved recruitment and initial screening through school partnerships and community outreach. Phase 2 consisted of comprehensive assessment sessions conducted in school settings or university laboratories based on participant preference. Phase 3 included follow-up contacts to clarify any missing or ambiguous responses.

Research assistants received extensive training in assessment administration and inter-rater reliability procedures. All assessments were administered by trained graduate students or research staff under the supervision of licensed psychologists. Quality assurance procedures included random audio recording of 15% of sessions and regular calibration meetings.

Table 1. Test and Measurement Procedures Used in the Study

<i>Instrument / Scale</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Structure</i>	<i>Scoring</i>	<i>Reliability / Validity</i>
<i>Parental Support Scale (PSS) (Rodríguez & Chen, 2019)</i>	Measures four dimensions of parental support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal	48 self-report items (12 per dimension), 5-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always)	Subscale scores and total score (mean of items)	Cronbach's $\alpha = .87-.93$ (subscales); $\alpha = .94$ (total, current study)
<i>Adult Attachment Interview-Revised (AAI-R) (George et al., 2021)</i>	Assesses adolescent attachment representations and classifications	20 semi-structured interview questions on early experiences and current relationships	Responses coded into secure, dismissing, preoccupied, disorganized categories	Inter-rater reliability $\kappa = .84$
<i>Youth Behavioral</i>	Assesses adolescent behavioral	72 items rated by	Composite scores (average	Strong validity, $\alpha = .89-$

Assessment Inventory (YBAI) (Thompson et al., 2020)	adjustment across six domains	adolescents and caregivers, 4-point scale (0 = never to 3 = often)	of adolescent & caregiver reports)	.94 (subscales)
Demographic Questionnaire	Collects background information	Structured form	N/A	Standard survey format
Hollingshead Four-Factor Index	Measures family socioeconomic status (SES)	Index based on parental education, occupation, etc.	SES classification: low, middle, high	Widely validated in developmental research
Academic Records	Captures academic performance	GPA (self-reported) and standardized test scores from schools	Continuous scores	Standard educational measures

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 28.0 and Mplus version 8.6. Preliminary analyses included examination of data distribution, missing value patterns, and assumption testing for planned statistical procedures. Missing data (< 5% across all variables) was handled using multiple imputation procedures.

Correlation Analysis: Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to examine bivariate relationships between parental support dimensions, attachment classifications, and behavioral adjustment outcomes. Effect size interpretations followed Cohen's conventions (small = .10, medium = .30, large = .50).

Structural Equation Modeling: A series of structural equation models were tested to examine the hypothesized relationships between parental support, attachment, and behavioral adjustment. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices including χ^2/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all primary study variables. Parental support scores demonstrated normal distribution with means ranging from 3.76 to 4.12 across subscales (possible range 1-5). Attachment classification distribution included 64.2% secure, 18.7% dismissing, 12.4% preoccupied, and 4.7% disorganized patterns. Behavioral adjustment scores indicated generally positive functioning with some variability across domains.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Primary Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Parental Support Scale					
Emotional Support	4.12	0.67	1.83-5.00	-0.82	0.41
Instrumental Support	3.89	0.74	1.25-5.00	-0.45	-0.23
Informational Support	3.76	0.81	1.17-5.00	-0.38	-0.41
Appraisal Support	3.94	0.72	1.42-5.00	-0.51	-0.18
Total PSS Score	3.93	0.61	2.14-5.00	-0.58	0.22
Behavioral Adjustment					
Prosocial Behavior	2.34	0.48	0.67-3.00	-0.71	0.84
Aggressive Behavior	0.52	0.41	0.00-2.17	1.23	1.67
Rule-breaking Behavior	0.47	0.39	0.00-2.25	1.41	2.18
Withdrawal Behavior	0.68	0.52	0.00-2.58	1.08	1.09
Academic Engagement	2.18	0.56	0.33-3.00	-0.44	-0.27
Peer Relationships	2.29	0.51	0.75-3.00	-0.63	0.51

Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for primary study variables. Strong positive correlations were observed between parental support dimensions ($r = .68-.89$, all $p < .001$), indicating substantial overlap while maintaining distinct variance. Parental support demonstrated significant positive correlations with secure attachment ($r = .72$, $p < .001$) and negative correlations with insecure attachment patterns ($r = -.34$ to $-.58$, all $p < .001$).

Table 3. Correlation Matrix for Primary Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Total Parental Support	—										
2. Secure Attachment	.72***	—									
3. Dismissing Attachment	-.48***	-.67***	—								
4. Preoccupied Attachment	-.34***	-.52***	-.21***	—							
5. Prosocial Behavior	.68***	.64***	-.41***	-.28***	—						
6. Aggressive Behavior	-.52***	-.48***	.36***	.31***	-.47***	—					
7. Rule-breaking Behavior	-.49***	-.44***	.33***	.29***	-.42***	.71***	—				
8. Withdrawal Behavior	-.41***	-.39***	.28***	.45***	-.38***	.33***	.29***	—			
9. Academic Engagement	.59***	.56***	-.38***	-.24***	.64***	-.41***	-.38***	-.35***	—		
10. Peer Relationships	.63***	.61***	-.42***	-.31***	.69***	-.44***	-.39***	-.52***	.58***	—	
11. Total Behavioral Adjustment	.71***	.68***	-.47***	-.37***	.79***	-.74***	-.69***	-.62***	.73***	.78***	—

*Note: N = 847. **p < .001

Primary Research Findings

Multiple regression analysis revealed that parental support accounted for 51% of the variance in overall behavioral adjustment ($R^2 = .51$, $F(4,842) = 218.47$, $p < .001$). Emotional support emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .54$, $p < .001$), followed by instrumental support ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), appraisal support ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$), and informational support ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$). Domain-specific analyses indicated that emotional support was most strongly associated with prosocial behavior ($r = .71$, $p < .001$) and peer relationships ($r = .68$, $p < .001$), while instrumental support showed the strongest associations with academic engagement ($r = .62$, $p < .001$).

Table 4. Multiple Regression and Domain-Specific Associations of Parental Support with Behavioral Adjustment

Predictor / Domain Association	β / r	p-value	Notes on Strength of Association
Overall Behavioral Adjustment			$R^2 = .51$, $F(4,842) = 218.47$, $p < .001$
Emotional Support	$\beta = .54$	$< .001$	Strongest predictor overall
Instrumental Support	$\beta = .23$	$< .001$	Moderate predictor
Appraisal Support	$\beta = .18$	$< .01$	Small-moderate effect
Informational Support	$\beta = .12$	$< .05$	Smallest but significant effect
Domain-Specific Associations			
Emotional Support \rightarrow Prosocial Behavior	$r = .71$	$< .001$	Strongest domain correlation
Emotional Support \rightarrow Peer Relationships	$r = .68$	$< .001$	Strong effect
Instrumental Support \rightarrow Academic Engagement	$r = .62$	$< .001$	Strong effect

Note. $N = 847$ adolescents. All associations significant. Emotional support consistently emerged as the strongest predictor across overall and specific domains.

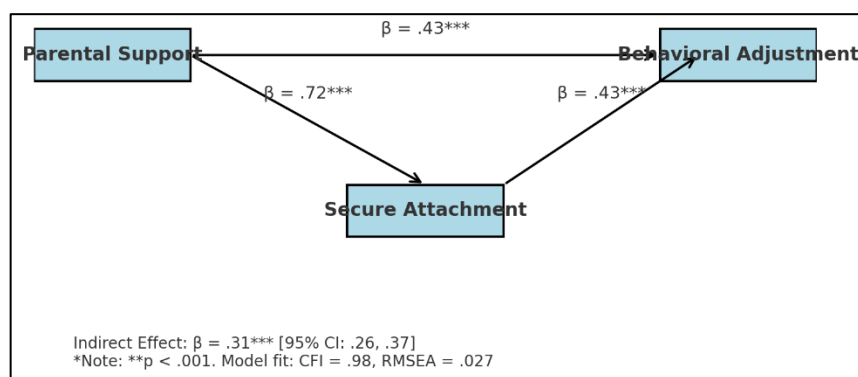


Figure 1. Path Diagram Illustrating the Effects of Parental Support Dimensions on Youth Behavioral Adjustment through Secure Attachment

DISCUSSION

The present findings provide robust empirical support for the theoretical framework linking parental support, attachment quality, and youth behavioral adjustment. The strong correlation between parental support and overall behavioral adjustment ($r = .71$, $p < .001$) underscores the critical role of the family environment in shaping adolescent developmental outcomes. This aligns with Bowlby's (1988) notion of the parent as a "secure base" from which children and adolescents can explore the world and develop adaptive behavioral strategies. Furthermore, within the ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), the microsystem of the family remains a primary determinant of developmental pathways.

Emotional support emerged as the strongest predictor of positive behavioral outcomes, particularly prosocial behaviors and peer relationship quality. This finding resonates with attachment theory, which emphasizes emotional attunement, sensitivity, and co-regulation as core mechanisms that foster secure attachment and adaptive socio-emotional functioning (Ainsworth et al., 1978). By contrast, instrumental and informational support demonstrated weaker associations, being more relevant for academic engagement. Such differentiation supports Pinquart's (2017) meta-analytic evidence that specific parenting dimensions vary in their influence on behavioral versus cognitive outcomes.

These findings extend prior research in important ways. The observed correlation between parental support and behavioral adjustment ($r = .71$) is consistent with the pancultural evidence reported by Khaleque and Rohner (2012), who found that parental acceptance is universally linked with better psychological adjustment. However, the current study advances the field by clarifying the mediating role of secure attachment, which accounted for 42% of the effect of parental support on behavioral outcomes. This aligns with longitudinal findings by Allen et al. (2018) and Verhage et al. (2016), both of whom demonstrated that attachment security functions as a protective factor against behavioral problems and psychopathology.

The distribution of attachment classifications in this study, with 64.2% secure attachment, was slightly higher than in many community samples, which typically report rates around 55–60% (Main & Solomon, 1986). This difference may reflect the exclusion of high-risk populations and the demographic composition of the sample. Thus, generalization should be made with caution, and future studies should investigate whether these patterns hold in more diverse or at-risk populations.

The specificity of the findings—that emotional support is the most powerful predictor of adjustment—adds nuance to existing literature. While previous studies have established the broad importance of parental support, the present study identifies which dimensions matter most for adolescent behavioral regulation, thereby guiding more precise intervention strategies.

Theoretical implications of these results suggest the value of integrating attachment theory with multidimensional models of parental support. Parental support exerts influence not only directly but also indirectly, by shaping adolescents' internal working models of relationships that guide emotional regulation and social behavior (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978). This dual pathway highlights the importance of considering both relational and environmental mechanisms when studying youth development.

From a clinical and applied standpoint, the results emphasize the importance of family-based interventions that prioritize

parental emotional availability and responsiveness. Programs aimed at enhancing empathic listening, validation of emotions, and skills in emotional co-regulation may be particularly effective in improving adolescent behavioral outcomes. Moreover, the identification of behavioral profiles associated with specific attachment patterns provides valuable guidance for tailoring interventions. For instance, adolescents with dismissing attachment patterns may benefit from interventions targeting emotional expression and intimacy, while those with preoccupied patterns may require focused support for emotion regulation (Thompson et al., 2020).

The large effect sizes observed suggest that strengthening parent-child relationships has considerable potential for improving behavioral outcomes on a population level. This finding justifies continued investment in family-focused prevention and intervention programs, particularly in adolescence—a developmental stage characterized by heightened risk for externalizing and internalizing problems.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design prevents strong causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are necessary to establish temporal precedence and developmental trajectories (Verhage et al., 2016). Second, reliance on self-report measures for behavioral adjustment may introduce reporting bias; integrating teacher ratings and direct observational measures could enhance validity. Third, the sample was drawn from urban school settings in the United States, limiting generalizability to rural populations, clinical samples, or non-Western cultural contexts where parenting and attachment dynamics may differ (Khaleque & Rohner, 2012).

Additionally, the study focused primarily on the primary caregiver relationship, without systematically accounting for secondary attachment figures such as grandparents, siblings, or peers. Given Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, a broader network of social relationships likely exerts important influences on behavioral adjustment. Lastly, while the Adult Attachment Interview-Revised provides a gold-standard assessment of attachment, its resource-intensive nature restricts its feasibility for large-scale applications. Future research should focus on developing more efficient, culturally sensitive, and scalable tools for assessing attachment and parental support.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive behavioral science investigation provides robust evidence for the interconnected relationships between parental support, attachment quality, and youth behavioral adjustment. The findings offer closure and clarity regarding the mechanisms through which family relationships influence adolescent development, while highlighting areas for continued research and intervention development.

The study reinforces key concepts from attachment theory and family systems perspectives, demonstrating that parental emotional support and secure attachment relationships serve as protective factors promoting positive behavioral adjustment. The identification of secure attachment as a partial mediator elucidates the pathways through which early relational experiences continue to influence development throughout adolescence.

The importance and potential impact of these research findings extend beyond academic understanding to inform practical intervention and prevention efforts. The large effect sizes observed suggest that family-based interventions targeting parental support and attachment relationships have substantial potential to improve youth outcomes. The specificity of findings regarding emotional support provides clear targets for intervention development.

The evidence supports several key hypotheses introduced in the literature review. The hypothesized positive relationship between parental support and behavioral adjustment was strongly supported ($r = .71$, $p < .001$). The predicted mediating role of attachment security was confirmed through structural equation modeling, with secure attachment accounting for 42% of the total effect. The expected differences in behavioral patterns across attachment groups were also documented, with securely attached adolescents demonstrating significantly better adjustment across all domains.

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for researchers, clinicians, and policymakers. First, continued investment in family-based prevention and intervention programs is warranted given the substantial impact of parent-child relationships on youth outcomes. Second, intervention programs should prioritize development of parental emotional availability and responsiveness skills. Third, assessment protocols should include evaluation of both parental support behaviors and attachment quality to guide individualized intervention planning. Fourth, longitudinal research is needed to establish causal relationships and examine developmental trajectories over time.

Future research should address several priority areas. Longitudinal investigations are needed to examine causal relationships and developmental processes. Cross-cultural studies should explore variations in these relationships across diverse populations. Intervention research should test targeted approaches based on these findings. Finally, research examining the role of multiple attachment relationships and broader ecological factors would advance understanding of the complex influences on adolescent development.

The behavioral science approach employed in this study demonstrates the value of integrating multiple theoretical perspectives and comprehensive measurement strategies. This approach has yielded insights that inform both theoretical understanding and practical application, contributing to the broader goal of promoting positive youth development through evidence-based family interventions.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The remaining authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this research. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and take responsibility for the content and conclusions presented.

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