

THE INFLUENCE OF ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ADULT ATTACHMENT AND THE TENDENCY TO DEVELOP SUICIDAL IDEATION

Nerea Guasch Torres

Abstract

Introduction: Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are defined as potentially stressful events directly affecting children and adolescents before the age of 18. These adversities have been linked to detrimental consequences for physical and mental health, especially if they have experienced 4 or more types of ACEs. Attachment relationships established in childhood persist into adulthood, and there is evidence that suggests an association between established attachment and ACEs. Especially certain ACEs increase the likelihood of developing insecure attachment which in turn could lead to an increased risk of suicidal tendencies (Eruiyar et al., 2023). **Objective:** To study the relationship between ACEs, the type of adult attachment established and suicidal ideation in emerging adulthood. **Method:** The sample was composed of 441 participants (69.8% women), between 18-30 years old, with an average of 21.84 years. The instruments used were the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Questionnaire, the Internal Models of Attachment Relationships Questionnaire (CaMi-R) and the Paykel Suicidal Ideation Scale (PSS). **Results:** Linear regression models found that the cumulative effect of ACEs was a predictor of insecure attachment and suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the specific ACEs of physical abuse and emotional neglect predicted an increased probability to develop insecure attachment. On the other hand, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and having family members with mental illness at home predicted a higher probability to develop suicidal ideation. **Conclusion:** Experiencing a greater number of ACEs and certain specific adversities in childhood influence the type of attachment that is established in adulthood and increases the probability of presenting suicidal ideation in emerging adulthood. Therefore, it is important to detect ACEs and intervene early.

Key words: Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), adult attachment, suicidal ideation, physical and emotional abuse.

Resumen

Introducción: Las experiencias adversas en la infancia (ACEs) se definen como acontecimientos potencialmente estresantes que afectan directamente a los niños y adolescentes antes de los 18 años. Estas adversidades se han relacionado con consecuencias perjudiciales para la salud física y mental, especialmente si han experimentado 4 o más tipos de ACEs. Las relaciones de apego establecidas en la infancia persisten en la edad adulta, y hay estudios que sugieren una asociación entre el apego establecido y las ACEs. Especialmente ciertas ACEs aumentan la probabilidad de desarrollar un apego inseguro que a su vez podría conducir a un mayor riesgo de tendencias suicidas (Eruiyar et al., 2023). **Objetivo:** Estudiar la relación entre las ACEs, el tipo de apego adulto establecido y la ideación suicida en la adultez emergente. **Método:** La muestra estuvo compuesta por 441 participantes (69,8% mujeres), entre 18-30 años, con una media de 21,84 años. Los instrumentos utilizados fueron el Cuestionario de Experiencias Adversas en la Infancia (ACEs), el Cuestionario de Modelos Internos de Relaciones de Apego (CaMi-R) y la Escala de Ideación Suicida de Paykel (PSS). **Resultados:** Los modelos de regresión lineal hallaron que el efecto acumulativo de las ACEs era un predictor del apego inseguro y la ideación suicida. Además, las ACEs específicas de abuso físico y negligencia emocional predijeron una mayor probabilidad de desarrollar apego inseguro. Por otro lado, el abuso emocional, el abuso sexual, la negligencia emocional y tener familiares con enfermedades mentales en el hogar predijeron una mayor probabilidad de desarrollar ideación suicida. **Conclusiones:** Experimentar un mayor número de ACEs y ciertas adversidades específicas en la infancia influyen en el tipo de apego que se establece en la edad adulta y aumentan la probabilidad de presentar ideación suicida en la edad adulta. Por ello, es importante detectar las ACEs e intervenir tempranamente.

Palabras clave: Experiencia Infantil Adversa (ACE), apego adulto, ideación suicida, abuso físico y emocional.

INTRODUCTION

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are defined as potentially stressful event that occur during childhood and/or adolescence and which may include physically, emotionally or sexually abusive relationships, emotional and physical neglect and adverse family circumstances, affecting children and adolescents or the environment in which they live before the age of 18 (Eruiar et al., 2023; Ferrer, 2022). The study of ACEs was conducted by Felitti et al. (1998), who found a strong relationship between ACEs and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults, especially if they had experienced 4 or more types of ACEs (Karatekin & Hill, 2019). Attachment is the first relationship that a newborn establishes, usually with its main caregiver, and it is a constant process that serves as the basis for all the affective relationships. There is evidence that suggest that there is an association between insecure attachment patterns and having suffered from ACEs, especially with regard to emotional and/or physical abuse and neglect experienced in childhood. These specific ACEs increase the likelihood of developing an insecure attachment and a higher risk of suffering from certain emotional disorders leading to suicidal tendencies (Corral-Proañó & Díaz-Mosquera, 2019; Moneta, 2014; Sahle et al., 2021).

OBJECTIVE

Study the relationship among ACEs, the type of adult attachment established and suicidal ideation in emerging adulthood.

HYPOTHESIS

H1 The cumulative effect of ACEs will lead to a lower probability of developing a secure attachment and an increased tendency to develop suicidal ideation during emerging adulthood.

H2 It is expected that having suffered from emotional and/or physical abuse in childhood will be related to insecure attachment and a greater tendency to present suicidal ideation in adulthood.

H3 It is expected that having suffered from emotional and/or physical neglect in childhood will be related to insecure attachment and a greater tendency to present suicidal ideation in adulthood.

METHOD

Participants 95% Spanish nationality
n=441 → 30.2% ♂ Age 18-30 years
69.8% ♀ } - Mean: 21.84
- SD= 2.92

- Instruments**
 - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998)
 - Internal Models of Attachment Relationships Questionnaire (CaMi-R) (Balluerka et al., 2011)
 - Paykel Suicidal Ideation Scale (PSS) (Fonsesca-Pedrero et al., 2020)

Procedure 20 euros gift voucher draw
Online questionnaire
Informed consent
Approval of the Jaume I University Ethics Committee: (reference number CD/92/2021)

RESULTS

Table 1. Linear Regression of the Attachment Type variable on the total ACEs

	β	SE	p	95%CI	R ²
Step 1					.016
Sex	-.32	.33	.335	[-.97, .33]	
Step 2					.174
Total ACEs	-.76	.08	<.001**	[-.92, -.59]	

Note: n=441; ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences; SE: Standard Error; *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .001

Table 2. Linear Regression of the Attachment Type variable on specific ACEs

	β	SE	p	95%CI	R ²
Step 1					.016
Sex	-.32	.33	.335	[-.97, .33]	
Step 2					.282
Emotional Abuse	.13	.47	.783	[-.79, 1.05]	
Physical Abuse	-.97	.44	.029*	[-1.84, -.09]	
Sexual Abuse	.37	.49	.451	[-.59, 1.34]	
Emotional Neglect	-4.94	.53	<.001**	[-5.98, -3.89]	
Physical Neglect	1.10	.77	.157	[-.42, 2.63]	
Divorce Separation	-.38	.32	.238	[-1.03, .25]	
Exposure to Domestic Violence	-1.24	.66	.061	[-2.54, .05]	
Substance Abuse Household	.12	.38	.747	[-.63, .88]	
Mental Illness in Household	-.44	.28	.121	[-1.01, .11]	
Incarcerated Household Member	-1.19	.93	.199	[-3.02, .63]	

Note: n=441; ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences; SE: Standard Error; *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .001

Table 3. Linear Regression of the Suicidal Ideation variable on the total ACEs

	β	SE	p	95%CI	R ²
Step 1					.006
Sex	.24	.14	.086	[-.03, .53]	
Step 2					.190
Total ACEs	.35	.03	<.001**	 [.28, .42]	

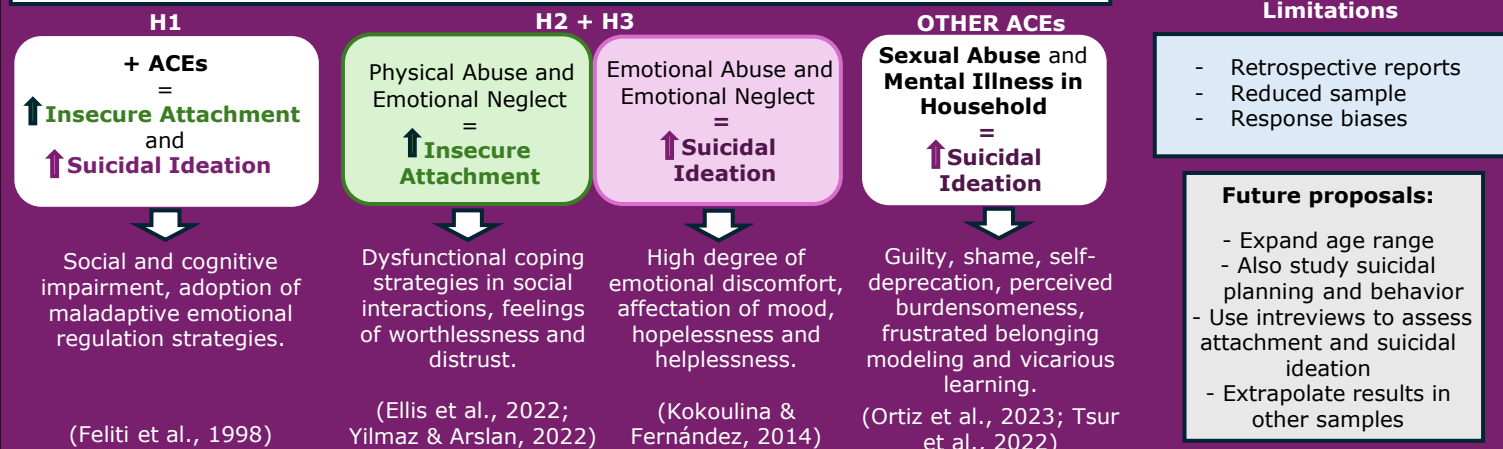
Note: n=441; ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences; SE: Standard Error; *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .001

Table 4. Linear Regression of the Suicidal Ideation variable on specific ACEs

	β	SE	p	95%CI	R ²
Step 1					.006
Sex	.24	.14	.086	[-.03, .53]	
Step 2					.234
Emotional Abuse	.77	.21	<.001**	[.36, 1.19]	
Physical Abuse	-.04	.19	.836	[-.43, .34]	
Sexual Abuse	.67	.22	.003*	[.23, 1.10]	
Emotional Neglect	.94	.23	<.001**	[.47, 1.41]	
Physical Neglect	-.46	.34	.183	[-1.14, .22]	
Divorce Separation	-.09	.14	.499	[-.38, .19]	
Exposure to Domestic Violence	.34	.29	.240	[-.23, .93]	
Substance Abuse Household	.28	.17	.105	[-.05, .62]	
Mental Illness in Household	.68	.12	<.001**	[.43, .93]	
Incarcerated Household Member	-.08	.41	.835	[-.90, .73]	

Note: n=441; ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences; SE: Standard Error; *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .001

DISCUSION and CONCLUSION



References

- Balluerka, N., Lacasa Saludas, F., Gorostiaga, A., Muela, A., & Pierrehumbert, B. (2011). Versión reducida del cuestionario CaMir (CaMir-R) para la evaluación del apego. *Psicothema*, 23(3), 486-494.
- Brokke, S. S., Bertelsen, T. B., Landrø, N. I., & Haaland, V. Ø. (2022). The effect of sexual abuse and dissociation on suicide attempt. *BMC Psychiatry*, 22(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03662-9>.
- Corral-Proañó, V. J., y Díaz-Mosquera, E. (2019). Entender la conducta suicida desde los vínculos de apego inseguro y el trauma infantil. *CienciAmérica*, 8(1), 48-61. <http://dx.doi.org/10.33210/ca.v8i1.204>.
- Ellis, B. J., Sheridan, M. A., Belsky, J., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2022). Why and how does early adversity influence development? Toward an integrated model of dimensions of environmental experience. *Development and Psychopathology*, 34(2), 447-471. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579421001838>.
- Eruyar, Ş., Yilmaz, M. ve Vostanis P. (2023). Understanding adverse childhood experiences (aces) and subsequent adult psychopathologies through the lens of attachment theory: A position paper. *Karatay Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, (11), 309-333. <https://doi.org/10.54557/karataysad.1348004>.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8).
- Ferrer, M. S. (2022). Impacto en la conducta de las experiencias adversas en la infancia. *Pediatría Integral*, 26(1), 49.e1-49.e5.
- Fonseca-Pedrero, E., & Pérez de Albéniz, A. (2020). Evaluación de la conducta suicida en adolescentes: A propósito de la escala Paykel de suicidio. *Papeles del Psicólogo*, 41(2), 106-115. <https://dx.doi.org/10.23923/pap.psicol2020.2928>.
- Karatekin, C., & Hill, M. (2019). Expanding the original definition of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 12, 289-306. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-018-0237-5>.
- Kokoulina, E., & Fernández, R. (2014). Maltrato físico y emocional en la infancia y conducta suicida en el adulto. *Revista de Psicopatología y Psicología Clínica*, 19(2), 93-103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/rppc.vol.19.num.2.2014.13060>.
- Moneta, M. E. (2014). Apego y pérdida: redescubriendo a John Bowlby. *Revista Chilena de Pediatría*, 85(3), 265-268. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0370-41062014000300001>.
- Ortiz, E. L., Tinoco, K. A. C., & Esparza, L. K. M. (2023). Entre la culpa y la vergüenza: Una aproximación al suicidio desde una perspectiva de género en clave emocional. *Revista de Psicoterapia*, 34(124), 47-70. <https://doi.org/10.5944/rdp.v34i124.37048>.
- Sahle, B. W., Reavley, N. J., Li, W., Morgan, A. J., Yap, M. B. H., Reupert, A., & Jorm, A. F. (2021). The association between adverse childhood experiences and common mental disorders and suicidality: an umbrella review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(10), 1489-1499. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01745-2>.
- Tsur, N., Najjar, A. A., & Katz, C. (2022). "Explode into small pieces": Suicidal ideation among child sexual abuse survivors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 131, 105780. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105780>.
- Yilmaz, H., Arslan, C., & Arslan, E. (2022). The effect of traumatic experiences on attachment styles. *Anales De Psicología*, 38(3), 489-498. <https://doi.org/10.6018/analesps.489601>.