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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN FAMILIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Abstract

The analysis of the Bene-Antoni test indicates that the child exhibits a predominant emotional attachment to the mother (positive relations 45%, dependency 60%), a moderate attachment to the father (positive relations 35%, dependency 30%), and the lowest attachment to the projective figure "Mr. Nobody" (positive relations 20%). Negative emotions are primarily directed toward "Mr. Nobody" (75%), whereas they are minimal toward the parents (10–15%), suggesting a preserved positive relationship with them and the use of a projection mechanism for handling conflicting experiences. In intact families, the mother-child bond ($M = 4.30$) is stronger than the father-child bond ($M = 3.85$), whereas in single-parent families, the mother-child bond decreases ($M = 3.85$) and data regarding the father are unavailable, highlighting the significance of a two-parent system for emotional development. Overall, the pattern demonstrates strong maternal attachment, moderate paternal significance, and the projective direction of negative feelings toward a symbolic figure, consistent with theories of child attachment and family dynamics.

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Introduction:-

The family is increasingly conceptualized as the "primary laboratory" for the development of emotional competence in early childhood. In this context, Aydođdu, Gürsoy, and Aral (2024) examine the mediating role of emotional regulation in the relationship between family climate and the emotional well-being of preschool-aged children. Their findings indicate that the quality of emotional relationships within the family has a direct impact on children's emotional stability and adaptability. Parental behaviors characterized by naming and validating children's emotions are associated with higher levels of self-control and effective self-regulation. From a theoretical perspective, these empirical findings align with the framework of attachment theory formulated by John Bowlby. Expanding on his ideas, X. Li et al. (2021) investigate so-called "internal working models"—cognitive-affective structures developed through repeated interactions with caregivers. These models shape fundamental beliefs about one's own worth and the reliability of others, which subsequently guide children's social strategies and regulatory mechanisms.

Contemporary theories of emotional socialization emphasize the importance of a secure emotional bond between parent and child as a prerequisite for the development of skills in recognizing, expressing, and regulating emotions. Empirical evidence from Zhang (2025) confirms that parental interactions characterized by emotional closeness and adequate support facilitate the development of emotional expression and self-regulation during the preschool years.

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Similarly, Zuo (2023) finds that positive and consistent parenting is associated with higher levels of emotional regulation, whereas conflictual and inconsistent practices increase the risk of emotional and behavioral difficulties. Over the past decade, there has been a conceptual shift from focusing on individual pathology to investigating “relational health” as a systemic feature of the family environment. Ashton et al. (2021) emphasize that the presence of at least one stable and supportive adult relationship constitutes the strongest predictor of emotional resilience in childhood. Emotional warmth and responsive parenting function as a buffer against external stressors, reducing the likelihood of maladaptive responses. Complementing this perspective, Osofsky (2024) highlights the need for “emotionally available parents,” who, through sensitive listening, shared play, and environmental predictability, support the development of a fundamental sense of security.

The emotional climate within the family should be viewed not as a sum of dyadic relationships but as a complex system of mutually influencing interactions. In its current guidelines, the American Psychological Association (2025) emphasizes the importance of “serve and return” interactions, in which parents respond to infants’ vocalizations, gestures, and facial expressions, laying the foundation for secure attachment and neurobiologically optimal development. Consistent with this, Xie et al. (2025) note that emotional closeness and the quality of marital relationships are structural factors that “weave” the child’s psychological world. They stress that warm and responsive interactions not only enhance emotional expression but also influence the development of brain structures responsible for social functioning. At the same time, elevated levels of parental stress can limit the capacity to sensitively interpret children’s signals and provide adequate emotional responses. The ability to understand children’s internal states (reflective functioning) serves as a key mediator between family climate and emotional development. Data from Jiang et al. (2025) indicate that the quality of parent–child relationships mediates the link between family closeness and emotional well-being: lower-quality interactions are associated with higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems.

The emotional climate within the family represents a central factor in the development of emotional regulation, resilience, and social adaptation in early childhood. The formation of secure, warm, and reflective relationships emerges as a fundamental prerequisite for optimal psychological and social functioning in children. The aim of the present study is to analyze and explore the characteristics of emotional relationships in families of 4-year-old children, focusing on their emotional orientation toward mothers and fathers across different family contexts. The object of the present study is the emotional relationships and emotional orientation of children in early preschool age toward parental figures within the family environment.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To identify the dominant emotional orientation of children toward parental figures.
2. To analyze the presence of positive and negative emotional tendencies in child–parent relationships.
3. To examine mother–child and father–child relationships in two different family contexts—intact families and single-parent families.

The study includes 30 four-year-old children (15 girls and 15 boys) attending preschool in an urban setting. Of these, 15 children come from intact families, while the remaining 15 live in single-parent households. This sample allows for a comparative analysis of child–parent emotional relationships across different family environments.

Methodology:-

In the present study, the Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test (Лидерс, 2007) was employed, in its adapted version for early childhood. The instrument constitutes a semi-projective derivative that allows the objectification of the child’s subjective experiences within the family environment. The experimental setup involves the use of three-dimensional figures representing members of the family constellation, as well as a neutral figure—“Mr. Nobody.” The latter serves as a psychometric filter for statements that the child does not attribute to a specific real-life object. The research procedure is structured through the distribution of 20 items (cards) containing emotionally charged statements. The child makes selections by placing the cards into the corresponding “mailboxes” of the figures, thereby minimizing resistance and facilitating the projection of affect.

Results are interpreted based on three primary dimensions:

1. Positive affective attitudes: Evaluates both outgoing emotions (from the child toward the object) and perceived incoming emotions (from the family toward the child).
2. Negative affective attitudes: Identifies levels of hostility, anger, and interpersonal conflict.

3. Degree of dependency: Measures the intensity of emotional attachment and potential over-involvement with a specific parental style.

For data verification, descriptive statistical methods were employed:

1. Frequency analysis: To determine the predominant choices.
2. Comparative analysis of mean values: To identify statistically significant differences in emotional vectors directed toward the mother, father, and neutral figure.

The study was conducted in a controlled, sensory-isolated environment (a calm setting), ensuring psychological comfort for participants. The session duration was fixed between 20 and 25 minutes. The research was carried out in strict compliance with ethical standards in psychological investigation. Written informed consent was obtained from legal guardians, and personal data were depersonalized, ensuring complete anonymity and confidentiality of the results.

Results:-

Mean Values, Standard Deviations, and Percentage Distribution in Relationship Categories with Mother, Father, and Mr. Nobody:-

The data obtained from the Bene–Antony test allow for a summarized analysis of the emotional relationships and dependencies of the subject with respect to three objects – mother, father, and the figure of “Mr. Nobody” (a projective figure toward which unacknowledged or socially undesirable experiences are directed).

Positive Emotional Relationships:-

In both tables, the highest intensity of positive feelings is observed toward the mother (45%; $M = 0.49$), followed by the father (35%; $M = 0.35$), with the lowest values reported for “Mr. Nobody” (20%; $M = 0.20$). These results indicate a clearly expressed emotional attachment to the mother as the primary figure of security and support. The standard deviations ($SD = 0.45$ for mother; $SD = 0.47$ for father; $SD = 0.40$ for “Mr. Nobody”) suggest relatively high variability, which may indicate some ambivalence or fluctuation in experiences, particularly regarding the parental figures.

Negative Emotional Relationships:-

The most pronounced negative feelings are directed toward “Mr. Nobody” (75%; $M = 0.75$), with significantly lower values toward the mother (10%; $M = 0.10$) and father (15%; $M = 0.15$). This concentration of negative experiences onto the projective figure suggests a psychological defense mechanism, whereby internal conflicts or aggressive impulses are displaced away from real attachment objects. The higher standard deviation for “Mr. Nobody” ($SD = 0.43$) may reflect emotional instability or internal tension associated with suppressed negative affects.

Dependence on Others:-

The indicator “Dependence on Others” (60% toward mother; 30% toward father; 10% toward “Mr. Nobody”) with corresponding means $M = 0.60$; 0.30 ; 0.10 delineates a clear orientation toward the mother as the primary source of security and support. The father occupies a secondary but significant position, while “Mr. Nobody” is practically not perceived as a resource figure. Standard deviations ($SD = 0.48$ for mother; $SD = 0.45$ for father; $SD = 0.30$ for “Mr. Nobody”) indicate a relatively stable pattern of dependence, albeit with some individual differences.

Mean Values on the “Mother–Child” and “Father–Child” Scales Depending on Two Different Family Contexts – Two-Parent Family and Single-Parent Family:-

In the context of a two-parent family, a higher mean is observed on the “Mother–Child” indicator ($M = 4.30$) compared to the “Father–Child” indicator ($M = 3.85$), with a difference of 0.45. This reflects a relatively more intense, closer, or positively experienced emotional relationship with the maternal figure. This result can be interpreted in light of classical attachment theories emphasizing the central role of the mother as the primary object of emotional security and care. The higher value suggests stronger identification, trust, and emotional richness in mother–child interactions. Simultaneously, the lower value for “Father–Child” should not be interpreted as a weakened relationship but rather as an indication of the father’s different functional role – often associated with normativity, autonomy promotion, and socializing influences, which may be experienced with less emotional expressiveness. In the context of a single-parent family, a decrease is observed in the mean value for the “Mother–Child” indicator ($M = 3.85$) compared to the same indicator in the two-parent family ($M = 4.30$), with a difference

of -0.45 , suggesting reduced intensity or a less positive evaluation of the relationship. This result may reflect the increased role burden of the sole parent, potentially affecting the quality of emotional availability. The accumulation of instrumental and affective functions in a single figure may lead to ambivalent experiences in the child – providing both security and dependence, but also tension related to the parent’s limited resources. The absence of data for the “Father–Child” indicator in the single-parent group likely reflects the absence of a paternal figure in the studied sample, structurally altering family dynamics and possibilities for differentiated identification. This circumstance limits comparative analysis but simultaneously underscores the importance of a two-parent system for a balanced distribution of emotional and socializing functions.

Discussion:-

The results obtained from the study using the Bene–Antoni test delineate a clearly structured system of the child’s emotional relationships with significant parental figures. The data indicate that the mother occupies a leading position as the primary object of positive feelings, emotional attachment, and dependency. She is perceived as the main source of security, support, and emotional closeness, which corresponds with classical concepts regarding the primary role of the maternal figure in the formation of attachment. The father also appears as a significant figure in the child’s emotional world, although his role manifests more moderately compared to that of the mother. This difference can be interpreted not as a weakened bond but as a reflection of the father’s distinct functional position within the family system—often associated with socialization, behavioral regulation, and the promotion of autonomy. At the same time, the concentration of negative emotions toward the projective figure “Mr. Nobody” indicates the presence of defensive psychological mechanisms, whereby internal conflicts, aggressive impulses, or socially unacceptable experiences are displaced onto objects outside the actual attachment figures. This allows for the preservation of a positive emotional representation of the parents and the maintenance of relational stability with them.

Comparative analysis between two-parent families and single-parent families shows that the presence of both parents creates more favorable conditions for the development of more intense and positively experienced mother–child relationships. In single-parent households, there is a noticeable reduction in the quality of the relationship, likely related to the increased role-related and emotional burden borne by the sole parent and the limited resources available for maintaining optimal emotional availability. Overall, the results emphasize the importance of family structure and parental roles in the formation of emotional relationships during childhood. The presence of a balanced two-parent system contributes to a clearer differentiation of parental functions and provides conditions for more stable emotional development in the child.

Conclusion:-

The study indicates that the child exhibits a strong emotional attachment to the mother, who fulfills the primary supportive and protective role, whereas the father participates more moderately, primarily in the processes of socialization and the promotion of autonomy. Negative emotions directed toward the projective figure “Mr. Nobody” function as a defense mechanism aimed at preserving a positive image of the parents. The findings underscore the importance of active involvement by both parents in establishing a stable emotional environment and fostering secure attachment in the child.

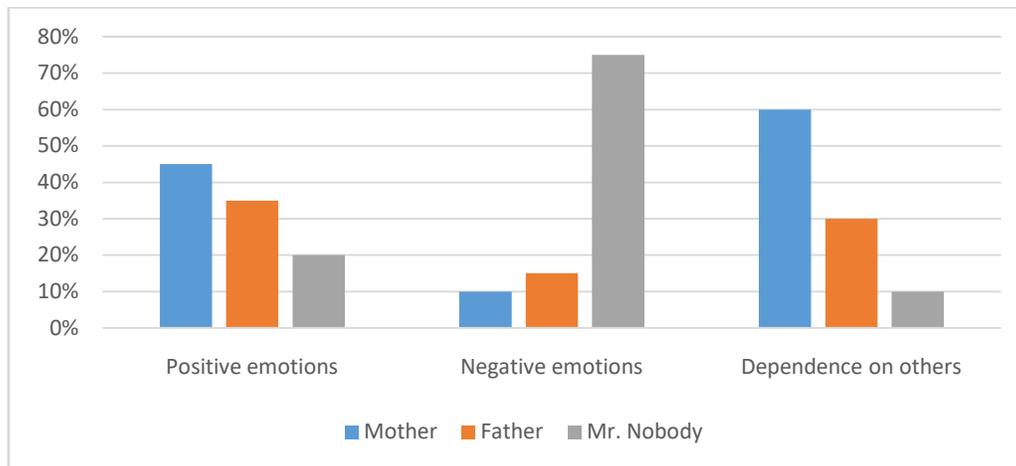
Tables:-

Table 1: Mean values and standard deviations for the relationship categories with the mother, the father, and Mr. Nobody.

Relationship Category	Mother		Father		Mr. Nobody	
	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation
Positive Attitudes	0.49	0.45	0.35	0.47	0.20	0.40
Negative Attitudes	0.10	0.30	0.15	0.35	0.75	0.43
Degree of Dependency	0.60	0.48	0.30	0.45	0.10	0.30

Table 2. Mean scores on the "Mother–Child" and "Father–Child" scales in two-parent and single-parent families.

Family Status	Mean Values	
	Mother–Child	Father-Child
Two-Parent Family	4.30	3.85
Single-Parent Family	3.85	-

Figures:**Figure 1. Percentage distribution across relationship categories for the mother, father, and Mr. Nobody.****References:-**

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