

**Insecure Attachment and Empathy Deficits in Adults with Childhood Trauma**

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### **Abstract**

Childhood trauma, encompassing various adverse experiences such as abuse, neglect, and disrupted caregiving, has profound effects on emotion regulation, attachment security, and overall social functioning throughout life. This literature review aims to examine the relationships between childhood trauma and its impact on the development of empathy in adulthood. The findings indicate that individuals exposed to traumatic experiences during childhood often exhibit insecure attachment patterns, which hinder their ability to engage in empathic interactions. Specifically, insecure or disorganized attachment styles are shown to disrupt emotion regulation and perspective-taking abilities, which are critical components of empathy. The review describes effective interventions, including emotionally focused therapy (EFT) and attachment-based frameworks, which have demonstrated success in promoting emotional safety and repairing attachment disruptions.

Keywords: *Childhood trauma, attachment, empathy, adulthood, emotion regulation, emotionally focused therapy*

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## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Research Problem Statement .....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Researchers Positioning Statement.....	11
Overview of the Paper .....	12
<b>Chapter 2: Methods of Literature Search .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Search Criteria .....	14
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.....	15
Challenges Encountered During the Literature Search Process .....	16
Evaluation of Significant Studies Reviewed.....	16
Methodological Concerns and Issues Observed .....	18
<b>Chapter 3: Literature Review, Synthesis, Critical Analysis and Findings.....</b>	<b>20</b>
The Foundations of Attachment and Socio-Emotional Development .....	21
Long-term Impacts of Childhood Trauma on Attachment Styles.....	23
<i>Attachment as a Mediator Between Trauma and Emotional Functioning</i> .....	24
Impact of Childhood Trauma on Empathy .....	25
Empathy and Child Development.....	28
Impact of Early Relationships on Empathetic Development.....	30
The Role of Attachment Styles in Empathy Development into Adulthood.....	33
Decreased Empathy Due to Childhood Trauma .....	36
Childhood Trauma, Heightened Resiliency, and Empathy.....	38
Summary of Findings.....	41

Ethical Considerations .....	42
<b>Chapter Four: Application to Clinical Practice .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Explanation of the Literature Review Integration .....	45
Application for Aspiring Practitioners.....	46
Consideration of Cultural Differences and Legislation .....	49
Recommendations for Clinical Practice.....	50
<b>Chapter Five: Suggestions and a Conclusion and Summary of the Study .....</b>	<b>52</b>
Recommendations for Future Research .....	52
Personal Reflection and Professional Learning .....	54
Closing Statement .....	55

## **Insecure Attachment and Empathy Deficits in Adults with Childhood Trauma**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Forming and maintaining relationships is a crucial aspect of human behaviour that is encouraged and learned from a young age. Empathy is a crucial social skill in forming and maintaining relationships, as well as promoting prosocial behaviours (Lévy et al., 2019). Most often, caregivers encourage socialization through school programming, which can have a positive impact on empathy and prosocial behaviours, such as helping and caring (Carrizales et al., 2022). Researchers have long been concerned with the origins of empathy in prosocial behaviour, and the degree to which empathy is learned or genetically predisposed (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Numerous studies have documented that insecure attachment styles, often rooted in adverse childhood experiences, correlate with deficits in empathy, which can manifest as difficulties in forming healthy relationships and navigating social interactions in adulthood (Karna & Simon, 2024; Kim et al., 2021).

Early caregiver interactions have a profound impact on a person's socioemotional development, particularly in the development of empathy in later life (Xu et al., 2022). Effective interpersonal relationships and general psychological well-being are, in part, based on empathy, which is the ability to understand and experience another person's feelings (Huh et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022). Empathy is a psychological construct that influences how we socialize, understand others, and form social connections, laying the groundwork for positive social behaviour and moral development (Miller & Eisenberg, 1987; Lévy et al., 2019). According to Eisenberg and Miller (1987), prosocial behaviour involves actions aimed at benefiting others and is influenced by social norms and moral beliefs. High empathy can promote prosocial behaviour and the well-being of others, which suggests that developing empathy may be crucial in motivating altruistic

behaviour (Ishtiyag et al., 2024). In contrast, low empathy is closely related to the externalization of aggressive behaviour and social adjustment (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Zych et al., 2019).

The literature indicates that trauma exposure is predictive of maladaptive emotion regulation and interpersonal behaviours later in life, emphasizing the cyclical nature of trauma and relationship dysfunction (Huh et al., 2020; Karna & Simon, 2024). Karna and Simon (2024) found that people who experienced childhood trauma tended to have anxious and avoidant attachment styles, which may indicate that trauma can disrupt the formation of secure caregiver bonds, further indicating that people's attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies can be significantly impacted by childhood trauma. Research in residential care facilities is also noteworthy, as adolescents in these settings are more likely to report disruptions in attachment (Costa et al., 2022). Costa et al. (2022) found that the quality of the relationship with residential caregivers moderated the association between attachment avoidance and emotion regulation strategies. Overall, the enduring impact of childhood trauma on adult relationships underscores the need for parent-child relationship interventions that emphasize supportive emotional environments to foster secure attachment styles. Further understanding these dynamics can aid therapeutic efforts aimed at improving emotion regulation and restoring secure attachment patterns among adults with trauma histories.

Additionally, studies show that childhood trauma is linked to both greater and lower empathetic capabilities in adulthood (Greenberg et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2022). For example, Greenberg et al. (2018) found that people with childhood trauma histories sometimes show higher levels of empathy, which is in contrast to the often-found outcomes that link trauma to deficits in empathy. These surprising findings necessitate thorough investigations to explore how early life attachment styles influence the development of empathy. The study of the complex

relationships between childhood trauma experiences and patterns of attachment alongside deficits in empathy is essential for addressing long-standing psychological effects in survivors. The expanding research holds significant importance for therapeutic methods and creating successful interventions that help build resilience while improving emotional health in adults who have experienced trauma.

Childhood trauma, encompassing experiences of abuse, neglect, and dysfunction within familial and caregiving environments, has been increasingly recognized for its profound impact on emotional and psychological development. Research has established a robust link between adverse childhood experiences and subsequent deficits in empathy, a vital ability for understanding and responding to the emotions of others. Experiences of trauma during formative years can significantly impair emotion regulation and hinder the capacity for perspective-taking, critical components of empathic understanding (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023). The emotional consequences left by such traumatic experiences may manifest as chronic emotional numbness, reducing the affected individuals' ability to connect emotionally and empathically with others.

The effects of specific types of childhood maltreatment further elaborate on the nuances of this relationship. Evidence indicates that different forms of trauma, be they physical, emotional, or sexual, produce distinctive alterations in emotional processing, resulting in enduring empathic deficits (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023). For instance, trauma survivors often grapple with difficulties in emotion regulation, leading to impaired empathic abilities, as illustrated in the findings of Wang et al. (2021). Moreover, research suggests that emotion dysregulation stemming from childhood trauma plays a crucial role in disrupting empathic engagement in adult relationships (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023).

Despite significant findings, the existing literature has limitations, particularly in terms of the methodologies employed. Many studies rely on self-reported data, which can be influenced by biases and inaccuracies, as highlighted by Wang et al. (2021). Additionally, Existing studies on attachment have predominantly focused on clinical populations, neglecting the impact of community and familial structures on attachment development and the resulting empathetic capacities. A pressing need remains for longitudinal research that captures the evolution of attachment-related empathy deficits over time, particularly in non-clinical populations. Lastly, the causative link between childhood trauma and empathy is not uniformly defined across studies, underscoring the need for more diverse and comprehensive methodologies in future research. While there is a growing consensus regarding the correlation between trauma and empathy deficits, there remain questions about the contextual and individual factors that modulate this relationship, such as resilience and emotion regulation strategies (Wang et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2018). Exploring these areas further could enhance our understanding of how childhood trauma influences empathy development, paving the way for more effective therapeutic interventions aimed at fostering emotional health and relational well-being.

### **Research Problem Statement**

Childhood trauma has profound implications for both psychological development and interpersonal relationships throughout life. Understanding how early adverse experiences shape an individual's attachment style and capacity for empathy is integral to recognizing the paths to mental health issues that many adults face. This paper seeks to explore the connections between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and empathy, particularly in the context of adults who have experienced significant childhood adversity. Additionally, while the significance of secure attachments in promoting resilience and emotional health is clear, research often overlooks how

interventions targeting attachment security can enhance empathic abilities in trauma-exposed individuals (Gander et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022). Comprehensive studies that incorporate diverse demographic factors and longitudinal designs could elucidate how therapeutic efforts can reshape attachment patterns and improve emotional competencies.

This review seeks to explore these connections more thoroughly, elucidating how the repercussions of childhood experiences manifest in adult attachment styles and empathetic capacities. While attachment theory provides valuable insights into emotional and relational dynamics, literature regarding its integration with empathy development, especially in contexts of childhood trauma, remains limited. Addressing these gaps can enhance therapeutic practices and improve outcomes for individuals grappling with the consequences of insecure attachments rooted in early adverse experiences. The literature review will investigate the following research question: To what extent do experiences of childhood trauma, and attachment style influence adult empathy?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Attachment Theory***

Attachment theory, conceived by Bowlby (1969/1982), posits that humans are inherently relational beings, with early caregiving experiences significantly shaping emotional and social development. This theory emphasizes that secure connections to parental figures are vital for emotional health and survival. Bowlby noted that proximity to caregivers promotes feelings of safety in children, thereby enhancing their ability to form relational bonds later in life.

Ainsworth's (1979) work expanded on this foundation, identifying various attachment styles: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized, each influencing how individuals perceive and engage in relationships as adults. Secure attachment generally correlates with positive emotion

regulation and social functioning. In contrast, insecure attachment often leads to challenges in managing emotions and relationships, manifesting as anxiety or avoidance in interpersonal contexts (Karna & Simon, 2024). The well-established link between attachment styles and emotional outcomes suggests that individuals with insecure attachments often struggle to regulate their emotions and respond empathetically.

Research indicates that childhood trauma contributes to the development of insecure attachment, which in turn hinders emotion regulation and empathy (Karna & Simon, 2024; Gander et al., 2020). However, there may be a lack of understanding about how diverse childhood traumas influence empathy development across various populations. Some individuals with histories of traumatic experiences may exhibit heightened empathetic responses, potentially as a coping mechanism, while others may demonstrate significant deficits (Back et al., 2021). This inconsistency highlights the complexity of empathy as a psychological construct influenced by many factors, including attachment and trauma histories.

### **Researchers Positioning Statement**

As a current child and youth care worker in children's services, I am deeply passionate about understanding how trauma affects emotional and social development throughout the lifespan. Through my work, I have observed many youth who have endured significant traumatic experiences early in life and how these experiences hinder their ability to regulate emotions. Youth who have experienced trauma often struggle to relate to others, leading to challenges in forming and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships as they move into adulthood.

In my professional experience, I have worked with many youth diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder who struggle to empathize with others, including the staff who support them. Through open conversations about empathy and their relationships with caregivers, many youth

reveal that they have learned to treat others the way they were treated, often through patterns of verbal abuse, neglect, or emotional invalidation. However, when exploring the roots of their attachment experiences and connecting these to their present behaviours, I have witnessed remarkable growth. Many begin to express their emotions more constructively, choosing to discuss their concerns with staff rather than acting out through aggression. Although many youth with trauma and attachment histories experience difficulty displaying empathy, I have also observed tremendous resilience and generosity among them. This has deepened my understanding of the unique complexities and individual differences present in each case. To address my own biases, I continually strive to consider each youth's cultural background, trauma history, and the influence of later life relationships when interpreting their behaviours and needs.

### **Overview of the Paper**

This capstone project is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the research topic, outlines the problem statement, identifies the research purpose and question, and discusses the significance of examining the relationship between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and empathy in adulthood. Chapter Two describes the literature search strategy in detail, including the databases consulted, search terms used, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the systematic approach taken to identify relevant studies. Chapter Three presents the literature review, synthesizing empirical findings that explore how childhood trauma contributes to the development of insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious and avoidant patterns, and how these attachment styles influence empathy, emotion regulation, and adult relational functioning. This chapter highlights the ways in which early emotional maltreatment shapes maladaptive behavioural and interpersonal patterns later in life. Chapter Four discusses the clinical implications of the reviewed findings, emphasizing attachment-informed and trauma-focused

interventions that enhance therapeutic outcomes. It explores strategies for promoting emotional attunement, empathy development, and the restoration of secure relational bonds among adults who have experienced early adversity. Finally, Chapter Five provides recommendations and conclusions. It summarizes the key findings of the review, discusses the ethical considerations and limitations identified within the existing research, and offers directions for future research and professional practice. The chapter concludes by underscoring the importance of recognizing the long-term effects of childhood trauma on adult emotional health and relational capacity. By integrating theoretical insights with practical applications, this capstone aims to contribute to both academic understanding and clinical practice, fostering emotional and relational resilience among individuals affected by childhood trauma.

## Chapter 2: Methods of Literature Search

This literature review systematically identifies and evaluates studies on the impact of childhood trauma on adult attachment styles and empathy development. This chapter presents search criteria and key terms to identify scholarly research, as well as the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies. The chapter describes the research difficulties encountered during the study process, while also evaluating the significant studies examined and discussing potential methodological concerns in the review literature.

### Search Criteria

The primary databases used for the literature search were PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Each database provided a breadth of resources, which enabled access to an expanded range of articles on childhood trauma, attachment theory, and empathy. The initial process of searching for literature was done by using the keywords *childhood trauma*, *attachment styles*, and *empathy in adulthood*. The search yielded systematic reviews, empirical studies, and meta-analyses.

Secondary searches were conducted within the initial database results using the key phrases *insecure attachment and empathy*, *childhood trauma and adult attachment*, and *impact of trauma on empathy* to further narrow the concentration. This layered approach ensured that the search strategy was systematic and that the studies identified were directly relevant to the research question. The search refinement process was important. This secondary search was conducted because the initial search yielded a large number of broad results. To refine the focus, additional keywords were used: *Insecure attachment*, *childhood trauma*, *adult empathy*, and *attachment insecurities* were applied within the first set of results. This process ensured the identification of studies that specifically examined the relationship between childhood trauma,

attachment insecurity, and empathy in adulthood, rather than more general discussions of trauma or attachment.

The final stages of searching were conducted using narrower key terms, such as *attachment theory* and *psychopathology in adulthood*, to identify studies that focused explicitly on childhood adversity and its influence on attachment styles. This search was conducted within the refined results of earlier searches rather than as an entirely separate search. Using this systematic and iterative process of narrowing keywords allowed for the identification of empirical studies most relevant to the research question. It enhanced the depth of understanding regarding the impact of childhood trauma.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The selection included peer-reviewed studies from the last decade to ensure the current relevance of the analysis; however, exceptions were made for seminal works due to their original contributions. The selected studies represented different demographic groups and employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. The studies included participants from all age groups who reported childhood trauma experiences to allow for a broad examination of psychological outcomes related to attachment patterns, empathy, and other co-occurring conditions such as anxiety and depression (Kim et al., 2021; Palumbo et al., 2024). The review excluded studies that focused solely on adult populations and made no mention of childhood. The criteria helped the review to arrive at a final list of research literature which focused on the relationship between early trauma and its impact on attachment security and empathetic development.

Preference was given to studies published in reputable, peer-reviewed journals indexed in PsycINFO, PubMed, and ScienceDirect, where journal impact factors indicate scholarly credibility and research quality. Each study was evaluated for methodological soundness by

considering factors such as sample size adequacy, clarity of research design, and the reliability and validity of measurement instruments assessing attachment, empathy, and related constructs. Attention was also given to the transparency of ethical procedures, including consent and participant protections.

### **Challenges Encountered During the Literature Search Process**

The literature search process encountered significant challenges due to the increasing number of studies which focused on childhood trauma and its implications for attachment and empathy from a range of perspectives. The scope of the studies was initially broad, requiring a rigorous analytical approach to refine the selection process. This involved closely examining each study's methodology, particularly the age range of participants, to ensure a focus on adult populations who had experienced childhood trauma and exhibited insecure attachment styles. The various research approaches presented challenges, as some studies employed qualitative interviews, while others used experimental methods, which necessitated careful attention to ensure their alignment with the research objectives (Yang et al., 2024).

### **Evaluation of Significant Studies Reviewed**

The examination of significant studies highlights critical relationships between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and adult empathy development. For instance, Eriksson et al. (2021) provide important insights into how childhood experiences shape attachment styles. Karna and Simon (2024) demonstrated that individuals who form secure attachments during the early years are better equipped to develop healthy empathetic relationships in adulthood. This research suggests that secure attachments fostered through supportive childhood environments provide a solid foundation for the development of robust interpersonal skills and the mitigation of empathy-related challenges in later life.

Complementing these insights, Békés et al. (2023) explore the broader implications of childhood trauma over the lifespan, particularly in the context of mental health. Their study reveals that childhood traumas are predictive of psychological distress during stressful life events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and thus have a long-term impact on early adversities on emotional health outcomes. This finding highlights the compensatory role of defensive functioning in coping with stress. It suggests that individuals with a history of trauma may develop maladaptive coping mechanisms which hinder their ability to show empathy in relationships.

Furthermore, Carrizales et al. (2022) examine the mediating role of empathy between different socialization agents and adolescent prosocial behaviours. The results suggest that strong empathetic skills may mitigate the adverse effects of insecure attachments, which can result from unsupportive parental relationships (Carrizales et al., 2022). The research suggests that empathy influences how people engage in interpersonal interactions and also affects their interactions with their immediate social environment. This further illustrates the importance of early relational dynamics in later social behaviour.

Huh et al. (2020) expand on our understanding of how childhood emotional neglect relates to adult attachment styles. This study provides evidence that neglectful childhood environments create vulnerabilities in children that manifest later in life as insecure attachments. The work of this research team emphasizes the need to focus on emotional neglect as one of the important factors which influence attachment security, which has a bearing on empathic responses in social relationships.

In addition to these findings, Karna and Simon (2024) provide additional insights into the specific mechanisms of emotion regulation in people with a history of childhood trauma. They

found that impaired emotion regulation in individuals with trauma history can exacerbate the challenges that these people face in forming empathetic connections with other people. This is one of the ways social interaction for this population is made more difficult (Kim et al., 2021). This relationship is indicative of the fact that trauma causes not just attachment insecurities but also functional impairments in empathy, which are nurtured by negative emotional experiences.

In summary, the studies offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted interplay between childhood trauma, attachment styles, and adult empathy development. The available evidence strongly suggests that early adverse experiences can have a long-lasting effect on attachment security, emotion regulation, and empathetic abilities. As such, understanding these dynamics is crucial in informing the development of therapeutic interventions designed to promote healthier relationships and emotional well-being.

### **Methodological Concerns and Issues Observed**

The literature analyzed had several methodological limitations that affected the strength and generalizability of the results. The predominance of Western samples in these studies limited the generalizability of the results, leaving many cultural factors that can influence empathy and attachment development in different settings unexamined (Tang, 2024; Xu et al., 2022). The overreliance on self-report questionnaires for the assessment of trauma exposure and attachment styles can create bias since participants may under-report experiences which they perceive to be stigmatizing or they may lack awareness of their attachment patterns (Karna & Simon, 2024; Palumbo et al., 2024).

Longitudinal and cross-sectional research designs require more careful interpretation, as cross-sectional studies have limitations in capturing the dynamic and developmental nature of attachment and emotion regulation systems (Békés et al., 2023). Current findings highlight the

importance of conducting longitudinal research to understand better the long-term effects of childhood trauma on attachment styles and the development of empathy. The integrated findings show the crucial link between childhood trauma and experiences with attachment styles and empathy deficits, and they also evaluated methodological strengths and weaknesses in the research literature.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review, Synthesis, Critical Analysis and Findings**

This is a comprehensive review of the literature, analysis, and findings. A growing body of evidence highlights the intricate ties between childhood trauma and deficient empathic abilities, suggesting that trauma can severely disrupt the secure attachment necessary for developing robust empathy skills (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023). Literature suggests that adverse experiences during childhood can significantly impact individuals' attachment behaviours and their capacity for empathy later in life, leading to various adverse psychological outcomes (Zheng et al., 2019).

Emergent themes suggest that while insecure attachments formed as a result of childhood trauma frequently impair empathetic capacities, there are potential avenues for adaptive responses and healing through targeted interventions that focus on emotion regulation and attachment repair (Flasbeck et al., 2019; Lévy et al., 2019; Narvey et al., 2020). This nuanced understanding is essential for developing effective therapeutic strategies aimed at enhancing empathic functioning in trauma survivors, thereby promoting healthier relationships and emotional resilience. The literature reviewed revealed several key themes regarding the impact of childhood trauma on attachment and empathy. First, research on attachment formation emphasizes the importance of caregiver responsiveness in shaping emotional security. Second, studies examining trauma show that adverse childhood experiences often disrupt attachment, leading to emotion dysregulation and relational difficulties. Third, literature on empathy development indicates that secure attachment supports empathic growth, whereas trauma and insecure attachment can hinder perspective-taking. Finally, research highlights the dual nature of empathy in trauma survivors, with some developing heightened sensitivity and others

experiencing reduced empathic capacity. These themes collectively illustrate how early relational experiences shape emotional functioning throughout the lifespan.

### **The Foundations of Attachment and Socio-Emotional Development**

Bowlby's (1973, 1969/1982) foundational research was among the first to emphasize the profound psychological impact of attachment security. Secure attachment fosters confidence, emotional resilience, and the ability to form close, trusting relationships. In contrast, insecure attachment is linked to difficulties in emotion regulation, increased anxiety, and relationship struggles. Additionally, attachment insecurity can manifest across two dimensions: attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety, both of which affect how individuals seek or withdraw from close relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). From a clinical perspective, understanding these patterns is essential, as attachment disruptions can contribute to mental health challenges. As Ainsworth (1979) noted, repeated insecure attachment experiences can have long-term consequences, potentially leading to difficulties with emotion regulation and empathy in adulthood. These insights form the basis for therapeutic interventions that aim to repair and strengthen relational bonds.

When caregivers are reliable and responsive, children are more likely to develop secure attachment styles, which correlate with healthier emotion regulation and social relationships (Costa et al., 2022). Conversely, trauma and neglect can lead to the formation of insecure attachment styles, such as anxious or avoidant attachment. These styles are characterized by either an excessive preoccupation with relationships or a withdrawal from them altogether (Karna & Simon, 2024). Karna and Simon discuss how individuals with childhood trauma may exhibit unhealthy emotion regulation strategies that further impede their ability to form secure attachments in adulthood. The cumulative effect of these patterns often manifests as significant

challenges in adult relationships, further perpetuating cycles of isolation and emotional dysregulation.

Karna and Simon (2024) examined a diverse sample of adults with varying histories of childhood trauma, evaluating the relationship between trauma types, attachment styles, and empathic responses. They discovered that individuals who experienced multiple types of childhood trauma show a pronounced tendency toward developing insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious and avoidant attachments. The participants in this study were categorized into different trauma experience groups: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Karna and Simon (2024) employed standardized assessment tools, including attachment style inventories and empathy scales, to quantify the participants' responses. The study also showed variation in empathic responses, with some individuals who experienced childhood trauma exhibiting heightened empathy, possibly as an adaptive coping mechanism to manage their experiences (Gander et al., 2020). This inconsistency in empathic responses underscores the complexity of empathy as influenced by attachment and trauma histories.

Karna and Simon's (2024) findings align with a broader body of research suggesting that the developmental environment plays a crucial role in shaping empathic capacities. Studies have shown that secure attachments foster resilience and healthier emotion regulation, thereby enhancing empathy (Greenberg et al., 2018). In contrast, the emotion dysregulation arising from childhood trauma significantly impairs perspective-taking abilities, which are essential for empathic understanding (Mikulincer et al., 2001). Thus, Karna and Simon's (2024) work not only supports existing theories concerning the interplay of trauma, attachment, and empathy but also emphasizes the necessity for targeted intervention strategies that address these relationships. The findings advocate for implementing therapeutic frameworks that aim to repair attachment

disruptions and improve emotion regulation skills, thereby potentially enhancing empathic functioning in trauma survivors.

### **Long-term Impacts of Childhood Trauma on Attachment Styles**

Studies show that traumatic experiences during childhood play a significant role in forming insecure attachment patterns, such as anxious and avoidant attachment in adults (Saadati et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2021). Saadati et al. (2023) established that survivors of childhood trauma display extensive interpersonal challenges through relational behaviours marked by dependency and detachment, which intensify their attachment insecurities. In a systematic review and meta-analysis, Kim et al. (2021) discovered that attachment insecurity from adverse childhood experiences causes emotion regulation disruption, which leads to maladaptive coping methods and relationship issues in adulthood. The research established that parental neglect experiences strongly connect with insecure attachment outcomes in adults, which supports the theory that adverse childhood environments shape adult attachment patterns (Kim et al., 2021).

Békés et al. (2023) expanded this body of work by examining the long-term influence of childhood trauma on adult stress responses in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study highlighted that individuals with a history of childhood trauma exhibited increased vigilance in relationships during this time of heightened uncertainty. This constant state of alertness heightened attachment-related anxiety, thus exacerbating existing relational difficulties. Participants reported a cyclical pattern of seeking closeness from partners or friends, followed by withdrawal, which reflects the instability indicative of insecure attachment styles. This fluctuating relational dynamic further complicates individuals' ability to develop secure connections and contributes to their overall well-being.

Collectively, these studies underscore the lasting impact of childhood trauma on attachment styles and emotion regulation, significantly shaping adult relational patterns. The research indicates that while childhood trauma creates a landscape fraught with relational challenges, these findings also pave the way for developing targeted therapeutic strategies aimed at fostering healing and enhancing relational capacities in individuals affected by trauma.

### ***Attachment as a Mediator Between Trauma and Emotional Functioning***

Those who develop insecure attachment styles after experiencing childhood trauma face persistent mistrust and abandonment fears, which lead to relational difficulties later in life. Research shows that people who have anxious attachment styles demonstrate increased sensitivity to rejection cues, which results in destructive relationship behaviours such as problems with setting healthy boundaries (Robakis et al., 2020). According to research by Saadati et al. (2023) and Robakis et al. (2020), adult stress can lead to relational instability, as feelings of isolation and challenges to trust formation emerge within the individual.

According to research by Hawes et al. (2021), the time the childhood adverse experiences occur changes their effects, and traumatic incidents that occur during critical developmental stages pose the greatest danger for establishing insecure attachments. On the other hand, Adults who develop secure attachments after experiencing adverse childhood events show enhanced resilience, which stems from their subsequent positive relationship experiences (Robakis et al., 2020).

The study by Kim, Baek, and Park (2021) offers a comprehensive examination of the association between parent-child experiences and the development of insecure attachment styles in adulthood through a systematic review and meta-analysis. The researchers synthesize findings

from 56 studies to assess how various childhood experiences, particularly neglect and maltreatment, contribute to the formation of insecure attachments that persist into adulthood. The study analyzed data from participants across various demographics and found that childhood experiences of neglect or abuse were significantly linked to maladaptive coping strategies, which perpetuated relational challenges in adulthood. Kim et al. noted that parental neglect led to adults experiencing discomfort with emotional vulnerability, thus complicating their ability to establish healthy interpersonal relationships. However, Kim et al. (2021) also found that the prevalence of insecure attachment tendencies among childhood trauma survivors diminishes through positive relational experiences in adulthood. This demonstrates that, despite experiencing trauma and insecure attachment throughout childhood, positive, secure relationships later in life may have the potential to promote resilience, thus supporting positive socio-emotional development.

### **Impact of Childhood Trauma on Empathy**

Psychological research has focused extensively on childhood trauma from familial maltreatment because of its profound effects on emotional growth and empathic skills (Miklikowska et al., 2011; Zhu-mei et al., 2023). Research suggests that early adverse experiences can lead to lasting deficits in the ability to empathize, which is essential for adequate interpersonal understanding (Miklikowska et al., 2011). Research demonstrates that different forms of childhood mistreatment may impact emotional processing abilities, which reduce people's ability to understand others' perspectives and establish emotional bonds. For instance, Narvey et al.'s (2020) research determined that people who suffered adverse events during childhood often display long-lasting emotional dullness, which severely reduces their ability to empathize.

The study conducted by Karabulut and Genç (2023) delves into the impacts of childhood trauma, with a specific focus on sexual abuse, and its long-term consequences on emotion regulation and empathy deficits in survivors. This research employed a comprehensive quantitative methodology involving a sample of 250 adult participants who self-reported their experiences of childhood, utilizing the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) to measure their participants' ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences. The Empathy Quotient (EQ) was used to assess individual differences in empathic abilities. The results revealed that individuals who reported a history of sexual abuse exhibited significantly poorer emotion regulation abilities compared to those without such a history. Furthermore, these participants demonstrated marked deficits in empathy, particularly in terms of emotional resonance and perspective-taking. The findings reveal a clear connection between disrupted emotion regulation and a reduced capacity for empathy. Additionally, Karabulut and Genç (2023) identified a mediating effect of emotion dysregulation on the relationship between childhood trauma and empathic skills, suggesting that difficulties in managing emotions may perpetuate the empathic deficits observed in survivors.

Research indicates that early life experiences play a significant role in shaping empathy, a crucial aspect of social functioning (Lévy et al., 2019). Current psychological studies show growing interest in how family-based childhood trauma influences the development of empathy. Current researchers found that trauma leads to difficulties in emotion regulation and perspective-taking, yet some studies note that post-traumatic growth and improved empathic sensitivity can occur in specific individuals (Combe, 2021; Greenberg, 2018). Current research on the implications of childhood trauma presents a dual narrative: While many studies assert that trauma leads to significant challenges in emotion regulation and perspective-taking (Karabulut &

Genç, 2023), other research highlights the phenomenon of post-traumatic growth and heightened empathic sensitivity in specific individuals (Combe, 2021; Greenberg, 2018). This juxtaposition invites further exploration into the diverse outcomes of trauma to understand why some individuals exhibit resilience and growth while others struggle with dysregulation and empathy deficits.

One factor that may explain these divergent outcomes is the presence of supportive relationships during or following the traumatic experience. For instance, individuals who receive adequate emotional support and nurturing during critical developmental periods may be more likely to develop resilience, which in turn leads to enhanced emotion regulation and empathy (Robakis et al., 2020). Conversely, individuals lacking such support can develop maladaptive coping mechanisms that hinder emotion regulation and empathetic engagement. As highlighted in the findings of Robakis et al. (2020), those with insecure attachment styles are often more prone to emotion dysregulation, which adversely affects their capacity for empathy. Their study indicates that without stable emotional connections, trauma survivors may become trapped in a cycle of emotional distress and relational difficulties, further compounding their empathic challenges.

Moreover, contextual factors such as the nature and timing of the trauma also play vital roles in shaping emotional outcomes (Karna & Simon, 2024). Different types of trauma can lead to distinct emotional pathways, where more severe trauma may result in heightened vulnerabilities and deficits in emotional skills. Conversely, some individuals may experience heightened sensitivity as a means of adapting to their circumstances, illustrating a complex interplay between trauma and resilience (Karna & Simon, 2024).

Future research must continue to explore these dynamics, focusing on resilience factors, such as social support and adaptive coping strategies, that might promote post-traumatic growth and enhance empathic abilities rather than emotion dysregulation. Therefore, further research is required to comprehend this relationship's complexities to create prevention and intervention strategies that enhance empathy among people with traumatic histories. Thus, research underscores the need for comprehensive support systems for trauma survivors that encompass both emotional healing and the development of social-emotional competencies.

### **Empathy and Child Development**

The ability to understand and share others' emotions is a crucial element of social-emotional development during childhood. This capability enables healthy social interactions and has a substantial impact on adult life achievements (Lévy et al., 2019). Early childhood marks the beginning of empathy development, and parents are the primary foundation for this growth. Research demonstrates that the level of sensitivity and responsiveness caregivers show to children substantially influences their development of empathy (Abdullah & Salim, 2020; Borelli et al., 2021). The study by Abdullah and Salim (2020) demonstrates that children raised in environments with empathetic and attentive parenting develop stronger empathy skills, which enable them to manage social relationships more effectively as adults.

Recent research reveals the brain mechanisms that drive empathy development through parental interactions with children. Kerr et al. (2020) shows that parents who respond empathetically to their children's distress exhibit positive parenting behaviours, which help to develop empathetic traits in their children. The reciprocal nature of this interaction underscores the vital role that emotional attunement plays in fostering empathetic responses. According to research by Ulmer-Yaniv et al. (2021), the emotional alignment between caregiver and child

throughout their developmental years plays a critical role in shaping the child's social brain development. Ulmer-Yaniv et al. (2021) conducted a study using brain-imaging techniques to explore the impact of synchronized interactions between caregivers and children on empathy-related neural activity. The research found that high-quality, synchronous caregiving enhances emotional awareness and strengthens a child's capacity for empathy by increasing neural sensitivity to emotional cues. The study also highlights the importance of nurturing environments in promoting empathy development.

As children move through different stages of development, their empathetic abilities become increasingly complex. Variations in the empathy development of preschool children stem from both parental influence and external environmental factors (Ulmer-Yaniv et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that parenting approaches characterized by warmth and responsiveness lead to better empathetic development in children (Kerr et al., 2020). Children face obstacles in developing empathy and show aggressive behaviours when their parents employ maladaptive parenting methods that involve neglect or harsh treatment (Zhu-mei et al., 2023; Combe, 2021).

Research shows that children raised in environments characterized by warmth and emotional attunement develop stronger empathic abilities, as both indulgent and authoritative parenting styles foster empathy through consistent emotional support (Zhu-mei et al., 2023). Zhu-mei et al. (2023) found that authoritative parenting, which balances warmth with clear and consistent boundaries, has been shown to support emotion regulation and social understanding even further, leading to more adaptive and empathetic behaviours. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, characterized by rigid control and low emotional sensitivity, has been linked to

reduced empathy and increased relational difficulties, underscoring the crucial role of parenting approaches in promoting empathy development (Zhu-mei et al., 2023; Combe, 2021).

Empathy develops through multiple dimensions, which vary for each child because of genetic factors and external influences from siblings and peers (Cenușă & Turliuc, 2025; Liu et al., 2022). Studies demonstrate that being a firstborn child affects empathic response capabilities, while sibling relationship dynamics also play a crucial role in shaping the development of empathy (Yakov et al., 2025). Research on maternal empathy supports the connection, as mothers with high reflective functioning and empathy levels tend to raise children who develop stronger empathetic skills (Borelli et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022).

Overall, the development of empathy during childhood is influenced by multiple factors, with parental emotional support, caregiving approaches, and the quality of sibling relationships playing key roles in determining its progression. Understanding the relationships between factors is crucial for creating environments that foster empathy, which in turn positively impacts individuals in their personal and social relationships.

### **Impact of Early Relationships on Empathetic Development**

Childhood trauma exerts a substantial effect on attachment style development, which results in insecure attachments that often continue through adult life (Huh et al., 2020). Insecure attachment presents as anxiety and avoidance behaviours in relationships because of disrupted caregiver interactions throughout early development (Lévy et al., 2019). Lévy et al. (2019) demonstrate that traumatic experiences in childhood can lead to the development of altered neural pathways, which disrupt emotional reactions and empathetic reasoning abilities, thereby significantly influencing children's attachment to their caregivers. According to Palumbo et al. (2024), individuals who receive early attachment-related interventions tend to exhibit healthier

attachment patterns as adults. The lack of nurturing relationships during vital developmental stages can impair empathetic abilities because social learning through primary caregiver interactions teaches these empathetic skills (Békés et al., 2023).

This section investigates how childhood trauma impacts empathy development by looking at both adverse outcomes and possible positive adaptations that arise from early adverse experiences. The examination of attachment theory provides insights into the relationship between childhood trauma and empathy deficits in adulthood. Attachment styles, developed during formative years through interactions with primary caregivers, play a crucial role in shaping emotional and empathic responses in later life (Hawes et al., 2021; Robakis et al., 2020). Research has demonstrated that individuals who experience adverse childhood events often exhibit diminished empathic abilities (Hawes et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021).

Adverse childhood experiences, particularly maltreatment in familial settings, have been identified as pivotal factors contributing to impaired emotion regulation and reduced capacity for empathy in adulthood. Narvey et al. (2020) found that individuals with a history of childhood maltreatment frequently experience long-term emotional numbing, which significantly diminishes their engagement in perspective-taking—a core component of empathy. This finding is consistent with other studies that highlight the enduring effects of early relational trauma on adult empathic functioning and emotional resilience (Hawes et al., 2021; Robakis et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021).

Moreover, Xie et al. (2021) elucidated neurobiological and psychological mechanisms through which childhood trauma affects adult mental health. Their findings indicated that disturbances in emotional processing and heightened stress responses are prevalent among adults with a background of childhood maltreatment, creating an environment where empathic

deficiencies are likely to manifest. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) discussed how relational trauma shapes empathy in adulthood, suggesting a correlation between both childhood and adult traumas and tendencies toward maladaptive behaviours, including criminal activity. The relationship between childhood trauma and empathy deficits is further complicated by biological factors, as examined by Lévy et al. (2019), who investigated the neural correlates associated with empathic responses. The findings highlight how chronic trauma can disrupt the development of neural pathways responsible for empathy, pointing to a potential neurobiological basis for the observed deficits in empathic capacity among trauma survivors. Even though there is strong evidence that childhood trauma negatively impacts empathy, some research offers a more nuanced view.

According to research by Greenberg et al. (2018), some adults who had experienced childhood trauma showed higher levels of empathy, indicating that the effects of trauma on emotional functioning are not always consistent. Certain circumstances can lead to increased empathy, such as when people receive emotional support during or after traumatic events, which promotes emotional awareness and resilience rather than emotional detachment (Combe, 2021; Robakis et al., 2020). Secure attachment styles and supportive post-trauma relationships seem to act as protective factors, enabling survivors to turn their emotional trauma into increased empathy. Additionally, the type and timing of trauma influence these outcomes; less severe or developmentally buffered adversities may promote adaptive coping and perspective-taking, whereas chronic or severe trauma often leads to emotion dysregulation and empathy deficits (Karna & Simon, 2024; Hawes et al., 2021).

These findings highlight that empathy following trauma emerges through a complex interaction of resilience, attachment security, and the social context surrounding each individual's experiences. Overall, research suggests that childhood trauma affects emotional,

relational, and neurobiological development and is a significant predictor of adult empathic functioning. Early exposure to relational trauma, abuse, or neglect has been repeatedly associated in research with long-term emotion dysregulation and a reduced capacity for empathy (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023). These conclusions are corroborated by neurobiological research, which demonstrates that long-term trauma impacts neural pathways related to perspective-taking and emotional processing, resulting in persistent deficits in empathy (Lévy et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2021). However, the literature also presents a more nuanced account. In certain circumstances, like stable attachment styles and supportive relationships, trauma survivors may develop enhanced empathic sensitivity, which is a sign of post-traumatic growth (Greenberg et al., 2018; Combe, 2021; Robakis et al., 2020).

These outcomes are further influenced by the type, timing, and intensity of trauma. Early or prolonged exposure increases vulnerability, whereas later or less severe experiences may promote prosocial awareness and adaptive coping (Karna & Simon, 2024; Hawes et al., 2021). Taken together, the evidence highlights that empathy development following trauma is multifaceted, emerging from the interplay of biological predispositions, attachment experiences, and environmental supports that determine whether individuals exhibit resilience or emotional impairment in adulthood. Future research focused on the interaction between attachment styles, trauma, and empathy may yield important therapeutic implications. Identifying effective interventions that address these complex relationships could significantly enhance emotional well-being and relational functioning for adults carrying the scars of early trauma.

### **The Role of Attachment Styles in Empathy Development into Adulthood**

Attachment theory posits that early relationships with caregivers can substantially shape emotional development, influencing how empathy is expressed and perceived in adult

relationships. Research indicates that individuals who experience insecure attachments or trauma during their formative years may exhibit pronounced deficits in empathy that can carry into adulthood (Karna & Simon, 2024; Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023).

Mikulincer et al. (2001) demonstrated that individuals primed with secure attachment, through experimental procedures designed to activate feelings of safety and connectedness, typically exhibit heightened empathic responses. Their findings suggest that activating a sense of attachment security can foster empathic reactions, implying that early experiences of safety and emotional support lay a foundation for empathy in later life. Conversely, those with insecure or disorganized attachment styles, often a result of childhood trauma, may struggle with emotion regulation and perspective-taking, which are crucial for empathic engagement. This finding correlates with those of Miklikowska et al. (2011), who emphasize the role of perceived parental support in the development of empathy during adolescence. Supportive caregiving encourages children to engage in perspective-taking experiences, ultimately nurturing their interpersonal skills and empathic capacities.

Moreover, childhood trauma can exacerbate difficulties in empathy and social cognition in adulthood. For instance, the negative consequences of adverse experiences are linked to personality disorders characterized by empathy deficits, as seen in studies conducted by Beeney et al. (2015). Their work highlights that individuals with borderline personality disorder often experience attachment-related challenges that impair their ability to empathize, linking attachment insecurity to social-cognitive disturbances. Furthermore, the relationship between childhood experiences and attachment was examined in studies by Yu et al. (2012), who concluded that secure attachments are associated with greater empathic functioning, while

avoidant attachments are correlated with empathic deficits. Meta-analytic studies have also shed light on these dynamics.

A meta-analysis by Xu et al. (2022) found that empathy and avoidant attachment styles were negatively correlated, while secure attachment and empathy were positively correlated in children and adolescents. The meta-analysis's findings indirectly support research that suggests early adverse experiences that disrupt attachment security may contribute to empathy deficits, even though its primary focus was on attachment quality and empathic outcomes rather than directly examining the role of childhood trauma (Hawes et al., 2021; Karabulut & Genç, 2023). These findings support the idea put forth by attachment theory that the significance of early relational experiences has a lasting impact on the capacity for empathy.

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations in the existing literature. Many studies rely on self-report measures that may be biased, resulting in inconsistencies in determining the causal relationships between attachment, childhood trauma, and empathy. Further, the effects of trauma on empathy may not be uniformly experienced across individuals, with varying degrees of impact depending on resilience and coping mechanisms. To deepen the understanding of these interrelations, future research should employ longitudinal methodologies and multifaceted approaches that elucidate how attachment security and trauma influence empathic development across the lifespan.

In summary, the literature emphasizes the critical role of attachment in shaping empathic abilities in adulthood, particularly for those with histories of childhood trauma. Secure attachment fosters empathic responsiveness, while insecure attachment linked to trauma can hinder emotional connections in adult relationships. A comprehensive understanding of these

dynamics is crucial for developing effective therapeutic strategies aimed at enhancing empathy and relational health in individuals with traumatic backgrounds.

### **Decreased Empathy Due to Childhood Trauma**

Current psychological research explores how childhood trauma affects empathic abilities because studies show that negative formative experiences can lead to deficits in empathy (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023). Traumatic experiences during childhood involving family maltreatment have profound effects on emotional growth and reduce perspective-taking abilities, which are vital for empathic understanding (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023). Research shows that different types of childhood maltreatment produce lasting changes in emotional processing, which frequently result in reduced empathic reactions throughout life. Narvey et al. (2020) examined a sample of 300 adults aged eighteen to sixty-five recruited from trauma recovery clinics and community mental health centers. Using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire to assess maltreatment exposure and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index to measure empathy, they found that individuals with childhood trauma histories frequently demonstrated chronic emotional numbness and reduced perspective-taking. These patterns were closely associated with difficulties in emotion regulation, suggesting that emotional blunting is a primary mechanism linking trauma to lowered empathy.

Karabulut and Genç (2023) further explored this relationship among 200 women diagnosed with substance use disorders. Drawing on structured interviews and psychometric assessments such as the Empathy Quotient and Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, their study revealed that women with histories of childhood sexual abuse exhibited particularly pronounced empathy deficits. These impairments were closely tied to emotional dysregulation, indicating that disrupted emotional processing may hinder the capacity to recognize and respond to others'

emotional states. Studies demonstrate that childhood trauma generates emotional dysregulation, which subsequently disrupts empathic abilities in adult relationships (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023).

The research by Narvey et al. (2020) and Karabulut and Genç (2023) has several limitations which need to be recognized. Research generally shows a connection between childhood trauma and reduced empathy. However, Wang et al. (2021) highlight that the use of self-report data can introduce biases and errors. Wang et al. (2021) highlight that one of the challenges in understanding the relationship between childhood trauma and empathy lies in the inconsistent definitions used across studies. Researchers often differ in how they define and measure empathy (e.g., cognitive empathy vs. affective empathy), as well as how they categorize traumatic experiences (e.g., single-event trauma, chronic maltreatment, or relational trauma). These inconsistencies make it difficult to draw clear causal conclusions (Greenberg et al., 2018; Flasbeck et al., 2019). Researchers continue to debate whether different forms of trauma produce distinct effects on empathy, as some studies report no measurable empathy deficits among trauma survivors, leading to inconsistent findings in the literature (Mueller et al., 2020).

Scientific studies have investigated the fundamental processes that link childhood trauma with changes in empathy. The study conducted by Wang et al. (2021) established a link between relational trauma and reduced empathy levels, which supports the view that social and environmental factors shape empathic abilities. Similarly, Xie et al. (2021) found that traumatic experiences disrupt cognitive-emotion regulation mechanisms, which results in diminished empathetic reactions and emotional health breakdowns among various populations faced with crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies on specific therapeutic approaches are necessary to

determine if they are effective in increasing empathy, modifying attachment style, and managing distress due to childhood trauma.

While researchers broadly agree that early adverse experiences undermine social and emotional functioning, the literature also highlights important nuances in how childhood trauma influences empathic ability. The type and severity of trauma play a critical role; for instance, experiences such as chronic emotional abuse and neglect are closely associated with difficulties in emotion regulation and reduced empathic responsiveness (Karabulut & Genç, 2023). The timing of trauma is also significant, as adverse experiences occurring during sensitive developmental periods are more likely to disrupt attachment formation and contribute to long-term empathy impairments (Hawes et al., 2021). Additionally, individual and contextual differences shape outcomes; for example, women with histories of childhood trauma in substance-use populations show markedly lower empathy, indicating that some groups may be more vulnerable to empathic disruption (Karabulut & Genç, 2023).

### **Childhood Trauma, Heightened Resiliency, and Empathy**

Studies demonstrate that early childhood trauma, along with attachment experiences during this period, significantly influence the formation of empathic abilities in later years. Current research indicates that in the presence of secure attachment and supportive relationships, individuals may transform traumatic experiences into increased empathic sensitivity rather than emotional withdrawal (Greenberg et al., 2018; Robakis et al., 2020). Research has explored this topic through investigations into attachment processes as mediators between childhood trauma and empathetic development. For instance, Gander et al. (2020) used an in-depth attachment interview (AAP) with adolescents to demonstrate how unresolved attachment-related traumatic content acts as a mediator between childhood maltreatment and dysfunctional personality traits,

including aspects of empathy. Furthermore, the research by Liu et al. (2023) demonstrates how parental attachment shapes prosocial behaviours by mediating empathy and self-compassion and shows that secure attachment acts as a protective factor against trauma. Research reveals that childhood trauma leads to negative consequences, but the quality of attachment bonds helps regulate empathetic sensitivity, which enables positive prosocial behaviours.

Research examining empathy directly suggests that early traumatic experiences lead to adults displaying higher empathic reactions. According to a study from Greenberg et al. (2018), adults with childhood trauma backgrounds showed elevated trait empathy. This study involved a sample of 150 adults with varied backgrounds, including individuals with documented histories of childhood trauma. Participants were assessed using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to evaluate distinct facets of empathy, such as emotional concern and perspective-taking.

Greenberg et al. found that enhanced sensitivity to others' suffering could stem from increased awareness of interpersonal vulnerabilities.

Additionally, empathy usually encourages prosocial behaviours, but experiences of childhood trauma can change empathetic processing, resulting in limited mentalizing abilities, which are crucial for recognizing that other people have different thoughts and beliefs (Greenberg et al., 2018). Research by Greenberg et al. demonstrates that people with childhood trauma histories may show high empathy levels, which conceal significant internal emotional struggles and detachment from their own emotional identity. One limitation of this research is its reliance on self-reported measures, which can introduce biases, such as social desirability bias, affecting the accuracy of the reported empathic traits. Moreover, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inferences regarding how childhood trauma influences empathy over time, as participant experiences were measured at a single point in time.

Furthermore, a study by Staples and Massey-Abernathy (2023) involving 200 participants who recalled their childhood adversities found positive links between remembered childhood adversity and both affective empathy and interpersonal resilience. This suggests that hardship can cultivate social strengths by enhancing empathic skills. The research employed a mixed-methods design, utilizing both qualitative interviews and quantitative assessments, to assess the impact of recalled adversities on empathic responses, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of how resilient traits can emerge from difficult childhood experiences. One limitation is the reliance on retrospective self-reports of childhood adversity, which recall biases can influence. Participants' current emotional states may affect their recollection of past experiences, potentially skewing the results regarding the impact of adversity on their present empathic abilities.

In addition, Mueller et al. (2020) employed network analysis to investigate the relationship between various types of childhood maltreatment and adult empathic responses in 300 participants. The study analyzed self-reported experiences of maltreatment alongside measures of empathic responses. Mueller et al. identified that different types of trauma, such as physical abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse, produced varied outcomes in empathic abilities, highlighting the significant influence of both trauma type and assessment methods on empathic processing. This suggests that empathy among trauma survivors is multifaceted. For some individuals, enhanced empathy may act as a protective mechanism that fosters social connection, whereas for others, it arises alongside emotional challenges and difficulties in regulating internal emotional experiences. Taken together, these findings indicate that empathy among trauma survivors is dual-natured. For some, enhanced empathy functions as a protective mechanism that supports social connection, whereas for others, it may coexist with emotional strain and difficulty in regulating internal emotional experiences.

The existing research demonstrates complex interactions among childhood trauma experiences and attachment styles and their collective impact on empathy development. Research shows that trauma negatively impacts personality functioning, but under specific conditions, including secure attachment patterns, it can lead to enhanced empathic sensitivity. Longitudinal studies with multimethod approaches could provide deeper insights into these complex connections and help verify stronger causal links. These research initiatives aim to enhance our understanding of the positive psychosocial effects following early adverse experiences, which will inform more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

### **Summary of Findings**

Experts now understand that childhood trauma, which includes abuse and neglect within family settings and caregiving systems, profoundly affects emotional and psychological growth. Scientific studies demonstrate a strong connection between childhood trauma and later impairments in the ability to empathize with others. Research by Narvey et al. (2020) suggests that traumatic childhood experiences can impair emotion regulation and perspective-taking abilities, both of which are essential for developing empathy. The research by Narvey et al. (2020), along with that of Karabulut and Genç (2023), supports these conclusions. Traumatic experiences create profound emotional experiences, which can develop into persistent emotional detachment that diminishes people's ability to engage with others emotionally.

The relationship between childhood maltreatment and its consequences becomes clearer when we examine different types of abuse. According to Narvey et al. (2020) and Karabulut & Genç (2023), different traumatic experiences, including physical, emotional and sexual trauma, generate unique changes in emotional processing that cause persistent deficits in empathy. Wang et al.'s (2021) findings reveal how trauma survivors face challenges in emotion regulation, which

impacts their empathic capacities. Studies demonstrate that emotion dysregulation from childhood trauma serves as a significant factor that interferes with adult relationship empathy (Narvey et al., 2020; Karabulut & Genç, 2023).

The current body of research shows substantial findings but faces critical limitations concerning its research methods. Research often relies on data collected through self-report methods, which are susceptible to both biases and inaccuracies (Wang et al., 2021). Different studies have yet to establish a uniform definition for the causal relationship between childhood trauma and empathy, which highlights the importance of adopting more diverse and comprehensive research approaches in future investigations. Researchers agree that trauma leads to empathy deficits, but they still need to understand which individual and contextual factors, such as resilience and emotion regulation strategies, shape this relationship (Wang et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2018). Extending research in these areas would improve our knowledge of childhood trauma's effects on empathy development, which would support the development of better therapeutic strategies to promote emotional health and relational well-being.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The examination of ethical standards in current literature surrounding childhood trauma, attachment, and empathetic deficits is crucial, particularly within the context of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) *Code of Ethics* (Government of Canada, 2019; CPA, 2017). Adherence to ethical principles in research is paramount to ensure the rights, welfare, and overall integrity of participants and the research process.

One significant ethical consideration pertains to the recruitment of participants, as outlined in Section 2 of the TCPS 2, which emphasizes fairness and equity in research practices.

A prevalent issue in the literature is that studies often focus on homogeneous samples, risking the exclusion of diverse perspectives (Government of Canada, 2019). Liu (2023) discusses how empathic deficits related to antisocial personality disorder are predominantly studied in male populations, leading to the underrepresentation of females and potentially skewing findings that affect policy and therapeutic approaches. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) highlight the adverse impacts of childhood maltreatment on empathy, suggesting that broader, culturally inclusive sampling strategies could improve the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, the clear articulation of informed consent is crucial for ethical compliance. The TCPS 2 stresses that consent should include comprehensive information on the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits (Government of Canada, 2019). However, many studies reveal gaps in descriptions of informed consent processes, which are often vague or incomplete (Zhang et al., 2023). Concerns arise regarding the clarity of consent, especially among vulnerable populations, such as children affected by trauma or attachment issues. Fehr et al. (2023) emphasize the need to address ethical challenges in pediatric research through tailored consent strategies that consider the developmental maturity of participants and the power dynamics inherent in caregiver-child relationships. Implementing these strategies can help ensure informed consent is both ethical and practical when working with vulnerable young populations.

Across the reviewed studies, varying degrees of adherence to ethical frameworks were noted, specifically the TCPS 2 and the CPA (Government of Canada, 2019; CPA, 2017). Strong ethical practices included transparent recruitment and informed consent tailored to the sensitivities of trauma, coupled with mental health support for participants (Karabulut & Genç, 2023; Staples and Massey-Abernathy, 2023; Wang et al., 2021). However, ethical limitations surfaced, such as a lack of diversity in study samples, predominantly comprising Western

populations (Tang, 2024; Xu et al., 2022). Additionally, informed consent processes were inconsistently detailed, raising concerns about potential re-traumatization. While some studies provided participant support measures, gaps remained in explicit documentation of debriefing processes (Karabulut & Genç, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Overall, the literature highlighted the need for improved ethical practices, emphasizing inclusive recruitment and trauma-informed research designs to enhance ethical integrity and applicability in diverse clinical contexts.

## **Chapter Four: Application to Clinical Practice**

A substantial body of research outlines the impact of childhood trauma on the development of insecure attachment patterns, including anxious and avoidant attachments. Saadati et al. (2023) assert that survivors of childhood trauma frequently confront interpersonal difficulties that manifest as dependency and detachment. The researchers demonstrated through qualitative interviews that these relational issues reinforce attachment insecurities, resulting in a vicious cycle of emotion dysregulation. This highlights the necessity for practitioners to understand not only the individual trauma history of their clients but also how those histories are articulated through attachment behaviours that may complicate therapeutic relationships.

Additionally, research shows that therapeutic approaches can help people move beyond childhood trauma by building resilience and developing healthier attachment patterns. Developing secure attachments during adulthood can help reduce adverse outcomes associated with childhood-developed insecure attachment styles by promoting supportive relationships and empathetic interactions (Eriksson et al., 2021; Tang, 2024). Wei et al. (2011) found that interventions enhancing emotion regulation capabilities, combined with self-compassion practices, are effective in closing the empathy gap observed in individuals with insecure attachment patterns. These interventions highlight the need to understand the complex ways childhood trauma affects adult relationships while demonstrating how positive relational experiences can lead to healing and personal development.

### **Explanation of the Literature Review Integration**

The findings underscore the significance of insecure attachment patterns, such as anxious and avoidant attachments, which are prevalent among individuals with a history of childhood trauma (Kim et al., 2021; Lévy et al., 2019). Practitioners should recognize that trauma does not

uniformly affect all individuals, as research demonstrates variability in empathic responses after trauma exposure. Some may exhibit heightened empathy as a coping mechanism, while others suffer from significant deficits (Karna & Simon, 2024).

One applicable framework drawn from the literature is attachment theory, which provides a foundation for understanding how childhood experiences shape emotional and relational outcomes in adulthood. For example, Bowlby's foundational work emphasizes that individuals who develop secure attachments are more resilient and capable of forming healthy relationships (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory has become foundational in therapeutic modalities designed to address the relational and emotional consequences of childhood trauma. Together, Johnson (2019) and Pleines (2019) illustrate how attachment-based conceptualizations deepen therapeutic work by acknowledging that trauma is not only a cognitive or behavioural experience, but fundamentally a relational one.

In emotionally focused therapy (EFT), Johnson (2019) emphasizes that attachment needs for connection, safety, and responsiveness are central to how individuals experience and regulate emotion within relationships. Similarly, Pleines' (2019) trauma-informed cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) applies attachment principles to address patterns of emotional dysregulation and distorted beliefs shaped by early relational trauma. Pleines (2019) suggests a trauma-informed cognitive behavioural approach as it incorporates attachment principles to address patterns of emotion dysregulation and distorted beliefs shaped by early relational trauma.

### **Application for Aspiring Practitioners**

Aspiring practitioners can utilize the insights from these studies to inform their clinical practices. For instance, awareness of the nuanced relationship between attachment styles and emotion regulation can empower clinicians to assess clients thoroughly and formulate targeted

interventions. It is critical to conduct assessments that not only identify trauma histories but also evaluate attachment styles and emotional coping mechanisms. Tools such as attachment style inventories and empathy assessments can provide deep insights into clients' relational difficulties. Some widely used measures of empathy can be divided into affective and cognitive empathy (Xie et al., 2021). Measures of emotional empathy include the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE) and the Empathy Concern Scale (ECS). The Hogan empathy scale (HES) is used to measure cognitive empathy. The Basic Empathy Scale (BES) and Interpersonal Relational Index (IRI) include measures of both emotional and cognitive empathy. Measures of empathy include both behavioural observations, such as the Q-sort (AQS), as well as questionnaire survey measures, including the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) and the Experience in Close Relationships (ECR).

Wei et al. (2011) examined the relationships between attachment styles, self-compassion, empathy, and well-being, identifying several interventions particularly supportive for individuals with insecure attachment patterns. The study emphasized self-compassion practices, including mindfulness and compassionate self-reflection, to reduce self-criticism and promote emotional warmth. Emotion regulation training, including cognitive reappraisal strategies, was shown to stabilize emotional responses and support empathic engagement. Empathy-building activities, such as role-playing and perspective-taking exercises, further encouraged individuals to connect with others' emotional experiences. Mindfulness interventions helped increase present-moment awareness and decrease emotional reactivity, enhancing both empathy and overall well-being. Finally, the study highlighted the importance of the therapeutic relationship itself as a corrective attachment experience, where consistent emotional attunement supports the development of healthier relational patterns. Together, these findings suggest that interventions which cultivate

self-compassion, emotion regulation, and secure relational experiences are effective in strengthening empathy among individuals with insecure attachment histories.

Additionally, practitioners should adopt a trauma-informed approach to support clients effectively. This approach emphasizes the understanding of trauma's pervasive influence on an individual's psychological and emotional landscape. As Békés et al. (2023) indicated, trauma survivors often exhibit heightened relational vigilance, which may result in attachment-related anxiety and relational conflicts. Furthermore, as Békés et al. (2023) stress, understanding this vulnerability becomes crucial following mass traumatic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, as childhood trauma is a predictor for increased distress. Practitioners should develop a trauma-informed approach by being mindful of the potential behaviours, emotional responses, and relationship dynamics, such as heightened relational vigilance and vulnerability to mass traumatic events that emerge.

Additionally, unresolved childhood trauma in adults creates relational difficulties that lead to increased anxiety and conflict both in personal partnerships and work relationships (Staples & Massey-Abernathy, 2023). Therapists need to guide these relational dynamics by tapping into clients' empathetic responses and teaching emotion regulation and self-care techniques, such as mindfulness, to protect against trauma exposure effects (Wei et al., 2011). In therapy, a focus on building safety and trust can help clients gradually develop more secure attachment behaviours. Overall, research suggests that understanding attachment styles can help clinicians provide tailored interventions, incorporate self-compassion training, cultivate empathy in therapeutic settings, and address cultural context. Future research could explore longitudinal studies, cultural variability, intervention studies, and diverse participant demographics.

## **Consideration of Cultural Differences and Legislation**

Cultural differences significantly impact attachment styles, emotion regulation, and perceptions of empathy. Practitioners must consider cultural contexts when exploring clients' trauma histories and resultant relational patterns, as research has indicated that attachment styles and emotional responses to trauma may vary across diverse cultural backgrounds. Research indicates that family dynamics, societal values, and cultural expectations can shape how individuals respond to trauma and develop attachment styles (Yakov et al., 2025). For example, Yakov et al. (2025) discuss how collectivist cultures might emphasize familial ties and communal support in ways that influence coping strategies and attachment outcomes. Clinicians should be aware of these dynamics and adopt culturally sensitive practices that respect clients' backgrounds and unique experiences. Recognizing these cultural dimensions allows clinicians to tailor their approaches to ensure they resonate with the values and experiences of their clients.

Legislation surrounding informed consent and ethical practices in therapy also plays a crucial role in the clinical application of these principles. According to the Government of Canada (2019), the TCPS 2 guidelines stipulate that consent processes must be comprehensive and transparent. However, when working with individuals who have complex trauma or attachment disruptions, the consent process requires additional care. Many trauma survivors have experienced breaches of trust or situations where their autonomy was not respected, which can influence how they perceive and respond to authority figures, including therapists. As such, the consent process should be approached as a collaborative and relational exchange rather than a one-time discussion. This means checking in frequently to ensure understanding, inviting the client to ask questions or clarify concerns, and explicitly affirming their right to slow down or step back from any intervention.

## **Recommendations for Clinical Practice**

To enhance the therapeutic experience for clients with trauma histories, several recommendations can be established. First, practitioners may employ an integrative approach that combines trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) with attachment-based family therapy (ABFT) principles (Diamond et al., 2021; Pleines, 2019). Trauma-focused CBT primarily targets maladaptive cognitions and trauma-related symptoms through structured techniques such as cognitive restructuring, exposure work, and skills training in emotion regulation. However, Pleines (2019) argues that when trauma is rooted in early relational experiences, cognitive interventions alone may not fully resolve distress because the emotional core of the trauma involves attachment wounds. In these cases, integrating attachment-based work is essential.

Attachment-based family therapy (ABFT) offers a framework for repairing relational ruptures by directly addressing patterns of emotional disconnection between the client and significant attachment figures (Diamond et al., 2021). In practice, this combined approach emphasizes the development of a strong therapeutic alliance, the exploration of attachment-related beliefs, and structured sessions that facilitate open emotional communication between clients and caregivers where appropriate. For example, whereas TF-CBT might teach a client to challenge distorted beliefs such as “I am unlovable,” ABFT goes further by helping the client experience corrective emotional interactions that reinforce a sense of safety and connection. This may involve guided attachment dialogues, validation of emotional needs within key relationships, and therapeutic work that supports clients in expressing vulnerability in a safe and supportive environment (Diamond et al., 2021).

A second recommendation involves the creation of specialized support groups focused on trauma recovery and attachment issues. These groups should be structured to address relational healing, rather than functioning solely as generalized psychoeducational or symptom-management groups. For example, group interventions can incorporate attachment-focused activities such as guided emotional expression, reflective listening exercises, and co-regulation practices that help members develop comfort with vulnerability and trust (Diamond et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2011). These groups can foster a sense of community and belonging, allowing individuals to share their experiences and develop secure attachment behaviours within the safety of peer interactions. Therapy groups can serve as a space for practicing interpersonal skills, regulating emotions, and developing empathy. Support groups can also reduce the isolation that trauma survivors often experience, fostering a sense of belonging and shared understanding among peers.

Lastly, further developing training programs that emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing attachment styles in therapeutic settings is crucial. As research exposes the complexities surrounding childhood trauma, attachment, and empathy, continuing education for practicing clinicians will ensure that best practices are adhered to in therapy. Recent research highlights the vital role of attachment security in fostering emotional resilience and the ability to form close, trusting relationships (Diamond et al., 2021). Continued education on attachment-informed practices can enhance therapeutic outcomes by equipping clinicians with the strategies necessary to address their clients' unique needs and concerns.

## **Chapter Five: Suggestions and a Conclusion and Summary of the Study**

This review examined the relationship among childhood trauma, attachment styles, and empathy deficits in adulthood. Based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth, 1979) and a growing body of research, the literature reviewed shows how trauma consistently harms the development of secure attachment and leads to unhealthy interpersonal patterns. The review revealed that insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious and avoidant attachments, are significantly associated with challenges in establishing healthy adult relationships, regulating emotions, and expressing empathy (Kim et al., 2021; Saadati et al., 2023). Trauma in childhood also makes people more likely to have stronger stress responses later in life, which makes anxiety related to attachment and relationship instability worse (Békés et al., 2023).

Crucially, empathy may manifest as a diminished capacity or, in certain instances, a heightened empathetic sensitivity among trauma survivors. This highlights the complexity of empathy's development and the interplay between resilience, coping strategies, and relational experiences (Greenberg et al., 2018; Gander et al., 2020). In general, this review shows that trauma in childhood has a long-lasting effect on emotional and relational growth. Attachment insecurity and empathy disruptions are primary mechanisms through which trauma exerts long-term effects. Nonetheless, indicators of resilience and post-traumatic growth suggest the potential for intervention, healing, and the formation of healthier attachment relationships.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The literature offers significant insights; however, numerous limitations and gaps necessitate further examination. Numerous studies heavily depend on self-report measures, thereby constraining the reliability and generalizability of their findings (Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, a significant portion of the research concentrates on Western populations, thereby

limiting our understanding of the influence of diverse social and cultural contexts on attachment and empathy outcomes. Based on the gaps in the literature the following recommendations for future research include the following,

1. Present research reveals varied outcomes for different types of trauma; however, additional comparative and comprehensive studies are needed (Karabulut & Genç, 2023; Narvey et al., 2020). Therefore, future research should investigate in what ways particular forms of childhood trauma (such as emotional neglect, physical abuse, and sexual trauma) influence the formation of attachment styles and empathetic capacities in adulthood. A guiding research question could be: How do different types of childhood trauma distinctly affect the formation of adult attachment styles and empathy development?
2. Research indicates variation in empathy outcomes, underscoring the need to examine resilience and adaptive coping further (Greenberg et al., 2018). Future research could delve deeper into understanding factors that promote resilience among individuals with childhood trauma backgrounds. Examples of potential research questions include: What protective factors contribute to the development of secure attachment styles in adults who have experienced childhood trauma? Or how do positive relational experiences mitigate empathy deficits for trauma survivors?
3. Western or clinical groups are the primary focus of most intervention research. More extensive research could enhance treatment strategies globally. Research should examine the impact of cultural variables on the trauma-empathy connection to better inform clinical practice within diverse populations. Future researchers could investigate the question, what is the impact of attachment-based interventions on empathic functioning in traumatized populations from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds? To improve

comprehension of the relationships between cultural variables on the trauma-empathy connection, researchers should also employ mixed-method approaches, such as combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measurements of attachment, trauma, empathy, and cultural variables.

Additionally, given the limitations of existing cross-sectional designs frequently observed in the literature, longitudinal studies can offer more conclusive insights regarding causal relationships among childhood trauma, attachment styles, and empathic capacities. A relevant research question might be, how do changes in attachment styles over time correlate with variations in empathetic responses in those with a history of childhood trauma?

### **Personal Reflection and Professional Learning**

From both clinical and research perspectives, this project has deepened my understanding of how early adversity shapes adult relational functioning. Clinically, I have learned that children and adults with trauma histories often display a broad spectrum of empathic abilities, and therapeutic interventions must be sensitive to these variations. For example, some survivors may struggle with emotional numbness, requiring structured interventions to rebuild emotional awareness. In contrast, others may exhibit heightened empathic sensitivity that can lead to burnout or relational enmeshment. From a research perspective, this project has highlighted the importance of methodological rigour and inclusivity. The reliance on self-report data and homogeneous samples limits the applicability of findings, and it is clear that more comprehensive, diverse, and longitudinal studies are needed to capture the complexity of trauma's impact fully.

Professionally, this work reinforces the centrality of attachment in understanding psychological well-being and interpersonal health. As a future clinician, I recognize the need to

integrate attachment-based approaches into practice, not only to address trauma's effects but also to foster resilience, secure relationships, and empathic capacities in clients. This project has also underscored the ethical responsibility of ensuring diversity and inclusivity in both research and practice, as cultural, socioeconomic, and community factors shape the impact of trauma.

### **Closing Statement**

In summary, childhood trauma significantly disrupts attachment and empathy, producing profound consequences for adult relationships and emotional well-being. However, alongside these challenges lies the potential for growth, resilience, and repair. By advancing research that addresses current gaps and by applying attachment-informed, empathically attuned clinical practices, professionals can contribute to healing pathways that restore trust, emotional connection, and resilience in trauma survivors.

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