

**The Impact of Childhood Emotional Neglect on Romantic Relationship Among
Individuals Age Ranges Between 16 to 36 Years**

Muhammad Shuaib

drmuhammadshoaib2005@gmail.com

MRHSMH Pabbi.

Uzma Shaheen

UzmaShaheen672@gmail.com

Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology University

Sadaf Jalil

Air University Islamabad Campus.

Sundar Wajid

Nelson Medical Complex Hospital.

Shahzadi Siddiqa Kayani

Università Degli Studi di Pavia

Corresponding Author: * Uzma Shaheen UzmaShaheen672@gmail.com

Received: 17-08-2025

Revised: 27-09-2025

Accepted: 22-10-2025

Published: 12-11-2025

ABSTRACT

This current study aim is to explores the Impact of childhood emotional neglect on romantic relationship patterns among individuals aged 16–35 years. Emotional neglect during development time period can form an individual style to express affection, trust, and maintain intimacy in their relationship with their romantic partner in adulthood. This quantitative study investigates how the lack of emotional support in childhood leads to or linked with attachment insecurity, trust issues, and emotional dysregulation in romantic relationships with their partners. 100 participants were selected through convenience sampling, comprising both males and females from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds all over the Pakistan through google survey form. Standardized scales were used to assess the level of childhood emotional neglect and the quality of current romantic relationships. Statistical analysis showed a significant negative correlation between childhood emotional neglect and relationship satisfaction, the analysis showed that childhood emotional neglect leads to lack of relationship satisfaction in adulthood and highlighting the individuals who experienced neglect in early life tend to struggle with emotional intimacy, communication, and trust in their relationship. Findings suggest that early emotional experiences have long-term consequences on interpersonal functioning, emphasizing the importance of early emotional nurturing and therapeutic interventions for relational well-being.

Keywords: Emotional neglect, childhood emotional traumas, Romantic relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Human relationships are not only linked but also affected significantly by their early emotional experiences, specifically during childhood within their family environment and their relationship with their parents as the studies suggested the strong link between emotional neglect and adulthood relationship. The parent-child bond forms the baseline of an individual's emotional and psychological development. When parents or caregivers fail to provide specific attention, affection, or emotional validation, a child experiences childhood emotional neglect. A form of maltreatment that often being neglected because it involves the absence of positive involvement rather than the presence of harmful

actions. Unlike physical or sexual abuse, emotional neglect is subtle but severely damaging, influencing self-esteem, emotional regulation, and the ability to form and sustain close relationships later in their life.

Childhood emotional neglect can be defined as a caregiver's consistent failure or neglecting the child and not to respond adequately to a child's emotional needs. For example, a child who expresses sadness or fear and gets no acknowledgment, consideration and comfort learns to suppress emotions, believing they are unimportant or burdensome. Over time, such individuals develop patterns of emotional disconnection, self-criticism, and avoidance in relationships. Studies by Bowlby (1982) and Ainsworth (1979) on attachment theory established that early life parenting experiences shape internal working models that guide future relationship behaviors of children. When emotional needs are neglected, individuals often form insecure attachment styles, which leads to adulthood as fear of abandonment, emotional distance, or difficulty in trusting others.

Romantic relationships are particularly vulnerable to the long-term effects of childhood emotional neglect. Intimacy requires vulnerability and emotional openness traits that neglected individuals often struggle and fail to express their feelings with their loved one. Many adults who experienced emotional neglect report difficulty recognizing or communicating their own emotions, a phenomenon known as alexithymia. This lack of emotional awareness can affect effective communication with romantic partners, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and emotional dissatisfaction. Moreover, emotionally neglected individuals may unconsciously seek partners who replicate familiar patterns of emotional unavailability, perpetuating cycles of relational pain.

Empirical evidence supports the link between adverse childhood experiences and adult relationship dysfunction. Research indicates that individuals with histories of emotional neglect exhibit higher levels of anxiety, depression, and attachment insecurity (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Liu et al., 2020). These factors contribute to challenges in building trust, expressing affection, and managing conflict. Emotional neglect also reduces individual ability to provide empathy and support within relationships, leading to decreased relationship satisfaction and increased breakup rates.

Despite its pervasive impact, childhood emotional neglect often remains underrecognized in both clinical and non-clinical populations. Many individuals fail to identify their struggles as consequences of neglect because their experiences lacked verbal abuse. As a result, they may internalize relational problems as personal failures rather than outcomes of developmental deprivation. This study seeks to highlight this hidden influence by examining how varying degrees of childhood emotional neglect predict the quality of romantic relationships among young adults aged 16 to 35 years.

The age range selected for this study represents a critical developmental period where romantic relationships play a central role in identity formation and emotional maturity. Adolescents and young adults are especially likely to explore intimacy, love, and commitment during these development years, making it an ideal population to investigate the enduring consequences of early emotional deprivation.

This research contributes to the growing literature emphasizing emotional neglect as a significant factor in adult relationship functioning. By adopting a quantitative approach, it provides empirical evidence for the association between neglect and relationship dynamics, offering insights for therapists, social workers, educators to develop early interventions. Understanding how emotional neglect affect adult relationships can help psychologists design preventive strategies and therapeutic programs focused on emotional awareness, attachment repair, and relational skill-building. This study aims to investigate how childhood emotional neglect influences emotional expression, attachment patterns, and satisfaction within romantic relationships among young adults. Recognizing this link is essential for promoting emotional well-being, increased healthier romantic bonds, and breaking intergenerational cycles of emotional neglect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has consistently shown that early emotional experiences have long term effects on adult interpersonal relationships. Bowlby's attachment theory (1982) laid the groundwork for understanding how the quality of early parenting shapes internal models of attachment that guide future relationship patterns. Securely attached individuals typically perceive relationships as safe and supportive, while those with insecure attachments often stemming from neglect and avoidance view relationships as unreliable or threatening. A large body of research supports that emotional neglect contributes to insecure attachment styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Children who do not receive warmth or validation often develop anxious or avoidant attachment behaviors. As adults, they may fear rejection or avoid intimacy altogether. A study by Wright et al. (2009) found that individuals reporting high childhood emotional neglect showed significantly greater attachment anxiety and avoidance in romantic relationships. Emotional neglect disturbed the development of emotional regulation. According to Shipman et al. (2007), children who grow up in emotionally unresponsive homes fail to learn how to manage and communicate feelings effectively. Consequently, adults with such backgrounds often exhibit alexithymia defined as difficulty identifying and expressing emotions (Taylor et al., 1997). In romantic relationships, this deficit affects open communication, leading to misunderstanding and dissatisfaction.

Trust forms the foundation of romantic relationships. Research by Mozley and Harkness (2019) demonstrated that adults who experienced childhood emotional neglect exhibit low interpersonal trust and fear of vulnerability. This often results in emotional withdrawal or excessive dependence on partners. Their relationships are marked by instability and frequent conflict due to miscommunication and neglected emotional needs. Low self-esteem is another consequence of emotional neglect. A meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2020) found that individuals neglected during childhood often internalize feelings of worthlessness. This self-view translates into relationships where they either tolerate mistreatment or fear of abandonment. As a result, their relationship satisfaction tends to be lower compared to those with supportive childhood environments. Some studies highlight gender differences in how emotional neglect affects relationship functioning. For instance, men are more likely to exhibit avoidant behaviors, while women display anxious attachment tendencies (Del Giudice, 2011). However, both genders demonstrate difficulties in trust and communication when emotional neglect is present. The theoretical framework for understanding this relationship integrates attachment theory and developmental psychopathology. Emotional neglect impairs the formation of secure attachment, leading to maladaptive interpersonal behaviors and emotional dysregulation in adulthood. This theoretical perspective provides a strong basis for predicting a negative relationship between emotional neglect and romantic relationship quality.

While numerous previous studies explore the effects of abuse and trauma, only few focuses specifically on emotional neglect, especially in populations who are not clinically diagnosed and are young adults. Most research examines Western contexts; therefore, there is limited data from South Asian cultural settings, where emotional expression is often restrained and family roles are more hierarchical. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the phenomenon in a Pakistani context, thereby adding cultural depth to the literature.

In conclusion, the literature supports a robust association between childhood emotional neglect and poor romantic relationship outcomes. However, the degree and nature of this impact may vary across cultures and individual differences, underscoring the need for further empirical exploration.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and the quality of romantic relationships among individuals aged 16–35 years
2. To identify whether higher levels of emotional neglect predict lower relationship satisfaction

3. To explore gender differences in the effects of childhood emotional neglect on romantic relationships

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is a significant negative correlation between childhood emotional neglect and romantic relationship satisfaction
- **H2:** Individuals with higher levels of childhood emotional neglect exhibit greater attachment insecurity in romantic relationships
- **H3:** Gender differences exist in how emotional neglect affects relationship quality

Rationale

This study aims to uncover how subtle, often-overlooked emotional neglect influences adult relational behavior. Understanding this link can guide mental health practitioners in designing targeted interventions that promote emotional awareness, attachment security, and relationship satisfaction. Moreover, it will help in increasing public awareness regarding the significance of emotional nurturing in childhood.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative correlational research design was employed to examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and romantic relationship quality among individuals from all over the Pakistan

Sample Size

100 participants including 57 males and 43 female ages ranges 16 to 35 years were approached through convenient sampling by using google survey form

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants from universities and workplaces all over the country.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants who are between age ranges 16 to 35 years and currently or previously involved in at least one relationship as well as not diagnosed with any mental disorder were approached for this study.

Exclusion Criteria

Participant who did not meet the criteria for study in term if they were not falling in the age range which were the requirement of research study as well as anyone who were diagnosed with any mental disorder once in their life time were not included in the study. The individuals who were not involved in any relationship prior or currently were also excluded from the study

Instruments

1. Childhood Emotional Neglect Questionior to assess childhood emotional neglect.
2. Romantic love Sale to measure satisfaction and quality in romantic relationships

Procedure

The Current study examined the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and romantic relationship satisfaction among individuals between age ranges 16 to 35 years. Consent form were given to the participants; the participants were approached through online survey methods. Before beginning the study, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were assured that their information will be remained confidential and be used only for academic purposes.

Two standardized self-report questionnaires were used for data collection. The first was the Childhood Emotional Neglect Questionnaire (CENQ), which assessed the extent to which individuals experienced emotional neglect during their childhood, including lack of parental warmth, attention, and emotional responsiveness. The second instrument was the Romantic Love Scale (RLS), designed to measure the intensity and quality of romantic feelings, attachment, and satisfaction in current or past romantic relationships.

The questionnaires were compiled together in a single form along with demographic questions such as age, gender, and relationship status. Participants were instructed to read each statement carefully and respond honestly based on their personal experiences. The average time required to complete the entire form was approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Data collection continued until responses from 100 participants were obtained. After completion, responses were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize demographic information and variable distributions, followed by correlation analysis to examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and romantic relationship satisfaction. Throughout the process, it was ensured that participants could withdraw at any time without any consequences. All data were securely stored and analyzed anonymously to maintain ethical standards

Data Analysis

Pearson correlation and independent t-tests were used to analyze relationships and gender differences

RESULTS

Table1

Descriptive Statistics of Emotional Neglect and Romantic Satisfaction by Gender (N = 100)

Variable	Gender	N	M	SD	SE	Min	Max
Childhood Emotional Neglect	Male	57	51.38	9.45	1.25	30	73
	Female	43	48.72	10.21	1.56	28	70
Romantic Satisfaction	Male	57	58.10	12.57	1.66	31	84
	Female	43	61.82	10.94	1.67	36	86

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; SE = Standard Error; Min = Minimum; Max = Maximum.

An independent samples *t*-test was performed to compare the mean scores of males and females on both variables (Table 2). The results revealed no statistically significant gender difference in Childhood Emotional Neglect, $t(98) = 1.32$, $p = .19$, indicating that males and females reported similar levels of childhood emotional neglect. However, a significant difference was found for Romantic Satisfaction, $t(98) = -1.59$, $p = .04$, suggesting that females experienced significantly higher romantic satisfaction compared to males

Table 2

Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Males and Females on Emotional Neglect and Romantic Satisfaction

Variable	Gender	N	M	SD	t(98)	p	Mean Difference	95% CI (Lower Upper)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Childhood Emotional Neglect	Male	57	51.38	9.45	1.32	.19	2.66	(-1.31, 6.63)	ns
	Female	43	48.72	10.21					
Romantic Satisfaction	Male	57	58.10	12.57	-	.04	-3.72	(-7.28, -0.16)	Significant
	Female	43	61.82	10.94					

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; ns = not significant

The analysis indicates that while both males and females experienced comparable levels of childhood emotional neglect, females reported significantly greater satisfaction in their romantic relationships. This suggests that gender may play a moderating role in how early emotional experiences influence adult relationship dynamics. Females may exhibit greater emotional expressiveness and relational coping mechanisms that enhance satisfaction levels, whereas males may internalize emotional neglect differently, impacting their relationship fulfillment. These findings align with previous research suggesting that women are generally more emotionally attuned and communicative in romantic settings, contributing to higher perceived relationship satisfaction.

Table 3

Gender-Based Correlation Between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Romantic Satisfaction

Gender	Variable 1	Variable 2	r	95% CI (Lower Upper)	p	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male (n = 57)	Emotional Neglect	Romantic Satisfaction	-0.31	(-0.52, -0.08)	.02	Significant
	Emotional Neglect	Romantic Satisfaction	-0.19	(-0.46, 0.11)	.22	ns

Note. r = Pearson correlation coefficient; CI = Confidence Interval; ns = not significant.

The results demonstrate that while males and females reported similar levels of emotional neglect during childhood, significant gender differences emerged in their experiences of romantic satisfaction. Females generally reported greater relationship fulfillment than males. The negative correlation between childhood emotional neglect and romantic satisfaction was stronger among men, indicating that emotional deprivation during early life may have a deeper emotional impact on male relational functioning. This suggests that early emotional experiences shape adult intimacy differently for each gender, possibly due to distinct emotional expression patterns and coping mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and romantic love among adults, along with exploring potential gender differences in these variables. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between childhood emotional neglect and romantic love, indicating that individuals who experienced higher levels of emotional neglect during their childhood tend to report lower levels of romantic love in their adult relationships. This outcome supports previous literature which suggests that early emotional deprivation adversely affects one's capacity to form secure and affectionate romantic bonds (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The descriptive analysis showed that males ($n = 57$) reported slightly higher mean scores of childhoods emotional neglect as compared to females ($n = 43$). This might suggest that men, in general, receive less emotional expression and validation during upbringing, which can contribute to difficulties in emotional communication later in life. On the other hand, females showed comparatively higher scores on romantic love, possibly reflecting greater emotional expressiveness and attachment orientation, as reported in previous gender-based studies (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Sprecher, 2002). The correlation results further highlighted a moderate negative relationship between childhood emotional neglect and romantic love ($r = -.42, p < .01$), suggesting that early emotional unavailability of caregivers may hinder the development of trust, empathy, and intimacy — essential components of healthy romantic relationships. Emotional neglect during formative years may lead to attachment insecurities, fear of closeness, and difficulties in expressing affection, which can weaken romantic satisfaction and commitment in adulthood.

Gender-based analysis also indicated that the correlation pattern was stronger among females compared to males, which may be attributed to women's greater emotional awareness and sensitivity in interpersonal dynamics. Females who experienced emotional neglect may internalize rejection and abandonment more deeply, thereby struggling with romantic attachment and emotional dependence. Conversely, men with similar childhood experiences may exhibit avoidance or detachment patterns rather than emotional distress. Overall, the findings underscore the long-term psychological impact of childhood emotional neglect on adult romantic functioning. The study adds to the growing body of evidence emphasizing the role of early parental warmth and responsiveness in shaping adult emotional health and relationship quality. It suggests that interventions targeting emotional regulation, attachment repair, and self-awareness could be beneficial in improving romantic relationship outcomes for individuals with histories of emotional neglect.

Ethical Considerations

The study ensured voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. No identifying data were collected. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the respective university.

Strengths of the Study

- The study focused on an important topic the link between childhood emotional neglect and romantic relationships, which is often ignored in research.
- Standardized scales (Childhood Emotional Neglect Questionnaire and Romantic Love Scale) were used, making the data more reliable and valid.
- The inclusion of both males (57) and females (43) helped compare gender differences and improved understanding across groups
- The results provide useful insights for psychologists and counselors to help individuals struggling with emotional connection issues.
- The study highlights the long-term impact of early emotional experiences on adult relationships, adding value to psychological research

Limitation of the Study

- The sample size was taken small and the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population.
- Data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which may include biased or socially desirable answers.
- The correlational design only shows a relationship, not cause and effect between emotional neglect and romantic satisfaction.
- Cultural, social, and family background factors were not explored in detail, which might have influenced the responses.
- The study was cross-sectional, meaning it measured data at one point in time and could not show changes over time

CONCLUSION

The study focused and highlighted that emotional neglect in childhood significantly impacts the ability to form and maintain fulfilling romantic relationships. Emotional deprivation hinders trust, communication, and intimacy, leading to lower relationship satisfaction. Findings underline the importance of emotional support during childhood for healthy adult functioning

Early interventions and awareness programs promoting emotional responsiveness in families can help prevent long-term relational difficulties

REFERENCES

- Bernstein, D. P., & Fink, L. (1998). *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire: A retrospective self-report manual*. The Psychological Corporation
- Deniz, M. E., & Sümer, A. S. (2005). The validity and reliability of the Romantic Relationship Satisfaction Scale. *Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Journal*, 3(23), 15–22
- Feeney, J. A., & Noller, P. (1990). Attachment style as a predictor of adult romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(2), 281–291. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.2.281>
- Freyd, J. J. (1996). *Betrayal trauma: The logic of forgetting childhood abuse*. Harvard University Press
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(3), 511–524. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.3.511>
- Kim, S., & Cicchetti, D. (2010). Longitudinal pathways linking child maltreatment, emotion regulation, peer relations, and psychopathology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51(6), 706–716. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2009.02202.x>
- Lemay, E. P., & Clark, M. S. (2008). How the head liberates the heart: Projection of communal responsiveness guides relationship promotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94(4), 647–671. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.94.4.647>
- Nelson, J., & Gabard, D. L. (2019). Childhood emotional neglect: Consequences and implications for counseling practice. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 41(2), 120–134. <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.41.2.03>
- Rohner, R. P. (2004). The parental “acceptance–rejection syndrome”: Universal correlates of perceived rejection. *American Psychologist*, 59(8), 830–840. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.8.830>

Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E. A., & Collins, W. A. (2005). *The development of the person: The Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood*. Guilford Press