



THE IMPACT OF DYSFUNCTIONAL ATTACHMENT ON RESILIENCE IN INSTITUTIONALIZED CHILDREN

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between dysfunctional attachment patterns and levels of psychological resilience in children living in residential care, aged 11 to 15.. Drawing on a sample of 100 participants residing in Romanian placement centers, the research employed the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment - Child Version (IPPA-C) and the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-12) as standardized assessment tools. Descriptive statistics revealed moderate resilience levels and predominantly insecure attachment profiles among the participants. Inferential analysis indicated a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between attachment and resilience scores ($r = .927, p < .001$), with higher attachment scores associated with increased resilience. Moreover, linear regression analysis demonstrated that attachment significantly predicted resilience ($\beta = .927, p < .001$), accounting for 86% of the variance ($R^2 = .860$). These findings emphasize the crucial role of attachment functioning in shaping children's capacity to adapt under adverse conditions. In institutional contexts where secure relational bonds are often absent, promoting emotional connection and repairing dysfunctional attachment patterns may serve as key strategies for enhancing resilience in vulnerable youth.

Keywords: *dysfunctional attachment, resilience, institutionalized children, psychological adaptation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Attachment represents one of the most fundamental affective structures formed during childhood, significantly shaping how individuals perceive relational safety, regulate emotions, and cope with stress (Bowlby, 1982). The internal working models developed early in life have a lasting impact on how children interpret interpersonal relationships, build their self-image, and manage adversity. Particularly, dysfunctional attachment, whether avoidant, anxious, or disorganized, is associated with increased vulnerability to stress and a diminished capacity for adaptive functioning (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

For institutionalized children, these risks are considerably heightened. In residential care settings, the absence of a consistent attachment figure, frequent staff turnover, and

exposure to emotional neglect contribute to chronic stress and relational insecurity (Johnson, Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2006). As a result, it is not uncommon for the majority of children in such environments to develop insecure attachment patterns, which negatively influence their overall psychological development.

Conversely, resilience, understood as the ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity, is a crucial construct for understanding psychological functioning in vulnerable populations (Masten, 2014). Resilience is not a fixed trait, but rather a dynamic process influenced by individual, relational, and contextual factors. Research has consistently emphasized the foundational role of attachment in the development of resilience: children who perceive their relationships as safe, consistent, and emotionally supportive are more likely to develop effective adaptive mechanisms (Van Breda, 2018).

In children with a history of dysfunctional attachment, resilience may be significantly affected by the degree of relational insecurity. Variations in the quality of attachment relationships may correspond to differing levels of resilience, suggesting that attachment patterns may serve as predictors of psychological adaptability.

While most studies examining the link between attachment and resilience focus on children raised in family environments, the institutionalized population remains underrepresented in the literature (Cameron et al., 2013). This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the association between dysfunctional attachment and resilience among children in foster care. The underlying premise is that, in the absence of secure attachment, the development of coping mechanisms becomes more fragile, potentially diminishing, but not eliminating, resilience.

Understanding this relationship holds direct implications for practice: psychological interventions within the child protection system should aim to strengthen meaningful relationships and reconstruct attachment patterns, with the goal of supporting resilience development and reducing long-term psychological vulnerability.

2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. OBJECTIVE

The general objective of this study is to examine the influence of dysfunctional attachment on the level of psychological resilience in children aged 11 to 15 living in institutional care settings.

1. To assess the relationship between the degree of attachment dysfunction and the level of resilience in institutionalized children.

2. To determine whether attachment quality significantly predicts psychological resilience using linear regression analysis.

2.2. HYPOTHESES

H1: There is a statistically significant correlation between dysfunctional attachment and resilience levels in institutionalized children.

H2: The degree of attachment dysfunction significantly predicts resilience in institutionalized children.

3. METHOD

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

The study included a total of 100 children aged between 11 and 15 years, all residing in residential care centers across different regions of Romania. The sample consisted of 54 male and 46 female participants. Eligibility was conditioned by current placement in institutional care, alignment with the specified age range, and the demonstrated ability, both cognitive and emotional, to comprehend and engage with the assessment tools.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, in collaboration with institutional staff who facilitated access to the children. Informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians or the responsible institutional representatives, and each child provided assent prior to participation. The research protocol was conducted in full compliance with established ethical guidelines, safeguarding participants' anonymity, protecting the confidentiality of their responses, and emphasizing the voluntary nature of their involvement.

3.2 INSTRUMENTS

Two widely validated self-report instruments were used to assess the psychological variables of interest:

1. **The Child and Youth Resilience Measure - 12 items (CYRM-12):** represents a concise adaptation of the original instrument introduced by Ungar and Liebenberg in 2011. It evaluates resilience as a multidimensional construct across individual, relational, and contextual domains in youth. The scale includes 12 statements rated on a 3-point Likert scale, with total scores ranging from 12 to 36, higher values indicating stronger perceived resilience. The instrument has demonstrated solid psychometric properties, including validity and cross-cultural consistency.

2. **Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment for Children (IPPA-C):** comprising 28 items modified to suit the institutional care environment. Participants evaluated the perceived quality of their connections with caregivers or adult figures using a 4-point Likert scale. Scores could range from 28 to 112, with interpretive benchmarks indicating secure attachment (95-112), moderate or transitional attachment (75-94), and insecure attachment for scores below 75. In the present sample, most children fell within the insecure attachment range, highlighting a widespread pattern of relational insecurity.

3.3 PROCEDURE

Data collection was conducted on-site during scheduled sessions organized within the participating residential care centers. The children completed the CYRM-12 and IPPA-C questionnaires in small group settings, under my direct supervision. Each session had an average duration of approximately 20 minutes.

To facilitate understanding and ensure the reliability of responses, instructions were read aloud, and participants were encouraged to seek clarification whenever necessary. Upon completion, the data were systematically entered into SPSS for processing. The analyses

included descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and simple linear regression to explore the associations between the key psychological variables.

4. RESULTS

To explore the connection between dysfunctional attachment and resilience among institutionalized children, the analysis employed descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression. The following results incorporate indicators of statistical significance (p-values), confidence intervals, and effect size metrics to evaluate the robustness and interpretative value of the observed relationships.

4.1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Resilience	100	10	22	16.23	2.403
Attachment	100	28	80	51.05	12.196
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Descriptive statistics were computed for the two main variables: resilience and attachment. The mean score for resilience was 16.23 (SD = 2.40), with values ranging from 10 to 22. This indicates a moderate level of adaptive capacity among institutionalized children in the sample, though with a tendency toward the lower end of the scale, which is consistent with their exposure to chronic stress and relational instability.

Regarding attachment, the mean score was 51.05 (SD = 12.19), with observed scores ranging from 28 to 80. Given that, according to the IPPA-C interpretative thresholds, scores below 75 are indicative of insecure or dysfunctional attachment patterns, these results confirm that the vast majority of children in the study present with significant attachment insecurity. The wide range of scores also suggests interindividual differences in the severity of attachment dysfunction, with some children experiencing more profound relational difficulties than others. Overall, the descriptive data reflect a vulnerable population characterized by moderate resilience and predominantly insecure attachment styles, reinforcing the theoretical basis for investigating the relationship between these two constructs in institutionalized contexts.

4.2 PEARSON CORRELATION ANALYSIS

There is a statistically significant correlation between dysfunctional attachment and resilience levels in institutionalized children.

Table 2. Pearson correlation between attachment and resilience

		1.	2.
1. Resilience	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	100	
2. Attachment	Pearson Correlation	.927**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To test the first hypothesis (H1), a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between attachment and resilience in institutionalized children. The results revealed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between attachment and resilience scores, $r(100) = .927$, $p < .001$.

This extremely high correlation coefficient suggests that children who reported more secure attachment patterns also tended to exhibit higher levels of resilience. Conversely, more dysfunctional attachment was associated with reduced resilience. The strength of the correlation indicates a substantial effect size, supporting the theoretical view that attachment security plays a critical role in shaping adaptive capacity under adverse conditions.

4.3 SIMPLE LINEAR REGRESSION ANALYSIS

The degree of attachment dysfunction significantly predicts resilience in institutionalized children.

Table 3. Linear regression coefficients predicting resilience from attachment

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	6.904	.392		17.635	.000		
Attachment	.183	.007	.927	24.482	.000	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Resilience

To test the second hypothesis (H2), a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether attachment scores could significantly predict resilience levels in institutionalized children. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 98) = 599.37$, $p < .001$, indicating that the regression model provided a good fit for the data.

The results showed that attachment was a strong and significant predictor of resilience ($\beta = .927$, $t = 24.48$, $p < .001$). The unstandardized coefficient ($B = 0.183$) indicates that for every one-point increase in attachment score, the resilience score increased by approximately 0.18 points. This positive linear relationship further confirms that more secure attachment patterns are associated with higher levels of resilience.

The model explained a substantial proportion of the variance in resilience scores, with an R^2 value of .860 (86.0%). This large effect size suggests that attachment accounts for a significant part of the differences observed in resilience among the participants.

These results support the second hypothesis and reinforce the conceptual framework that positions attachment as a key predictor of emotional and psychological adaptation in vulnerable child populations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research examined how dysfunctional attachment relates to psychological resilience in institutionalized children aged 11 to 15. The findings demonstrated a strong, statistically meaningful association, showing that children who reported higher attachment security also exhibited stronger adaptive responses in the face of adversity. Moreover, regression analysis confirmed that the quality of attachment significantly predicts resilience, accounting for a large share of the variance in resilience outcomes ($R^2 = .860$).

These results emphasize the pivotal role of attachment as a psychological safeguard for children in care systems. In settings where emotional consistency and stable relationships are frequently lacking, the strength or fragility of attachment bonds directly influences children's capacity for emotional regulation and psychological recovery. Although attachment insecurity was widespread in the sample, the differing levels of resilience observed suggest that compensatory strengths or context-specific protective factors may still be at play and deserve further attention.

The data support the implementation of specialized programs within residential environments that aim to build and repair attachment structures. Promoting emotionally secure relationships may not only improve the immediate wellbeing of institutionalized children but also contribute to more stable and resilient developmental outcomes over time.

Future investigations would benefit from longitudinal methodologies and the inclusion of multiple perspectives (e.g., caregiver reports, clinical observations) to more fully understand how attachment and resilience interact and evolve, and to uncover other contextual or personal factors that influence this complex dynamic.

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