

Chapter 4

I Need You!

The Importance of Social Relationships With Significant Others for the Child's Development

Nadia Hristova Koltcheva

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4651-7414>

New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

Human relationships are not only timeless but remain a critical area of study in our ever-changing world. This chapter explores the vital role of social relationships in shaping human development, emphasizing their profound influence on brain development, cognitive, emotional and social domains. Grounded in foundational frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model, Bowlby's Attachment Theory, and Rohner's Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory, alongside cutting-edge neuroscience research, it examines how early interactions with caregivers and other key figures provide essential scaffolding for human being development and functioning. By integrating findings from various research studies, the chapter highlights the essence of relationships in shaping human development and lifelong well-being. Key themes include a brief overview of human development, biological predispositions to social interactions, environmental influences, and gene-environment interactions.

INTRODUCTION

“Good relationships make us happier and healthier!”

Robert Waldinger

Human relationships are a topic that has fascinated philosophers, poets, writers, and researchers across disciplines for millennia. From ancient thinkers to modern scientists, countless works have explored the profound significance of these connections (Perlman & Duck, 2006). Despite the passage of thousands of years and remarkable advancements in understanding human nature and the world, relationships with significant others remain a cornerstone of human life. The topic of human relationships is still relevant and up-to-date.

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One's relationship with another human being is deeply woven into our human nature. According to Bowlby (1969), our initial bond with a caregiver (most often the mother) originates from a biologically determined behavioural system, creating mental patterns that influence relationships throughout life. Many scholars have written about our universal biological need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002; Leary, 1999). Rohner (2016, 2021) asserts in the Personality Subtheory of his Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPARTheory) that:

“In the course of shared biocultural evolution, people everywhere in the world have developed an enduring, biologically determined emotional need for a positive response from the people most important to them.”

R. Rohner (2021, p. 10)

Modern research, such as the Harvard Study of Adult Development (2024) - the longest longitudinal study of human development - confirms the centrality of relationships. After more than 85 years of following the lives of participants from diverse backgrounds, two groups of young people, students at Harvard University and young people from the poorest neighbourhoods of the city of Boston, after a huge amount of work over the decades, collected tens of thousands of pages of information and data, the researchers reached a striking conclusion: “Good relationships make us happier and healthier!” (Waldinger, 2016, TED Talk, 6:16). Summarizing decades of work, R. Waldinger (2016) shared three vital lessons about human relationships:

1. Social connections promote health and longevity

People who are more socially connected to family, friends, and community experience greater happiness, better physical health and longer lives. Conversely, loneliness is toxic, leading to unhappiness, earlier health decline, and shorter lifespans.

2. The quality of relationships matters more than quantity

High-conflict relationships are detrimental to health, while warm, supportive bonds provide protection against the challenges of ageing. Living in the midst of good, warm relationships is protective. Relationship satisfaction at age 50 predicts health outcomes at age 80.

3. Good relationships protect both body and brain

Securely attached relationships in later life support memory retention and mitigate cognitive decline. Even amidst occasional conflict, relationships characterized by mutual reliability offer significant benefits.

These findings underscore an ancient truth: “Good, close relationships are good for our health and well-being – this is wisdom as old as the world” (Waldinger, 2016, TED Talk, 10:04).

Research consistently links the quality and quantity of social relationships to life satisfaction (Broderrick & Blewitt, 2020). For instance, Diener and Seligman's (2002) study on happiness found that their happiest participants had “excellent” social relationships.

Throughout our existence as human beings, the bonds we form with significant individuals intertwine into intricate patterns that not only influence our experiences but also shape our self-perception, our understanding of the broader world, and our personal development and well-being. The significant

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