

## TRACING THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE ON ADOLESCENT DETACHMENT AND ANXIETY

Marta Sechi<sup>1</sup>, Danilo Calaresi<sup>2</sup>, Valeria Saladino<sup>2</sup>,  
Fiorenza Giordano<sup>3</sup>, & Valeria Verrastro<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Humanistic Research and Innovation, University of Bari (Italy)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Health Sciences, Magna Græcia University of Catanzaro (Italy)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Human, Social and Health Sciences, University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (Italy)

### Abstract

Patterns of psychological adjustment during adolescence are shaped by the complex interplay between developmental transitions and relational experiences. Emotional abuse, in particular, has been repeatedly associated with a wide range of negative outcomes, including maladaptive personality features, and elevated internalizing symptoms. Despite this growing body of evidence, the mechanisms through which emotional abuse exerts its influence over time remain insufficiently clarified. To address these gaps, the present longitudinal study investigated the dynamic relationships between emotional abuse, detachment, and anxiety across three time points spanning one year. Data were collected at baseline, six months later, and twelve months later from a large community sample of 1,847 Italian adolescents, with a mean age of 15.50 years ( $SD = 1.09$ ). EA was assessed using the Emotional Abuse subscale of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), detachment through the detachment subscale of the Personality Inventory for DSM-5–Brief Form (PID-5-BF), and anxiety via the anxiety subscale of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales–21 (DASS-21). Structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent variables was conducted. The final model showed acceptable fit:  $\chi^2(312)=525.179$ ;  $p<.001$ ,  $\chi^2/df=1.683$ ,  $CFI=.993$ ,  $RMSEA=.019$  (90%  $CI=.016-.022$ ), and  $SRMR=.014$ . The findings revealed that emotional abuse at T1 and at T2 significantly predicted both detachment and anxiety at T2 and at T3, respectively. Detachment at T1 and at T2 significantly predicted anxiety at T2 and at T3, respectively. Detachment did not predict emotional abuse, and anxiety did not predict either emotional abuse or detachment. Mediation analyses indicated that emotional abuse at T1 indirectly predicted anxiety at T3 through emotional abuse at T2, detachment at T2, and anxiety at T2. In addition, detachment at T1 indirectly predicted anxiety at T3 through detachment at T2 and anxiety at T2, but not through emotional abuse at T2. Finally, anxiety at T1 did not indirectly predict anxiety at T3 through emotional abuse at T2, detachment at T2, or anxiety at T2. Taken together, these results underscore the central role of detachment as a key mechanism linking emotional abuse as a predictor to the development of anxiety as an outcome. From a clinical and preventive perspective, these findings highlight the importance of early identification of emotionally abusive experiences and the implementation of interventions aimed at promoting emotional awareness, adaptive coping strategies, and relational engagement. Strengthening emotional resilience during adolescence may be particularly crucial for disrupting maladaptive developmental pathways and reducing the long-term psychological burden associated with emotional abuse.

**Keywords:** *Emotional abuse, detachment, anxiety, adolescents, longitudinal study.*

---

### 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by heightened emotional reactivity and evolving social dynamics, during which emotional validation and support are essential for healthy psychological development. Emotional abuse (EA), defined by a lack of emotional recognition and nurturing, is associated with adverse developmental outcomes and increased vulnerability to psychological disorders (Calaresi, Verrastro, Giordano, Gullo, & Saladino, 2024; Saladino, Cuzzocrea, Calaresi, Gullo, & Verrastro, 2024). A potential mechanism linking EA to anxiety is detachment, a coping response marked by emotional withdrawal and social disengagement (Back, Flechsenhar, Bertsch, & Zettl, 2021). Although initially protective, persistent detachment may impair emotional regulation, reduce social support, and exacerbate psychopathology when individuals face stressors (Galloghly, Apputhurai, & Knowles, 2024;

Lin, Ye, Ye, Wang, & Zhang, 2024). The Developmental Cascade Model (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010) provides a framework for understanding how early adverse experiences, such as EA, initiate interconnected developmental processes that shape later psychological outcomes. Within this perspective, EA disrupts the development of key competencies, including emotional regulation and healthy relational skills (Krvavac & Jansson, 2021), triggering a chain of maladaptive adjustments. One central mechanism in this cascade is detachment, conceptualized as a protective response to emotionally harmful environments (Back et al., 2021; Galloghly et al., 2024). Although initially adaptive, persistent detachment may consolidate into a stable trait, limiting emotional expression and access to social support. Over time, this process amplifies vulnerability to anxiety, as reduced relational and regulatory resources hinder effective coping under stress (Galloghly et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2024). In this model, anxiety emerges both as a direct consequence of EA and as an outcome reinforced by detachment within the cascading developmental pathway.

### 1.1. Objectives

This study uses a three-wave longitudinal design to examine the associations among EA, detachment, and anxiety symptoms in adolescence. While prior research has highlighted the detrimental effects of EA and detachment on mental health, longitudinal evidence on their dynamic interplay remains limited, particularly regarding the role of detachment in linking EA to anxiety. The study therefore investigates reciprocal relationships between (1) EA and detachment, (2) EA and anxiety, and (3) detachment and anxiety across time, and tests potential mediation pathways connecting EA and anxiety through detachment.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

The study recruited adolescents aged 14–17 from Northern, Central, and Southern Italy using a three-wave longitudinal design over one year (November 2023–November 2024). Data were collected via a 15-minute online questionnaire administered in schools by trained research assistants. At T1, 1,847 out of 1,934 eligible students participated (95.5% response rate), with retention rates of 93.8% at T2 and 88.1% at T3. Informed consent was obtained from adolescents and their legal guardians, and the study complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and AIP ethical guidelines, with formal ethical approval granted.

### 2.2. Measures

**2.2.1. Emotional Abuse.** EA was measured using the Italian version of the EA subscale from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF) (Sacchi, Vieno, & Simonelli, 2018), consisting of five items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater exposure. Internal consistency was high across waves ( $\alpha = .87-.88$ ).

**2.2.2. Detachment.** Detachment was assessed using the Italian adaptation of the detachment subscale from the Personality Inventory for DSM-5-Brief Form (PID-5-BF) (Fossati, Somma, Borroni, Markon, & Krueger, 2017), including five items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater social withdrawal and emotional disengagement. Reliability was strong across time points ( $\alpha = .87-.88$ ).

**2.2.3. Anxiety.** Anxiety levels were assessed using the Italian adaptation of the anxiety subscale from the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (Bottesi et al., 2015), composed of seven items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater symptom severity. Internal consistency was high across waves ( $\alpha = .87-.89$ ).

### 2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS and RStudio. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations were first computed to examine demographic characteristics and associations among EA, detachment, and anxiety across three waves. Longitudinal and reciprocal associations among EA, detachment, and anxiety were tested using three-wave SEM with latent variables, accounting for autoregressive and residual effects. Parameters were estimated via maximum likelihood, and parceling (three indicators per construct) was applied to enhance measurement precision. Indirect effects were tested using bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Model fit was evaluated using  $\chi^2$ ,  $\chi^2/df$ , CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all study variables across the three waves, providing key demographic information, as well as the means and standard deviations for the variables at each time point.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables.

	Time 1 (N = 1.847)	Time 2 (N = 1.732)	Time 3 (N = 1.627)
	%	%	%
<b>Sex</b>			
Boys	49.5	49.8	49.3
Girls	50.5	50.2	50.7
<b>Gender Identity</b>			
Cisgender Girls	47.4	47.1	47.6
Cisgender Boys	43.3	43.8	43.1
Transgender Girls	2.5	2.4	2.4
Transgender Boys	3.9	3.8	3.8
Non-Binary	2.8	2.8	3.0
<b>Ethnicity Identity</b>			
Asian	4.8	4.8	4.5
Black	8.9	9.3	9.2
Latinx	5.4	5.3	5.4
Multi-ethnic	7.5	7.6	7.4
White	73.4	73.0	73.4
<b>Maternal Education</b>			
Elementary School	22.6	23.0	22.4
Middle School	33.0	32.9	33.3
High School Diploma	32.4	32.3	32.3
Bachelor's Degree	8.5	8.2	8.3
Postgraduate Degree	3.5	3.6	3.7
<b>Paternal Education</b>			
Elementary School	21.7	22.3	21.7
Middle School	30.5	30.1	30.5
High School Diploma	35.3	34.9	35.0
Bachelor's Degree	10.8	10.9	10.9
Postgraduate Degree	1.7	1.8	2.0
<b>Variable</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>
EA	9.32 (4.07)	9.27 (4.03)	9.28 (4.09)
Detachment	5.08 (4.23)	5.07 (4.30)	4.99 (4.03)
Anxiety	5.74 (4.05)	5.77 (4.44)	5.79 (4.19)
Age	15.50 (1.09)	-	-

Note. EA = Emotional Abuse; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.

Table 2 displays the correlations between the study variables. The correlation coefficients varied from .28 to .63, indicating moderate strength and confirming the expected relationships. The correlations within each variable showed a moderate degree of stability over time. Furthermore, the cross-variable correlations revealed consistent patterns, with significant relationships observed across all waves, providing support for the hypothesized connections between the variables.

Table 2. Descriptive analyses and correlations.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. EA T1	-								
2. EA T2	.62*	-							
3. EA T3	.55*	.63*	-						
4. Detachment T1	.39*	.31*	.30*	-					
5. Detachment T2	.34*	.37*	.31*	.54*	-				
6. Detachment T3	.33*	.36*	.38*	.43*	.53*	-			
7. Anxiety T1	.42*	.34*	.32*	.38*	.29*	.28*	-		
8. Anxiety T2	.41*	.43*	.37*	.37*	.40*	.33*	.44*	-	
9. Anxiety T3	.39*	.42*	.44*	.34*	.38*	.42*	.39*	.44*	-

Note.  $p < .01$ . EA = Emotional Abuse; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.



## 5. Conclusion

In sum, findings highlight the interconnected roles of EA, detachment, and anxiety, emphasizing detachment as a key mediator. Early intervention targeting EA and detachment may help reduce the risk of developing significant anxiety. This study contributes to the literature on the long-term impact of early adverse experiences and informs future research and interventions aimed at preventing and managing adolescent psychological distress.

## References

- Back, S. N., Flechsenhar, A., Bertsch, K., & Zettl, M. (2021). Childhood Traumatic Experiences and Dimensional Models of Personality Disorder in DSM-5 and ICD-11: Opportunities and Challenges. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 23(9), 60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-021-01265-5>
- Bates, G. W., Elphinstone, B., & Whitehead, R. (2021). Self-compassion and emotional regulation as predictors of social anxiety. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 94(3), 426–442. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12318>
- Berzenski, S. R. (2019). Distinct emotion regulation skills explain psychopathology and problems in social relationships following childhood emotional abuse and neglect. *Development and Psychopathology*, 31(02), 483–496. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579418000020>
- Bottesi, G., Ghisi, M., Altoè, G., Conforti, E., Melli, G., & Sica, C. (2015). The Italian version of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21: Factor structure and psychometric properties on community and clinical samples. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 60, 170–181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2015.04.005>
- Calaresi, D., Verrastro, V., Giordano, F., Gullo, J., & Saladino, V. (2024). Pathways from Family Functioning to Internet Gaming Disorder: The Mediating Role of the Dark Triad. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(8), 668. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14080668>
- Domènech-Abella, J., Gabarrell-Pascuet, A., Faris, L. H., Cristóbal-Narváez, P., Félez-Nobrega, M., Mortier, P., ... Haro, J. M. (2021). The association of detachment with affective disorder symptoms during the COVID-19 lockdown: The role of living situation and social support. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 292, 464–470. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.05.125>
- Fossati, A., Somma, A., Borroni, S., Markon, K. E., & Krueger, R. F. (2017). The Personality Inventory for DSM-5 Brief Form: Evidence for Reliability and Construct Validity in a Sample of Community-Dwelling Italian Adolescents. *Assessment*, 24(5), 615–631. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191115621793>
- Gabarrell-Pascuet, A., Félez-Nóbrega, M., Cristóbal-Narváez, P., Mortier, P., Vilagut, G., Olaya, B., ... Domènech-Abella, J. (2023). The role of social support, detachment, and depressive and anxiety symptoms in suicidal thoughts and behaviours during the Covid-19 lockdown: Potential pathways. *Current Psychology*, 42(11), 9237–9248. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02205-5>
- Galloghly, R. J., Apputhurai, P., & Knowles, S. R. (2024). Exploring the role of dysfunctional attitudes and unhelpful thoughts in the relationship between personality traits and psychological distress in Australian University students. *Current Psychology*, 43(31), 25704–25711. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-06239-3>
- Krvavac, S., & Jansson, B. (2021). The role of emotion dysregulation and alexithymia in the link between types of child abuse and neglect and psychopathology: A moderated mediation model. *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 5(3), 100213. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejtd.2021.100213>
- Lin, B., Ye, Z., Ye, Y., Wang, K., & Zhang, Y. (2024). The effect of childhood emotional abuse and neglect on disturbed dreaming frequency: The important role of rumination and perceived social support. *Dreaming*, 34(4), 318–327. <https://doi.org/10.1037/drm0000270>
- Masten, A. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2010). Developmental cascades. *Development and Psychopathology*, 22(3), 491–495. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579410000222>
- Sacchi, C., Vieno, A., & Simonelli, A. (2018). Italian validation of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire—Short Form on a college group. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 10(5), 563–571. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000333>
- Saladino, V., Cuzzocrea, F., Calaresi, D., Gullo, J., & Verrastro, V. (2024). Attachment Styles, Vulnerable Narcissism, Emotion Dysregulation and Perceived Social Support: A Mediation Model. *Social Sciences*, 13(5), 231. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13050231>
- Tomoda, A., Nishitani, S., Takiguchi, S., Fujisawa, T. X., Sugiyama, T., & Teicher, M. H. (2024). The neurobiological effects of childhood maltreatment on brain structure, function, and attachment. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00406-024-01779-y>