

Mapping the Influence of Infant-Parent Relational Quality on Life Course Relationships



A Scoping Review of Prospective Cohort Studies

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About the project

This review is part of the **Nurturing Early Relational Health Review Series**[1], a comprehensive initiative aimed at advancing our understanding of early relational health and its impact on human development.

The review series, comprising **11 core papers**, is currently underway. The series will be published as a special collection within the Springer-produced **Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review**.

[1] This research was funded by the **Paul Ramsay Foundation**, and led by **Deakin University**.

Who is this research relevant to?



Our review findings are valuable for **family therapy and systemic practice clinicians**, as well as **public health and social policy developers** aiming to promote early relational health and enhance wellbeing over the life course.

What did we ask?

We looked at all existing cohort studies exploring how the relationship between a child and their main caregiver in the early years affects functioning in relationships later in life. This includes how early interactions within the main carer-infant dyad influence the quality of different relationships during early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

What did we find?



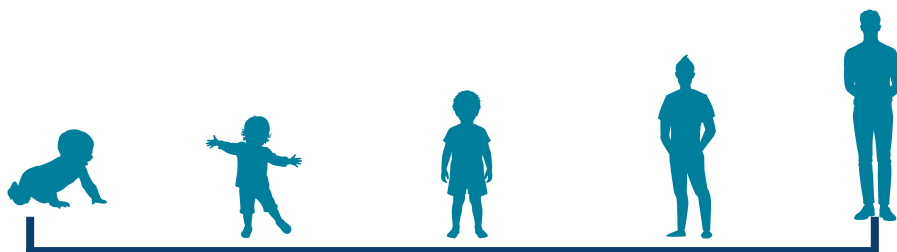
117

relevant studies

identified by this review.

(published between 1985 and 2022)

These studies reported on child-parent relational health (e.g., attachment, maternal sensitivity [2]) when children were aged **between 3 months and 3 years old**, and subsequent outcomes of relationship quality across the life course (**to age 35 years**).



3 months old

35 years old

[2] Other predictor variables include:

(Classified as child initiated:)

- child emotional availability to parent
- responsiveness and involvement
- gaze
- connected behaviour
- compliance
- avoidance
- reciprocity

(Classified as parent initiated:)

- parent emotional availability
- parenting strategies and practices
- engagement
- parental separation anxiety
- co-regulatory behaviours
- bonding
- supportive behaviours
- communication

We also found....

56%

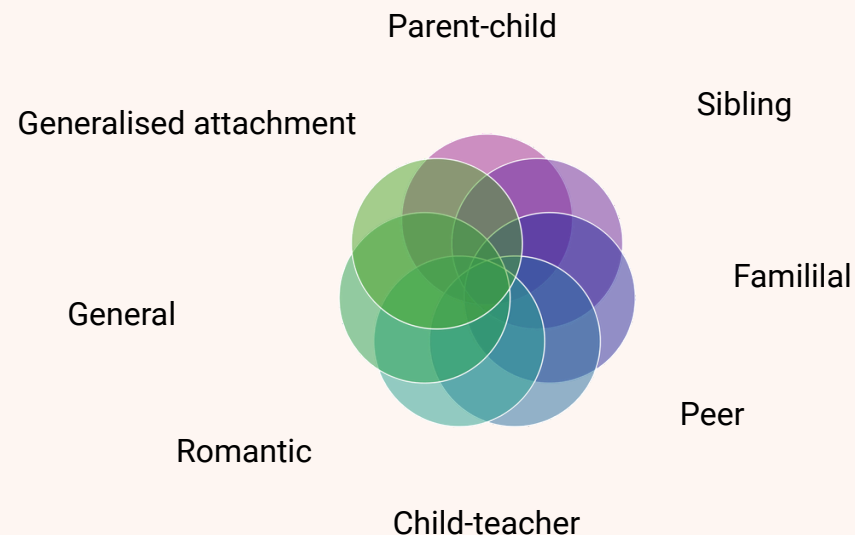
of studies focused on the link between children's early relational health with their parents

28%

of studies focused on the quality of their relationships in early and middle childhood.

Studies explored outcomes relating to **8 different relationship structures**, with quality of parent-child, peer and romantic relationships the most common.

Relationship structures included:



What did the research say?

(A lot: Here is a short summary of some key findings)

1

The **quality of interactions children have** with their main caregiver affects how they get along with family, friends and young adult peers as they grow up.

2

Relational interactions can be led by the child (e.g. attachment-based signalling for comfort and closeness) **or by the parent** (e.g. sensitivity in how they help the child manage emotions). Each can affect future relationships across development into young adulthood in different ways.

3

The **quality of early relational interactions** matters on its own but also interacts with other factors to shape later relationships.

4

Infant-parent relationship quality in the first three years of life plays a significant role in shaping relationships, both within and outside the family.

- **Positive infant-parent interactions may promote healthy relationships over time.** For example, a secure infant-parent attachment is linked to positive behaviours in early childhood, like being capable and kind to others.
- By the same token, **maladaptive relational patterns in the early years pose risk for poorer functioning in relationships as children age.** Specifically, insecure attachment styles are linked to negative peer-related outcomes, such as aggression, social problems, and disruptive behaviour.

5

The type of attachment a child forms with their parents in the early years (i.e., secure vs. insecure) often continues into early and middle childhood. Research exploring continuity of attachment into adolescence is less common, with greater focus on the influence of attachment on other relationship structures (i.e., with peers).

6

A negative shift over time from secure attachment status to insecure (i.e., discontinuity), can occur through risk exposures, such as child maltreatment, maternal depression and conflicted family functioning.

7

Gaps in knowledge were highlighted, including;

- Research specifically focused on the influence of infant-father relationship quality and subsequent relationship outcomes
- The reach of early relational health, intergenerationally
- Research tracking developmental trajectories across diverse cultural backgrounds, care relationships, and kinship systems

What does this mean?



A focus on early relational health between infants and their caregivers is critical in policy and practice settings, as is early identification of, and response to, maladaptive relational patterns.



Investment in community messaging about early relational health may help to raise awareness and mitigate risk.



Further long-term cohort studies exploring how relationships develop both within and outside the family system over time are needed.



Exploring relationships for people from different cultural backgrounds including First Nations communities, and those in foster and kinship care, is important.

Full article available at

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-025-00527-5>



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Interested in learning more about this project?

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