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4 **EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN FAMILIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD**
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8 **Abstract:**

9 The analysis of the Bene–Antoni test indicates that the child exhibits a predominant emotional attachment to the mother (positive relations 45%,
10 dependency 60%), a moderate attachment to the father (positive relations 35%, dependency 30%), and the lowest attachment to the projective
11 figure “Mr. Nobody” (positive relations 20%).
12 Negative emotions are primarily directed toward “Mr. Nobody” (75%), whereas they are minimal toward the parents (10–15%), suggesting a
13 preserved positive relationship with them and the use of a projection mechanism for handling conflicting experiences.
14 In intact families, the mother–child bond (M = 4.30) is stronger than the father–child bond (M = 3.85), whereas in single-parent families, the
15 mother–child bond decreases (M = 3.85) and data regarding the father are unavailable, highlighting the significance of a two-parent system for
16 emotional development.
17 Overall, the pattern demonstrates strong maternal attachment, moderate paternal significance, and the projective direction of negative feelings
18 toward a symbolic figure, consistent with theories of child attachment and family dynamics.
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21 **Key words:-**

22 Emotional Attachment, Family Relationships, Early Childhood, Bene–Antoni Test
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26 **Introduction:-**

27 The family is increasingly conceptualized as the “primary laboratory” for the development of emotional competence
28 in early childhood. In this context, Aydođdu, Gürsoy, and Aral (2024) examine the mediating role of emotional
29 regulation in the relationship between family climate and the emotional well-being of preschool-aged children. Their
30 findings indicate that the quality of emotional relationships within the family has a direct impact on children’s
31 emotional stability and adaptability. Parental behaviors characterized by naming and validating children’s emotions
32 are associated with higher levels of self-control and effective self-regulation.
33 From a theoretical perspective, these empirical findings align with the framework of attachment theory formulated
34 by John Bowlby. Expanding on his ideas, X. Li et al. (2021) investigate so-called “internal working models”—
35 cognitive-affective structures developed through repeated interactions with caregivers. These models shape
36 fundamental beliefs about one’s own worth and the reliability of others, which subsequently guide children’s social
37 strategies and regulatory mechanisms.
38 Contemporary theories of emotional socialization emphasize the importance of a secure emotional bond between
39 parent and child as a prerequisite for the development of skills in recognizing, expressing, and regulating emotions.
40 Empirical evidence from Zhang (2025) confirms that parental interactions characterized by emotional closeness and
41 adequate support facilitate the development of emotional expression and self-regulation during the preschool years.
42 Similarly, Zuo (2023) finds that positive and consistent parenting is associated with higher levels of emotional
43 regulation, whereas conflictual and inconsistent practices increase the risk of emotional and behavioral difficulties.
44 Over the past decade, there has been a conceptual shift from focusing on individual pathology to investigating
45 “relational health” as a systemic feature of the family environment.
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49 Ashton et al. (2021) emphasize that the presence of at least one stable and supportive adult relationship constitutes
50 the strongest predictor of emotional resilience in childhood. Emotional warmth and responsive parenting function as
51 a buffer against external stressors, reducing the likelihood of maladaptive responses.
52 Complementing this perspective, Osofsky (2024) highlights the need for “emotionally available parents,” who,
53 through sensitive listening, shared play, and environmental predictability, support the development of a fundamental
54 sense of security.
55 The emotional climate within the family should be viewed not as a sum of dyadic relationships but as a complex
56 system of mutually influencing interactions. In its current guidelines, the American Psychological Association
57 (2025) emphasizes the importance of “serve and return” interactions, in which parents respond to infants’
58 vocalizations, gestures, and facial expressions, laying the foundation for secure attachment and neurobiologically

59 optimal development. Consistent with this, Xie et al. (2025) note that emotional closeness and the quality of marital
60 relationships are structural factors that “weave” the child’s psychological world. They stress that warm and
61 responsive interactions not only enhance emotional expression but also influence the development of brain
62 structures responsible for social functioning.

63 At the same time, elevated levels of parental stress can limit the capacity to sensitively interpret children’s signals
64 and provide adequate emotional responses. The ability to understand children’s internal states (reflective
65 functioning) serves as a key mediator between family climate and emotional development. Data from Jiang et al.
66 (2025) indicate that the quality of parent–child relationships mediates the link between family closeness and
67 emotional well-being: lower-quality interactions are associated with higher levels of emotional and behavioral
68 problems.

69 The emotional climate within the family represents a central factor in the development of emotional regulation,
70 resilience, and social adaptation in early childhood. The formation of secure, warm, and reflective relationships
71 emerges as a fundamental prerequisite for optimal psychological and social functioning in children.

72 The aim of the present study is to analyze and explore the characteristics of emotional relationships in families of 4-
73 year-old children, focusing on their emotional orientation toward mothers and fathers across different family
74 contexts.

75 The object of the present study is the emotional relationships and emotional orientation of children in early
76 preschool age toward parental figures within the family environment.

77 The objectives of the study are as follows:

- 78 1. To identify the dominant emotional orientation of children toward parental figures.
- 79 2. To analyze the presence of positive and negative emotional tendencies in child–parent relationships.
- 80 3. To examine mother–child and father–child relationships in two different family contexts—intact families and
81 single-parent families.

82 The study includes 30 four-year-old children (15 girls and 15 boys) attending preschool in an urban setting. Of
83 these, 15 children come from intact families, while the remaining 15 live in single-parent households. This sample
84 allows for a comparative analysis of child–parent emotional relationships across different family environments.
85

86 **Methodology:-**

87 In the present study, the Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test (Лидерс, 2007) was employed, in its adapted version
88 for early childhood. The instrument constitutes a semi-projective derivative that allows the objectification of the
89 child’s subjective experiences within the family environment. The experimental setup involves the use of three-
90 dimensional figures representing members of the family constellation, as well as a neutral figure—“Mr. Nobody.”
91 The latter serves as a psychometric filter for statements that the child does not attribute to a specific real-life object.

92 The research procedure is structured through the distribution of 20 items (cards) containing emotionally charged
93 statements. The child makes selections by placing the cards into the corresponding “mailboxes” of the figures,
94 thereby minimizing resistance and facilitating the projection of affect.

95 Results are interpreted based on three primary dimensions:

- 96 1. Positive affective attitudes: Evaluates both outgoing emotions (from the child toward the object) and perceived
97 incoming emotions (from the family toward the child).
- 98 2. Negative affective attitudes: Identifies levels of hostility, anger, and interpersonal conflict.
- 99 3. Degree of dependency: Measures the intensity of emotional attachment and potential over-involvement with a
100 specific parental style.

101 For data verification, descriptive statistical methods were employed:

- 102 1. Frequency analysis: To determine the predominant choices.
- 103 2. Comparative analysis of mean values: To identify statistically significant differences in emotional vectors directed
104 toward the mother, father, and neutral figure.

105 The study was conducted in a controlled, sensory-isolated environment (a calm setting), ensuring psychological
106 comfort for participants. The session duration was fixed between 20 and 25 minutes. The research was carried out in
107 strict compliance with ethical standards in psychological investigation. Written informed consent was obtained from
108 legal guardians, and personal data were depersonalized, ensuring complete anonymity and confidentiality of the
109 results.

110 111 **Results:-**

112 **Mean Values, Standard Deviations, and Percentage Distribution in Relationship Categories with Mother,**
113 **Father, and Mr. Nobody**

114 The data obtained from the Bene–Antony test allow for a summarized analysis of the emotional relationships and
115 dependencies of the subject with respect to three objects – mother, father, and the figure of “Mr. Nobody” (a
116 projective figure toward which unacknowledged or socially undesirable experiences are directed).

117 1.Positive Emotional Relationships

118 In both tables, the highest intensity of positive feelings is observed toward the mother (45%; $M = 0.49$), followed by
119 the father (35%; $M = 0.35$), with the lowest values reported for “Mr. Nobody” (20%; $M = 0.20$). These results
120 indicate a clearly expressed emotional attachment to the mother as the primary figure of security and support.
121 The standard deviations ($SD = 0.45$ for mother; $SD = 0.47$ for father; $SD = 0.40$ for “Mr. Nobody”) suggest
122 relatively high variability, which may indicate some ambivalence or fluctuation in experiences, particularly
123 regarding the parental figures.

124 2.Negative Emotional Relationships

125 The most pronounced negative feelings are directed toward “Mr. Nobody” (75%; $M = 0.75$), with significantly
126 lower values toward the mother (10%; $M = 0.10$) and father (15%; $M = 0.15$). This concentration of negative
127 experiences onto the projective figure suggests a psychological defense mechanism, whereby internal conflicts or
128 aggressive impulses are displaced away from real attachment objects.
129 The higher standard deviation for “Mr. Nobody” ($SD = 0.43$) may reflect emotional instability or internal tension
130 associated with suppressed negative affects.

131 3.Dependence on Others

132 The indicator “Dependence on Others” (60% toward mother; 30% toward father; 10% toward “Mr. Nobody”) with
133 corresponding means $M = 0.60; 0.30; 0.10$ delineates a clear orientation toward the mother as the primary source of
134 security and support. The father occupies a secondary but significant position, while “Mr. Nobody” is practically not
135 perceived as a resource figure. Standard deviations ($SD = 0.48$ for mother; $SD = 0.45$ for father; $SD = 0.30$ for “Mr.
136 Nobody”) indicate a relatively stable pattern of dependence, albeit with some individual differences.

137

138 **Mean Values on the “Mother–Child” and “Father–Child” Scales Depending on Two Different Family** 139 **Contexts – Two-Parent Family and Single-Parent Family**

140 In the context of a two-parent family, a higher mean is observed on the “Mother–Child” indicator ($M = 4.30$)
141 compared to the “Father–Child” indicator ($M = 3.85$), with a difference of 0.45. This reflects a relatively more
142 intense, closer, or positively experienced emotional relationship with the maternal figure. This result can be
143 interpreted in light of classical attachment theories emphasizing the central role of the mother as the primary object
144 of emotional security and care. The higher value suggests stronger identification, trust, and emotional richness in
145 mother–child interactions. Simultaneously, the lower value for “Father–Child” should not be interpreted as a
146 weakened relationship but rather as an indication of the father’s different functional role – often associated with
147 normativity, autonomy promotion, and socializing influences, which may be experienced with less emotional
148 expressiveness.

149 In the context of a single-parent family, a decrease is observed in the mean value for the “Mother–Child” indicator
150 ($M = 3.85$) compared to the same indicator in the two-parent family ($M = 4.30$), with a difference of -0.45 ,
151 suggesting reduced intensity or a less positive evaluation of the relationship. This result may reflect the increased
152 role burden of the sole parent, potentially affecting the quality of emotional availability. The accumulation of
153 instrumental and affective functions in a single figure may lead to ambivalent experiences in the child – providing
154 both security and dependence, but also tension related to the parent’s limited resources.

155 The absence of data for the “Father–Child” indicator in the single-parent group likely reflects the absence of a
156 paternal figure in the studied sample, structurally altering family dynamics and possibilities for differentiated
157 identification. This circumstance limits comparative analysis but simultaneously underscores the importance of a
158 two-parent system for a balanced distribution of emotional and socializing functions.

159 **Discussion:-**

160 The results obtained from the study using the Bene–Antoni test delineate a clearly structured system of the child’s
161 emotional relationships with significant parental figures. The data indicate that the mother occupies a leading
162 position as the primary object of positive feelings, emotional attachment, and dependency. She is perceived as the
163 main source of security, support, and emotional closeness, which corresponds with classical concepts regarding the
164 primary role of the maternal figure in the formation of attachment.

165 The father also appears as a significant figure in the child’s emotional world, although his role manifests more
166 moderately compared to that of the mother. This difference can be interpreted not as a weakened bond but as a
167 reflection of the father’s distinct functional position within the family system—often associated with socialization,
168 behavioral regulation, and the promotion of autonomy.

169 At the same time, the concentration of negative emotions toward the projective figure “Mr. Nobody” indicates the
 170 presence of defensive psychological mechanisms, whereby internal conflicts, aggressive impulses, or socially
 171 unacceptable experiences are displaced onto objects outside the actual attachment figures. This allows for the
 172 preservation of a positive emotional representation of the parents and the maintenance of relational stability with
 173 them.

174 Comparative analysis between two-parent families and single-parent families shows that the presence of both
 175 parents creates more favorable conditions for the development of more intense and positively experienced mother–
 176 child relationships. In single-parent households, there is a noticeable reduction in the quality of the relationship,
 177 likely related to the increased role-related and emotional burden borne by the sole parent and the limited resources
 178 available for maintaining optimal emotional availability.

179 Overall, the results emphasize the importance of family structure and parental roles in the formation of emotional
 180 relationships during childhood. The presence of a balanced two-parent system contributes to a clearer differentiation
 181 of parental functions and provides conditions for more stable emotional development in the child.
 182

183 **Conclusion:-**

184 The study indicates that the child exhibits a strong emotional attachment to the mother, who fulfills the primary
 185 supportive and protective role, whereas the father participates more moderately, primarily in the processes of
 186 socialization and the promotion of autonomy. Negative emotions directed toward the projective figure “Mr.
 187 Nobody” function as a defense mechanism aimed at preserving a positive image of the parents. The findings
 188 underscore the importance of active involvement by both parents in establishing a stable emotional environment and
 189 fostering secure attachment in the child.
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191 **Tables:-**

192
 193 Table 1: Mean values and standard deviations for the relationship categories with the mother, the father, and Mr.
 194 Nobody.

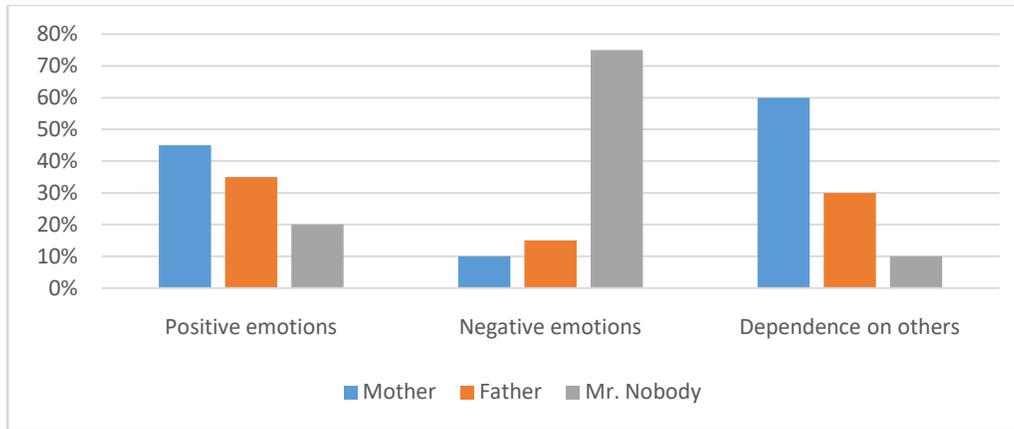
Relationship Category	Mother		Father		Mr. Nobody	
	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation
Positive Attitudes	0.49	0.45	0.35	0.47	0.20	0.40
Negative Attitudes	0.10	0.30	0.15	0.35	0.75	0.43
Degree of Dependency	0.60	0.48	0.30	0.45	0.10	0.30

195
 196 Table 2. Mean scores on the "Mother–Child" and "Father–Child" scales in two-parent and single-parent families.

Family Status	Mean Values	
	Mother–Child	Father-Child
Two-Parent Family	4.30	3.85
Single-Parent Family	3.85	-

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 198 **Figure:**

199 Figure 1. Percentage distribution across relationship categories for the mother, father, and Mr. Nobody.



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