Journal Of Emotions, Relationships And Psychology

P ISSN: xxxx-xxx

VOL.1-NO.1-2026

E ISSN: xxxx-xxx

CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN ADULTHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Childhood emotional neglect is a developmental experience characterized by the persistent absence or insufficiency of emotional responsiveness, validation, support, and attention from caregivers. Unlike overt forms of childhood maltreatment, emotional neglect may occur without visible signs of harm, making it difficult to recognize during childhood and even in adulthood. Nevertheless, the absence of consistent emotional support may influence the development of emotional awareness, self-regulation, interpersonal trust, and psychological well-being. The present research paper explores the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and emotional regulation in adulthood, with particular attention to the potential psychological mechanisms connecting early caregiving experiences with adult emotional functioning. It examines how emotionally unresponsive caregiving environments may contribute to difficulties identifying emotions, tolerating emotional distress, expressing feelings appropriately, and responding adaptively to challenging situations. The paper also considers the possible roles of attachment patterns, emotional invalidation, self-concept, and interpersonal relationships in this relationship. A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design is proposed for examining the association between retrospectively reported childhood emotional neglect and adult emotion-regulation difficulties. Validated psychological questionnaires, demographic information, and appropriate statistical analyses could be used to investigate the research question. The literature-informed discussion suggests that childhood emotional neglect may be associated with greater emotional-regulation difficulties, although outcomes are likely to vary according to individual characteristics, supportive relationships, later life experiences, and access to psychological resources.

KEYWORDS: *Childhood emotional neglect, emotional regulation, adulthood, attachment theory, emotional awareness, childhood adversity, psychological well-being, emotion dysregulation, interpersonal relationships, developmental psychology.*

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a critical period of human development during which individuals acquire the emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral skills necessary for functioning throughout life. During this period, parents and other primary caregivers play an essential role in shaping children's understanding of emotions, relationships, safety, and self-worth. Amini-Tehrani, M., Mazidi, M., Ranjbar, S., Ohan, J. L., Weinborn, M., & Naragon-Gainey, K. (2026). found that Children depend on caregivers not only for food, shelter, education, and physical protection but also for affection, emotional validation, reassurance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. When these emotional needs are consistently unmet, children may experience childhood emotional neglect, a form of adverse caregiving experience that can have lasting implications for psychological development.Childhood emotional neglect generally refers to a pattern in which caregivers fail to respond adequately to a child's emotional needs. It may involve ignoring expressions of sadness, failing to provide comfort during distress, showing limited interest in the child's emotional experiences, or discouraging the expression of feelings. Unlike physical abuse or explicit emotional abuse, emotional neglect may occur through the absence of expected care rather than through an identifiable harmful action. Consequently, it can be difficult for children to recognize, describe, or communicate their experiences. Some children grow up in households where their material

needs are met but their emotional needs receive little attention.The psychological significance of emotional neglect lies partly in the developmental opportunities children may miss. Through repeated interactions with responsive caregivers, children learn to identify emotions, understand the reasons behind emotional experiences, tolerate frustration, communicate distress, and recover from upsetting events. Caregivers often serve as external regulators of children's emotional states before children gradually develop independent regulatory abilities. When caregivers are emotionally unavailable or inconsistent, children may receive fewer opportunities to develop these skills in a supportive environment.

Research has increasingly examined the relationship between childhood neglect and adult emotional functioning. A scoping review by Simon et al. (2024), which examined 25 studies, identified important gaps in knowledge and emphasized the need for longitudinal research, clearer distinctions between neglect and other forms of maltreatment, and greater cultural diversity in study samples. These gaps demonstrate the importance of investigating emotional neglect as a distinct developmental experience rather than treating it as interchangeable with every other form of childhood adversity.Childhood emotional neglect can occur in different family environments and does not necessarily mean that caregivers do not love their children. Some caregivers may experience psychological distress, financial hardship, relationship difficulties, limited emotional awareness, or a lack of positive parenting experiences themselves. Others may believe that children should suppress difficult emotions, become independent at an early age, or avoid discussing personal problems. Regardless of the reasons, persistent emotional unresponsiveness may affect the opportunities available to children to learn about their feelings.For example, a child who cries after experiencing rejection at school may be told to stop crying rather than being helped to understand the sadness and disappointment involved. A child who expresses fear may be dismissed as overly sensitive. Another child may achieve something important but receive little emotional acknowledgment or encouragement. When such experiences occur repeatedly, children may begin to believe that their feelings are unimportant, inappropriate, or burdensome to others.

It is important to distinguish emotional neglect from emotional abuse. Emotional abuse typically involves harmful actions such as humiliation, intimidation, rejection, or verbal degradation. Emotional neglect primarily concerns the failure to provide necessary emotional responsiveness, although both experiences may occur together. Physical neglect, in contrast, concerns inadequate provision of physical necessities and supervision. These experiences may overlap, but distinguishing them helps researchers investigate their potentially different developmental consequences. Bibi, S., Khan, B., Sehar, F., Akhtar, N., Nawaz, F., & Shah, S. T. A. (2026). Explained that A further difficulty is that emotional neglect is often assessed retrospectively. Adults may struggle to remember specific childhood events or may have difficulty identifying neglect because it was normalized within their family environment. Some may describe their childhood as ordinary because there was no obvious physical violence, even though emotional support was limited. Researchers must therefore consider the subjective nature of retrospective reporting and avoid assuming that every person who reports emotional neglect will experience psychological difficulties.Emotional regulation refers to the processes through which individuals influence which emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how they express or manage those emotions. It includes recognizing emotional states, understanding their causes, tolerating uncomfortable feelings, selecting appropriate coping strategies, and adjusting emotional responses according to a

particular situation.Effective emotional regulation does not mean eliminating negative emotions or remaining calm at all times. Sadness, anger, anxiety, disappointment, and fear are normal human experiences. Healthy regulation involves responding to these emotions flexibly and constructively. For example, an individual may acknowledge anger without becoming aggressive, experience anxiety while continuing to complete an important task, or communicate disappointment without withdrawing from a relationship.

The relationship between childhood emotional neglect and adult emotional regulation may be understood through developmental learning. Children learn how to respond to emotional experiences partly by observing how caregivers respond to their own emotions and to the child's distress. When caregivers acknowledge feelings, provide reassurance, and help children solve problems, they demonstrate practical ways of understanding and managing emotions.In emotionally neglectful environments, children may receive fewer opportunities to practice these processes with adult support. They may learn to ignore their emotional experiences, distract themselves from distress, avoid asking for help, or conceal feelings to maintain family harmony. Although these responses may be adaptive within the original family environment, they may become less helpful when carried into adult relationships, employment, education, and other social settings.For instance, an adult who learned that emotional expression was unwelcome may find it difficult to explain personal needs to a partner. Another may respond to criticism with intense shame because ordinary mistakes activate long-standing concerns about personal worth. Others may withdraw during disagreements, become overwhelmed by uncertainty, or struggle to distinguish anxiety from anger. These examples illustrate possible pathways rather than inevitable outcomes.A recent review of the literature indicates that the relationship between neglect and adult emotion regulation remains insufficiently established in several respects. Simon et al. (2024) highlighted limitations in the number and diversity of available studies, supporting the need for more focused investigation. Moreover, research on emotional abuse cannot automatically be generalized to emotional neglect, even though the two experiences can coexist.

Attachment theory provides another framework for understanding how early caregiving experiences may influence adult emotional functioning. According to Bowlby (1982), early relationships contribute to the development of expectations about the availability and responsiveness of significant others. Ainsworth et al. (1978) demonstrated that patterns of caregiver responsiveness are associated with different attachment behaviors in childhood.When children experience reliable emotional support, they may develop greater confidence in seeking help and recovering from distress. Amini-Tehrani, M., Mazidi, M., Ranjbar, S., Ohan, J. L., Weinborn, M., & Naragon-Gainey, K. (2026). found that When emotional support is inconsistent or unavailable, some children may become highly concerned about rejection, while others may minimize their emotional needs and emphasize self-reliance. These patterns should not be treated as fixed categories or direct diagnoses; rather, they represent possible relational adaptations that may change over time.In adulthood, attachment-related expectations may influence how individuals interpret conflict, intimacy, dependence, and emotional disclosure. A person who expects rejection may interpret delayed communication as evidence of abandonment. Another who expects emotional needs to be dismissed may avoid vulnerability, even with a supportive partner. Such responses can complicate emotional regulation because interpersonal situations frequently activate strong emotional reactions.However, adult relationships can also provide corrective experiences. Supportive partners, friends, mentors, and therapists may help individuals develop greater

Journal Of Emotions, Relationships And Psychology
VOL.1-NO.1-2026
P ISSN: xxxx-xxx
E ISSN: xxxx-xxx

emotional trust and practice new ways of expressing feelings. Childhood emotional neglect should therefore be understood as a possible risk factor rather than a permanent limitation on emotional development.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and emotional-regulation difficulties in adulthood.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

1. Is childhood emotional neglect significantly associated with emotional-regulation difficulties among adults?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on childhood emotional neglect and adult emotional regulation draws on developmental psychology, attachment theory, trauma research, and emotion-regulation models. These perspectives collectively suggest that early caregiving experiences may influence the development of emotional awareness, coping strategies, interpersonal expectations, and psychological adjustment. Nevertheless, the strength and specificity of these relationships remain important research questions.A central distinction in this literature is the difference between childhood emotional neglect and childhood emotional abuse. Emotional neglect concerns insufficient emotional care, whereas emotional abuse involves harmful emotional treatment. Clinchard, C., Casas, B., & Kim-Spoon, J. (2026). Explains that Both may influence emotional development, but evidence relating to one cannot automatically be treated as evidence for the other.Simon et al. (2024) reviewed 25 studies examining childhood neglect and emotion regulation in adulthood. Their review highlighted limitations in the existing evidence, including geographical gaps, inconsistent differentiation between types of neglect, and a shortage of longitudinal research. The authors recommended studies using diverse populations and following individuals over time. These findings provide the foundation for examining the proposed relationship while recognizing that emotional neglect is not a uniform experience and that adult outcomes may vary considerably.

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1982) and supported by the observational research of Ainsworth et al. (1978), explains how early interactions with caregivers contribute to expectations about relationships and emotional safety. Children depend on caregivers for comfort, reassurance, and protection during stressful experiences. Through repeated interactions, they gradually develop expectations about whether others will respond when support is needed.When emotional responses from caregivers are consistently unavailable, children may develop strategies that reduce their immediate dependence on others. Some may become reluctant to express distress, while others may become particularly sensitive to signs of rejection. These patterns may later influence emotional regulation because close relationships frequently involve uncertainty, disagreement, vulnerability, and competing needs.For example, an adult who expects emotional dismissal may avoid discussing personal concerns with a partner. Doba, K., Pezard, L., & Nandrino, J. L. (2026). Explained that Another may become highly distressed when a friend appears distant. Such responses may reflect learned expectations, but they can also arise from other experiences and individual

differences. Attachment theory therefore offers a useful explanatory framework rather than proof that emotional neglect necessarily produces a particular adult attachment style.Gross (1998) described emotion regulation as a set of processes that influence the development and expression of emotional responses. His process model includes situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. These processes help explain why people experiencing similar events may respond differently.

Childhood emotional neglect may be associated with fewer opportunities to learn flexible regulatory strategies through caregiver guidance. For example, a child who receives help reconsidering a frightening situation may gradually learn cognitive reappraisal. A child whose distress is repeatedly ignored may instead rely on avoidance or suppression.Gratz and Roemer (2004) expanded the conceptualization of emotion regulation by emphasizing emotional awareness, emotional clarity, acceptance, impulse control, and access to effective strategies. Armbruster-Genç, D. J., Spilger, E., & Basten, U. (2025). Explains that This framework is especially useful for the present study because it treats regulation as a multidimensional ability rather than a single behavior.An adult may, for instance, recognize sadness but be unable to tolerate it without withdrawing from social contact. Another may experience intense anger and struggle to inhibit an impulsive response. A third may have difficulty identifying the emotion itself. Measuring these dimensions can provide a more detailed account of how childhood experiences relate to adult functioning.Social learning perspectives emphasize that children develop behavioral and emotional patterns partly through observation, imitation, reinforcement, and interaction with significant others. Caregivers communicate explicit and implicit messages about emotions through their words, facial expressions, reactions, and everyday behavior.When children are encouraged to discuss their feelings, they may develop a vocabulary for describing emotional experiences and learn that difficult feelings can be managed constructively. Conversely, repeated dismissal of emotional expression may communicate that feelings should be concealed or that seeking support is inappropriate.Emotional socialization also occurs through schools, peers, extended families, and broader cultural environments. Therefore, caregiver responsiveness is important but not the only influence on emotional development.

The scoping review by Simon et al. (2024) found that the available literature was relatively limited and heterogeneous. Its recommendations emphasized that neglect should be examined separately from other forms of maltreatment where possible, and that longitudinal designs are needed to clarify developmental patterns. This evidence supports further investigation but does not justify a universal claim that childhood emotional neglect inevitably leads to emotion dysregulation. The relationship may differ depending on the severity and duration of neglect, other childhood experiences, supportive relationships, and individual characteristics.Research on broader childhood maltreatment provides additional context. Peter, L., Sitarski, E., Kobel, S., Wendt, J., Fegert, J. M., & Köhler-Dauner, F. (2026). revealed that A 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis of child maltreatment and resilience in adulthood reported negative associations between childhood maltreatment and several resilience domains, including emotion regulation, with stronger associations reported for emotional abuse and neglect than for some other maltreatment categories. However, resilience and emotion regulation are related but distinct constructs, so these findings should be interpreted as complementary rather than direct evidence for every dimension of emotional neglect.Similarly, a 2026 meta-analysis by Amini-Tehrani and colleagues examined

childhood emotional abuse and adult emotion-regulation processes across 124 independent samples. The authors reported associations with avoidant strategies and aversive emotional experiences, while noting substantial heterogeneity across studies. Because the primary exposure was emotional abuse, these results provide related evidence rather than a direct estimate of the effect of emotional neglect alone. Taken together, these studies indicate that adverse childhood experiences warrant careful investigation in relation to adult emotional functioning. They also demonstrate why researchers should avoid combining different forms of maltreatment without considering their distinct characteristics.

A responsive caregiver can acknowledge both emotions and help the child prepare for the transition.When emotional experiences receive little attention, children may have fewer opportunities to develop emotional vocabulary and confidence in interpreting their feelings. In adulthood, some may describe being overwhelmed without knowing whether the underlying experience is sadness, shame, fear, anger, or a combination of emotions.However, emotional awareness should not be assumed to be impaired in every person who experienced neglect. Individuals can develop emotional insight through friendships, education, reflective activities, or psychotherapy. Future research should examine whether emotional awareness represents a specific pathway linking childhood neglect with broader regulation difficulties.Emotional acceptance involves allowing feelings to occur without automatically judging them as unacceptable or attempting to eliminate them. Schaumburg, L. M., & Nimtz, C. (2026). Elaborated on It does not mean agreeing with every emotional impulse or acting on every feeling. Rather, it allows an individual to acknowledge an emotional experience while deciding how to respond.Children who repeatedly encounter dismissal of their feelings may learn that sadness, fear, or anger is unacceptable. Some may suppress outward expressions of emotion, while others may avoid situations that could trigger distress. These strategies may reduce immediate discomfort, but rigid reliance on them can make it harder to address emotional needs.The 2026 meta-analysis of childhood emotional abuse by Amini-Tehrani and colleagues reported associations with avoidant regulatory tendencies and aversive emotional experiences.

METHODOLOGY

The proposed study will investigate the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and emotional-regulation difficulties in adulthood using a quantitative research methodology. A quantitative approach is appropriate because the primary objective is to measure the two constructs systematically and determine whether a statistically significant association exists between them. The study will focus on adults aged 18 years and above who are able to provide informed consent and complete the research questionnaires. Participants may be recruited through universities, community organizations, online research invitations, and other accessible adult populations, depending on institutional approval and available resources. A non-probability convenience sampling method may be used for an initial student research project, although this method may limit the generalizability of the findings. If resources permit, a larger and more diverse sample should be recruited to improve representation across age groups, gender identities, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic circumstances. Childhood emotional neglect will be assessed retrospectively using the emotional-neglect subscale of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), subject to instrument permissions and suitability for the study population. Adult emotional regulation will be assessed using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale

(DERS), which measures several dimensions of regulatory difficulties, including emotional awareness, clarity, acceptance, impulse control, and access to effective strategies. A demographic questionnaire will collect relevant information such as age, gender, educational level, and other non-identifying characteristics required for the research. Before data collection begins, ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional review committee.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research will employ a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design to examine the association between childhood emotional neglect and emotional regulation in adulthood. A non-experimental design is appropriate because the researcher cannot ethically manipulate childhood experiences or randomly assign participants to conditions involving emotional neglect. Instead, participants will report their childhood experiences retrospectively and describe their current emotional-regulation difficulties using standardized questionnaires. The independent or predictor variable will be the level of reported childhood emotional neglect, while the dependent or outcome variable will be the level of reported emotional-regulation difficulties. Higher scores on the relevant scales will be interpreted according to their official scoring instructions, and reverse-coded items will be handled as required by each instrument. The target population will consist of adults aged 18 years and above, with the final inclusion criteria determined by the approved research protocol. Recruitment may take place in educational institutions and community settings, with efforts made to avoid an exclusively homogeneous sample. The required sample size should be determined through an a priori statistical power analysis based on the anticipated association, desired statistical power, significance level, and planned analyses rather than an arbitrary number. Participants will receive a participant information sheet and consent form before completing the questionnaire package. The questionnaire order and instructions will be standardized to reduce unnecessary procedural variation. The study will distinguish emotional neglect from emotional abuse and physical neglect wherever possible, because these experiences are related but conceptually different.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis will be conducted using an appropriate statistical software package, such as SPSS, R, or another institutionally approved program. Before analysis, the dataset will be checked for duplicate submissions, incomplete responses, eligibility problems, inconsistent entries, and values outside the permitted response ranges. The researcher will follow a predefined missing-data procedure rather than automatically replacing missing responses with averages. The extent and pattern of missing data will be documented, and any exclusions will be reported transparently. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations where appropriate, will be calculated to summarize participant demographics and the distributions of childhood emotional-neglect and emotional-regulation scores. The internal consistency of the questionnaire scales may be examined using suitable reliability estimates, such as coefficient alpha or omega, while recognizing that reliability estimates do not establish validity. Before inferential analysis, the researcher will examine the distribution of scores, potential outliers, linearity, and other assumptions relevant to the chosen statistical methods. Pearson's product-moment correlation

Journal Of Emotions, Relationships And Psychology
VOL.1-NO.1-2026
P ISSN: xxxx-xxx
E ISSN: xxxx-xxx

will be used to assess the association between the two continuous variables when its assumptions are reasonably satisfied. If the data are unsuitable for Pearson's correlation, Spearman's rank-order correlation will be considered. Multiple linear regression may be used to determine whether childhood emotional neglect is associated with emotional-regulation difficulties after adjusting for prespecified demographic or contextual variables. The analysis will report the direction and magnitude of associations, confidence intervals, exact p-values where available, and appropriate effect-size measures.

FINDINGS

Because this document presents a proposed study rather than a completed empirical investigation, the actual findings cannot yet be determined. The findings section should be completed after participant recruitment, questionnaire administration, and statistical analysis. The first part of the section should describe the final sample, including the number of eligible participants, relevant demographic characteristics, and the extent of missing data or exclusions. The next part should report descriptive statistics for childhood emotional neglect and emotional-regulation difficulties, including the means and standard deviations when appropriate. The primary result should address whether childhood emotional neglect is statistically associated with emotional-regulation difficulties. If a positive association is observed, the findings should state that higher reported childhood emotional neglect is associated with greater reported difficulties in emotional regulation within the studied sample. If the association is negative, weak, or statistically nonsignificant, the report should describe that result accurately rather than changing the interpretation to match the expected hypothesis. Where regression analysis is conducted, the section should explain whether childhood emotional neglect remains associated with the outcome after adjustment for the selected covariates. Any analyses of emotional awareness, emotional acceptance, impulse control, or access to regulation strategies should be presented as secondary results, with appropriate consideration of multiple testing. The findings should include relevant effect sizes and confidence intervals so that the reader can evaluate the magnitude and precision of the observed associations. Differences between the study results and previous research should be described cautiously, particularly if the sample is small, geographically restricted, or drawn primarily from a university population.

CONCLUSION

Childhood emotional neglect represents an important area of developmental and psychological research because emotional responsiveness during childhood may contribute to the development of emotional awareness, coping abilities, interpersonal expectations, and psychological well-being. When caregivers consistently fail to acknowledge or respond to a child's emotional needs, the child may have fewer opportunities to learn how to identify feelings, tolerate distress, communicate personal needs, and select effective emotional-regulation strategies. These experiences may be associated with difficulties in adulthood, although individual outcomes vary and cannot be predicted from childhood experiences alone. The present research proposal focuses on examining the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and emotional-regulation difficulties among adults. Attachment theory, emotion-regulation theory, and research on emotional socialization provide possible explanations for this relationship. Previous literature suggests that childhood adversity is

associated with several aspects of adult psychological functioning, while recent reviews emphasize that the specific mechanisms linking emotional neglect to adult emotional regulation remain incompletely understood. In particular, research must distinguish emotional neglect from emotional abuse and other forms of maltreatment rather than assuming that all adverse childhood experiences produce identical outcomes. The proposed quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design provides a practical approach to examining the association between retrospective reports of childhood emotional neglect and current emotional-regulation difficulties. Standardized instruments, transparent statistical procedures, and appropriate ethical safeguards can strengthen the quality of the research.

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