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## Adverse Childhood Experiences, Attachment, and Intimate Partner Violence: A Review

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### ABSTRACT

Childhood is a crucial phase for the integral development of individuals. However, not all children have the privilege of growing up in a healthy environment, experiencing adverse experiences in childhood. These adversities in childhood have been repeatedly associated with impairments in various aspects of development, which later have repercussions on the physical and psychological health of individuals, as well as on the behaviors they adopt. In addition, based on this interaction with reference figures, attachment styles will developed. These attachment styles can be useful for understanding the perpetration of violence in intimate relationships. Thus, based on the assumption that lived experiences shape human development, the present study aims to describe the relationship between Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), attachment styles and the perpetration of intimate partner violence (IPV) and to understand how these variables are interconnected, providing an overview of current evidence that supports these associations. It was found that scientific literature consistently shows that Adverse childhood experiences are associated with higher health risks, emotional and behavioral difficulties, compromised well-being, the development of insecure attachment styles, and the perpetration of violence in intimate relationships during adulthood.

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ACEs encompass various forms of abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction that disrupt emotional security and developmental processes in early life (Felitti et al., 1998; Spratt & Kennedy, 2021). Research has demonstrated that ACEs can lead to long-term consequences, including physical and mental health issues, impaired emotional regulation, and behavioral

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difficulties (Boullier & Blair, 2018; Danese & McEwen, 2012). These early adversities also have neurological and epigenetic effects, potentially influencing future generations (Testa et al., 2022). However, despite these risks, not all individuals exposed to ACEs develop psychopathologies, as resilience and adaptive coping strategies play a critical role in mitigating adverse outcomes (Beilharz et al., 2020).

One of the key mechanisms through which ACEs impact later life is attachment. Bowlby (1969) theorized that humans possess an innate attachment system that influences their relationships with primary caregivers and shapes their emotional development (Galbally et al., 2022; Soares, 2009). Secure attachment fosters trust and emotional stability, while insecure attachment – manifesting as Avoidant, Anxious, or Disorganized patterns – can result in difficulties with emotional regulation, self-perception, and interpersonal relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although new relationships form throughout life, early attachment experiences continue to shape one's sense of security and relational patterns (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982). Individuals with ACEs are at a heightened risk of developing insecure attachment styles, which can perpetuate maladaptive relational dynamics and increase vulnerability to negative experiences in adulthood.

One such outcome is the increased risk of IPV, a widespread public health issue with severe physical and psychological consequences (Alhusen et al., 2023; Speranza et al., 2022). IPV encompasses physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, as well as coercive control behaviors, and often follows patterns of emotional dysregulation and maladaptive relationship models formed in early childhood (Breiding et al., 2015). Individuals with a history of ACEs and insecure attachment are more likely to engage in or experience IPV due to difficulties in emotional regulation, trust, and conflict resolution (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1982).

Building on this understanding, this study aims to explore the relationship between ACEs, attachment patterns, and the perpetration of IPV. To this end, literature searches were conducted across the following electronic databases: EBSCO, Academic Search, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, PubMed, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Search terms were applied to abstract fields (AB) to ensure conceptual relevance and included combinations of the following terms related to childhood maltreatment (adverse childhood experiences OR ACEs OR child abuse OR child neglect OR childhood trauma OR child maltreatment OR complex trauma), attachment (attachment theory OR attachment OR attachment style OR attachment behavior OR attachment behavior OR insecure attachment), and intimate partner violence (IPV OR “intimate partner violence” OR “domestic violence” OR “partner abuse” OR “intimate partner aggression”). Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search strategy.

To ensure methodological rigor and relevance to the objectives of this review, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to the literature search. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: a) empirical or review articles published between 2009 and 2025, and b) studies addressing at least one of the following relationships: ACEs and attachment styles, ACEs and IPV, or attachment styles and IPV. Exclusion criteria comprised: a) theoretical articles lacking empirical data, b) dissertations, conference abstracts, or other non-peer-reviewed materials, and c) studies focusing exclusively on children or on highly specific clinical populations.

### **Adverse childhood experiences**

ACEs are categorized into three main groups: abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1998). Abuse includes physical (e.g., aggression), psychological (e.g., humiliation or threats), and sexual abuse (e.g., non-consensual acts). Neglect involves failure to meet a child's basic needs, including physical (e.g., lack of food or medical care) and emotional neglect (e.g., lack of affection or emotional support). Family dysfunction encompasses issues like parental mental illness, divorce, domestic violence, substance abuse, and imprisonment (Felitti et al., 1998; Hunt et al., 2017). More recently, other adversities, such as bullying, financial difficulties, and the loss or serious illness of a loved one, have been included in the ACEs framework (Hunt et al., 2017). Empirical evidence indicates significant gender differences in exposure to ACEs. Studies show that women tend to report a greater diversity of ACEs compared to men (Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020). Moreover, women are more likely to experience emotional neglect, witness family violence, experience sexual abuse, and grow up in households with parental mental health problems, whereas men are more frequently subjected to physical abuse (McAnee et al., 2019; Merrick et al., 2018).

In addition to adversities that occur within the family, recent research has highlighted the importance of non-family ACEs, such as peer bullying, community violence, poverty, discrimination, and exposure to natural disasters, which also shape individuals' emotional and relational development (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Lereya et al. (2015) compared the long-term effects of peer bullying and family maltreatment, finding that bullying had an impact on adult mental health that was as severe as, or more severe than, family maltreatment. These findings suggest that adverse experiences outside the family environment can also disrupt internal representations of security and trust, key mechanisms underlying the formation of attachment patterns.

Although ACEs are influenced by familial, national, and cultural contexts, they are consistently linked to poor physical and mental health, risky behaviors, early death, and relational problems (Alhowaymel et al., 2021; Heidinger

& Willson, 2019). Studies show that ACEs are deeply harmful, even when occurring in early life stages, and are a significant risk factor for developing psychopathology (Blose, 2024; Stern et al., 2018).

Behaviorally, ACEs are associated with poor coping strategies, involvement in violent behaviors, and difficulties in emotional regulation, self-image, decision-making, and impulse control (Forster et al., 2020; Moreira et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). These adverse experiences are also linked to a range of psychological disorders, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal behavior, PTSD, and to insecure attachment styles that hinder the development of positive self-models and secure relationships (González-Araya et al., 2023; McKay et al., 2021; Warmingham et al., 2023).

## **Attachment**

Bowlby (1969) proposes that humans are born with an innate psychobiological system, the behavioral attachment system, which motivates them to seek proximity to attachment figures, typically parents. Attachment plays a critical role in psychological development, helping form an individual's sense of self (Galbally et al., 2022; Soares, 2009). Through early interactions with attachment figures, individuals form mental representations of themselves and others. Those with secure representations generally have positive views of their abilities to face life's challenges and tend to form healthier relationships. In contrast, those with insecure representations see the world as untrustworthy and struggle with emotional regulation, often withdrawing from challenges and developing negative expectations of others (Kobak & Hazan, 1991).

Bowlby's Internal Dynamic Models (IDM) guide individuals' future behaviors, especially in relationships outside the family (Canavarro et al., 2006; Khodaei & Rahimi, 2023). Although Attachment Theory focuses on early child-caregiver interactions, it also highlights the importance of later interpersonal experiences (Nam et al., 2022). As individuals grow, the influence of early experiences lessens, with later relationships playing an increasing role (Repper & Carter, 2011). Ainsworth (1978) identified three primary attachment patterns: Secure, Insecure Avoidant, and Insecure Ambivalent/Resistant, later expanding to include a fourth pattern – Disorganized/Disoriented (Main & Solomon, 1986).

## **Attachment in adults**

Although Bowlby (1969) focused his research mainly on childhood, and specifically on the child's attachment to parents, and especially to the mother (Canavarro et al., 2006), the author suggests that the attachments established

in adulthood tend to resemble those of childhood and, therefore, considers that the quality of primary attachment relationships can shape the development of relationships throughout life (Claro & Mota, 2019).

From the 1980s onwards, research on attachment in adolescence and adulthood gained increasing relevance (Canavarro et al., 2006). Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed that romantic love can be understood as an attachment process, highlighting parallels between early attachment relationships and those formed in adulthood. Building on this perspective, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) expanded the conceptualization of adult attachment by describing four attachment Styles: Secure, Preoccupied, Dismissing, and Fearful, based on internal representations of self and others. These later models maintained the core principles of Bowlby's (1982) and Ainsworth's (1989) theories, emphasizing the enduring influence of early attachment experiences on later relational patterns, even though new bonds may emerge during adolescence and adulthood.

### **Violence in intimate relationships**

IPV is described in the literature as a global public health problem, with adverse consequences for physical and mental health and substantial morbidity and mortality rates (Alhusen et al., 2023; Fávero et al., 2025). IPV encompasses any act of violence, whether physical, sexual or psychological, and a range of controlling or intimidating behaviors (e.g., stalking), perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner, whether a spouse or not, or by the parent of a child in common (Kyle, 2022; Speranza et al., 2022). Physical violence involves the intentional use of force and includes behaviors such as scratching, hair pulling, pushing, strangling, among others. Psychological violence is a less visible form of IPV that may go unrecognized by victims due to its often manipulative nature. It typically involves verbal or non-verbal behaviors aimed at emotionally harming or controlling the partner, and often co-occurs with other forms of IPV, influencing their overall impact (e.g., coercive control, threats, or limiting contact with others). Finally, sexual violence is characterized as sexual acts against the victim's will (in attempted or consummated form) and includes behaviors such as genital contact or penetration (Breiding et al., 2015). Generally, within a violent relationship, several types of violence coexist, which is why individuals with a history of IPV experience multiple forms of abuse over time (World Health Organization [WHO], 2012). Typically, IPV results in a pattern of violent episodes that tend to increase in frequency, intensity and dangerousness over time. These behaviors are followed by periods of reconciliation and appeasement, which ultimately makes it difficult for victims to end the abusive relationship and seek help. In addition, the aggressor frequently uses manipulation and control

strategies toward the victim, making it once again difficult to end these abusive relationships (Fávero et al., 2025).

IPV affects individuals across all genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Alhusen et al., 2023; Kyle, 2022).

Although several psychosocial factors, such as substance use, mental health problems, exposure to domestic violence, and relationship dissatisfaction, have been linked to IPV perpetration (Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Oliveira et al., 2023), these factors alone do not explain its occurrence (Alhusen et al., 2023). Recent research emphasizes that perpetrators do not constitute a homogeneous group (Brassard et al., 2023) and that, while men are more frequently identified as perpetrators, women may also engage in IPV (Machado et al., 2024; Vasconcelos et al., 2022). Furthermore, research suggests that, while women are more frequently victims of severe forms of violence, resulting in greater physical and psychological harm, men and women report comparable levels of involvement in less severe acts, such as pushing, slapping, or verbal aggression, both as aggressors and as victims (Zhu et al., 2024).

### **Relationship between adverse childhood experiences, bonding and perpetration of violence in intimate relationships**

Specifically regarding the relationship between ACEs and attachment patterns, the literature suggests that in the range of consequences resulting from adverse childhood experiences, the association between these experiences and attachment patterns should be considered, both in childhood and in adulthood, since there are studies that demonstrate that child abuse and neglect (e.g., adverse childhood experiences) tend to affect the attachment pattern, triggering insecure attachment styles (e.g., Benavente et al., 2009). In the same vein, MacIntosh and Ménard (2021) and Noonan and Pilkington (2020), through their studies, report that children exposed to violence and parental neglect are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles, compared to children who were not exposed to violence. In turn, Murphy et al. (2014) found that a higher number of ACEs was associated with the likelihood of disorganized attachment.

Regarding the relationship between ACEs and IPV, the reviewed literature consistently indicates that exposure to adverse childhood experiences is a strong predictor of IPV in adulthood. Studies have shown that witnessing domestic violence or experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse during childhood increases the likelihood of engaging in or becoming a victim of physical, sexual, and psychological IPV later in life (Forke et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Karakoc et al., 2015; Kimber et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020; Margaretha et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2024). Similarly, both physical and

emotional neglect have been associated with the development of violent attitudes and behaviors in adulthood (Goodman et al., 2020). Overall, higher ACE scores have been consistently linked to an increased risk of involvement in IPV, whether as a perpetrator or a victim (Li et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2024).

Particularly regarding the relationship between attachment and IPV, research supports the existence of an association between attachment styles and IPV, suggesting that insecure attachment styles may increase the risk of IPV (Almeida et al., 2023). Furthermore, the literature also reveals that the degree of discomfort with closeness and the degree of concern related to abandonment have important implications and may contribute to the understanding of IPV. Specifically with the insecure attachment style, several studies (Lee et al., 2014; Spencer et al., 2021; Sutton et al., 2014; Velotti et al., 2022) suggest that this attachment style may be a significant predictor of IPV perpetration. Additionally, Velotti et al. (2022) also reported that the anxious insecure attachment style was strongly related to psychological violence, while the avoidant insecure attachment style was related to both physical and psychological violence. Recent evidence from meta-analytic research further differentiates the role of specific attachment styles in IPV dynamics. Both anxious and avoidant attachment styles have been found to be significantly associated with the perpetration and victimization of physical IPV, whereas secure attachment shows a negative relationship with these outcomes. Among the insecure patterns, anxious attachment tends to exhibit the strongest correlation with IPV involvement, suggesting that heightened fears of abandonment and emotional dependence may increase the likelihood of engaging in or experiencing violence. Avoidant attachment, on the other hand, appears to relate to IPV through emotional distancing and controlling behaviors within relationships. In contrast, secure attachment functions as a protective factor, consistently associated with lower rates of both perpetration and victimization (Spencer et al., 2021).

Analyzing the triple interaction of the aforementioned variables, there are studies that suggest that they influence each other (e.g., Segundo et al., 2022). In a study with adolescents, Stover et al. (2018) found that although not all adolescents who are victims of childhood abuse become perpetrators in adulthood, the truth is that these experiences constitute a significant predictor of perpetration of violence in intimate relationships. The results of this study also demonstrated the importance of secure attachment in the prevention of IPV, since for the individuals included in the study sample who had secure attachment patterns, the history of childhood abuse was not significant. In turn, McClure and Parmenter (2020) found that childhood trauma and anxious attachment styles were significantly associated with IPV perpetration and victimization. Specifically, experiences of physical and emotional abuse or neglect during childhood were linked to higher levels of both verbal and physical IPV, as well as controlling behaviors in adulthood. Later, Segundo

et al. (2022) developed a study with a sample of Hispanic women and demonstrated the existence of a relationship between adverse childhood experiences, attachment and physical IPV, as women who perpetrated IPV were more likely to have ACEs and showed avoidant attachment patterns. In turn, Osa et al. (2022) proposed to evaluate, among a group of men who had already been convicted of gender violence (violence perpetrated against the opposite sex), whether attachment styles, whether secure or insecure, and childhood maltreatment by one of the parents were predictors of aggression. The results showed that attachment styles significantly predicted aggression, with insecure attachment styles being more predisposed to violence. Nevertheless, this study also demonstrated that attachment styles are a relevant variable, but not sufficient to explain the aggression of these men, indicating that the most coherent thing to do is to understand violence between intimate partners by considering more variables (e.g., relational variables). Regarding childhood adversities, this study demonstrated that having suffered psychological and/or physical abuse by the father in childhood was a significant predictor of aggression. Zietz et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study with individuals with a history of perpetrating IPV. They concluded that, despite childhood adversities, attachment to parents can constitute a protective factor in dealing with stress and conflicts with peers in adulthood. Children who established a secure attachment (especially in early childhood) were better able to control negative emotions and, consequently, less likely to perpetrate IPV, since the quality of relationships established in childhood is activated in times of stress in intimate relationships, playing an important role in this process (Almeida et al., 2023).

More recently, Sokar et al. (2023) applied Social Learning Theory and Attachment Theory to explore the link between ACEs and IPV, namely exposure to violence during childhood, with the perpetration of intimate partner violence during adulthood. In this study, specifically with Attachment Theory, the authors hypothesized that attachment insecurities mediated the association between exposure to parental violence and the perpetration of IPV, that is, adults with high levels of exposure to parental violence during childhood would be more likely to report high levels of attachment insecurity, which, in turn, would be related to a high frequency of IPV, whether physical, sexual or psychological. The results obtained in this study partially supported this hypothesis, as they confirmed a significant effect of witnessing physical interparental violence only on psychological IPV.

### **Implications for clinical practice**

Studying the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles, and violence in intimate relationships raises important considerations for clinical practice in Psychology. Additionally, the

study of these variables provides direct implications for the prevention and strengthening of parental bonds and, consequently, for the promotion of safer attachment styles, for the prevention of violent behaviors, and for the promotion of emotional health in adult relationships. This topic is relevant for the community in general, and particularly for health professionals, since understanding the impact of adverse childhood experiences, as well as the analysis of possible risk factors associated with the variables under study, can be an important starting point for the creation of intervention programs (e.g., programs for the prevention and strengthening of parental bonds and psychotherapeutic interventions focused on childhood and programs for the prevention of violence in intimate relationships) that aim to minimize risk behaviors.

### **Public policies**

ACEs are not just an individual issue, but also a social issue that requires collective attention from all of us as a society. Therefore, the creation of public policies aimed at preventing and mitigating the impacts of these experiences is crucial. These public policies should range from actions aimed at promoting healthy family environments to specialized interventions for individuals at risk or already affected by these adversities. Therefore, it is essential to invest in actions that prioritize the protection of children at risk, access to mental health services, and the strengthening of social and emotional support networks.

In terms of prevention, creating awareness campaigns about the lasting impacts of adverse childhood experiences, combined with the creation of environments that promote safe attachments, can have a positive effect on reducing the prevalence of violence in intimate relationships. In terms of identifying the experience of these adversities and, consequently, providing early support to individuals, it would be essential to strengthen child and youth protection programs. It would also be of utmost importance to implement educational programs with teachers, health professionals and other workers who have close contact with children and young people, to help them recognize signs of trauma, neglect or abuse, in order to ensure that interventions are carried out before the damage becomes irreversible.

Specifically in the case of perpetration of violence, it is also important to promote intervention programs for aggressors, who often also have histories of unresolved childhood trauma. The creation of therapeutic programs for these individuals, focused on restructuring the bonding patterns established in childhood, as well as on managing violent behavior, may contribute to reducing violence in intimate relationships.

## Implications for future studies

In this study, ACEs were limited to different interpersonal adversities (physical, psychological and sexual abuse), neglect (physical and emotional) and multiple forms of family dysfunction. However, it would be important to conduct similar studies that cover a wider range of adversities, including not only adversities linked to the family context, but also all others that are equally significant for human development (e.g., bullying experiences). It would also be interesting to investigate the typology of violence in intimate relationships (e.g., financial abuse) and explore whether ACEs and attachment styles are more strongly related to certain types of violence compared to others.

## Integrative synthesis

ACEs play a crucial role in shaping emotional development and relational patterns across the lifespan. The literature consistently demonstrates that ACEs are associated with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Lemon et al., 2022; Moreira et al., 2020; Terrel et al., 2023), the development of insecure attachment styles (Warmingham et al., 2023), and an increased risk of IPV in adulthood (Forster et al., 2022; King, 2021; Zhu et al., 2024). In particular, insecure attachment has been consistently linked to a greater likelihood of relationships characterized by violence (Almeida et al., 2023; Spencer et al., 2021; Velotti et al., 2022). Nevertheless, while early adversities exert a powerful influence, they do not irrevocably determine the course of future relationships (Beilharz et al., 2020).

In sum, integrating research on ACEs, attachment, and IPV advances theoretical understanding within Psychology and offers practical insights for the development of more effective interventions aimed at breaking the cycle of violence and fostering healthy relationships. Continued research on these variables remains essential to ensure that knowledge in this field continues to evolve, enabling past adversities to be transformed into resilience and emotional growth.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

As this article is a theoretical study, based on a review of existing literature, no new data were created or analyzed, so Data Availability Statement does not apply.

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