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**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGGRESSION AND
ATTACHMENT IN ADOLESCENCE**

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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The dissertation consists of 160 pages and includes an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography containing 193 sources. The work is supported by 23 tables reflecting the sample distribution, as well as descriptive and inferential statistics. It also includes 8 figures, comprising distribution diagrams and comparative graphs of the studied levels of aggression and attachment.

The public defense of the dissertation will take place on July 3, 2026, at, in the Conference Hall of the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, New Building, 236 Bulgaria Blvd.

The materials regarding the defense are available for review at the University Library, Rectorate, 24 Tsar Asen St.

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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION THESIS

In the dynamic conditions of modern society, characterized by intense social transformations and the digitalization of interpersonal relationships, the problem of **adolescent aggression** takes on new dimensions and relevance. The frequent manifestations of violence among adolescents – in the school environment and in the digital space – are not isolated acts but can be viewed as symptoms of deeply embedded psychological processes that require precise scientific analysis.

Adolescence is a period of intense ontogenetic transition, during which basic personality characteristics are restructured, identity is formed, and autonomous models of social behavior are built. It is in this phase that aggressive manifestations often become a maladaptive tool for coping with internal conflicts, low self-esteem, or frustration. **Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory** offers a fundamental explanatory framework for the genesis of aggressive behavior, linking the quality of early emotional bonds to the individual's subsequent social behavior.

The choice of topic is dictated by its theoretical capacity and the author's practical experience in the field of psychological counseling, where it is systematically observed that an aggressive act is rarely an end in itself – it is often a dysfunctional defense mechanism stemming from deficits in significant early relationships.

The scientific novelty of the work lies in the comprehensive study of aggression in adolescents in the contemporary Bulgarian context, with an emphasis on:

- **Differentiating aggressive components** according to the Buss and Perry model (physical, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility);

- **The influence of different attachment figures** – mother, father, and peers;

The choice of the research problem is determined by the author's practical experience in the field of psychological counseling and social services. Empirical observations indicate that the aggressive act often functions as a specific "cry for help" or a defense mechanism, corresponding to deficits in early affective bonds. In a theoretical aspect, the doctoral thesis relies on the classical postulates of **John Bowlby (1969)** and **Mary Ainsworth (1978)** regarding "internal working models," as well as the modern contributions of **Mario Mikulincer and Phillip Shaver (2016)**.

The **object** of the study is the psychological characteristics of aggression and attachment as components of personality development in adolescence.

The **subject** of the study is the nature, direction, and strength of the correlational dependencies between dimensions of attachment (trust, communication, alienation) and specific forms of aggression (physical, verbal, anger, hostility) in adolescents.

The **aim** of the empirical study is to explore the nature of the relationship between the quality of attachment to mother, father, and peers and the manifestations of aggressive behavior in adolescents, by identifying the specific dimensions of attachment that have predictive value for aggression. Achieving this aim is associated with the fulfillment of the following research tasks:

1. Theoretical systematization of the main psychological postulates regarding aggression and attachment theory in the context of adolescent development.
2. Establishing the levels and leading forms of aggression (physical, verbal, anger, hostility) using the **Buss and Perry Questionnaire (BPAQ)**.
3. Analyzing the attachment profile to parents and peers using the **IPPA methodology**.

4. Checking for differences in aggression and attachment based on the demographic indicator "gender."
5. Establishing the presence, direction, and strength of statistically significant relationships between attachment subscales and components of aggressive behavior.
6. Defining the predictive value of attachment indicators regarding aggression in adolescents.
7. Formulating guidelines for the prevention and correction of aggressive behavior in the school environment.

In the empirical study of the doctoral thesis, two hypotheses are posed: **Hypothesis 1:** There is a significant statistical relationship between the quality of attachment to significant figures (parents and peers) and the levels of aggressive behavior in adolescents. **Hypothesis 2:** Secure attachment (high levels of Trust and Communication) acts as a protective factor, negatively associated with manifestations of aggression.

The doctoral thesis titled "Relationship between aggression and attachment in adolescence" represents a comprehensive and in-depth psychological study of the mechanisms through which the quality of affective bonds with significant figures determines manifestations of destructive behavior. In the work, aggression is conceptualized not simply as a behavioral act, but as a complex configuration of affects and cognitions, the regulation of which is directly dependent on the dynamics of relationships with the mother, father, and peers.

The work is structured in accordance with academic standards and includes: introduction, three main chapters, conclusion, scientific contributions, and bibliography. The main text covers 142 pages. The list of used literature begins on page 143 and includes a total of 193 sources, of which 36 titles in Cyrillic, covering contemporary works by authors such as K. Tagareva, M. Manolov, V. Matanova, and R. Stamatov. The Latin sources are 157 titles, covering classic and current studies by leading world scientists such as J. Bowlby, M. Ainsworth, A. Bandura, L. Berkowitz, K. Dodge, M. Mikulincer, and F. Shaver. The study is

supported by visual and tabular data, providing clarity and reliable verification of the obtained results. The text integrates 23 tables reflecting the detailed distribution of the sample, the psychometric characteristics of the tools (validity and reliability), descriptive statistics, as well as the results of inferential analysis (t-tests, analysis of variance, correlation, and regression analysis). 8 figures are presented, including distribution diagrams, comparative graphs of the studied levels of aggression and attachment, a correlational "Heatmap" matrix, and diagnostic diagrams of regression residuals.

Chapter One, titled "Theoretical analysis of the phenomena of aggression and attachment in adolescence," represents a theoretical overview of fundamental psychological concepts and modern models defining aggression and attachment. In the section dedicated to aggression, the evolution of scientific knowledge is traced – from classical psychoanalytic paradigms through the social-cognitive theories of Albert Bandura (1973) and K. Dodge (1980) to the modern integrative **General Aggression Model (GAM)**. The construct is analyzed in its multidimensionality, including physical, verbal, affective (anger), and cognitive (hostility) dimensions. The analysis of attachment theory is based on the works of John Bowlby (1969) and Mary Ainsworth (1978), detailing the four main styles of attachment and their transformation during adolescence. Special emphasis is placed on the father figure and his specific role as a regulator of aggressive impulses. The chapter ends with the derivation of an integrative theoretical framework in which the quality of attachment is postulated as a determinant of social behavior – from a risk factor in insecure types to a protective buffer in secure attachment.

Chapter Two, titled "Organization and methodology of the empirical study," presents the design of the conducted empirical study, realized in the period March 2025 – January 2026. The structure of the research sample is described, including 216 adolescents (13–19 years old), differentiated into two groups: an experimental group (n=119), composed of individuals with registered deviant manifestations, and a

control group (n=97) with normative behavior. The choice of diagnostic tools is detailed, including the "Aggression Questionnaire" (BPAQ) by Buss and Perry and the "Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment" (IPPA). The methodological part justifies the choice of mathematical-statistical methods for processing primary data (descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis) and outlines the ethical frameworks of the study, ensuring anonymity and informed consent of the participants.

Chapter Three, titled "Results and analysis of the empirical study of the relationship between aggression and attachment," presents the quantitative data and their qualitative interpretation, through which the raised hypotheses are confirmed.

In the first chapter, a psychological analysis of aggression is made, examining classical concepts and modern models. In modern psychology, the definition of aggression is characterized by significant multidimensionality, with the phenomenon being interpreted as a mental state (Levitov, 1972), a biologically innate instinct (Adler, 2004), or a specific behavioral reaction (Buss, 1961). A central place in the theoretical analysis is occupied by the **AHA model - Anger-Hostility-Aggression** by C. Spielberger (1988), which offers a clear hierarchical differentiation between:

- **Anger** (affective component and emotional state);
- **Hostility** (stable cognitive disposition);
- **Aggression** (external behavioral manifestation).

The doctoral thesis relies on an integrative framework in which aggressive behavior in adolescence is viewed as a dynamic process resulting from the interaction between individual dispositions, cognitive-affective structures, and attachment models. Special emphasis is placed on the role of insecure attachment and deficits in emotional regulation as key factors, which, through mechanisms like "hostile attribution," modulate the threshold of aggressive response in adolescents. In psychological literature, emotional regulation is a significant mediator for development, with its foundations laid through early interactions with

attachment figures (Tagareva, 2020). Leading interpretations of aggression are analyzed from three main perspectives: the psychoanalytic paradigm, the behavioral reading of aggression (social learning), and the cognitive-affective model.

The second point in the first chapter examines attachment as the foundation of personality development. The doctoral thesis performs a critical retrospective analysis of theoretical models exploring the emotional bond between the child and the caregiver. The genesis of the understanding of attachment is traced from the classical psychoanalytic paradigm (Freud, 1964; Spitz, 1965; Mahler et al., 1975) to the theory of object relations, which shifts the focus to the quality of the environment and the role of the "**good enough mother**" (Winnicott, 1950; Klein, 1935).

The central place in the theoretical framework is occupied by the **Attachment Theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth** (1969; 1978). Attachment is defined as an autonomous biological system for security and a bioenergetic strategy for emotional regulation. In the context of aggressive behavior, of particular scientific interest is the differentiation postulated by Bowlby between:

- **Adaptive anger** – directed at restoring the broken bond;
- **Destructive hostility** – resulting from pathological separation and inability to integrate the loss.

The classification of attachment styles is detailed, evolving from early childhood to adolescence, differentiating four main types: **Secure attachment**, **Insecure-avoidant attachment**, **Insecure-ambivalent attachment**, and **Disorganized attachment** (Main & Solomon, 1986). The thesis argues that the controlling-punitive model is the strongest predictor of externalized aggressive behavior.

Another important aspect of the analysis is the period of adolescence as a critical transition, where the focus shifts from behavioral manifestations to representative levels of attachment. Special scientific emphasis is placed on the differentiated role of the father as a specific regulator of aggressive behavior.

In the context of pathological transformation, the risks of insecure and disorganized models are discussed. It is emphasized that aggression in disorganized adolescents is often a result of a "fragmented Self" and dissociative mechanisms (Lyons-Ruth & Spielman, 2004), while in controlling-punitive strategies, it serves to maintain illusory control during interpersonal stress. The theoretical overview is supplemented by data on the Bulgarian sample (Bakracheva & Manolov, 2019), revealing an important regularity: after 17 years of age, the restructuring of the value system and more mature reflection on internal working models lead to increased conscious self-control and effective avoidance of conflicts.

Based on the theoretical model of **Mikulincer and Shaver (2016)**, two specific secondary strategies for regulation resulting from insecure attachment are analyzed:

- **Hyperactivation (anxious style):** characterized by "emotional overflow" and hypervigilance to rejection signals, which often escalates into reactive aggression;
- **Deactivation (avoidant style):** associated with systematic suppression of affect and cognitive distancing. Upon exceeding the threshold of emotional endurance, this mechanism collapses, provoking manifestations of hostility or instrumental aggression.

The conclusion of the first chapter points to an integrative framework of the relationship between aggression and attachment, which synthesizes the classical postulates of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth with modern achievements in the field of social-information processing and emotional regulation.

Chapter Two of the dissertation research describes the conceptual framework and methodological support of the empirical study, conducted between March 2025 and January 2026. The research design is structured to provide a reliable check of the hypotheses regarding the role of attachment as a regulator of adolescent aggression. The study involves a total of 216 adolescents (13–19 years old), distributed into two groups according to their behavioral and socio-legal

status. **Experimental group (n=119)**: Composed of individuals with registered antisocial manifestations. **Control group (n=97)**: Includes students without data on antisocial manifestations, demonstrating adequate emotional regulation and social competence.

Two internationally recognized tools with proven psychometric qualities were used to operationalize the variables:

- **Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ)**: The methodology examines aggression as a multidimensional construct through four subscales: Physical aggression and Verbal aggression (instrumental component), Anger (affective component), and Hostility (cognitive component).
- **Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)**: The revised version of Armsden and Greenberg was used, which allows for a differentiated study of the bond with the mother, father, and friendship circle.

Chapter Three presents the results of the conducted empirical study. The analysis of the data from the **Buss and Perry Questionnaire (BPAQ)** reveals a clear differentiation between the two groups on all indicators. Total aggression in the experimental group ($M = 93.49$) is significantly higher than in the control ($M = 72.28$). The analysis of attachment through the **IPPA** questionnaire by Armsden and Greenberg outlines a characteristic deficit profile in adolescents with deviant manifestations regarding all three objects of attachment. Regarding the mother, the experimental group demonstrates significantly lower levels of trust ($M = 3.10$ vs $M = 3.87$) and communication ($M = 2.90$), with simultaneously higher alienation ($M = 3.92$). Regarding the father, the deficits are even more pronounced. Communication with the father recorded the lowest value in the entire study among deviant adolescents ($M = 2.56$), and trust is significantly lower ($M = 2.86$ vs $M = 3.39$).

A specific picture is observed regarding attachment to peers — it is highest for the entire experimental group. Trust in friends ($M = 3.62$) and communication with them ($M = 3.80$) are significantly better than the indicators towards parents. Almost identical levels of alienation from

peers in both groups indicate that deviant adolescents are not socially isolated but seek and find compensatory emotional support in informal groups.

Two-factor **analysis of variance (ANOVA)** confirms that the "Group" factor is the leading predictor for levels of aggression ($F = 159.58, p < .001, \omega^2 = 0.426$), explaining 42.6% of the variation. Gender and the "Group \times Gender" interaction did not reach statistical significance. The result categorically shows that aggressive behavior in adolescence is a socially determined phenomenon, in which the family environment and the type of attachment dominate over biological factors. Based on the conducted analyses, it can be formulated as a fundamental conclusion that aggressive behavior in adolescence is a socially determined phenomenon, in which the quality of the family environment and the type of attachment dominate over biological factors. Aggression "transcends" gender differences and establishes itself as a function of interpersonal dynamics. The use of **Welch ANOVA** and the high **effect size** make this result a stable empirical foundation for further modeling of attachment as a central psychological mechanism for behavioral regulation.

The comparative analysis (**Welch's t-test**) between the two groups confirms significant differences in almost all parameters ($p < .001$). The only exception is alienation from friends ($p = .311$) – the only indicator without a significant difference between groups, which confirms the thesis of social compensation through peers. The comparative analysis conducted via **Welch's t-test** reveals a systematic and profound differentiation between adolescents with deviant manifestations and those in the control group. The data categorically indicate that deviant behavior is not an isolated act, but a symptom of a specific psychological configuration, including high aggressiveness and compromised attachment. The most significant differences are observed in **General Aggression** ($t = 13.15, p < .001$) and **Physical Aggression** ($t = 10.45, p < .001$). The extremely high **Cohen's effect size** ($d = 1.769$) shows that the difference between the two groups is not only quantitative

but qualitative. In the experimental group, aggression has become the dominant model of social responding. High levels of **Hostility** ($d = 1.293$) complete this profile, revealing persistent cognitive distortions - suspiciousness and a negative attitude toward the intentions of others. Empirical data confirm the hypothesis that when the family environment fails to provide trust and security, the adolescent turns to the peer group, where deviant and aggressive behavior often becomes a mechanism for gaining status and social belonging. In this way, aggression functions simultaneously as a defensive reaction against alienation at home and as "social glue" in the micro-environment of peers.

The **Pearson correlation analysis** reveals a system of significant negative dependencies between indicators of **secure attachment** and levels of aggression. Trust in the father ($r = -0.293$) and communication with the mother ($r = -0.264$) are among the strongest protective factors. Trust in both parents correlates negatively with experienced anger – more strongly with the father ($r = -0.375$) than with the mother ($r = -0.331$).

Alienation from the mother proves to be a leading predictor of anger ($r = 0.291$, $p < .001$) and indicates the presence of a generalized model of insecurity, which is also transferred to relationships with the father and peers. Attachment to friends also shows a significant negative correlation with aggression ($r = -0.261$), confirming their compensatory role.

The intercorrelations between individual components of attachment ($r = 0.776$ between trust and communication with the mother; $r = 0.739$ with the father) validate the instrument used and indicate that security in the family environment is a systematic, not an isolated, phenomenon. It is empirically proven that alienation, especially from the maternal figure, is a leading psychological marker for the escalation of aggression. The strong positive link between alienation from the mother and physical aggression ($r = 0.323$) indicates that a rupture in the primary emotional bond leads to a direct externalization of tension in the form of violence. The established "**generalized model of alienation**" ($r = 0.459$

between both parents) indicates that systematic insecurity in the family deprives the adolescent of the capacity for socially acceptable processing of frustration. In conclusion, the correlation data outline aggression in adolescents not as an isolated behavioral act, but as a direct result of deficits in interpersonal security. The results provide a solid basis for the conclusion that strengthening emotional connection and communication models within the family system is the most effective strategy for the prevention of deviant behavior in adolescence.

The two applied **regression models** reveal the predictive value of attachment for aggressive behavior. The **integral model (M1)** explains 44.9% of the variation in general aggression ($R^2 = .449$), with group membership being the leading predictor ($B = -21.09$, $p < .001$), followed by attachment to the mother.

The **differentiated model (M2)**, including individual components of attachment, demonstrates higher explanatory power ($R^2 = .522$) and identifies key predictors: alienation from the father ($\beta = -0.304$, $p < .001$), trust in the father ($\beta = -0.244$, $p = .014$), and alienation from friends ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = .008$). The negative direction of the coefficient for "alienation from the father" is interpreted as "**protective alienation**" — with a conflicted father figure, the adolescent suppresses the aggressive response in favor of a potential internalization of tension.

Both working hypotheses are confirmed. **Hypothesis 1** - regarding the significant functional dependency between attachment and aggression - is confirmed by the regression model ($F = 22.35$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .522$). **Hypothesis 2** - regarding the **protective function of secure attachment** - is confirmed by the correlation analysis, establishing persistent negative dependencies between trust and communication with parents and all forms of aggression. The obtained data prove that attachment is not just a passive background, but an active mechanism for psychological navigation. While the mother figure primarily provides emotional stability and buffers anger, the father figure functions as a structuring factor, whose presence (through trust) or absence (through alienation) determines the adolescent's social strategies. The model

confirms that 52.2% of aggression in this age group can be predicted and potentially prevented by strengthening the quality of these key interpersonal bonds.

The results outline aggression in adolescents not as an isolated behavioral trait, but as a **maladaptive regulatory mechanism** determined by the quality of significant emotional bonds. The mother and father perform functionally different roles: the mother provides the affective "**secure base**" and modulates the adolescent's internal emotional world, while the father acts as a regulator of behavioral expression and social control. Peers function as a compensatory environment, but can also be a risk factor depending on the normative orientation of the group. The study emphasizes the need for preventive programs aimed at strengthening family communication, and in particular the father-child relationship, as a key tool for reducing adolescent aggression.

The empirical study conducted confirms the fundamental role of **attachment as a systemic regulator** of aggressive behavior in adolescence. Through the application of a complex statistical apparatus, it was proven that aggression is not an isolated personality phenomenon, but an etiologically linked result of deficits in the adolescent's interpersonal dynamics. The main conclusions of the scientific research can be summarized in several directions:

- **First**, a differentiated profile of deviant behavior. A statistically significant link was established between deviant behavior and a specific configuration of high levels of physical aggression, anger, and hostility, corresponding to critically impaired emotional connection with parents (low trust and high alienation).
- **Second**, the specific role of parental figures. The study reveals a functional differentiation in the regulatory functions of parents. While the mother figure is a determinant for emotional security and an inhibitor of affective anger, the father figure emerges as a key regulator of social behavior. The established model of

"**protective alienation**" from the father highlights the complexity of intrapsychic conflicts, where emotional distancing blocks open aggression but generates internal tension.

- **Third**, group membership as a mediator. The regression analysis proves that over 50% of the variation in aggressive behavior is explained by the interaction between attachment dimensions and the social environment. The lack of pronounced gender differences leads to the conclusion that socio-psychological factors have dominant importance over biologically determined ones in the context of deviance.
- **Fourth**, the compensatory role of peers. Data refute the myth of social isolation of deviant adolescents, revealing high levels of trust in the friend environment. This positions the peer group as a powerful compensatory mechanism, which, however, can also function as a risk factor depending on its normative orientation.

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PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION THESIS

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REPORT ON THE SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION THESIS

1. **Theoretical verification of the model:** The study confirms the applicability of attachment theory in the context of a contemporary Bulgarian adolescent sample, establishing the role of emotional bonds as a fundamental regulator of social behavior.
2. **Differentiation of parental roles:** A scientific contribution is the establishment of the specific influence of both parental figures—while deficits in attachment to the mother appear to be a leading predictor of internal hostility and anger, the breakdown in communication with the father is closely linked to the externalization of aggression and deviant behavior.
3. **Uncovering the compensatory mechanism of peers:** The study sheds light on the role of the peer circle in adolescents with deviant behavior. It is proven that high attachment to peers can act as an emotional "buffer," but at the same time, it can serve as an environment for legitimizing aggressive patterns in the absence of family security.
4. **Psychometric adaptation and validation:** The high reliability of the instruments—the **Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)** and the **Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ)**—has been confirmed for studying Bulgarian adolescents with deviant behavior, which enriches the toolkit for future research in the fields of special education and criminal psychology.