

# Attachment Style and Relationship Difficulties in Parents of Children with ADHD

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**Abstract** Previous studies report that parents of children with ADHD often experience difficulties in their couple relationship. The present study investigated the role of adult attachment style in relation to problems with dyadic adjustment and conflict communication. A cross-sectional design was employed, involving 98 parents of children and adolescents with ADHD and 153 parents of offspring without the disorder (age range in 3–19). Participants completed the following: Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire-R, Communications Pattern Questionnaire, Dyadic Adjustment Scale, and Conner’s Parent Rating Scale–48. According to the findings, the two parental groups differed regarding relationship difficulties only when attachment style was controlled for. Moreover, attachment avoidance moderated the impact of having a child with ADHD on dyadic adjustment while attachment anxiety moderated such an impact on conflict communication. Also, parents of children with less severe ADHD symptoms were more likely to experience relationship problems, while having a child with ADHD moderated the effects of gender on the roles taken in demand-withdraw communication. Considering adult attachment style may provide useful insights into how parents of children with ADHD relate to each other and may inform supportive interventions.

**Keywords** Attachment style · Dyadic adjustment · Conflict communication · Demand withdraw · Parents of children with ADHD

## Introduction

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder occurs in about 3–6 % of children and adolescents in the general population making it the most common but also most socially and economically costly behavioural disorder of childhood (Richters et al. 1995). A constellation of problem behaviours characterised by inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity make the suffering child difficult to care for and generate substantial levels of stress in the parents. Despite the intense research interest in recent years, much still remains unclear about the exact causal mechanisms leading to ADHD. According to a recent review of the evidence, no single risk factor has been identified but both genetic and environmental influences seem to contribute interdependently (Thapar et al. 2013).

A major area of parental distress is relationship difficulties in the parental couple. Studies suggest that, compared to parents of children without the disorder, parents of children with ADHD report lower levels of marital satisfaction (Murphy and Barkley 1996) and are more likely to divorce (Wymbs et al. 2008). A central element of relationship distress among those parents seems to be the high levels of conflict that they experience (Barkley et al. 1990). Research suggests that conflict in couple relationships in general is often linked with an individual’s inability to perceive their partner as supportive (Campbell et al. 2005). Such perception appears to contradict the function of the couple relationship as an essential source of emotional support in adults (Weiss 1991). As parents of children with

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