

The Relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Adolescent People-Pleasing

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Abstract: From the perspective of developmental psychology, this paper explores the intrinsic link between childhood emotional neglect and adolescent people-pleasing personality. It first posits that childhood emotional development is foundational to individual mental health, and that emotional neglect leads to deficits in security and low self-worth. Subsequently, it analyzes the etiology of people-pleasing personality, identifying cognitive attribution bias and blurred interpersonal boundaries as core contributing factors. Finally, it elaborates on the psychological transformation mechanism from “emotional neglect” to “people-pleasing behavior,” and proposes a tiered school-based psychological intervention framework—spanning micro (individual counseling), meso (group guidance), and macro (campus culture cultivation)—tailored to contemporary primary and secondary education. Findings suggest that scientific psychological intervention and emotionally responsive schooling can effectively help adolescents break free from people-pleasing patterns and develop an authentic, healthy sense of self.

Keywords: childhood; emotional neglect; people-pleasing personality; developmental psychology

1. Introduction

A distinct group of students is often observed in schools: they are well-behaved, never cause trouble, and constantly monitor others' emotions for fear of disappointing anyone. Even when wronged, they suppress their distress. “People-pleasing personality” is a construct widely discussed in developmental psychology. A growing body of research and educational practice indicates that this trait often originates from childhood emotional neglect^[1]. When children lack adequate emotional responsiveness during development, they internalize the belief that “I am unlovable.” To secure minimal attention and validation, they suppress their authentic selves to accommodate others. This paper examines the relationship between these constructs and proposes actionable school-based psychological intervention strategies aligned with adolescent mental health needs.

2. Research Background

Extensive clinical and educational evidence suggests that people-pleasing personality is not innate; its roots frequently trace back to early childhood—particularly experiences of emotional neglect. When caregivers chronically dismiss children's emotional needs, children suppress genuine emotions to maintain attachment bonds, developing other-oriented behavioral patterns. While such adaptive strategies may serve survival functions in childhood, they often manifest as serious psychosocial difficulties in adolescence, including chronic anxiety, depression, identity confusion, and interpersonal dysfunction^[1].

Adolescence is a critical period for identity formation. As the primary socialization setting beyond the family, schools bear dual responsibilities: psychological repair and education. Therefore, elucidating the causal relationship between childhood emotional neglect and people-pleasing personality, and constructing a scientific, systematic school intervention system, holds both theoretical significance and urgent practical value.

3. The Significance of Childhood Emotional Development

Traditional educational paradigms often overvalue cognitive ability and academic achievement.

However, developmental psychology research indicates that emotional development during childhood (ages 3–12) plays a more foundational role in personality construction than intellectual growth. Emotion underpins all psychological activity; a healthy emotional foundation fosters psychological resilience, enabling children to recover from adversity. Conversely, children with impaired emotional development—even those with high IQ—often struggle with emotion regulation and social adaptation, hindering their capacity to navigate complex life challenges^[2].

Childhood is a pivotal stage of emotional development. A child with a healthy emotional foundation develops integrated personality and robust psychological well-being. We must treat childhood emotional development with gravity because **emotional validation is the starting point of self-worth formation**. “Belongingness and love” constitute the second tier of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—a fundamental human requirement. When children express joy, sadness, or fear and receive responsive, attuned feedback (e.g., “You seem very sad—I’m here”), they internalize the core belief: “*My feelings matter.*” In contrast, parental dismissal or invalidation (e.g., “There’s nothing to cry about,” “Don’t bother me”) leads children to internalize a maladaptive belief: “*My true self is unacceptable.*” Emotional “malnutrition” predisposes individuals to low self-esteem and anxiety in adulthood.

Positive responsive mechanisms: Attuned emotional resonance from caregivers cultivates the foundational belief in one’s own worth—the bedrock of healthy self-esteem.

Consequences of neglect: Chronic dismissal, invalidation, or punishment of emotional expression severs the development of secure attachment. Children become hypervigilant, uncertain when love might be withdrawn. Many oscillate between extreme self-focus and self-negation. Those who adopt excessive accommodation—rather than selfish withdrawal—fall into the people-pleasing pattern. They are not expressing genuine care but engaging in *love-for-service exchange*.

John Bowlby’s attachment theory further clarifies the damage of emotional neglect. Parents should serve as a “secure base” for exploration. When children trust they can return to safety and support after setbacks, they confidently explore the external world, developing social competence and autonomy. Childhood emotional neglect dismantles this secure base^[3]. Children fail to form secure attachments and remain in constant fear of relational rupture. To prevent abandonment, they prematurely assume “little adult” roles, using excessive giving to maintain connections—the early prototype of people-pleasing personality.

Thus, the childhood emotional environment is akin to soil: fertile ground nurtures thriving growth, while barren conditions yield distorted development. Understanding the primacy of childhood emotional development reveals that many adolescent psychological issues stem from early emotional deprivation. Like the body, the psyche requires emotional nourishment. Chronic emotional neglect results in “emotional malnutrition”—an invisible trauma that does not heal spontaneously. It erupts in adolescence as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, perfectionism, and—critically—people-pleasing personality.

4. Etiology of People-Pleasing Personality

People-pleasing personality is not innate but an acquired defensive adaptation shaped by long-term interpersonal dynamics. Beyond childhood emotional neglect—its core precipitant—cognitive attribution biases and severe low self-esteem drive its development. Many adolescents with this trait exhibit marked cognitive distortions, habitually attributing others’ emotional reactions to themselves. For example, if parents are irritable, the child concludes, “*I must have done something wrong.*” This internal attribution bias keeps them in perpetual “defensive readiness.” To avoid error and conflict, they suppress personal needs and unconditionally comply with others’ demands^[3]. At their core lies a persistent, fragile narrative: “*Only if I am useful will others stay.*”

In emotionally neglectful environments, love is perceived as a scarce resource. Children subconsciously adopt the logic: “*I am unlovable as I am; I must perform to deserve love.*” To access this conditional affection, they suppress authentic needs and develop a hypersensitive “radar system” dedicated to detecting and prioritizing others’ emotions and desires.

These adolescents also lack clear interpersonal boundaries. Healthy functioning requires differentiation between self and other. People-pleasers struggle to distinguish their own responsibilities, needs, and emotions from those of others. They treat others’ demands as their own obligations. For instance, they dare not refuse a classmate’s request to complete homework for them—even when exhausted—fearing relational rupture. Such limitless concession reflects an absence of independent self-worth.

Cognitive distortions are pervasive, characterized by extreme *internal attribution*: negative external events are excessively blamed on the self (“My parents argued because I wasn’t good enough”; “My friend is upset because I failed”). This fuels *defensive compliance*—a state of perpetual vigilance against perceived failure and abandonment^[4]. All personal preferences that might trigger conflict are suppressed, crystallizing into the irrational schema: “*Any mistake is my fault.*”

Socialization reinforces this “interpersonal transaction” logic. Emotionally neglected children internalize that “love is conditional.” They hear: “I’ll be happy only if you get first place.” “Dad will take you out only if you behave.” Over time, they equate love with barter: warmth must be purchased through sacrifice. People-pleasers maintain status through concession—offering gifts, services, or even tolerating bullying to sustain pseudo-friendships. Traditional educational settings further entrench this pattern by preferentially rewarding “compliant,” “well-behaved” students. Positive reinforcement confirms the false belief that masking authenticity and suppressing needs earns approval, cementing the maladaptive cycle. Without intervention, this pattern persists into adulthood, culminating in severe psychological depletion.

5. The Neglect-to-Pleasing Mechanism and Intervention Pathways

What psychological transformation occurs between “childhood emotional neglect” and “adolescent people-pleasing personality”? How can school-based psychological education intervene?

5.1. Psychological Transformation Mechanism: From Neglect to People-Pleasing

This process is conceptualized in psychology as the formation of a “**false self.**” When adolescents repeatedly encounter cold, unresponsive walls upon expressing genuine feelings and needs, profound despair ensues. To reestablish connection with caregivers, they disconnect from their authentic emotional experience and construct a *false self*—one that is perpetually compliant, accommodating, and other-focused^[5].

Beneath this facade lies an individual desperate for love yet convinced of their own unworthiness. Every act of pleasing is a muted cry: “*See me. Please don’t leave.*” Donald Winnicott’s concept of the *false self* precisely describes this mechanism.

- **Suffocation of the true self:** When children’s authentic feelings, needs, and impulses consistently meet coldness or punishment (i.e., emotional neglect), they experience acute despair. To protect the true self from annihilation, they sever ties with their inner experience.
- **Emergence of the false self:** A “pseudo-self” develops—excessively compliant, considerate, and externally oriented. It functions as thick armor shielding the fragile, terrified true self beneath.
- **The cost of adaptation:** On the surface, pleasing behaviors appear altruistic or deferential. At depth, each act is a plea: “*Notice me,*” “*Don’t abandon me,*” “*I am so useful—please keep me.*” While temporarily alleviating abandonment fears, this mechanism exacts the price of psychological vitality. Adolescents inhabiting the false self cannot access genuine joy or pain, descending into existential emptiness^[6].

5.2. Group Psychological Guidance

Adolescents with people-pleasing tendencies often feel uniquely flawed. Group counseling effectively reduces isolation and stigma. School psychologists can recruit students sharing this trait to form 8–10 member “self-esteem rebuilding” groups. Within a safe group climate, members use role-playing and sandplay therapy to reenact real-life pleasing scenarios^[7]. For example, during *refusal skills training*, participants practice stating boundaries gently but firmly. Experiencing that relationships endure despite saying “no” generates powerful cognitive dissonance. Peer support accelerates disengagement from pleasing patterns.

For students with severe symptomatology, individual counseling is provided:

- **Establishing a “safe container”:** The counselor’s primary task is building an absolutely safe, nonjudgmental therapeutic alliance—allowing the student to experience acceptance without needing to please.
- **Cognitive restructuring:** Identifying and challenging irrational beliefs (e.g., “I must be perfect,”

“Refusal destroys relationships”) and constructing adaptive schemas.

- **Self-worth reconstruction:** Through assertiveness training, students internalize that their existence inherently holds value—*independent of external achievements or service to others.*

5.3. Campus Culture and Teacher Training

School psychological education must transform the soil that breeds people-pleasing personality. First, integrate implicit mental health curricula: infuse literature and history lessons with themes of self-acceptance and autonomous identity; conduct homeroom classes centered on “Loving My Imperfect Self.” Schools should cultivate an inclusive campus ethos where students understand that existence itself confers value—no pleasing required^[8]. Second, enhance teacher training in developmental psychology. Many educators inadvertently reinforce pleasing behaviors (e.g., over-praising compliance). Training enables teachers to identify “invisible” pleasers and offer unconditional positive regard. When a teacher responds to a student’s honest mistake with, “Thank you for telling the truth—that takes courage,” a new template of self-worth is forged.

Here is the professional English translation of the text, utilizing precise terminology from developmental, clinical, and counseling psychology.

Blocking the Intergenerational Transmission of the People-Pleaser Personality and Facilitating Self-Correction: A Developmental Psychology Perspective

At the core of excessive people-pleasing often lies emotional deprivation and neglect during childhood. Developmental psychology posits that the ages of 0 to 12 are a critical period for personality formation; the quality of emotional responsiveness received during this time directly impacts an individual's ability to form healthy ego boundaries and self-worth^[9]. To prevent and correct the people-pleaser personality, interventions must target both family dynamics and social support systems.

1) Emotionally Responsive Parenting: Constructing a Secure Base in Childhood

John Bowlby, the founder of Attachment Theory, argued that children are biologically predisposed to seek emotional bonds with caregivers, and the quality of these bonds determines their future social relational patterns. When parents respond to an infant's emotional cues in a timely and appropriate manner, the child develops a **secure attachment**, which serves as a "secure base" for exploring the world. Conversely, if parental responses are cold, inconsistent, or **contingent** (conditional), the child is likely to develop an **anxious-avoidant attachment** style, laying the groundwork for a people-pleaser personality.

Virginia Satir’s **"Iceberg Model"** suggests that beneath the surface of pleasing behavior lie unmet needs: the need for acceptance, validation, and love. Many parents fall into the trap of **"Conditional Positive Regard."** For instance, they offer enthusiastic embraces when a child achieves a perfect score but respond with cold indifference when the child makes a mistake. This differential responding causes the child to internalize a distorted belief: *"I am only worthy of love when I meet others' expectations."* Over time, the child's self-worth becomes entirely contingent on external validation, leading to a gradual loss of authentic self-awareness.

To foster emotionally responsive parenting, caregivers should adopt the concept of the **"Good-Enough Parent"** (D.W. Winnicott). This philosophy suggests that parents need not be perfect, but merely "good enough"—providing adequate support when needed and allowing space for exploration. Specifically, parents can utilize a three-step **emotional validation** process:

- **Awareness:** ("I see you are very angry right now.")
- **Labeling:** ("You feel wronged because your toy was taken.")
- **Empathic Response:** ("If that happened to me, I would feel sad too.")

This approach helps children build an emotional vocabulary, enabling them to express needs through language rather than through compliance. Prevention requires shifting the family system from an **"Achievement-Oriented"** model to an **"Emotion-Oriented"** one, ensuring the child understands that their existence inherently holds value, independent of performance.

2) Reconstructing Social Support Systems and Pathways for Self-Correction

When the family fails to provide adequate emotional nurturing, schools and social support systems become vital compensatory forces. Urie Bronfenbrenner’s **Ecological Systems Theory** posits that

development is shaped by interactions within the Microsystem (family, school), Mesosystem (home-school interaction), Exosystem (parental work environments), and Macrosystem (cultural values). An imbalance in any of these systems can impact personality development.

In schools, teachers often serve as "**Significant Others.**" Research indicates that teachers who praise **effort** rather than innate talent foster a **Growth Mindset**. Conversely, educational approaches that overemphasize being "obedient" or "well-behaved" inadvertently reinforce people-pleasing behaviors^[10]. Educators should establish **multidimensional evaluation systems** to recognize diverse strengths, ensuring that children who are less adept at ingratiation also gain a sense of worth. Peer relationships are equally crucial; group counseling can help children establish healthy friendship models and learn egalitarian interpersonal skills to counteract maladaptive familial patterns.

For adolescents and adults already exhibiting a people-pleaser personality, correction involves three stages: **Awareness, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction.**

- **Awareness:** Use journaling to record triggers and internal dialogues, identifying automatic "Must-Should" cognitions (e.g., "I must satisfy everyone").
- **Deconstruction:** Utilize **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** techniques to challenge these irrational beliefs and test the reality that "rejection does not equal abandonment."
- **Reconstruction:** Practice setting small goals involving "**Gentle but Firm**" **Refusal (Gentle Firmness)** to gradually expand one's psychological comfort zone.

Correcting a people-pleaser personality is a gentle revolution. It requires treating the inner self as a precious seedling—pausing at every moment of impulse to please and asking, "*What do I truly need right now?*" Only when we can face our own needs with acceptance—without harsh judgment or avoidance—can the inner child who once twisted themselves to earn love finally blossom into their own unique self within the garden of the psyche^[6]. This is not only a journey of personal growth but also a collective endeavor to create a healthier social culture.

6. Conclusion

Childhood emotional neglect profoundly impacts adolescent mental health. By severing the child's connection to the authentic self, it becomes fertile ground for people-pleasing personality. Modern education must deploy scientific psychological guidance to reshape adolescents' cognitive frameworks: imperfection is universal; altering oneself for others is unnecessary; every individual's existence is inherently unique^[7].

As the primary context for adolescent development, schools must assume responsibility for intervention. A three-tiered system—micro-level individual counseling to repair trauma, meso-level group guidance to correct behavior, and macro-level campus culture to reshape values—can synergistically disrupt the "neglect-to-pleasing" cycle. Future research should refine interventions for people-pleasing subtypes and develop sustainable home-school collaboration mechanisms. Educators must persist in attending to this invisible population.

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