

Researcher finds link between parenting styles, workplace behaviors

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If you're having problems at work, there's a chance that your parents might share some of the blame, claimed Dr. Peter Harms, a University of Alabama researcher.

"It seems cliché, but, once again, we end up blaming mom for everything in life," said Harms while laughing. "It really is about both parents, but because mothers are typically the primary caregivers of the children, they usually have more influence on their children."

Harms, an assistant professor in management at UA's Culverhouse College of Commerce, studied manager-employee relationships in the workplace and found a link between parenting styles and workplace behaviors. His new research is published in the journal *Human Relations*.

Harms and his colleagues studied how so-called attachment styles impact how employees react to their supervisors. Their research was based on the work of John Bowlby, an early psychoanalyst, who argued that the way parents treat their offspring could have long-term implications for how their children approach relationships. In particular, the work focused on how parents acted when their infants cried out for help.

"You'll see this in almost any parenting book you buy," said Harms. "Should you let the baby cry, or should you rush to comfort them?"

Babies learn over time that when they feel abandoned or threatened they can either count on their parent to come to their rescue right away or they need to escalate to high levels of distress in order to get attention. Or, on the flip side, if babies learn that parents are simply not a reliable source of comfort, they stop making overt appeals for help.

Individuals with reliable parents view others as potential sources of support. Those individuals with unreliable parents tend not to see parents as sources of support. These people are often categorized as having anxious or avoidant attachment depending on the style they adopted to cope with distress.

"Anxiously attached people genuinely want to be loved, but they are nervous that the important people in their lives won't return their affection," explained Harms. "So, they overreact anytime they think their relationships are threatened. They use guilt and extreme emotional displays so that others will stay near and reassure them. They get really upset and can't turn it off. On the other hand, avoidant people feel, 'I

don't want to love you, and you don't need to love me. So just leave me alone.' You won't find these people weeping over broken relationships."

Harms and his colleagues speculated that individuals may transfer this pattern of thinking into the workplace and, in particular, that it may influence one's relationship with one's boss.

"Your boss is sort of like your parent," said Harms. "They're the ones who can take care of you, they're supposed to train you and support you. This is especially true for individuals new to the workforce."

Their research also finds that the way bosses treated their subordinates impacted some, but not all, employees.

"Essentially, we figured that bosses would matter less to individuals with secure or avoidant attachment styles," said Harms. "Secure individuals have a long history of caring relationships, so they have other people who they can fall back on. And avoidant individuals just simply don't care. It was the anxiously attached individuals we were most interested in."

Their findings showed that when anxious followers were paired with supportive leaders, they were perfectly fine. But when they were paired with distant, unsupportive leaders, the anxiously attached employees reported higher levels of stress and lower levels of performance.

"They felt threatened," said Harms. "Their deep-seated anxieties leak out, and it starts to preoccupy them in an unhealthy way."

In general, avoidant individuals reported lower levels of stress but also less willingness to help co-workers.

"Good boss, bad boss. Whatever. They just don't care. They just want to

do their job and go home," said Harms.

So, would the working world be a better place if [parents](#) just hugged their kids more?

"Probably," said Harms, "but we can make a difference even if [people](#) come into the workplace with insecurities. Our research shows that a mother or father figure later in life can provide that needed love and support, even in the context of the workplace.

"Ultimately, though, the relationship between a manager and their subordinates has to be like a parent-child relationship in another way," said Harms. "You can provide attention and support early, but the sign of a mature relationship is that you trust one another to the point where managers can trust their subordinates to let them be autonomous, and subordinates can act without seeking permission. In other words, you graduate and move out of the house."

More information: P. D. Harms et al. How leader and follower attachment styles are mediated by trust, *Human Relations* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0018726716628968](#)

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