

# Attachment Theory & Adult Non-Romantic Relationships

Systematic Review

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## Introduction

Attachment theory, first conceptualised by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), provides a framework for understanding how early-life relational experiences shape expectations and behaviours in adult relationships.

While much research has examined romantic and parent-child attachments, there is a growing recognition of the critical role non-romantic relationships play in adult well-being.

Friendships, sibling and other significant family bonds, workplace relationships, mentorships, supervision and therapeutic relationships all serve as attachment-relevant contexts, providing security, a sense of belonging, and emotional support.

## Method

This poster synthesises findings from a systematic review (2015–2025) of peer-reviewed scientific studies exploring adult non-romantic attachment relationships.

Databases searched included PsycINFO, PubMed, and Cochrane Library. Inclusion criteria focused on empirical studies with adults (18 years and older) that examined attachment within friendships, sibling/extended family relationships, the workplace, mentorships/supervision, or therapeutic relationships.

During the search, an emerging area of parasocial/digital attachment was identified and included in this review. Excluded were studies limited to romantic or parent-child attachments and Therapeutic Relationships, recognised as an area in itself, found to be extensively researched previously. 27 studies were included in the review.

## Friendships / Peers

Secure Attachment → intimacy, reciprocity, repair  
Insecure-Anxious → reassurance-seeking/volatility.  
Insecure-Avoidant → distance/low disclosure  
Practice: steady contact, low-pressure check-ins

## Siblings / Family

Secure Attachment → support, warmth, cohesion  
Insecure-Anxious → stress vulnerability/reassurance needs  
Insecure-Avoidant → estrangement/instrumental help  
Practice: rituals + validation + reliable availability

## Results

Across non-romantic ties, Secure Attachment aligns with higher trust, cohesion, and repair; Insecure Anxious Attachment with vigilance and reassurance seeking; Insecure Avoidant Attachment with distance and low disclosure.

## Mentorship / Supervision

Secure Attachment → dependable access + responsive feedback → strong alliance, exploration & skill growth  
Insecure-Anxious Mentee → frequent reassurance  
Insecure-Avoidant Mentee → under-use support  
Practice: "help-seeking = competence," explicit rupture—repair

## Workplace / Community

Secure Attachment → psychological safety, coordination, voice, performance  
Insecure-Anxious → volatility & conflict  
Insecure-Avoidant → low trust & cohesion  
Practice: "secure-base leadership" (humility, clear goals, timely support)

## Parasocial / Digital

Authenticity + Continuity → secure attachment-like bonds and healthy engagement  
Insecure-Anxious → over-investment under loneliness  
Insecure-Avoidant → disengagement & withdrawal  
Design: trust-by-design, transparent policies, human handover.

## Discussion

Adult non-romantic attachment relationships are central to psychosocial development, resilience, and well-being. Findings highlight that attachment dynamics extend beyond caregiver-child relationships and intimate & therapeutic relationships, shaping diverse relational domains.

Cross-cultural research highlights variations in attachment expression, particularly between collectivist and individualist contexts.

Genetic & Neurobiological studies suggest hormonal and stress-regulation pathways mediate attachment behaviours across multiple non-romantic relationships.

## Conclusion

Attachment theory provides a powerful lens for understanding non-romantic adult relationships. These findings expand the theory's relevance, emphasising the importance of friendships/peers, siblings/other family members, workplace, mentorship, supervision, and parasocial/digital attachments in adult psychological health.

Future research should integrate longitudinal and cross-cultural designs, and clinical practice should consider attachment-informed approaches to supporting non-romantic relational bonds.

Education, workplaces, and other community services should actively encourage the formation of secure relationships. Investing in secure attachment is a public-health and organisational imperative that reduces avoidable strain, enhances learning and collaboration, and builds resilience across the non-romantic relationships that sustain adult life.