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The Roles of Early Life Stress and Peer Relationships in Adolescents' Relationship-Specific Attachments

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Abstract

Early life stress (ELS) may influence attachment processes in adolescence. However, the developmental mechanisms underlying this association remain unclear. This longitudinal study of 866 families examined how ELS was associated with adolescents' relationship-specific attachment towards mother, father, best friend, and romantic partner. Middle childhood peer exclusion was tested as both a mediating and a moderating mechanism. Parents reported ELS during pregnancy and infancy, and peer exclusion in middle childhood; Children (17–19 years, 50% boys) reported their attachment in adolescence. Results indicated that peer exclusion mediated the association between ELS and attachment insecurity toward best friend. However, no moderation effects of peer exclusion or direct effects of ELS were found. These findings suggest that ELS may influence attachment in adolescence through social developmental cascades involving later interpersonal experiences, rather than through persistent direct influences of early stress.

Keywords: Early Life Stress, Peer Exclusion, Relationship-Specific Attachment, Adolescence