

# Mothering styles predict nature of adult relationships

January 27 2011, By George Lowery

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Anxious about the stability of your relationship with your romantic partner? Uncomfortable relying on a friend?

It could be because of how your mother treated you as a toddler, reports a new Cornell study that finds that such treatment can predict your experiences in these adult relationships.

That's the finding of Vivian Zayas '94, assistant professor of psychology, whose study is published online by *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

"It was assumed that differences in adult attachment -- how people experience their relationships in adulthood, especially with [romantic partners](#) -- was rooted in their experience with their primary [caregiver](#) early on in life, typically one's mother," Zayas said.

Yet no long-term longitudinal work had looked at whether early life maternal experiences were in fact related to attachment behaviors with romantic partners and friends in adulthood.

Zayas studied 36 young adults, who were all about 22 years old and had been studied as 18-month-olds with their mothers; the [toddlers](#) and their mothers had been closely observed for [facial expressions](#), displays of affection, and other measures during free play. Zayas explored their relationships in adulthood two decades later.

Young adults who as toddlers had received sensitive, non-controlling maternal [caregiving](#) were less avoidant about their attachments to their partners and friends (e.g., were able to share their feelings). Avoidance to partners in adulthood was assessed by asking the young adults to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with such statements as "I am very comfortable being close to my boyfriend/girlfriend."

These young adults were also less anxious about their attachment with partners. They were less likely to endorse a statement like, "I worry that my boyfriend/girlfriend doesn't care about me," which reflects anxiety. "If you're low on avoidance and [anxiety](#), you're securely attached. If you're high on one or the other or both, then you are insecurely attached in the relationship. We see long-term links between moms' behavior at 18 months and young adults' experiences with their romantic partners and friends," Zayas said.

These findings are consistent with experimental work done in animals that were either assigned to poor- or high-quality maternal care. However, the study's data are correlational, and other important variables may have contributed to the results, said Zayas, a faculty fellow in the Institute for the Social Sciences' Judgment, Decision Making and Social Behavior theme project. Because researchers can't assign children to good and poor environments, "We're trading off experimental control to look at something that we couldn't manipulate for ethical reasons," Zayas said.

"We're assessing naturally occurring differences in the quality of maternal caregiving experienced at 18 months and seeing how they relate to naturally occurring differences in attachment style in adulthood," Zayas said.

A second finding: "There was essentially no significant relationship

between the type of caregiving they experienced at 18 months and their attachment to their mothers in [adulthood](#)," Zayas said.

As children grow, their attachment shifts from parents to peers. But parents continue to "provide you with a sense of security that very few people can replace," Zayas said.

But the way you were treated at 18 months hardly predetermines your fate. "I don't think you're marked for life," Zayas said. "The research shows that early life experiences don't set things in stone. They are definitely malleable. Change can happen."

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Provided by Cornell University

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