

The Role of Early Childhood Teachers in Fostering Positive Attachment in Educational Settings: A Theoretical Review from the Perspective of Developmental Psychology

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Abstract

This literature review examines the pivotal role of early childhood teachers in fostering positive attachment relationships within educational settings, grounded in developmental psychology theory. Secure attachments between teachers and young children are essential for promoting socio-emotional well-being, cognitive development, and school readiness. Drawing on recent empirical studies and theoretical frameworks, this review highlights how teacher responsiveness, emotional availability, and consistent caregiving contribute to children's sense of security and trust. Key indicators of positive attachment—such as proximity seeking, distress alleviation, and child-initiated interactions—are linked to improved social competence, reduced anxiety, and enhanced academic outcomes. Furthermore, the review explores the neurodevelopmental implications of teacher-child attachment, emphasizing its influence on brain regions responsible for stress regulation and executive function. The compensatory role of teachers for children experiencing insecure attachments at home is also discussed, underscoring the protective effects of sensitive and stable caregiving in educational contexts. Finally, the importance of institutional support, including low child-teacher ratios, professional development in attachment-informed pedagogy, and teacher well-being, is emphasized as critical to sustaining effective teacher-child relationships. The findings advocate for integrating attachment theory into early childhood education policy and practice to foster holistic development and resilience in young learners.

Keywords: early childhood education, teacher-child attachment, developmental psychology

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Introduction

Early childhood is universally recognized as a critical period in human development. It is during this stage—particularly between birth and six years of age—that children form foundational skills in emotional regulation, social interaction, and cognitive processing. Recent studies underscore that emotional security in early relationships plays a pivotal role in shaping children's confidence and adaptability in various social contexts (Rokach & Schell, 2020).

One of the core psychological frameworks that explain the significance of early relationships is attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby. Although initially focused on the parent-child bond, recent research has expanded the theory's application to formal educational settings, particularly in early childhood education (ECE). Teachers in ECE settings are now recognized not just as academic instructors, but also as vital attachment figures (Rudasill et al., 2020).

In early learning environments, children often spend extended periods with their teachers, making them highly influential in the child's social-emotional development. Positive teacher–child relationships can foster a secure attachment, which in turn encourages exploration, resilience, and social engagement (Riber, 2022). These relationships help create a classroom climate that supports both emotional and academic growth.

Teachers who are emotionally attuned, consistent, and responsive act as secure bases for children to safely navigate the complexities of group learning and peer interaction. Longitudinal studies have shown that early positive attachment experiences with teachers correlate strongly with later academic success and social competence (McKinnon et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of intentionally nurturing emotional bonds in educational settings.

Conversely, when teacher–child interactions are marked by emotional distance, harshness, or inconsistency, children may develop anxiety, withdrawal behaviors, or oppositional tendencies. These outcomes not only affect classroom harmony but can also hinder the overall developmental trajectory of the child. Therefore, teacher–child emotional dynamics must be seen as central—not peripheral—to early childhood pedagogy (Zinsser et al., 2021).

Despite the growing body of evidence, many early childhood education institutions still prioritize cognitive achievement and school readiness above emotional well-being. This imbalance often results in a neglect of the relational and emotional aspects of learning, which are equally, if not more, foundational in early development (Cumming, 2020). Moreover, many educators lack formal training in emotional responsiveness and attachment-building practices.

Supporting teachers' emotional well-being and professional self-understanding has also been found to influence the quality of their relationships with children. Teachers who experience high levels of stress or emotional burnout may struggle to form meaningful connections with their students (Erden et al., 2023). Thus, systemic support for educators is crucial in facilitating positive teacher–child attachments.

Given these findings, a theoretical literature review is necessary to examine how early childhood teachers can effectively foster secure attachments in educational settings. By synthesizing developmental psychology frameworks with recent empirical research, this study aims to provide insights and recommendations for strengthening emotional bonds between teachers and children—thereby supporting the holistic development of young learners.

Given this context, a theoretical investigation into the role of early childhood teachers in fostering positive attachment in educational settings is both timely and necessary. This literature-based study aims to explore how teacher–child attachment relationships can be intentionally nurtured through everyday educational practices. Grounded in developmental psychology and supported by recent empirical findings, this review aspires to inform educators, institutions, and policy-makers on the significance of emotionally secure teacher–child relationships as a foundation for effective early learning.

Methodology

This study employs a library research design with a qualitative descriptive approach to deeply examine the role of early childhood teachers in fostering positive attachment in young children from the perspective of developmental psychology. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing information from secondary literature without conducting primary data collection.

The study targets literature consisting of reputable international journal articles, textbooks on developmental psychology and early childhood education, as well as academic documents related to attachment and the role of teachers in early childhood education centers. The literature population is limited to publications from the last five years (2019–2024) to ensure up-to-date and relevant data. Purposive sampling is applied with inclusion criteria focused on teacher-child attachment, credible sources, and valid research findings.

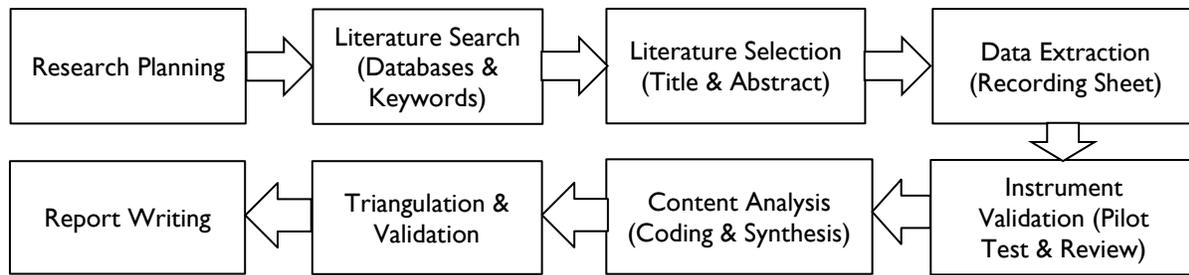


Figure 1. Research Process Flowchart

Data collection was conducted through systematic searches on Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, and ScienceDirect using keywords such as “early childhood teacher attachment,” “secure attachment in early childhood education,” and “teacher-child relationship and child development.” A time filter from 2019 to 2024 was applied. Initial selection was based on titles and abstracts, then relevant sources were downloaded and organized using Zotero.

A data recording instrument was developed in the form of a worksheet containing columns for title, author, year, purpose, method, main findings related to the teacher’s role and attachment, and important quotations. Instrument validation was carried out by piloting on five initial articles and discussing with the academic supervisor.

Table 1. Data Extraction Framework

No	Aspect Recorded	Description
1	Source Title	Title of the article, book, or document
2	Author and Year of Publication	Name of the author(s) and year of publication
3	Research Purpose	Summary of the research objectives or focus
4	Research Method	Type and design of the research used
5	Main Findings on the Role of Early Childhood Teachers	Information about how teachers contribute to building positive attachment in children
6	Indicators of Positive Attachment	Factors or signs of a secure and positive attachment relationship in the context of early childhood education
7	Developmental Psychology Implications	Impact of teacher-child relationships on children's emotional and social development
8	Important Quotations	Relevant sentences or paragraphs used as evidence or support from the source

The data collected from selected sources were organized using a structured extraction sheet as outlined in Table 1. Each source was reviewed to identify key components relevant to the research focus, such as the role of teachers in early childhood settings, developmental psychology implications, and indicators of secure attachment. The extraction framework facilitated consistency in evaluating the literature, ensuring that each article contributed meaningful information aligned with the study objectives.

Qualitative content analysis was used to interpret the data. The process began with thorough reading and open coding of each source, marking sections that related to the defined aspects in the instrument. Codes were grouped into thematic categories including “teacher behavior promoting attachment,” “secure base indicators,” and “developmental outcomes.” This thematic organization enabled a clearer synthesis of the literature and identification of recurring patterns.

To strengthen the validity of the findings, source triangulation was applied. This involved comparing insights across multiple studies to ensure reliability and detect any conflicting interpretations. Discrepancies in findings were critically examined and, where necessary, discussed with academic experts in early childhood and developmental psychology to reach a balanced perspective. This approach helped build a nuanced understanding of the topic.

Throughout the process, regular discussions with the academic supervisor were held to confirm analytical consistency and ensure academic rigor. Reflective notes were maintained to monitor potential researcher bias and support transparency in interpretation. The combined use of a structured instrument, content analysis, and triangulation ensured a methodologically sound and credible foundation for the theoretical insights presented in this study.

Results and Discussion

The literature review revealed consistent findings across multiple sources, highlighting the critical role that early childhood teachers play in establishing and maintaining positive attachment relationships with young children. These attachments are foundational for children's socio-emotional development, academic readiness, and long-term psychological well-being.

The Role of Teachers as Attachment Figures

Recent studies emphasize that early childhood teachers often function as secondary attachment figures, especially for children who spend extended hours in early learning environments (Ahnert et al., 2021; Spilt et al., 2020). Teachers who exhibit responsiveness, warmth, and consistency in their interactions contribute significantly to children developing a sense of security and trust (Sabol & Pianta, 2022). The teacher's role extends beyond academic instruction to encompass emotional regulation support, conflict resolution, and scaffolding of social interactions.

In the context of early childhood education, teachers frequently act as secondary attachment figures, a role that becomes increasingly significant for children who spend substantial time in institutional care settings. This role is not merely incidental—it is deeply rooted in the developmental need of young children to establish emotional connections with consistent caregivers. Recent research by Ahnert et al. (2021) and Spilt et al. (2020) underscores that the teacher's presence, reliability, and responsiveness fulfill many of the same psychological functions as a primary caregiver, especially during formative years. These attachment bonds provide children with a secure emotional base from which they can confidently explore their environment, engage with peers, and develop learning competencies.

The emotional quality of teacher-child relationships hinges largely on teacher behaviors characterized by warmth, attunement, and consistency. According to Sabol and Pianta (2022), teachers who consistently demonstrate empathy, patience, and emotional support promote a sense of trust and psychological safety in children. These characteristics are not only relational but also pedagogical, as they foster classroom climates that support exploration and risk-taking—both essential elements in early learning. The relational nature of teaching in early childhood thus positions the teacher as both an educator and a co-regulator of children's emotional states, particularly during moments of distress or uncertainty.

Empirical evidence from studies by Elfer and Page (2019) and Degotardi et al. (2023) further illuminates the importance of teacher sensitivity and emotional availability in shaping secure attachments. These researchers found that teachers who can accurately read children's emotional signals and respond in a timely, comforting, and individualized manner are more likely to foster secure relationships. Such secure attachments manifest behaviorally in children through increased exploratory behavior, willingness to express emotions, and greater resilience in challenging situations. In essence, children internalize these secure relational experiences as a template for future relationships and coping strategies.

Furthermore, this body of research reveals that attachment-related behaviors in children are both context-dependent and responsive to teacher interaction styles. Children who receive consistent emotional support and validation from their teachers tend to show enhanced social competence, reduced anxiety, and more adaptive stress responses. In contrast, environments where teacher responsiveness is lacking or inconsistent may hinder children's

ability to form trusting relationships, which can negatively affect their socio-emotional development. These findings highlight the need to intentionally design early childhood programs that support relational pedagogy and provide teachers with the training and institutional support necessary to fulfill their role as attachment figures effectively.

Indicators and Outcomes of Positive Attachment

Positive attachment between teachers and young children is typically indicated by a range of observable behaviors that reflect emotional security and mutual trust. Key indicators include proximity seeking, comfort-seeking in moments of distress, child-initiated communication, and sustained eye contact during interactions (Zhang et al., 2021). These behaviors reveal the child's confidence in the teacher as a reliable emotional support figure. The presence of such indicators in early childhood settings suggests that the child perceives the teacher as someone who can provide safety and reassurance, especially in unfamiliar or stressful situations.

Children who form secure attachments with their teachers tend to exhibit more confident and autonomous engagement in classroom activities. Research by Deneault et al. (2020) shows that these children display greater willingness to explore new tasks, adapt more easily to transitions, and demonstrate stronger problem-solving skills. Additionally, they are more likely to establish cooperative peer relationships and show empathy toward others. Importantly, secure attachment also correlates with lower incidence of behavioral difficulties, such as aggression, withdrawal, or heightened anxiety, as the child develops appropriate mechanisms for emotional regulation.

The outcomes of secure teacher-child attachments extend beyond emotional and behavioral domains into cognitive and academic performance. Studies by Mortensen and Barnett (2020) and Shin et al. (2021) found that securely attached preschool children outperformed their peers in early literacy and numeracy assessments. This association supports Bowlby's (1988) concept of the "secure base," in which emotional security enables children to fully engage with learning experiences. When children feel emotionally supported, they are more likely to take cognitive risks, persist in challenging tasks, and benefit from instructional scaffolding provided by the teacher.

Moreover, the attachment quality within teacher-child relationships contributes to long-term developmental trajectories, including improved self-esteem, resilience, and social adaptability. Secure attachments lay the groundwork for children to develop a coherent sense of self and a positive outlook on relationships with adults and peers alike. From a pedagogical perspective, recognizing these indicators allows educators to tailor their interactions and classroom environments to support secure bonding. Ultimately, promoting secure teacher-child attachments should be viewed not only as an emotional necessity but as a strategic foundation for holistic child development in early childhood education.

Developmental Psychology Implications

From the perspective of developmental psychology, the attachment relationship between young children and their early childhood educators mirrors, in many aspects, the foundational parent-child attachment dynamic. Secure teacher-child relationships serve as an essential emotional base during critical windows of socio-emotional and cognitive development (Thomason et al., 2019). These bonds support the formation of key regulatory functions, including self-soothing, impulse control, and emotional labeling. Children who experience emotionally responsive and consistent interactions with teachers are better equipped to navigate challenges, adapt to transitions, and form positive relationships with peers.

Neuroscientific research has further validated the role of secure attachments in shaping neurological pathways that govern executive functioning and stress response systems. According to Brito and Noble (2020), early positive interactions with caregivers—including teachers—correlate with increased cortical thickness and white matter organization in brain areas related to attention, working memory, and emotional regulation. These neurodevelopmental outcomes provide biological evidence for the long-term impact of early attachment experiences in educational settings. As such, the emotional quality of teacher-child interactions becomes a

fundamental factor not only in behavioral development but also in shaping the physiological architecture of the brain.

Importantly, early childhood educators can serve a compensatory function for children who lack secure attachment relationships at home. Several longitudinal studies, such as those conducted by Howes et al. (2021) and Broekhuizen et al. (2022), have demonstrated that teacher sensitivity—marked by attunement, emotional availability, and consistent responsiveness—can buffer children from the developmental risks posed by family instability, neglect, or trauma. In these contexts, teachers act as “secondary attachment figures,” providing the psychological safety necessary for children to engage in learning and develop adaptive social-emotional skills.

This compensatory role is particularly crucial in early childhood education environments serving children from high-risk populations. Findings from Hamre and Pianta (2007) suggest that for children exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the presence of a warm, reliable teacher significantly reduces the likelihood of developing behavioral problems and promotes resilience. Secure attachment in the classroom has been associated with improved school readiness, reduced aggression, and greater prosocial behavior, all of which are foundational to long-term academic and life success. Therefore, interventions aimed at enhancing teacher-child attachment quality may serve as effective preventive strategies in educational policy and practice.

Ultimately, the implications of secure teacher-child attachment extend into multiple domains of child development, including cognitive, emotional, and neurological pathways. Developmental psychology not only offers a theoretical framework for understanding these relationships but also underscores their practical significance in early learning environments. A teacher’s ability to foster secure attachment relationships should thus be regarded as a core professional competency, requiring targeted training, reflective supervision, and institutional support. Embedding attachment-informed practices into early childhood education holds promise for promoting equity, well-being, and lifelong developmental outcomes for all children.

Pedagogical and Institutional Considerations

Establishing secure attachments between teachers and young children is not solely an individual effort—it must be structurally supported by pedagogical strategies and institutional frameworks. The research underscores that attachment-building thrives in environments where systemic conditions—such as low child-teacher ratios, consistent classroom staffing, and continuity of care—are prioritized (Colwell et al., 2023; Pianta et al., 2021). These conditions allow teachers to become more attuned to individual children’s emotional needs and behavioral patterns, fostering trust, security, and emotional safety in classroom interactions.

Professional development that integrates attachment theory, emotional literacy, and responsive caregiving practices has also shown to significantly enhance teachers’ relational capacity. Educators trained in the nuances of emotional attunement are better able to interpret children’s cues, regulate classroom dynamics, and support emotional growth through co-regulation and empathy-driven responses. According to Colwell et al. (2023), such training leads to measurable improvements in teacher-child relationship quality, especially in early learning environments with high emotional demands or vulnerable populations.

Moreover, institutional cultures that embrace relational pedagogy—a pedagogical approach that values relationships as central to learning—create fertile ground for nurturing secure attachments. Embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks into the curriculum supports this relational focus by explicitly teaching empathy, cooperation, and emotional expression. Policies that promote SEL not only benefit children directly but also serve as a guide for educators to model secure, emotionally responsive interactions. These frameworks must be aligned with daily teaching routines, discipline practices, and family engagement efforts to be fully effective.

Finally, the emotional well-being of educators is a critical but often overlooked component of attachment-informed pedagogy. Reflective supervision, peer mentoring, and access to mental health resources contribute to teachers’ emotional resilience and reduce the risk of burnout (Page, 2022). When teachers feel emotionally supported and professionally valued, they are more capable of sustaining the patience, warmth, and consistency that

secure attachments require. Institutional investment in teacher well-being is thus not only a moral imperative but also a pedagogical necessity for optimizing child development outcomes in early education settings.

Conclusion

This literature review has underscored the critical role of early childhood teachers as significant attachment figures within educational settings. Drawing from developmental psychology and attachment theory, the findings affirm that emotionally attuned, responsive, and consistent teacher-child relationships contribute substantially to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Teachers serve not only as facilitators of learning but also as secondary caregivers who provide secure relational foundations, particularly for children facing relational deficits at home.

Positive teacher-child attachments are manifested through observable indicators such as proximity-seeking behavior, emotional openness, and secure exploration. These behaviors are strongly associated with improved peer relationships, reduced anxiety, and enhanced classroom engagement. Beyond emotional well-being, such attachments also correlate with improved academic outcomes in early literacy and numeracy, supporting Bowlby's assertion that secure attachments enable effective exploration and learning.

From a developmental perspective, secure attachments with teachers foster core competencies such as self-regulation, empathy, and resilience—skills essential for lifelong learning and adaptation. In cases where children experience insecure attachment in their family environments, sensitive teachers can serve as protective buffers, reducing the long-term risks of emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Finally, the review highlights the importance of institutional conditions that support relational pedagogy. Policies that ensure low student-teacher ratios, stable staffing, training in attachment-informed care, and emotional support for educators themselves are foundational to cultivating attachment-rich classrooms. Future research and educational policy should further explore how early learning institutions can intentionally foster these dynamics to support holistic child development.

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