

# The Implications of Childhood Abuse on Adult Attachment Style and Criminal Behavior

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## Summary

- ❖ Bowlby's attachment theory was developed to examine the effect of childhood bonds with caregivers on adult interpersonal relationships.
- ❖ Researchers now examine attachment style in other psychological contexts.
- ❖ In the case of forensic psychology, researchers investigate the relationship between attachment styles and the likelihood of committing criminal offenses.
- ❖ Prior research has found that children who were raised in environments where they experienced or witnessed abuse or neglect were more likely to engage in violent and non-violent crime in their adult lives (Christian, Sellbom, & Wilkinson, 2017; Ogilvie, Newman, Todd, & Peck, 2014; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- ❖ Previous research has also found that children who suffer from or witness abuse or neglect are more likely to maintain insecure attachment styles in their adult relationships (Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- ❖ The forms of attachment in these studies include secure and insecure, with insecure attachment styles being anxious-ambivalent and avoidant (Renn, 2002; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- ❖ Disorganized attachment style has not been examined in prior research.
- ❖ Insecure attachment styles which develop in childhood and carry through adulthood have been found to impact an individual's ability to empathize with others in times of distress (Hansen et al., 2011; Schimmenti et al., 2014).

- ❖ While few studies have been conducted on the relationship between empathy and attachment, it has been found that inconsistent communication and certain parenting tactics can cause a child not to trust others (Renn, 2002).
- ❖ The research also indicated that children raised in dysfunctional environments have difficulty trusting themselves (Renn, 2002).
- ❖ Prior research has found that individuals with insecure attachment style and a comorbid disorder of either psychopathy or antisocial personality disorder are significantly more likely to have been victims of child abuse and to commit violent and non-violent offenses (Christian et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2011; Schimmenti et al., 2014).
- ❖ Childhood trauma that is unresolved often contributes to violent and non-violent criminal behavior in adulthood (Renn, 2002).
- ❖ While most studies indicate that child abuse, empathy, and criminal behavior have a correlational relationship, a study done by Jones, Cislet, Morais, and Bai (2018) found the opposite.
- ❖ The researchers found that there was not a relationship between childhood abuse, empathy, and criminal behavior in juvenile sexual offenders (Jones, Cislet, Morais, & Bai, 2018).
- ❖ While the researchers did not find correlations between childhood abuse and empathy, they did find that juvenile sexual offenders were more likely to have psychological diagnoses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and conduct disorder, difficulty with emotional regulation, and lowered resilience (Jones, Cislet, Morais, & Bai, 2018).

## Forensic Implications

- ❖ Examining the implications of childhood abuse on adult attachment style and criminal behavior will be helpful in understanding the origins of criminal behavior.
- ❖ Research has thus far shown that childhood abuse predicts adult attachment style, which seems to shape the likelihood of criminal behavior.
- ❖ Further examination of the relationships between child abuse, attachment style, and criminal behavior will yield a better understand for professionals in the fields of criminal justice and forensic psychology.



- ❖ The knowledge will help forensic psychologists to better assess and understand criminal behavior.
- ❖ The information can be shared with lawyers to help advocate to the justice system to help youth who have engaged in criminal behavior as a result of insecure attachment and child abuse.

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