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Secure attachment in early childhood: A systematic review of the literature

Apego seguro en la primera infancia: revisión sistemática de la literatura

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Abstract

This review aims to describe secure attachment in childhood, based on a comprehensive analysis of recent scientific articles. To this end, a systematic literature review was conducted using the SciELO and Scopus databases, applying the PRISMA methodological guidelines to ensure rigor in the search, selection, and evaluation of scientific evidence. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established, allowing for the selection of 20 relevant articles published between 2019 and 2025. The results show that secure attachment in childhood plays a fundamental role in children's holistic development. This type of attachment facilitates the creation of an emotional environment characterized by trust and security, which significantly contributes to strengthening children's self-esteem. Furthermore, it was found that secure attachment promotes children's ability to manage their emotions appropriately, as well as to establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships throughout their lives. The review also highlights the importance of the emotional bond children form with their caregivers or protectors, which serves as the foundation for positive socio-emotional development. In conclusion, secure attachment not only supports emotional and interpersonal well-being during childhood but also lays the groundwork for balanced and adaptive personal growth in later stages.

Keywords: attachment, infant, protector, relationships, security.

Resumen

Esta revisión tiene como objetivo principal describir el apego seguro en la infancia, basándose en un análisis exhaustivo de artículos científicos recientes. Para ello, se llevó a cabo una revisión sistemática de la literatura utilizando las bases de datos Scielo y Scopus, aplicando los lineamientos metodológicos de PRISMA para garantizar la rigurosidad en la búsqueda, selección y evaluación de la evidencia científica. Se establecieron criterios específicos de inclusión y exclusión que permitieron filtrar 20 artículos relevantes, publicados entre los años 2019 y 2025. Los resultados muestran que el apego seguro en la infancia desempeña un papel fundamental en el desarrollo integral de los niños. Este tipo de apego facilita la generación de un entorno emocional caracterizado por la confianza y la seguridad, lo que contribuye significativamente al fortalecimiento de la autoestima infantil. Además, se evidenció que el apego seguro favorece la capacidad de los menores para

gestionar sus emociones de manera adecuada, así como para establecer y mantener relaciones interpersonales saludables a lo largo de su vida. Asimismo, la revisión destaca la importancia del vínculo afectivo que los niños establecen con sus cuidadores o protectores, el cual actúa como base para un desarrollo socioemocional positivo. En conclusión, el apego seguro no solo sostiene el bienestar emocional e interpersonal durante la infancia, sino que también sienta las bases para un crecimiento personal equilibrado y adaptativo en etapas posteriores.

Palabras clave: apego, infante, protector, relaciones, seguridad.

Introduction

The development of personality in children is influenced by various factors, including genetics, character, socialization, and the family environment, in which the family plays a crucial role. Additionally, the quality of the relationship with the caregiver, whether it be the mother, father, or another significant individual, is pivotal in forming emotional bonds and attachment (Romero & Romero, 2022).

To establish secure attachment in children, it is essential to create connections that facilitate optimal development. This requires harmonious interaction with their caregivers, who must demonstrate empathy, be available to meet the children's needs, and avoid any emotional harm or deprivation of affection (Sánchez & Bolívar, 2023).

Attachment is developed and maintained through emotional bonds that children form with others throughout their comprehensive development, seeking protection, affection, and security. Consequently, it is viewed as a process of emotional regulation that significantly influences how children express their emotions, curiosities, and impulses, essential manifestations of secure attachment (Mónaco & Montoya-Castilla, 2021).

Secure attachment is a lasting emotional bond that children develop during early childhood with their protector, caregiver, or parental figure. This attachment initially forms primarily with parents during the first six months of life. At this stage, the bond is not fully developed, but the child begins to internalize the qualities and characteristics of the caregiver, displaying directed signals such as gestures, smiles, and vocalizations (Bennett, Hernández & López, 2021).

Secure attachment is considered the most significant connection in early childhood, as it represents a critical expression of neoformation, where the concepts of person and object are developed, thereby strengthening the child's social and emotional dimensions (Rocha et al., 2019). An additional important factor is the influence of the mother or primary caregiver, who shapes the child's personality at a stage where verbal communication is not yet fully articulated. Given that parents are the primary caregivers, affectionate relationships with them are crucial for the comprehensive development of children (Lecannelier, Monje & Guajardo, 2019).

While parental influence is vital in promoting secure attachment, many contexts reveal emotional voids and the absence of the paternal figure. This attachment signifies a profound and enduring bond that the child establishes with their caregiver, upon whom they depend for physical protection and, most importantly, emotional security during early childhood (Hernández, López & Echevarría, 2019).

Infants develop a secure attachment style when trust and safety prevail with the person providing care and meeting their basic needs. Moreover, they begin to recognize the emotions and affection of their protector, factors that play a decisive role in their future behavior (Barroso, 2019).

It has been demonstrated that infants often adopt behaviors similar to those of their caregivers, who exemplify the attachment figure. Such behaviors include emotional dependency, a sense of safety, and emotional refuge. Conversely, separation from the caregiver can evoke reactions such as stress and anxiety. In response, children strive to restore a sense of security by maintaining physical proximity to their protectors, seeking to preserve effective emotional balance (Santos & Larzabal, 2021; Salinas-Quiroz, Domínguez-Espinosa & Ríos, 2023).

In most cases, secure attachment in infants develops within the family environment, primarily through interactions with the mother, grandparents, and, in some cases, stepparents, who provide trust, readiness, affection, and love (Mantilla, 2023). Infants typically exhibit feelings of satisfaction, well-being, security, and protection from their caregivers. However, negative manifestations may also arise, becoming prevailing memories from childhood, particularly when children have experienced maltreatment or abandonment by their protectors. For this reason, the presence of other family members during early childhood is vital, as they contribute to establishing positive emotional bonds (Bernal & Avello-Sáez, 2023).

Thus, secure attachment in early childhood constitutes a profound emotional bond between the child and their caregivers, grounded in trust, well-being, security, consistency, and the fulfillment of basic needs. This relationship emerges when caregivers adequately understand and interpret the child's emotional needs, providing the necessary security for them to explore their surroundings. Furthermore, caregivers play an essential role in

child development, as children with secure attachment are more predisposed and capable of regulating their emotions in early life, which reduces the onset of negative feelings, stress, and anxiety (Tabachnick et al., 2021).

During early childhood, this attachment enables secure emotional relationships and bonds between children and their caregivers, who meet their primary needs and facilitate healthy behavioral patterns that prevent stressors. These bonds foster emotional regulation throughout life (Tabachnick et al., 2020). Therefore, secure attachment reflects an emotional relationship pattern founded on safety, stability, and trust between the caregiver and the child. To achieve this, caregivers must respond sensitively to the child's needs, providing a solid foundation and emotional protection that fosters secure bonds during childhood (Wu, 2022).

This emotional bond is fundamental, as it not only engenders trust in the relationship between children and caregivers but also ensures the child's immediate emotional well-being. Simultaneously, it nurtures the development of key skills and capabilities essential for their independence and emotional regulation. Consequently, secure attachment is a decisive factor in supporting child autonomy (Chao & Cheng, 2025). This early relationship influences not only immediate well-being but also psychological adjustment throughout life. The fulfillment of emotional needs and the support provided by the caregiver contribute to healthy development (Ribera et al., 2022).

In cases of maltreated children, negative emotional manifestations and traumatic experiences are often observed. In such contexts, secure attachment may serve as a mitigating factor against adverse psychological impacts (Ensink et al., 2021). Therefore, the bonding process must foster the child's trust alongside the caregiver's responsiveness, promoting a healthy social and emotional development that endures throughout life. It is crucial to optimize caregiving and enhance therapeutic benefits to strengthen secure attachment in childhood (Tsappis et al., 2022).

However, secure attachment can be compromised when children face separations, losses, traumas, or other challenging circumstances related to their caregivers or protectors, especially in vulnerable contexts. To prevent or address these difficulties, it is advisable to implement playful activities, such as games, that can distract and help children improve their self-esteem and sense of belonging. Furthermore, these activities facilitate the development of practical strategies that allow parents, educators, and therapists to strengthen secure attachment and promote the formation of healthy bonds (Moore, 2021).

Methodology

This systematic review study was conducted by searching for articles in the Scielo and Scopus databases. Key terms such as "attachment," "infant," and "secure attachment" were employed, yielding a total of 20 relevant results pertaining to secure attachment in infants or children, published between 2019 and 2025.

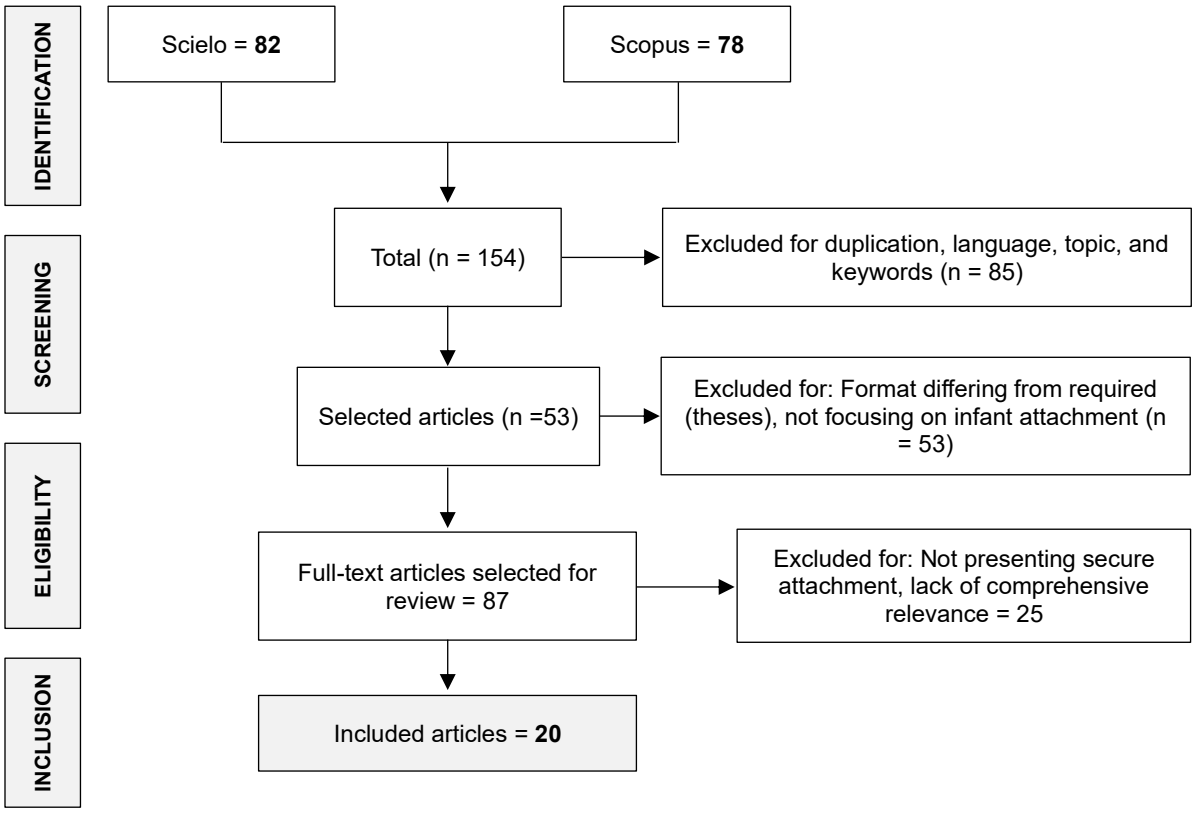
In the Scielo database, the search was performed using the terms "attachment" and "secure attachment in children," resulting in 82 total outcomes. From these, 62 articles were filtered and selected, all published between 2019 and 2025. However, only 10 articles written in Spanish were included for this review.

Conversely, in the Scopus database, the search utilized English terms such as "attachment" in conjunction with "attachment insurance" or "secure attachment in infants." This inquiry yielded 78 English-language results. After analyzing the abstracts according to thematic relevance, 25 articles were selected, of which 10 were ultimately considered.

Inclusion criteria were restricted to articles published in Scielo and Scopus, in both Spanish and English, released between 2019 and 2025, specifically focusing on secure attachment during childhood. Furthermore, exclusion criteria were applied to eliminate irrelevant articles regarding attachment in infants or children, as well as any duplicates found in databases other than the selected ones.

Following the searches in scientific databases, an initial total of 140 articles was obtained, with publication years ranging between 2019 and 2025. After removing duplicates and articles not related to secure attachment, the sample was reduced to 20 articles; this consisted of 10 from Scielo and 10 from Scopus, selected according to the established criteria for this review.

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram



The PRISMA diagram reflects a total of 154 initially reviewed articles. During the identification phase, the Scielo and Scopus databases were consulted, applying exclusion filters for duplication, language, and thematic relevance, resulting in the selection of only 85 articles.

In the subsequent screening phase, articles with differing formats, especially theses, or those that did not focus on secure attachment in infants were excluded, decreasing the sample to 35 articles.

Next, in the eligibility phase, articles that mentioned secure attachment merely as a type of attachment, without direct relevance to the central theme, were discarded.

Finally, in the inclusion phase, 20 articles that met all criteria for analysis and interpretation were consolidated in accordance with the study's objective.

Of the 20 selected articles, 10 come from the Scielo database and 10 from Scopus. The distribution of the articles by country of origin is detailed in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Distribution of articles by country of origin



Results and discussion

This review article emphasizes the importance of protection provided by caregivers, who deliver the essential security, well-being, and affection necessary for the physical, psychological, and emotional development of infants. In this regard, Romero and Romero (2022) noted that this protection also influences personality development, playing a crucial role in the formation of emotional bonds and attachment. Furthermore, Sánchez and Bolívar (2023) indicated that caregivers must strengthen the connections that ensure optimal development, necessitating an attentiveness to the needs of infants.

Similarly, Mónaco and Montoya-Castilla (2021) argued that secure attachment not only provides developmental benefits but also facilitates emotional regulation in early childhood, particularly when children can freely express their moods, curiosities, and impulses. In line with this, Rocha et al. (2019) highlighted that reinforcing the emotional and social dimension of infants is necessary for the consolidation of this attachment.

According to Bennett, Hernández, and López (2021), attachment is initially established with parents or guardians, particularly during the first months of the infant's life. This bond is characterized by its robustness, wherein the child assimilates the unique qualities of their caregivers. Additionally, this bond is fundamental in the child's life, influencing aspects such as the perception of the caregiver and the social and emotional reinforcement within the developing context (Lecannelier, Monje & Guajardo, 2019). However, Hernández, López, and Echevarría (2019) pointed out that attachment does not fully manifest when there is an absence of the paternal figure or emotional voids, both essential elements for child well-being and security.

Secure attachment is present in the affective climate expressed by parents, meeting the child's needs during their childhood (Santos & Larzabal, 2021). This attachment is strengthened when parents establish relationships based on trust, care, and attention, which in turn serve as models for the child's future behaviors (Barroso, 2019). In most cases, the maternal figure or grandparents are those who solidify and nurture secure attachment in infants (Mantilla, 2023).

On the other hand, infants tend to imitate the behaviors of their caregivers, including gestures, characteristics, and emotional dependency. Nevertheless, they may also adopt contradictory behaviors, such as anxiety, stress, and problematic manifestations (Santos & Larzabal, 2021). Moreover, Salinas-Quiroz, Domínguez-Espinosa, and Ríos (2023) mentioned that children often seek physical and emotional proximity to their protectors, who are the first to provide them with security and well-being. Conversely, these caregivers can also be the source of negative experiences, such as maltreatment and abandonment (Bernal & Avello-Sáez, 2023).

An important aspect to highlight is that overprotection by caregivers can limit the development and independence of infants throughout their lives, despite these caregivers playing a vital role in emotional development and affective regulation (Tabachnick et al., 2021).

In today's society, the affective connection between caregivers and children is often inadequately fostered (Tabachnick et al., 2020). Many children experience maltreatment, criticism, or negative gestures that can lead to rejection or negative behaviors (Ensink et al., 2021). For this reason, it is crucial for caregivers to promote love and understanding, particularly during the earlier stages of life (Wu, 2022). Similarly, Tsappis et al. (2022) emphasize the need to cultivate trust and healthy emotions in children to develop secure attachment that ensures their well-being. To avoid trauma and difficulties, caregivers should employ playful strategies that allow children to engage and foster the creation of secure and healthy bonds (Moore, 2021).

Finally, it is essential for caregivers to show affection and acceptance toward infants so that they feel valued, and to include them in family activities to ensure they perceive support and understanding (Chao & Cheng, 2025). Moreover, it is necessary to teach children to be independent and autonomous in their decisions, considering their fears and supporting them in addressing those fears, as this is crucial to their social and emotional development (Ribera et al., 2022).

Conclusions

Secure attachment is established when a solid and consistent emotional bond exists between the infant and their protector or caregiver, who attentively and sensitively addresses the child's basic and emotional needs. This type of attachment fosters in infants a profound sense of security, protection, and love, fundamental elements that facilitate and enhance their physical, cognitive, and emotional development, allowing the child to grow in an environment that supports their overall well-being.

Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen parenting practices in the family environment, promoting attentive and responsive care that prevents the transmission or imitation of negative behavioral patterns. The absence or deficiency in this process can lead to situations adversely affecting the child, such as violence, insecurity, chronic stress, and anxiety, factors that compromise their emotional and social stability.

Additionally, secure attachment during early childhood not only contributes to generating feelings of safety and trust but also enhances the child's self-esteem and ability for emotional self-regulation. This bond becomes a secure and comforting space essential for sustaining their comprehensive growth and development throughout life, positively influencing their future relationships and social adaptation.

Ultimately, to ensure the persistence and consolidation of this secure attachment, it is crucial for caregivers or protectors to offer consistent, affectionate, and sensitive care, adequately responding to the signals and needs of the child. This type of care strengthens a stable and enduring bond during the early life stages, laying the foundation for healthy and balanced development both in childhood and adulthood.

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