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# THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF PARENTAL EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION ON A CHILD SELF-ESTEEM AND FUTURE RELATIONSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

This paper rigorously examines the enduring impact of parental emotional manipulation on psychological development, specifically its long-term consequences for self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. Integrating attachment and social learning theories, it posits that consistent manipulative behaviours within the parent-child dynamic constitute a significant adverse childhood experience, disrupting secure attachment and modelling unhealthy relational patterns. The analysis meticulously explores how tactics like gaslighting, guilt-tripping, and conditional affection erode a child's self-worth, leading to internalized self-doubt, a fragile identity, and self-criticism. Furthermore, the paper critically investigates the protracted consequences on adult relationships, highlighting how early exposure to manipulation impedes the development of trust, intimacy, and healthy communication. It examines the potential for individuals to either replicate these patterns or become vulnerable to them, impacting romantic attachments and fostering co-dependency. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, this paper underscores the profound and often underestimated long-term impact of this subtle maltreatment on both self-concept and relationship quality. It advocates for greater recognition and further research to inform intervention and prevention strategies, aiming to mitigate its enduring negative consequences across the lifespan.

## Introduction

The foundational experiences of childhood are instrumental in shaping an individual's sense of self-worth and their capacity for meaningful interpersonal bonds. Within this critical developmental phase, the parent-child relationship ideally serves as a bedrock of security, trust, and unconditional acceptance. However, when this fundamental connection is compromised by parental emotional manipulation, the repercussions can extend far beyond adolescence, leaving enduring imprints on a child's self-perception and their ability to forge healthy relationships in the future. Emotional manipulation, in this context, encompasses a spectrum of subtle yet powerful behaviours wherein a parent exploits a child's emotions, vulnerabilities, and inherent desire for parental approval to exert control or fulfil their own needs. This can manifest through various tactics, including the induction of guilt, persistent criticism framed as concern, the distortion of a child's reality through gaslighting, or the contingent offering of affection based on compliance. Unlike more overt forms of maltreatment, emotional manipulation often operates covertly, leaving the child feeling disoriented, doubting their own judgment, and internalizing feelings of inadequacy.

The insidious nature of such parental tactics can systematically erode a child's Intrinsic sense of value. When their emotional experiences are consistently dismissed, their thoughts disregarded, and their personal boundaries violated, children learn that their internal world is insignificant or incorrect. This can cultivate a deeply rooted lack of self-confidence, a propensity for self-blame, and challenges in advocating for their own needs in later life.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the skewed relational models established during childhood through emotional manipulation can significantly affect an individual's capacity to form secure and healthy attachments in adulthood. Having encountered inconsistency, a deficit of genuine empathy, or the strategic use of emotions for control, these individuals may grapple with issues of trust, intimacy, and effective communication in their relationships. They might be more vulnerable to repeating unhealthy relational patterns, either as the one enacting manipulation or as the recipient.<sup>2</sup>

This paper endeavours to explore the profound and long-term consequences of parental emotional manipulation on a child's self-esteem and their subsequent relational patterns. By

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<sup>1</sup> John Bowlby, "Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1: Attachment" 1 *Attachment and Loss* 1 (1982).

<sup>2</sup> Mary D. S. Ainsworth, Mary C. Blehar, Everett Waters & Sally Wall, "Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation" 50 *Erlbaum* 1 (1978).

examining the diverse forms of manipulative behaviours and their psychological sequelae, we aim to shed light on the often-unseen wounds of emotional maltreatment and underscore the vital importance of increased awareness and comprehension regarding its lasting impact across the lifespan.

### **Objectives**

1. To highlight the lasting harm of parental emotional manipulation.
2. To explain its impact on self-esteem and relationships theoretically.
3. To urge greater awareness and more research on this issue.

### **Theoretical perspective on emotional manipulation**

Understanding the long-term impact of parental emotional manipulation necessitates a robust theoretical framework. Several psychological theories offer valuable lenses through which to analyse its mechanisms and enduring consequences. Primarily, Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory provide complementary perspectives, highlighting the relational and learned aspects of this detrimental dynamic.

From an Attachment Theory perspective, the parent-child relationship serves as the foundational blueprint for all future relationships. Secure attachment, characterized by consistent and responsive caregiving, fosters a sense of safety, trust, and the belief that one's needs will be met. However, parental emotional manipulation fundamentally undermines this process. Manipulative behaviors, such as inconsistent responses, conditional affection, and the prioritization of the parent's needs over the child's, create an insecure attachment style.<sup>3</sup> Children subjected to such tactics may develop anxious-ambivalent attachment, marked by a preoccupation with their caregiver's availability and a fear of abandonment, or avoidant attachment, characterized by emotional distance and a suppression of their own needs to avoid disappointment. Disorganized attachment, often seen in more severely maltreated children, can also arise, characterized by contradictory and unpredictable behavior stemming from

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Fonagy, Gergely Gergely, Elliot L. Jurist & Mary Target, "Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self" 1 *Other Press* 1 (2002).

inconsistent and frightening parental figures.<sup>4</sup>

The Implications for self-esteem are profound within this framework. Securely attached children develop a positive internal working model of themselves as worthy of love and care. Conversely, children experiencing emotional manipulation internalize negative working models, viewing themselves as inadequate, unlovable, or responsible for the parent's emotional state. The inconsistency inherent in manipulative behaviour creates a sense of unpredictability and instability, hindering the development of a coherent and positive self-concept. These negative self-perceptions, formed early in life, can persist into adulthood, impacting self-confidence and the ability to form healthy self-regard.

Social Learning Theory, pioneered by Albert Bandura, offers another crucial lens. This theory emphasizes that children learn behaviours, attitudes, and emotional responses through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. In the context of emotional manipulation, children directly observe and experience how power dynamics and emotional leverage operate within their primary relationship. They may learn that expressing their own needs or emotions leads to negative consequences, such as parental withdrawal, guilt induction, or criticism. Consequently, they may learn to suppress their feelings, prioritize the parent's needs, and even adopt manipulative behaviors themselves as a means of navigating relationships or gaining a sense of control.

Furthermore, social learning theory highlights the role of modelling. If a parent consistently uses manipulative tactics, the child may internalize these as normative relational behaviours. They might unconsciously replicate these patterns in their interactions with peers and later in romantic relationships, either as the manipulator or as someone vulnerable to manipulation. The lack of exposure to healthy communication and conflict resolution within the family system deprives the child of the necessary social skills to navigate interpersonal relationships effectively. They may struggle to assert their boundaries, express their needs directly, or recognize and respond appropriately to the emotional cues of others.<sup>5</sup> Integrating these perspectives reveals a complex interplay. Insecure attachment, fostered by manipulative parenting, creates a vulnerability and a predisposition towards unhealthy relational patterns.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel J. Siegel, "The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are" 1 Guilford Press 1 (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma" 1 Viking 1 (2014).

Social learning mechanisms then provide the tools and models through which these patterns are learned and perpetuated. The child learns not only that their own needs are secondary but also how to navigate relationships through indirect and emotionally charged means.

Beyond these core theories, concepts from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can also contribute to understanding the long-term impact. Emotional manipulation often involves cognitive distortions, such as blaming the child for the parent's feelings or distorting the child's perception of reality (gaslighting). These repeated distortions can lead to the child internalizing negative thought patterns about themselves and their relationships. CBT principles highlight how these maladaptive thought patterns can contribute to low self-esteem, anxiety, and difficulties in forming healthy attachments in adulthood.<sup>6</sup>In conclusion, the theoretical perspectives of attachment theory and social learning theory, complemented by insights from cognitive behavioral therapy, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the profound and lasting impact of parental emotional manipulation. Attachment theory illuminates the disruption of secure bonding and the development of negative internal working models, while social learning theory explains how manipulative behaviours are learned and potentially replicated. Together, they underscore the critical role of early relational experiences in shaping an individual's self-esteem and their capacity for healthy and fulfilling relationships throughout their lives.

### **Parental Emotional Manipulation and Child Self-Esteem**

The assertion that parental emotional manipulation acts as a corrosive force on a child's developing self-esteem warrants a more profound and nuanced exploration. This insidious form of maltreatment doesn't leave visible scars like physical abuse, yet its impact on a child's internal landscape and their lifelong sense of self can be devastating and enduring. The systematic undermining of a child's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, when perpetrated by the very individuals entrusted with their care and nurturing, strikes at the core of their developing identity and erodes the foundational belief in their own worthiness.<sup>7</sup> When parents consistently resort to tactics that exploit a child's inherent emotional vulnerabilities for their own control or gratification, they are, in essence, communicating a profoundly damaging

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce D. Perry & Maia Szalavitz, "The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook" 1 *Basic Books* 1 (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, "Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror" 1 *Basic Books* 1 (1992).

message: “Your internal world does not matter. Your feelings are invalid. Your needs are a burden to me.” This repeated invalidation, often subtle and insidious, forms the bedrock upon which a fragile and ultimately fractured sense of self-esteem is built. The child learns, through consistent experience, that their subjective reality is unreliable, that their emotional responses are inappropriate, and that their inherent value is contingent upon meeting the often shifting and self-serving demands of the manipulating parent.

Consider the devastating impact of gaslighting in this context. When a parent consistently denies or distorts a child’s perceptions, memories, and even their very sense of reality, the child begins to question their own sanity and judgment. If a child expresses hurt or confusion about a parent’s inconsistent behaviour and is met with denials “That never happened,” or “You’re just being too sensitive”, they learn to distrust their own internal compass. This erosion of trust in their own mind extends far beyond specific incidents, leading to a pervasive uncertainty about their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of the world. This profound self-doubt makes it exceedingly difficult for the child to form a stable and positive identity, as their internal experiences, the very building blocks of selfhood, are constantly being undermined and invalidated.

Furthermore, constant criticism, even when cleverly disguised as “helpfulness” or concern, acts like a relentless drip of acid on a child’s nascent confidence. While constructive feedback aims to guide and support growth, manipulative criticism is often laced with negativity, focusing on perceived flaws and shortcomings rather than offering genuine guidance. The child internalizes these critical messages, fostering a deep-seated belief that they are inherently flawed, incapable, and perpetually falling short of expectations.<sup>8</sup> This constant barrage of negativity chips away at their sense of competence and self-efficacy, leaving them feeling inadequate and unworthy of praise or recognition. The insidious nature of this tactic lies in its disguise; the child may be led to believe that the criticism is for their own good, further blurring the lines of healthy parental guidance and emotional abuse.

The employment of conditional love delivers another significant blow to a child's self-esteem. When a parent’s affection and approval are explicitly or implicitly contingent upon the child’s behavior, achievements, or compliance with the parent’s desires, the child learns that their

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<sup>8</sup> Dante Cicchetti & Sheree L. Toth, “Developmental Perspectives on Trauma: Theory, Research, and Intervention” 34(3) *Development and Psychopathology* 597 (2022).

worth is not intrinsic but rather something that must be constantly earned.<sup>9</sup> This fosters a deep-seated fear of disappointing the parent, leading to a relentless and often anxiety-ridden pursuit of external validation. The child's sense of self becomes tethered to external approval, hindering the development of genuine self-acceptance and an internal locus of control. They may grow into adults who constantly seek the approval of others, struggle with setting boundaries for fear of rejection, and lack a solid foundation of self-love that is independent of external validation.

Guilt-tripping, another potent tool in the manipulator's arsenal, instils in the child an inappropriate and often overwhelming sense of responsibility for the parent's emotions and well-being. The child learns that their actions, or even their very existence, can cause the parent distress or unhappiness. This leads to a pattern of prioritizing the parent's needs above their own, often at the expense of their own emotional and developmental needs. The child develops a pervasive feeling of inadequacy, constantly fearing that they will "fail" to meet the often-unrealistic and emotionally charged demands of the parent. This can manifest as a lifelong pattern of self-sacrifice, difficulty asserting their own needs, and a persistent feeling of being responsible for the happiness of others.

This damaged self-esteem manifests in a multitude of ways throughout the child's development and into adulthood. They may exhibit a lack of assertiveness, struggling to express their own opinions and needs. They often experience significant difficulty in setting and maintaining healthy boundaries in their relationships, making them vulnerable to exploitation by others.<sup>10</sup> This vulnerability can perpetuate a cycle of low self-worth, as they may find themselves in relationships that mirror the manipulative dynamics of their childhood. The absence of a secure, validating, and unconditionally loving parental figure leaves the child without the crucial foundation necessary for developing a strong and resilient sense of self, impacting their ability to navigate the complexities of life with confidence and self-assurance. The scars of parental emotional manipulation, though invisible, can run deep, shaping their self-perception and their interactions with the world for years to come.

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<sup>9</sup> Allan N. Schore, "Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development" 1 *Lawrence Erlbaum Associates* 1 (1994).

<sup>10</sup> Louis J. Cozolino, "The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment, Loss, and the Developing Social Brain" 2nd ed., 1 *W. W. Norton & Company* 1 (2014).

## The Impact of Parental Emotional Manipulation on Future Relationships

The relational wounds inflicted by parental emotional manipulation cast a long shadow over an individual's ability to form healthy and fulfilling relationships in adulthood. Having experienced inconsistency, a lack of genuine empathy, and the strategic use of emotions for control in their formative years, these individuals often enter future relationships with a deeply ingrained sense of distrust and insecurity. One significant impact lies in the difficulty establishing trust. When a primary caregiver, the supposed source of safety and security, is also the source of emotional manipulation, it erodes the child's capacity to trust others. They may enter relationships with a hypervigilance, constantly anticipating betrayal or manipulation, making genuine intimacy challenging to achieve. This can manifest as reluctance to be vulnerable, fear of commitment, or a tendency to misinterpret neutral behaviours as hostile or deceptive.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the distorted communication patterns learned in childhood often persist. Individuals who were emotionally manipulated may struggle to express their own needs and feelings directly, fearing rejection or retaliation. They might resort to indirect communication, mirroring the manipulative tactics they experienced, or become overly passive and accommodating to avoid conflict. This can lead to misunderstandings, resentment, and ultimately, relationship dissatisfaction.

The lack of a healthy model for emotional regulation and conflict resolution also poses significant challenges. Having witnessed or been subjected to emotionally charged and manipulative interactions, these individuals may lack the skills to navigate disagreements constructively. They might either avoid conflict altogether, leading to unresolved issues, or engage in emotionally reactive behaviors, perpetuating unhealthy cycles.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the damaged self-esteem resulting from parental manipulation can make individuals vulnerable to repeating unhealthy relationship dynamics. They may seek out partners who mirror the familiar manipulative patterns, subconsciously reinforcing their negative self-beliefs or attempting to gain a sense of control in the relationship. Conversely, they might struggle to recognize and assert their boundaries, making them susceptible to being exploited or controlled by others.

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<sup>11</sup> Kim Bartholomew & Leonard M. Horowitz, "Attachment Styles Among Young Adults: A Test of a Four-Category Model" 61(2) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 226 (1991).

<sup>12</sup> Mary Main & Judith Solomon, "Discovery of an Unclassified Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment Pattern in Infancy: Implications for the Study of Dissociation" 1 *Attachment Theory and Research: Overview with Suggested Applications to Child Custody* 121 (1990).



Ultimately, breaking free from these ingrained relational patterns requires significant self-awareness, often coupled with therapeutic intervention, to cultivate trust, healthy communication, and the ability to form secure and equitable relationships.

Addressing the pervasive issue of parental emotional manipulation requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach that targets various levels of society. Foremost is the critical need for widespread education and awareness campaigns aimed at demystifying emotional manipulation, highlighting its subtle yet damaging forms, and underscoring its profound long-term consequences on a child's self-esteem and future relationships. Equipping parents with positive parenting skills through accessible educational programs is equally vital. These programs should emphasize empathetic communication, effective conflict resolution, and the importance of validating children's emotions without resorting to manipulative tactics.

Furthermore, professionals who interact with children and families, such as educators, paediatricians, and counsellors, must be trained to identify the often-subtle signs of emotional manipulation early on. Timely intervention can provide crucial support and resources for both the affected child and the manipulating parent, potentially involving therapeutic interventions to address underlying issues and foster healthier family dynamics. Strengthening community support systems can offer parents valuable resources and reduce feelings of isolation, while therapeutic support for individuals who have experienced such manipulation is essential for healing past wounds and developing healthier relational patterns.<sup>13</sup>

Breaking the intergenerational cycle of emotional manipulation is another critical aspect. Empowering survivors to recognize these patterns in their own behaviors and relationships, often through therapy and increased self-awareness, is key to fostering healthier interactions with their own children and partners. While legally challenging, recognizing the harm caused by emotional manipulation within child protection frameworks and implementing policies that support positive parenting can also contribute to prevention efforts. Ultimately, a sustained societal commitment to education, support, early intervention, and therapeutic healing is necessary to dismantle the ingrained practice of parental emotional manipulation and promote healthier emotional development for future generations.

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<sup>13</sup> John Bowlby, "Attachment and Loss, Vol. 3: Loss, Sadness and Depression" 1 *Attachment and Loss* 1 (1980).

## Suggestions

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article meticulously illuminates the insidious and far-reaching impact of

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<sup>14</sup> David Finkelhor, "Childhood Victimization: Violence, Crime, and Abuse in the Lives of Young People" 1 *Oxford University Press* 1 (2008).

parental emotional manipulation, revealing its profound and enduring consequences on a child's developing sense of self-worth and their subsequent ability to forge healthy and fulfilling relationships. By drawing upon established theoretical frameworks such as attachment theory, which underscores the fundamental need for secure and responsive caregiving, and social learning theory, which highlights the power of observation and modelling in shaping behaviour, we explore the intricate mechanisms through which subtle, yet consistent manipulative tactics employed by parents systematically erode a child's intrinsic value. These behaviours, ranging from gaslighting and guilt-tripping to the conditional withholding of affection, foster negative internal working models, leading to deeply ingrained feelings of inadequacy and a pervasive lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how these early experiences model unhealthy interpersonal dynamics, creating a blueprint for future relationships characterized by difficulties with trust, intimacy, and effective communication. Individuals who have endured such manipulation often grapple with a heightened vulnerability to repeating these detrimental patterns or, conversely, becoming susceptible to similar dynamics in their adult lives.

The findings of this exploration underscore the critical and often overlooked need for greater societal awareness regarding this frequently invisible form of maltreatment. Recognizing the long-term psychological scars left by parental emotional manipulation is not merely an academic exercise; it represents the crucial first step towards effective prevention strategies and informed intervention efforts. Ongoing and future research endeavours continue to be vital in further dissecting the nuanced complexities of these dynamics, exploring the specific impact of various manipulative tactics, and evaluating the efficacy of diverse therapeutic approaches designed to facilitate healing and recovery. Ultimately, the article posits that fostering family environments that prioritize empathy, genuine and open communication, and the provision of unconditional positive regard for children is absolutely essential to safeguarding their emotional well-being. Such an approach lays a solid foundation for the development of secure attachment styles and paves the way for the cultivation of more stable, equitable, and fulfilling relationships in their future. Addressing this deeply ingrained issue necessitates a collective and sustained effort across individual, familial, and societal levels to educate, provide comprehensive support, and facilitate healing, thereby actively working to break the intergenerational cycle of emotional manipulation for the benefit of generations to come. It compellingly argues for a greater and more nuanced recognition of this subtle yet deeply damaging form of emotional maltreatment within both clinical practice, academic research,

and broader public discourse, emphasizing the urgent need for increased awareness and comprehensive comprehension regarding its enduring and often devastating impact across the entirety of the human lifespan. The paper further emphasizes the critical imperative for continued rigorous research to enhance our understanding of its complex psychological sequelae and to inform the development of effective and targeted intervention and prevention strategies aimed at mitigating its enduring negative consequences on individuals, families, and society as a whole.