

THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY ON THE ACADEMIC  
ACHIEVEMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY ON THE ACADEMIC  
ACHIEVEMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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## VITA

Elise Presley Johnson, daughter of Charles David Presley, Jr. and Beth Collins Presley, was born January 16, 1973 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She graduated from Virgil I. Grissom High School in Huntsville, Alabama, in 1991. After graduating from Birmingham-Southern College in 1995 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology/Psychology, she earned a Master of Science degree in Counseling-College Student Personnel from Shippensburg University in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania in 1999. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), National Certified Counselor (NCC) and a certified school counselor. Elise and Daniel Anthony Johnson married on August 8, 1997. They have two children, Carley Elisabeth and Henry “Hank” Harris.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY ON THE ACADEMIC  
ACHIEVEMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between students' perceptions of parental emotional availability and academic achievement, specifically high school graduation status and grade point average (GPA). Differences in parental roles, gender and race of participants were also discussed. Participants included 75 females (33) and males (42) from one public charter high school in the Southeastern United States. They were all 18 years of age or older and of senior standing. Students had also taken the state high school graduation exam at least one time. Participants were asked to complete one instrument assessing their perceptions of parental emotional availability (LEAP). Additional demographic information was collected through self-report. Regression and correlational analyses were used to analyze the data.

The current study found positive relationships between the variables of emotional availability and academic achievement; however, none of these relationships were determined statistically significant. Student gender and race were not found to be significant in moderating the relationship between perceptions of emotional availability and academic achievement. The current study revealed two noteworthy findings. Other forms of social involvement and support (i.e. extracurricular activities) were significantly related to academic achievement. In addition, participants' perceptions of paternal emotional availability were more strongly correlated with academic achievement than that of maternal emotional availability.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Emotional Availability

Theories of human relations and connectedness can be traced back to Freud's early psychoanalytic theory as well as Lorenz's work with imprinting in birds. Finding roots in both, John Bowlby theorized that children form attachments to caregivers, primarily mothers, early in life (Easterbrooks, 1989; Biringen, 1994). Accordingly, secure attachments lead to a willingness to explore the environment; insecure attachments lead to negative behaviors and lack of affect (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1958; Ainsworth, 1969). The balance between the need for attachment and desire for exploration is contingent on the context of each individual situation and paramount in developing secure human relations (Biringen, 1994).

Researchers have focused for decades on the connection between parental behaviors and a child's emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development. The questions surrounding the differences between parents' physical and emotional presence beginning at the earliest stages of their child's infancy continue to intrigue personality and developmental psychologists, philosophers, and attachment theorists (Easterbrooks, Biesecker, & Lyons-Ruth, 2000). Over the past three decades, the focus has changed from looking at the effects of parental emotional attunement only during states of distress in a child to assessing parental emotional interaction with their child across a wide range

of emotions, both negative as well as positive (Biringen, 2000; Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000).

The construct of emotional availability represents a central ingredient in the quality of parent-child relations, and healthy parenting depends upon the parameters outlined by the relational construct of emotional availability (Lum & Phares, 2005). Researchers have conceptualized emotional availability and the qualities constituting emotionally available parents somewhat differently; however, Lum and Phares cite the primary tenets as encompassing “parental responsiveness, sensitivity, and emotional involvement” (p. 211). Earlier research by Biringen, Robinson, and Emde (2000a; 2000b) outlines emotional availability across six dimensions and scales: the four parental dimensions being sensitivity, structuring, nonintrusiveness, and nonhostility, and the two child dimensions being the child’s responsiveness to the parent and the child’s involvement of the parent.

According to Biringen et al. (2000b) and Easterbrooks and Biringen (2000), sensitivity is defined as a parent’s awareness of and responsiveness to the child, affective quality of the parent-child interactions, quality of conflict negotiation, and creativity during play. The authors define structuring as the parent’s ability to structure the parent-child interaction in a way that maintains the child’s engagement. Nonintrusiveness, or the ability of the parent to be available and involved in the interaction without infringing on the child’s autonomy, is also considered an essential component of parental emotional availability. Nonhostility is defined as parental communication and behavior that is not abrasive, impatient, or antagonistic toward the child. Although definitions can differ, the concept of emotional availability has some common themes across all systems: emotional

availability describes aspects of the parent-child relationship with regard to emotional signaling and responding (Emde, 2000).

The descriptions and definitions of emotional availability are grounded in John Bowlby's attachment theory which posits that higher levels of parental emotional availability promote more secure infant attachment and responsiveness to the parent (Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000; Emde, 2000; Lum & Phares, 2005). The theorists postulated that infant self and emotional expression is promoted not just by physical availability of the parent but physical presence coupled with emotional responsiveness (Biringen, 2000).

Much theoretical and empirical evidence exists as to the relationship between highly emotionally involved parents and a child's greater sense of security. Ainsworth and colleagues compared the effects of maternal sensitivity and responsiveness to an infant's attachment security. In fact, these studies, along with many others, showed the close linkage between maternal sensitivity measured in early infancy to the security of attachment assessed during the child's second year of life (Biringen et al., 2000a; 2000b; Easterbrooks et al., 2000). This security later in life has been attributed to social, emotional and academic learning and development in children and adolescents.

#### Academic Achievement

Why is academic achievement important? Research shows that students who perform better academically tend to function more effectively socially, emotionally and financially in adulthood. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), students who finish high school earn on average \$8500 more per year than those who drop out prior to graduation. Fifty percent of the prison population is made up of high school dropouts

(Cassel, 2003). Therefore, understanding the variables which impact academic achievement is not only critical to the learners themselves but the families, communities and economies impacted by those who do not perform to their potential.

Similar to studies on parental emotional availability and child responsiveness, many studies over the years have examined the role of parental involvement in students' learning. Fan (2001) studied the effect of parental involvement on students' academic growth during high school and found that select dimensions of parental involvement had a consistent and positive effect on students' academic growth. More specifically, a significant positive relationship was found between parental aspirations for students' education attainment and their academic achievement.

The findings related to parental involvement and academic achievement are, however, controversial. Research supports the claim that student learning and achievement may be more sensitive to variations in parental availability. Several studies suggest that student achievement appears to be directly related to the time parents spend in the learning process with their child and/or the types of involvement activities (i.e. at-home vs. at-school involvement and parental support for and encouragement in the learning process) (Goldberg, Greenberger & Nagel, 1996; Shumow & Miller, 2001).

Studies focusing on the effects of maternal employment are also contradictory. Goldberg et al. (1996) reported that male students from middle class families whose mothers worked were more likely to experience low achievement test scores. Male students appeared to be more vulnerable when faced with less parental supervision and involvement. Similarly, another study found that girls whose mothers had worked extensively during their first year of life displayed fewer problem behaviors than boys

whose mothers worked during the same time period (Barglow, Contreras, Kavesh, & Vaughn, 1998). Spera (2005) found that adolescent achievement was a product of parental involvement and monitoring but warranted further research across cultures and socioeconomic status. On the other hand, Bianchi (2000) reported little if any negative effects of maternal employment on children's academic achievement and emotional adjustment.

The opposite of parental emotional responsiveness and high levels of sensitivity can create profoundly negative effects in infant emotional responses. Emotional unavailability has been found to be more distressing to infants in a clinical setting than physical absence of the parent. Furthermore, emotional unavailability occurred when the mother remained unresponsive to her infant despite her physical presence in the room. Other studies have documented similar negative outcomes of parental emotional unavailability not only with infants but preschoolers and older children as well. Studies have shown that parents continue to assert influence on the emotional and behavioral development of their children even as they mature into adolescents and young adults (Lum & Phares, 2005). This continued parental influence constructs the groundwork for further investigations into the impact of parental emotional availability on adolescent learning and behavior.

Significant findings have been reported about the positive relationship between parental emotional availability and child attachment as well as parental involvement and student achievement. However, the majority of parent-child research has emphasized the mother-child interaction virtually neglecting the fathers' behaviors and potential impact on the child's early development. More recently, however, the role of the father in



infant/child attachment has become a focus for researchers interested in the topic of emotional availability (Volling, McElwain, Notaro, & Herrera, 2002). Lum and Phares (2005) reported that mothers and fathers appear to have “similarities in the types of bonds they have with their offspring” (p. 222). Simply stated, fathers appear to play a unique and important role in the emotional and behavioral development of infants and children, a role worthy of further investigation.

While physical time spent with a child in the learning process has rendered some significant results in relation to student achievement, more research is needed to determine if, in fact, emotional availability is a key factor in helping students achieve academically and persist to high school graduation. Further investigation is also necessary to see if parental emotional availability offsets any effect produced by physical unavailability.

Research on parental emotional availability and involvement and the effects on students’ achievement have valuable implications for understanding parent-child relations as well as developing effective school programming. Counselors who work with adolescent student populations may gain insight into the significant roles both mothers and fathers play on their child’s learning and achievement. It is critical for counselors to be aware of the social dynamics and cultural differences in their schools and communities in order to implement programming appropriately. Counselors should also be cognizant of the differences in parenting styles and how this factor may impact students’ behavior and learning potential. When negative outcomes are apparent, intervention strategies in schools and within the community must be implemented.

## Purpose

Attachment, and more recently the emotional availability of parents, has been discussed extensively in the research literature; however, assessment has been limited primarily to clinical laboratory observations between infants and parents, and primarily mothers. Emotional availability has rarely been evaluated quantitatively especially among older children, adolescents, and young adults. The limited research findings may be due to the difficulty and rather subjective nature of assessing parental emotional availability as opposed to more objective physical involvement; however, the current study will attempt to investigate such a relationship.

The purpose of the current study is to quantitatively examine the relationship between both maternal and paternal emotional availability and students' academic achievement using the Lum Emotional Availability of Parents (LEAP) Scale. In addition, students' gender and race will be explored as moderating factors in the relationship between parental emotional availability and academic achievement.

## Significance of Study

Researchers continue to debate about the most significant influences on students' academic achievement. Studies have resulted in conflicting outcomes with regard to such parental behaviors as maternal employment (Goldberg et al., 1996; Spera, 2005; Bianchi, 2000). Paulson (1996) and Goldberg et al. also assert that parenting style and parental involvement, student gender, and socioeconomic status all contribute to differences in student achievement. Although numerous factors have revealed relationships with academic achievement, most researchers agree on one premise: parents play a significant role in how their children learn, perform, and persist in school.

Much research has focused on the parenting styles as well as physical presence of parents both at-home and in-school and their impact on students' academic achievement. Several studies have shown the positive influence of parental emotional availability on infants' security of attachment (Biringen et al., 2000b). Although the number of studies examining the impact of parental emotional availability on a number of child and adolescent behaviors has increased in recent years, little is known about the effect of parental emotional availability on students' academic achievement. This is surprising given the attention placed on academic achievement and that the period of adolescence is characterized by numerous developmental changes which inevitably influence or are influenced by models of attachment. This research has the potential to bridge the gap in research findings between clinical observations in infants and attachment and the extensive research on parental involvement and academic achievement by providing evidence of a relationship between parental emotional availability and students' academic achievement using a quantitative measure.

In order to quantify the research findings regarding parental emotional availability, this study will utilize the Lum Emotional Availability of Parents (LEAP) scale. The information gathered from the LEAP will be combined and compared with measures of academic achievement, i.e. current grade point average (GPA) and high school graduation status. The measured information will also be compared to demographic information such as gender, race, extracurricular involvement and other sources of social support. The collection of students' overall GPA and high school graduation status will be used to determine the relationship between parental emotional availability and academic achievement. Furthermore, collection of the demographic

measures will help to determine if students' perceptions of maternal and/or paternal emotional availability and the relationship to academic achievement differ among students' gender, race and various variables of social support.

The LEAP shows good psychometric qualities with regard to reliability and validity (Lum & Phares, 2005). In particular, the LEAP scale assesses adolescents' perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' emotional availability separately. The instrument addresses the changing family constellation by including adoptive and step-parents when assessing perceived parental emotional availability. "Emotional availability appears malleable through educational and clinical interventions, so preventative interventions may be helpful in reducing the risk for the development of children's emotional/behavioral problems" (p. 224). The LEAP appears useful in determining parental emotional availability. Implications for parents, school counselors and counselor educators can then be determined upon the research findings.

#### Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

- (1) Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school graduation status?
- (2) Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school grade point average (GPA)?
- (3) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student gender?
- (4) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student race?

- (5) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ as a function of maternal vs. paternal emotional availability?

#### Definition of Terms

- (1) Academic achievement: dependent variable of the current study as indicated by students' GPA and graduation status (pass/fail) based on four sections of a standardized state high school graduation exam.
- (2) Attachment: associated with the degree to which a parent expresses emotional availability and promotes emotional regulation in childhood (Easterbrooks et al., 2000).
- (3) Attachment theory: developed by John Bowlby, the theory states "experience with a caregiver who is emotionally accessible and responsive is an essential component of helping infants come to regulate their own emotions adaptively" (Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000, p. 123).
- (4) Emotional availability: "a relational construct involving the emotional expression and responsiveness of both partners in a relationship" (Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000, p. 123); Emotional availability refers to a relationship on a continuum between parent and child.
- (5) Lum Emotional Availability of Parents (LEAP) Scale: a scale used to measure students' perceptions of parental emotional availability.
- (6) Parental emotional availability: based on parental behavior in the presence of a child which involves responsiveness, sensitivity, and involvement (Lum &

Phares, 2005). Perceptions of parental emotional availability will be measured using the LEAP scale.

- (7) Parental involvement: related to and often correlated with parental emotional availability; parental involvement refers to participation by a parent or parents in an activity with a child; for the purposes of this study, physical participation by or presence of a parent or parents does not necessarily purport parental emotional availability.

### Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the current study. The concepts of emotional availability and academic achievement are discussed and briefly defined. Attachment theory is presented and provides the foundation for the relational construct of emotional availability. Academic achievement is an important factor in learning and development as well as school programming, career development, and life planning. The concepts will be discussed in depth and compared to examine the possible relationship between the two. The purpose of the study, significance of the study, measures used and definition of terms are also discussed.

CHAPTER 2  
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The complexity of human relations and bonding has fascinated learning and personality theorists for decades. Interest in studying the formation of early interpersonal relations has resulted in a number of theoretical approaches to learning and development. Terms such as “object relations” and “dependency” have often been used to describe an infant’s relationship with his or her mother (Ainsworth, 1969). However, the original works by John Bowlby (1958, 1969/1982) and Mary Salter Ainsworth (1969) first described parent-child, and primarily mother-child, relational development in terms of “attachment.” Bowlby described attachment behaviors as separate from other instincts such as feeding and sexual activity; the development of attachment is viewed as a survival behavior rooted in the social and emotional connections to a specific other, human or animal. More recently termed *emotional availability*, (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975), this emotional attunement between caregiver and child supports the theory held by early learning theorists and psychoanalysts: emotional bonds and relations are created between individuals in order to reduce primary human drives (i.e. food for infants). In essence, humans need other humans to meet their needs (Biringen, 1994). From this, emotional availability has developed into a valid construct predictive of individual’s behavior and performance.

Konrad Lorenz, the Austrian ethologist who dedicated much of his life studying the phenomenon of “imprinting,” was renowned for his work with greylag geese. Lorenz described filial imprinting as the process by which young precocial birds learn to attach or bond to the first recognizable object they see just after hatching (Lorenz, 1952; Johnson, 1992). Through his research with geese hatched in an incubator, Lorenz discovered that this recognition and bonding process occurred approximately 36 hours after hatching, or within a “critical period.” Serving as the prominent figure for his laboratory geese during this critical period, the goslings would imprint on Lorenz himself and subsequently follow his lead (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Biringen, 1994). Lorenz’s research demonstrates not only the innate process by which imprinting occurs but the importance of early relational development between an infant and caregiver.

Beginning in the 1950’s, research shifted many theorists’ views that emotions were adaptive processes rather than “disruptive states” (Emde, 2000). Based on this new framework, individual development was seen as an active psychobiological system rather than a passive stimulus-response system. Adaptation in terms of *motivation* and *communication* became key ingredients to understanding emotional functioning and set the stage for continued research on individual differences and caregiving relationships. Recognizing the importance of early relational development, specifically between mother and child, and realizing the commonalities with Bowlby’s attachment theory, Emde (1980) pioneered the research on emotional availability. Through further development of the relational construct, the first Emotional Availability (EA) scales were created in 1988 and since revised twice, in 1993 and 1998 (Emde, 1980; Biringen & Robinson, 1991).



## Attachment Theory

Related to Lorenz's work with imprinting, Bowlby (1958), and later Ainsworth (1969), described this process of infant-caregiver bonding in terms of early mother-child interactions. Bowlby's mother-child laboratory observations led to the development of his theory of attachment -- children form attachments to caregivers, primarily mothers, early in life (Easterbrooks, 1989; Biringen, 1994), and they develop behaviors to attain or retain proximity to the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1980; Biringen). Subsequently, he also found Lorenz's descriptions of mother-child separation, distress and proximity seeking in his geese experiments remarkably similar to those of young children (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Attachment is not only viewed as a biological function of the infant but also as a fundamental feature of early interactions and experiences between the child and caregiver (Emde, 2000). Many assert that this early interaction is critical in the cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral development of children (Lum & Phares, 2005; Main & Weston, 1981) and the future development of adolescents and adults (Phares & Renk, 1998).

According to Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth (1969), secure attachments lead to a willingness to explore the environment while insecure attachments lead to negative behaviors and diminished affect (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). More specifically, Bowlby (1969/1982) postulated that attachment in human relationships, particularly in the mother-child dyad, develops slowly during the child's first year of life. This attachment system creates the secure base from which the child is able to leave the care of the mother or caregiver and explore the surrounding environment (Easterbrooks, 1989; Biringen, 1994). Exploration continues freely until the distance between the mother and

child increases to a certain point; when the child experiences fear and distress, activation of the attachment system behaviors results. As separation and distress increase, so do the resulting attachment behaviors; following or clinging to the attachment figure may occur along with calling or crying (Bowlby, 1980). The child then seeks closer proximity to the mother in order to reduce the anxiety, the ultimate goal being “to maintain certain degrees of proximity to, or of communication with, the discriminated attachment figure(s)” (Bowlby, p. 40).

A balance continues between the two systems, activation of attachment and exploratory, and changes according to the contextual factors intrinsic in the situation. Bowlby (1980) postulated whereas attachment bonds are enduring, the various attachment behaviors that contribute to the development of those bonds are active only when necessary. Strangeness, fatigue, unavailability or unresponsiveness of the attachment figure or caregiver can activate the mediating behaviors of the attachment system; depending on the arousal strength of the attachment behavior(s), termination of the behaviors may require a familiar environment or availability, responsiveness, touching or active reassurance on the part of the caregiver. This delicate balance between attachment activation and exploration early in life is considered paramount in developing secure and healthy human relations later in life. Furthermore, Bowlby asserted that if a child had not formed an attachment by the age of three, he or she “may never be able to form or to maintain stable attachments (Biringen, 1994, p. 405).

Bowlby’s theory of attachment resulted from numerous studies and case observations of mother-infant and mother-child separation and maternal deprivation. During World War II, observations of children placed in hospital wards and residential

nurseries showed common and predictable patterns of behavior during periods of maternal separation. Bowlby (1969/1982, 1980) termed these three behavioral phases of separation: (1) protest, (2) despair and (3) detachment. Based on his observations, the initial phase of protest occurred almost immediately upon separation from the mother. This phase lasted several hours to a week or more. The child cried loudly and expressed extreme distress by flailing and throwing him or herself around; the combination of these apparent negative feelings and subsequent behaviors depicted what is commonly known as “separation anxiety.” These characteristics of extreme sadness and distress were accompanied by proximity seeking behaviors. The child looked eagerly toward “any sight or sound which might prove to be his missing mother” (Bowlby, 1980, p. 9; Field cited in Brazelton & Yogman, 1986, p. 125).

The following phase of despair was characterized by a sense of helplessness. A consistent desire for the mother’s return did not diminish; however, the child’s hope of her return becoming a reality decreased significantly (Bowlby, 1980). Intermittent crying and fewer physical movements suggested the child’s increasing social and emotional withdrawal. Interestingly, persistent longing for the missing mother was often accompanied by intense, generalized hostility toward others. Bowlby believed the origins of this anger and hostility were most likely directed toward the missing mother. Robertson (1953 cited in Bowlby) provides a vivid and emotional description for children aged eighteen to twenty-four months who experienced this second phase of despair:

If a child is taken from his mother’s care at this age, when he is so possessively and passionately attached to her, it is indeed as if his world had been shattered. His intense need of her is unsatisfied, and the frustration and longing may send

him frantic with grief. It takes an exercise of imagination to sense the intensity of this distress. He is as overwhelmed as any adult who has lost a beloved person by death. To the child of two with his lack of understanding and complete inability to tolerate frustration it is really as if his mother had died. He does not know death, but only absence; and if the only person who can satisfy his imperative need is absent, she might as well be dead, so overwhelming is his sense of loss. (p. 10)

The last phase, detachment, was characterized by the absence of any attachment behavior upon the first meeting of the mother's return. This phenomenon was generally observed in a child between the ages of approximately six months and three years who had spent a week or more away from the mother's care and was not being cared for "by a specially assigned substitute" (Bowlby, 1980, p. 20). The child appeared to become more sociable by no longer seeming to reject other caregivers in close proximity. In fact, new relationships were sought as the child smiled and appeared to welcome the interaction. Upon the mother's return, however, the child did not greet her enthusiastically. Rather, "the child remained remote and apathetic; instead of tears there was a listless turning away, as if the child had 'lost all interest in her'" (Bowlby, 1969, cited in Brazelton & Yogman, 1986 p. 125). Conversely, if the child was able to find and relate to another "mother-figure," a secure attachment formed. If the child was unable to relate to a single attachment figure or related only briefly to multiple others, he or she became "increasingly self-centered and prone to make transient and shallow relationships with all and sundry" (Bowlby, p. 14).

Other children during the war who were separated from their mothers were fortunate to move together in groups from camp to camp. Remaining in a peer group

appears to have partially compensated for the anxiety-related feelings and behaviors associated with the parental separation. Children in these instances displayed strong attachments to each other and expressed distress when they were separated from the group (Brazelton & Yogman, 1986). In these cases, attachment to a parent, primarily the mother, appears necessary for an infant's sense of security; however, there is evidence that attachment to another significant caregiver or group can mitigate the effects of separation anxiety to a certain extent. Bowlby's (1969/1982) observations clearly demonstrate the relationship between caregiver interaction and infant and child response and reveal the importance of early attachments and how they impact relational development over the lifespan.

### *The Strange Situation*

In the Ainsworth Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), variations in infant attachment were noticed as a result of a history of infant-parent interactions. The quality of the infant-parent relationship differed based on the quality of parental care provided and not on innate infant characteristics (Borkowski, Ramey & Bristol-Power, 2002). In essence, Ainsworth's research supports that variations in attachment relationships are predicted by caregiver sensitivity early in the development of the relationship and not by infant temperament or other genetically-based traits.

Bowlby and Ainsworth postulated that the development of relationships early in a child's life played a significant role in how relationships develop later in life. Bowlby's numerous mother-child observations (1958, 1969) and Ainsworth and Bell's (1970) Strange Situation study showed a strong positive correlation between mother-child separation and increased levels of anxiety and stress. These relationship-oriented

attachment studies are supported by much of the research on separation anxiety and proximity seeking in children (Biringen, 1994; Svanberg, 1998) as well as in mothers (Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992) and highlight the critical importance of the mother's role in early parent-child bonding and attachment.

Emphasis is placed on the nature and history of the parent-child relationship in determining how children will respond to parental separation. Generally responsive mothers tend to have children who “eagerly approach [them] when distressed to seek comfort; children whose mothers have been rejecting attempt to cope with distress on their own; children who have been treated inconsistently may mix seeking and resisting proximity” (Kochanska & Coy, 2002, p. 228). More specifically, the securely attached infant is able to operate from a secure base while maintaining a smooth balance between proximity-seeking and independent exploration prior to separation; the balance continues with distress during separation, contact-seeking, and contact-maintaining. He or she is also easily soothed when reunited with the attachment figure. On the contrary, when faced with a stressful situation such as separation or maternal deprivation, the insecurely attached infant may exhibit one of three coping styles: avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized (Biringen, 1994). Numerous studies of the strange situation have been replicated across the United States and worldwide and continue to result in similar findings (Ainsworth, et al., 1978; Main & Weston, 1981; Fox, Kimmerly & Schafer, 1991; Kerns, Tomich, Aspelmeier, and Contreras, 2000).

The emphasis on parent-child relations as they impact attachment behaviors is in contrast with studies focusing on individual differences in child emotionality or personality. Some researchers propose that the behavior of the child in response to

parental separation depends primarily on the child's innate qualities (Kochanska & Coy, 2002; Sroufe, 1985). The controversy continues between relationship-oriented research and researchers citing individual differences in personality as the primary indicator for behavioral manifestations in children. For the purposes of this article, individual differences in child, and more specifically young adult, temperament and personality as they relate to attachment behaviors will not be explored.

### *Attachment and Fathers*

Although significant findings have pointed to the positive relationship between parental involvement and child attachment, the majority of parent-child studies have emphasized the mother-child interaction virtually neglecting paternal behaviors and their potential impact on the child's early development. Nearly 30 years ago, Bowlby (1979) realized the fabric of the workforce had dramatically changed. Women had moved into professions once dominated by men and made up a significant and vital sector of the workforce. Childcare had become more of a joint effort and responsibility between mothers and fathers, and the needs of women and mothers had been altered. However, with the changing roles in society that are even more pronounced today, mothers are still held responsible for the positive outcomes, and more notably the problems, that develop in children's lives. Attention is rarely given to the positive influence, and even less to the potential negative consequences, of fathers' behaviors on children's mental health (Phares, 1996/1999). From this, research has continued to focus primarily on mother-child interactions in assessing attachment, bonding and separation behaviors (Bowlby, 1958; Ainsworth, 1969). Research involving fathers has often been combined with that of "parents" but rarely studied alone. When reviewing the literature published between 1984

and 1991 on child and family clinical issues, researchers found that “fathers were clearly underrepresented” (Phares, Fields, Kamboukos & Lopez, 2005, p. 735).

Similar to Ainsworth’s Strange Situation study, Main and Weston (1981) conducted a study involving 61 infants with their mothers and fathers. In terms of attachment, infants determined to be “non-secure” with mothers but “secure” with fathers generally interacted with the stranger in a more responsive and congenial way than those infants who were “non-secure” with both parents. The researchers postulated that infants are capable of developing a variety of attachment relationships with people assuming they have sufficient opportunity to interact, and subsequently, attach. In addition, the researchers suggested that secure relationships were able to mitigate or buffer the negative effects of insecure relationships (Field cited in Brazelton & Yogman, 1986). These results are supported by Bowlby’s (1969/1982) description of attachment in terms of commitment; both parties – whether parent-child or another significant individual – in the social relationship must be committed to each other for secure attachment to occur. Particularly in cases of parental absence, the positive effects of developing other attachment relationships are encouraging.

In addition to infants, the role of attachment with older children has also been considered in the research involving fathers. Cohn, Patterson, and Christopoulos (1991) suggested that father-child attachments become even more important in middle childhood. In a study of fathers and mothers, researchers studied the relationships between 176 children (9 – 12 years of age) and their parents. The researchers observed and assessed the child’s perception of security, avoidant and preoccupied coping strategies, and state of mind with respect to attachment. Mother’s and father’s willingness



to serve as an attachment figure was also considered in the assessment and rated in terms of responsiveness. Results showed that emotional bonds were identified and established in much the same way between mother-child and father-child. These emotional bonds were also consistent over time. However, mother-child attachment was related in terms of emotional health and father-child attachment was related to behavior regulation. These unique bonds likely lead to the development of different, yet vital, life skills and personal attributes (i.e. increased self-esteem leading to confidence versus social and emotion-regulation skills) (Kerns et al., 2000). In all, fathers appear to play a unique and important role in the emotional and behavioral development of infants, children, and adolescents, a role worthy of further investigation (Biringen & Robinson, 1991; Emde, 2000).

#### *Attachment and Emotional Development*

Similar to mother-infant or -child connectedness and attachment behaviors, the connection between parental behaviors and a child's emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development has also fueled the interest of researchers (Sroufe in Borkowski, Ramey & Bristol-Powers, 2002). Understanding the nature and quality of parent-child interactions has proven important in understanding how children feel, think and behave (Wiefel, Wollenweber, Oepen, Lenz, Lehmkuhl, & Biringen, 2005). Bowlby's observations led him to theorize that infants suffering from insecure attachments were more likely to be characterized as "affectionless" or engage in delinquent behaviors later in life (Bowlby, 1958; Ainsworth, 1969; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). More recent research cites isolation from parents as being one of the leading contributors to the emotional problems exhibited in children and adolescents (Levine, 2006).

Secure attachment is crucial to highly functional emotional development. The effects are observed beginning in infancy and persist throughout adulthood. Bowlby (1969/1982) offers an overall picture of an effective process of attachment:

A young child's experience of an encouraging, supportive and co-operative mother, and a little later father, gives him the sense of worth, a belief in the helpfulness of others, and favourable model on which to build future relationships. Furthermore, by enabling him to explore his environment with confidence and to deal with it effectively, such experience also promotes his sense of competence. Thenceforward, provided family relationships continue favourable, not only do these early patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour persist, but personality becomes increasingly structured to operate in moderately controlled and resilient ways, and increasingly capable of continuing so despite adverse circumstances. (p. 378)

Bowlby believed that emotionally attuned parents provided the framework for children to function effectively and live healthy and productive lives despite adversity.

#### *Attachment and Learning*

Parents' involvement in their child's academic environment has been cited by some researchers as the fundamental building block for ensuring adequate social and emotional learning (Elias cited in Elias & Arnold, 2006). Children who form more secure attachments tend to have less difficulty interacting socially (Granot & Mayseless, 2001) and demonstrate "greater curiosity and confidence when working on challenging tasks" (Kern et al, 2000, p. 614). Another study found that secure children demonstrated better search behaviors at age one and larger vocabularies at 19 months. They were also more

likely to pass a test assessing understanding of others' minds at age four than their insecure peers (Larose, Bernier & Tarabulsky, 2005).

A study of 108 school-aged children (6 years of age) assessed the affective quality of mother-child interaction patterns, child cognitive engagement, and the quality of child attachment to the mother. Academic performance, measured by language and mathematics grades obtained from end-of-year report cards, was assessed 2 years later (at age 8). Results showed that secure children scored higher than their peers who were determined insecure on communication and cognitive engagement (Moss & St.-Laurent, 2001).

Sroufe (cited in Borkowski, Ramey & Bristol-Powers, 2002) and colleagues concluded after a 26-year longitudinal study of individual development that “nothing is more important for the child’s development than the quality of care received” (p. 187). Other studies have noted the positive correlation between parental support and general academic attainment as well as academic persistence among young children, early and late adolescents, and young adults (Bell, Allen, Hauser & O’Conner, 1996; Peng, 1994; Fass & Tubman, 2002). In sum, research supports that the connection between parent and child is one of the most, and often cited as *the* most, important factors when assessing learning and development.

### *Attachment Perspectives*

When studying attachment, researchers typically depend on laboratory observations along with individual perceptions of the attachment relationship. One criticism by researchers interested in the field has been the neglect of the parental perspective on the attachment relationship. In other words, the attachment research has

focused primarily on the child's need for safety and security often ignoring parental needs and relational outcomes related to attachment (Bretherton, Biringen, Ridgeway, Maslin, & Sherman, 1989).

In a longitudinal, qualitative study involving thirty-seven mothers, researchers asked open-ended questions about the mothers' perceptions of attachment and attachment relationships with their two- and three-year-old children. The mothers expressed poignant thoughts and feelings about their experiences in the attachment relationship. Overall, they expressed experiencing difficulty when balancing the desire to foster their child's autonomy (secure base) while supporting him/her emotionally (safe haven). Similar to attachment studies focused on child responses, most mothers exhibited, in some form, the characteristic attachment behavior of proximity seeking and experienced mild discomfort during separation episodes (Bretherton, et al., 1989; Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992). Additional research would promote a greater understanding of parental perspectives of attachment relationships with children and provide an alternative to laboratory observations and interpretations.

#### Emotional Availability

For years since and including the Bowlby and Ainsworth's studies on mother-child interactions, the attachment research has focused on the effects of parental attunement only when the child exhibited signs of distress. However, since the early 1980s, the focus has broadened to include assessing parental emotional interaction with their child across a wide range of emotions, both negative as well as positive (Biringen, 2000; Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000; Lum & Phares, 2005). In essence, researchers have more recently become interested in assessing not only how parents react to their child

when he or she is upset or angry but also when the child is content or expresses joy or excitement. This parental attunement to or engagement with a child and the child's responsiveness, regardless of the child's emotional state, is termed by many researchers as *emotional availability* (Mahler, et al, 1975; Biringen, 2000; Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000; Biringen, Robinson, & Emde; 2000b).

The construct of emotional availability represents a central ingredient in the quality of parent-child relations. Lum and Phares (2005) posit that healthy parenting depends upon the parameters outlined by the relational construct of emotional availability. Although research has led to varying conclusions regarding the specific qualities constituting emotionally available parents and provides somewhat different conceptualizations of emotional availability, the primary tenets include "parental responsiveness, sensitivity, and emotional involvement" (Lum & Phares, p. 211).

Mahler et al., (1975) first coined the phrase and described the construct in terms of the degree to which a mother (and later in the research father) expresses love, encouragement and supportiveness in the parent-child relationship. These parental qualities and behaviors provide the "emotional refueling" necessary for the child to explore his or her environment with confidence. Through observational studies, the researchers concluded that higher levels of perceived parental emotional availability led to the child's increased willingness to explore while developing a more secure bond between the parent and child.

Biringen, Robinson, and Emde (2000b) outlined emotional availability across six dimensions, and subsequently developed six scales, of the parent-child interactions: four involving the parent toward the child and two involving the child toward the parent. The

four parental dimensions are sensitivity, structuring, nonintrusiveness, and nonhostility, and the two child dimensions are the child's responsiveness to the parent and the child's involvement with the parent. The dimensions of emotional availability are described as variables intrinsic in specific relationships, i.e. the relationship between the parent and child; the researchers view the construct "as indexed by particular styles in a relationship context" (p. 257) and do not define it in terms of a trait or personal characteristic.

The development of the six scales incorporated observational techniques and assessment procedures adopted from Bowlby's (1969/1982) laboratory observations and subsequent attachment theory and Ainsworth's et al. (1978) Strange Situation study. Dimensions of parental emotional availability were originally developed by Ainsworth (1991) and later adapted and refined to the named six by Biringen, et al., (2000a; 2000b) and Easterbrooks and Biringen (2000).

The first dimension, sensitivity, is defined by several components: a parent's awareness of and responsiveness to the child, affective quality of the parent-child interactions, quality of conflict negotiation, and creativity and variety during play. Highly sensitive parents display "genuine, authentic, and congruent interest, pleasure and amusement" (Biringen, et al., 2000b, p. 257). These feelings and emotions are demonstrated through smiles and giggles that are timely in nature and attuned to the specific needs of the child. Children reciprocate this apparent emotional connection through gestures of excitement and joy. A special quality exists between the parent and child when the parent engages in the highly sensitive care-giving described. In contrast, a parent who is behaviorally or physically available yet not emotionally present or attuned to the child's signaling is not viewed as highly sensitive (Biringen, et al., 2000b).

Researchers are careful to note that warmth is not synonymous with sensitivity; when a parent displays warm affect yet couples it with controlling or “infantilization” behaviors (i.e. treating the child as if he/she is much younger than his or her actual age or performing tasks for the child that he/she is capable of performing), enmeshment can result in the parent-child relationship (Biringen, et al., 2000b). In the same vein, Levine (2006) argues that praise does not constitute parental warmth. Parents often use “praise” to push an agenda of achievement or to bolster a child’s poor sense of self; however, a warm parent, according to the author, unconditionally accepts accomplishments as well as failures.

The second parental dimension described by Biringen et al. (2000b) is structuring. The researchers define structuring as the parent’s ability to construct and organize the parent-child interaction in a way that maintains the child’s engagement but is not overpowering or overprotective. Appropriate limits are set for the child’s behavior, and the establishment of rules along with adherence to these rules is apparent. Related to Bowlby’s description of the relationship between attachment activation and exploration, optimal structuring establishes an appropriate balance between the child’s ability to explore and a supportive base from which the child is able to successfully work and interact. Discipline or limit-setting is firm, not harsh. A certain degree of scaffolding is critical in successfully structuring the parent-child interaction to ensure increased levels of motivational and cognitive functioning (Biringen & Robinson, 1991); a parent following the child’s lead is balanced with necessary and appropriate assistance (Biringen et al., 2000b).

Combined with structuring in earlier scale development but later separated into an independent dimension, nonintrusiveness is the ability of the parent to be available and involved in the interaction without infringing on the child's autonomy (Biringen, Robinson & Emde, 2000b). Like structuring, nonintrusiveness is influenced by the child's reactions to the parent and considered essential to emotionally available parenting. During a parent-child interaction, the parent is available but not overpowering; a spacious quality exists to the interaction, and "the parent is...emotionally available without necessarily doing something to the child (Biringen et al., 2000b, p. 264).

The fourth and final parental dimension of emotional availability is nonhostility. Nonhostility is defined as parental communication and behavior that is not abrasive, impatient, or antagonistic either directly toward the child or in general. Optimum nonhostility reasons that a parent is able to successfully regulate his or her emotions during parent-child interactions. A nonhostile climate is apparent in the environment and relationally between the parent and child. Conversely, signs of covert parental hostility are impatience, discontent, boredom, resentment, eye-rolling, teasing, or raising the voice. Parents who are easily irritated by a child and subsequently "snap back" are said to be displaying covert hostility. This style of communication can often lead to overt hostility including facial and/or verbal harshness or abrasiveness; threatening or frightening behavior is also apparent (Biringen et al., 2000a).

Parents who engage in behaviors consistent with an authoritarian style typically engage in more hostile forms of communication with their children; rather than being responsive to their child's needs, such parents tend to have unreasonably high expectations and are more demanding. A child's natural inclination to explore is stifled



resulting in a lack of curiosity. Studies have also shown that children from authoritarian homes often display overly dependent and more aggressive behaviors (Levine, 2006). All in all, secure attachment and ideal parent-child relations depend on the delicate balance that exists between parents setting clear limits while also encouraging autonomy (Larose, Bernier & Tarabulsy, 2005).

The four parent dimensions of emotional availability described by Biringen et al., (2000a) outline a process by which the researchers observed participants in a laboratory setting and made generalized assessments using “contextual cues and clinical judgment to infer the appropriateness of behaviors” (p. 256), namely the parents’. However, the construct of emotional availability is an interdependent quality of relation between parent and child and would not be complete without the two child dimensions: child responsiveness to parent and child involvement with parent. These two dimensions complement the four dimensions describing the emotional signaling of the parent to the child with the signaling of the child to the parent (Lum & Phares, 2005).

Two aspects of the child’s behavior reflect the level of child responsiveness to the parent: (1) a suggestion or offer for exchange followed by the child’s eagerness or willingness to engage with the parent; and (2) the display of clear signs of pleasure in the interaction. Optimal responsiveness is observed when the child displays a balance between responsiveness to the parent and autonomous pursuits. The child generally responds eagerly and with pleasure to the parent’s bid for interaction but without a sense of urgency or necessity (Biringen, et al., 2000b; 2000a).

Child involvement with the parent measures the degree to which the child attends to and engages the parent in interaction or play. Optimal involving behaviors suggest a

balance between the child's autonomous play and interest in engaging the parent in play. The child can draw the parent into play by seeking an audience or requesting assistance, but the manner in which the child seeks the attention lacks urgency. The interaction with the parent appears more important than the task at hand although, ideally, a balance exists between the two (Biringen & Robinson, 1991).

Supporting the notions of child responsiveness in relation to parental structuring and nonintrusiveness, a study conducted by Sorce and Emde (1981) involved forty 15-month old infants and their mothers. The researchers were interested in assessing the role of the mother's availability in prompting and promoting infant interest and exploration. They hypothesized that a mother's signaling of unavailability would reduce her infant's interest in her as well as exploration of the environment. Half of the mothers were engaged in an ambiguous situation: reading a newspaper with their faces in full view but their attention fully engaged in reading. As the infants bid for their attention, the mothers remained unresponsive and continued to engage in the reading exercise. The other mothers served as a nonreading group and watched their infants while responding sensitively to their requests for attention. Results showed that infants were involved in higher levels of exploratory play and displayed greater pleasure when mothers were sensitive and responsive, i.e. emotionally available, to them than when mothers were merely present but uninvolved. Studies have shown that parents continue to assert influence on the emotional and behavioral development of their children even as they mature into adolescents and young adults (Lum & Phares, 2005). This continued parental influence constructs the groundwork for further investigations into the impact of parental emotional availability on adolescent learning and behavior.

The opposite of parental emotional responsiveness and high levels of sensitivity have shown profoundly negative effects on infant emotional responses (Lum & Phares, 2005) and attachment behaviors (Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000; Aviezer, Sagi, Joels & Ziv, 1999; Sroufe, 2005). In a clinical laboratory study, mothers were asked to simulate emotional unavailability by displaying a depressed demeanor and refraining from any facial expression. From the perceived emotional unavailability, infants displayed emotional distress, even more distress than when the parent was physically absent. Other studies have documented similar negative outcomes of parental emotional unavailability not only with infants but older children and adolescents as well (Lieberman, Doyle & Markiewicz, 1999; Levine, 2006).

As stated earlier, the research on emotional availability involving fathers has been limited. However, the role of the father in infant/child attachment has more recently become a focus for researchers interested in the topic of emotional availability (Biringen & Robinson, 1991; Emde, 2000). Researchers in one study observed both mothers and fathers in free play and teaching sessions with their 12-month old children to examine parents' emotional availability and infants' emotional competence. Results showed, "Fathers' early emotional availability was significantly related to the development of young children's emergent self-regulation and early forms of internalization" (Volling, McElwain, Notaro, & Herrera, 2002, p. 462).

Lum and Phares (2005) reported that mothers and fathers appear to develop and maintain similar types of bonds with their offspring. Another study showed that perceptions of paternal emotional availability were a particularly important predictor of lower levels of peer conflict for children and adolescents (Lieberman, et al., 1999).

Overall, contributions by both parents are significant in influencing the child's ability to regulate emotions (Aviezer, et al., 1999) and attach securely (Main & Weston, 1981; Fox, et al., 1991; Kerns, et al., 2000), but additional research specific to fathers is warranted.

The descriptions and definitions of emotional availability are grounded in Bowlby's theory of attachment as described earlier. More recent research on attachment theory posits that as parental emotional availability increases, child attachment security and responsiveness to the parent also increases (Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000; Emde, 2000; Lum & Phares, 2005). Although definitions differ, the relational construct of emotional availability bears some common threads across all systems. Emotional availability describes (1) aspects and the quality of the parent-child relationship with regard to emotional signaling and responding (Biringen & Robinson, 1991; Emde, 2000); and (2) an interdependent relational quality between parent and child (Lum & Phares, 2005). Accordingly, much theoretical and empirical evidence exists regarding the relationship between highly emotionally involved parents and a child's greater sense of security (Bretherton, 2000; Lum & Phares).

#### Academic Achievement

Why do concerned individuals, schools, communities and lawmakers place so much emphasis on school persistence and academic achievement? Research shows that students who perform better academically tend to function more effectively socially, emotionally and financially in adulthood. Educational attainment has been touted as one of the, if not *the*, best predictor of future income. According to 2000 census data reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), a high school dropout earns 49% of what an average adult worker earns each year. That is, students who finish high school earn approximately

\$8500 more annually than those who drop out prior to graduation. Average wages increase dramatically for those who attain some level of higher education, from associate to graduate and professional degrees. In 2004, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2006), 10.3 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school credential, either diploma or GED. Therefore, it is apparent that a large percentage of young adults are either unemployed or earning low wages while suffering the devastating effects of not completing a high school education.

Leaving high school often leads to involvement with the penal system. Fifty percent of the prison population, or more than one million individuals, is made up of high school dropouts (Cassel, 2003). Academic achievement has also been described as an important 'protective factor' for adolescent substance use (Kostelecky, 2005). In sum, "perhaps no single event in the adolescent life course more strongly determines later social and economic success than dropping out of school" (South, Haynie & Bose, 2007, p. 69). So, understanding the variables which impact academic achievement and school resiliency is not only critical to the well-being of the learners themselves but the families, communities and economies impacted by those who perform below their potential.

Many social and environmental factors have been identified as being related to academic achievement. School mobility, or changing schools, has been shown to contribute to reduced academic performance and school completion. However, peer networks and the academic performance of those peers appears to moderate the effects of the mobility-dropout association (South et al., 2007). School attachment (Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, Jr., 2001; South et al., 2007; Becker & Luthar, 2002), teacher support

and peer values (Becker & Luthar, 2002) have also been shown to significantly influence school performance.

Emotional and psychological variables have also been linked to academic achievement. Larose, Bernier & Tarabulsky (2005) cite that students with a 'dismissing state of mind' perform poorer and achieve lower grades than those classified as 'autonomous.' In the study, a classification of 'dismissing' was negatively related to attachment security; therefore, more autonomous and secure individuals, in this case traditional-aged students transitioning to college, performed better academically.

The results of one study showed that cognitive ability was a significant predictor of college students' grade point averages; however, broader measures of functioning such as attachment, intellectual ability and self-esteem, were significant predictors of scholastic competence. Results suggest that perceived attachment to both parents and peers was a variable related to social competence and adjustment that may serve as protective or compensatory factors during key transitions in young adulthood, such as the demands for academic achievement.

Similar to studies on parental emotional availability and child responsiveness, many studies over the years have examined the role of parental involvement in the student learning process (Elias cited in Elias & Arnold, 2006). Although a large body of literature exists citing the importance of parental involvement in ensuring student academic achievement (Sroufe in Borkowski, Ramey & Bristol-Power, 2002), conflicting reports have surfaced. Questions regarding the definition of and ways to operationally measure "parental involvement" have given rise to inconsistencies (Fan, 2001; Fehrman, Keith & Reimers, 1987). Is there a relationship or difference between physical

involvement and emotional involvement? How do in-school and at-home involvement differ in their impact? Do gender, race and/or age significantly moderate the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement?

### *Parental Involvement and Academic Achievement*

Although high levels of parental involvement and monitoring have shown to predict success for children in many areas (Spera, 2005), both intrusion and overinvolvement “prevent the development of the kinds of skills that children need to be successful” (Levine, 2006, p. 139). Problem-solving skills, such as becoming a self-starter, engaging in trial-and-error learning, delaying gratification, tolerating frustration, showing self control, learning from mistakes, being flexible and thinking creatively, are inhibited when parents become overly and unnecessarily involved in their child’s social and academic lives (Levine, 2006). Studies have shown that parental involvement has led to positive outcomes for standardized tests and in-class grades as well as reading achievement with elementary school students (Fehrmann et al., 1987). Improved school performance and higher levels of student achievement are often associated with parents who are highly yet appropriately involved in the learning process (Beckar & Luthar, 2002; Fehrmann, et al.) while placing value on cooperation, social responsibility and self-regulation (Lee, Daniels & Kissinger, 2006; Spera, 2005).

Fan (2001) studied the effect of parental involvement on students’ academic growth during high school and found that select dimensions of parental involvement had a consistent and positive effect on students’ academic growth. More specifically, a significant positive relationship was found between parental aspirations for students’ education attainment and their academic achievement measured by performance on

achievement tests in the four academic subject areas: reading, math, science, and social studies. This study highlights one of the many definitions often used to describe parental involvement: parents' expectations of school performance. Other descriptors of parental involvement include verbal encouragement, interactions regarding schoolwork, direct reinforcement of improved academic performance, general academic guidance and support, students' perceptions of parental influence on after-high school plans, and students' perceptions of the degree to which their parents monitored their daily activities and school progress (Fehrmann et al., 1987).

Another study examined students' perceptions of parental demandingness and responsiveness and the potential relationship to students' academic achievement. Students' positive perceptions of these individual contextual factors were related to positive achievement outcomes (Marchant, Paulson & Rothlisberg, 2001). Regardless of the specific variables included in defining parental involvement, lawmakers, teachers, school administrators, parents, and students generally agree that parental involvement is critical to the academic success of students (Mundschenk & Foley, 1994).

The positive findings related to highly involved parenting and academic achievement are, however, controversial. Research supports the claim that student learning and achievement may be more sensitive to variations in parental availability. Several studies suggest that student achievement appears to be directly related to the time parents spend in the learning process with their child and/or the types of involvement activities (i.e. at-home vs. at-school involvement and parental support for and encouragement in the learning process) (Goldberg et al., 1996; Shumow & Miller, 2001).



Therefore, additional research critically examining variations in parental involvement is necessary.

Additional specific variables related to parental involvement have also surfaced in the literature. For instance, studies focusing on the effects of maternal employment on academic achievement have produced conflicting results. Goldberg et al. (1996) reported that male students from middle class families whose mothers worked were more likely to experience low achievement test scores. Male students appeared to be more vulnerable when faced with less parental supervision and involvement. Similarly, another study found that girls whose mothers had worked extensively during their first year of life displayed fewer problem behaviors than boys whose mothers worked during the same time period (Barglow, Contreras, Kavesh, & Vaughn, 1998). On the other hand, Bianchi (2000) reported little if any negative effects of maternal employment on children's academic achievement and emotional adjustment.

Parental involvement, specifically that of fathers, strongly supports enhanced emotional functioning for children (Lum & Phares, 2005). Research suggests this is particularly true for boys "as they tend to model their powerful but nurturant fathers' behavior and internalize his problem-solving abilities and manner of thinking" (Williams & Radin, 1993, p. 306). However, one study involving maternal employment and paternal involvement during a child's early years found that fathers who were highly involved had a negative impact on adolescents' academic achievement (Williams & Radin). Although the appeal for parental involvement in students' academic achievement is strong, some issues remain unresolved.

Spera (2005) found that adolescent achievement was positively related to parental involvement and monitoring but warranted further research across cultures and socioeconomic status. Although the research on attachment is extensive, the investigation of variables such as race and ethnicity as moderating factors related to learning and achievement has received less attention. Many studies have shown that secure attachment is critical to early learning, however, further research across cultures and races is necessary to determine the extent to which individual characteristics influence achievement and learning (Spera). One study examined attachment relationships in Israeli kibbutz children using the Emotional Availability scales as a framework. “Both mothers' attachment representations and infants' attachment classifications [were] associated with emotional availability in dyads as it [was] behaviorally observed in mother-infant interaction” (Aviezer et al., 1999, p. 817). Still, additional research is necessary to fill the research gap regarding diverse populations, attachment and emotional availability.

#### *Emotional Availability and Academic Achievement*

While the body of research correlating parental involvement and academic achievement is rich, much less is known about the relationship between the emotional availability of parents and a student's ability to perform scholastically. For the purposes of this study, parental involvement is defined and described in terms of emotional involvement or attunement, i.e. emotional availability, which may include the physical presence of a parent although not a prerequisite.

Lum and Phares (2005) found that parental emotional availability was consistently associated with child functioning regardless of the parent. They researchers sampled 745 children and adolescents and found that lower levels of parental emotional

availability were clearly related to higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems. Much of the research that exists on parental emotional availability with infants and young children supports these findings (Volling et al., 2002; Biringen, 2000; Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000). Furthermore, children's and adolescents' reports of parental emotional availability were correlated strongly with their parents', mothers and fathers, reports of their own emotional availability (Lum & Phares, 2005). This illustrates the importance of including parent's perspectives of the parent-child relationship when assessing the child's perception of parental emotional availability.

Research suggests that parental influence continues to have a significant impact even as young children mature into adolescents (Lum & Phares, 2005); however the majority of the research on emotional availability involves infants and young children. Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline and Russell (1994) conducted a study of 418 undergraduate college students to determine the extent to which perceived social support from parents predicted college grade point average (GPA) during the student's initial one to two years after leaving the parent's home. When controlling for academic aptitude (ACT scores), family achievement orientation, and family conflict, perceived parental social support, particularly reassurance of worth, predicted college GPA. Support found in other significant relationships (i.e. peers and romantic partners), was not predictive of GPA. Although the amount of variance in academic performance explained by parental social support was small, support from parents was a significantly predictor of scholastic achievement.

While physical time spent with a child in the learning process has rendered some significant results in relation to student achievement, more research is needed to

determine if, in fact, emotional availability is a key factor in helping students achieve academically and persist to high school completion. Numerous research studies have concluded that academic engagement and institutional connectedness correlate positively with high school retention (Johnson et al., 2001; Becker & Luthar, 2002). “Students who are engaged and attached to their schools do better academically, but higher achievement is also likely to enhance future efforts and draw students more closely into the school order” (Johnson et al., p. 320). This concept is not unique to the secondary school setting. Researchers have found that students who are academically engaged and closely connected with postsecondary institutions also tend to persist to graduation (Kuh, Shuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991).

However, much less is known about the factors that underlie the motivations to become academically engaged or personally connected to schools. Some believe that students who feel supported by their parents or other influential adults may be more apt to engage academically (Wong, Wiest & Cusick, 2002; Cutrona et al., 1994) and, in turn, persist to graduation. Others think that individual student characteristics or qualities provide the basis for understanding academic abilities and achievement (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Johnson et al., 2001). Still others have found that school climate and the external learning environment play important roles in shaping students’ abilities to achieve academically (Alspaugh, 1998; Lever, Sander, Lombardo, Randall, Alexrod, Rubenstein & Weist, 2004; Marchant et al., 2001).

More broadly, counselors who work with adolescent student populations may gain insight into the significant roles both mothers and fathers play on their child’s learning and achievement. “The importance of students’ supportive relationships and the

internalization of the messages conveyed to them underscore the need for a contextual view by school psychologists (and counselors) when consulting with parents and education staff regarding achievement concerns” (Marchant et al., 2001). The results of the numerous studies cited suggest that enhancing parental involvement in schools and perceived parental support may lead to enhanced academic achievement.

Parents, counselors and other school officials should also be cognizant of the developmental stages of adolescence and how these factors may impact students’ behavior and learning potential. Adolescence has been referred to as a period of unique transition (Roeser, Strobel & Quihuis, 2002) as well as a time of intense stress (Baustad, 1998; Ainslie & Shafer, 1996; Tatar, 1995; Windle, 1992). Many factors have been associated with this viewpoint to include: the developmental and environmental demands placed on adolescents such as increased academic workload and parental expectations (Baustad; Mailandt, 1998; Tatar; Windle); biological and physical changes such as physical growth and puberty (Rosen, Tacy, & Howell, 1990); and social tasks to include forming peer and intimate relationships as well as making career decisions (Baustad; Massey, 1998; Windle). Developmental theories such as Erikson’s psychosocial theory also suggest that adolescents move through a stage in life where they struggle between role confusion and creating an identity for themselves. The process of creating an identity is dynamic and guided by the question “Who am I?” For these reasons, the developmental factors affecting adolescents’ relationships with parents are complex and will have an impact on their perceptions of emotional availability. Albeit complex, the relationship between perceived parental emotional availability and the effects on student

achievement have valuable implications for understanding parent-child relations and warrant further investigation.

### Summary

This chapter included a review of literature concerning attachment, emotional availability and academic achievement. Attachment theory was discussed and provided the foundation for explaining the relational construct of emotional availability. The history of attachment theory and emotional availability as a quantifiable construct and relationships between attachment and academic achievement were also discussed.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter will discuss the research methodology and design used by the researcher to examine the relationship between parental (maternal and paternal separately) emotional availability and academic achievement. The relationship between parental emotional availability and academic achievement will be further examined as a function of students' gender and race. The research questions, population to be examined, data collection, instruments, and overall procedures will also be discussed.

#### Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

- (1) Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school graduation?
- (2) Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school GPA?
- (3) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student gender?
- (4) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student race?
- (5) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ as a function of maternal vs. paternal emotional availability?

## Participants

A nonrandom sample of student participants was recruited from one public charter high school within a suburb of a large metropolitan city in the Southeast United States. Students were limited to those of junior and senior standing in high school English courses. Given the number of variables involved in this study, a sample size of 60 high school students was needed. All students' participation was voluntary and confidential. As an incentive for participation, students were entered into a drawing for gift cards to local book, music and coffee stores.

## Instruments

### *Lum Emotional Availability of Parents (LEAP) Scale*

To assess parental emotional availability, adolescents completed the Lum Emotional Availability of Parenting Scale (LEAP; Lum & Phares, 2005) for mothers and fathers. The LEAP consists of 15 items developed to measure children's and adolescents' (ages 9 -17) perceptions of maternal and paternal emotional availability for a total of 30 items. The items depict adolescents' perceptions of some form of verbal exchange or nonverbal acknowledgment initiated by the parent (e.g., "shows a genuine interest in me," "consoles me when I am upset," and "makes me feel wanted"). Items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always". Higher scores indicate higher emotional availability of the parent (based on the mean of the responses for that parent). The test-retest correlation coefficients for reliability were .92 ( $p < .0001$ ) for the mother form and .85 ( $p < .0001$ ) for the father form. Internal consistencies of both the mother and father forms are considered highly reliable because all item-total correlations



were above .79. “Overall, there was sufficient evidence of the construct validity of the LEAP in relation to other measures of parenting” (Lum & Phares, 2005, p. 215).

### Procedure

The current study is a non-experimental, correlational study to determine the relationship between variables: perceptions of maternal and paternal emotional availability (independent variables) and academic achievement (dependent variables) using GPA and high school graduation status as indicated by first attempt pass/fail on four sections of the state high school graduation exam. Gender and race (moderator variables) are also used to determine if the relationship between emotional availability and any observed phenomenon in academic achievement is significantly modified as a function of student gender and/or race.

Students of senior standing who have taken the standardized state high school graduation exam at least once were recruited through their high school English and economics classes at a public charter high school in the Southeastern United States. All students were provided a research packet containing the LEAP scale (Appendix A), demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) and informed consent/information letter (Appendix C). The informed consent/information letter provided students with information about the purpose of the research study, benefits and risks of the current study, and their rights concerning participation. Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. Eligible students were asked to consider participation and instructed to complete the packets in class. The participants were instructed to keep one copy of the informed consent/information letter for their records should any questions arise in the future. After student consent was secured and survey

instruments completed, the participants returned the research packets to the researcher; 75 high school students volunteered to participate.

Personal identifying information was only accessible by the high school counselor in order to determine student grade point averages (GPAs). Once GPAs were determined, the counselor deleted the names of each student and provided academic records identifiable only by a five-digit student ID number. Test packets were coded only by student ID number.

The researcher entered all collected data from the LEAP into The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for scoring and statistical analysis. The LEAP consists of two subscales, which include 15 identical questions for mother and father for a total of 30 items.

#### Data Analysis

The data analysis for the current study included descriptive analysis of demographic variables. In addition, moderated regression analyses were used to determine the extent to which emotional availability predicted the two criterion variables, GPA and high school graduation status, as moderated by gender and race. Linear regression analysis provided the necessary information to help differentiate the direction and strength of specific factors associated with emotional availability and GPA. Logistic regression analysis was used to predict dichotomous outcomes (high school graduation status – success or failure) from emotional availability. It provided the necessary information to help predict a conditional probability and answered the question “What is the probability of the outcome occurring given that an individual possesses a specific characteristic or set of characteristics?”

Correlational analysis was necessary in order to examine the strength of the relationships between the variables of emotional availability and academic achievement (GPA and graduation status), as well as the strength of the relationships between emotional availability and the moderator variables of gender and race.

#### Limitations of study

The generalizability of the findings in the current study may be limited due to the homogeneity of the sample drawn from the same geographical region in the Southeastern United States. Subjects are similar in age but appear diverse in race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Also, as outlined in the literature, parental emotional availability may impact students' behaviors, and subsequently their academic achievement earlier in life. Assessing students' academic achievement in high school may not be the most sensitive time to measure the effect of parental emotional availability (Fan, 2001). The LEAP scale is a newly-developed measure of parental emotional availability. Although tests for reliability and validity appear sound and provide strong results, further research using the LEAP scale is necessary to provide even more support of its usefulness in measuring parental emotional availability.

#### Summary

The LEAP measure was used in the current study and discussed in this chapter. Participants were asked to respond to questions concerning their perceptions of maternal and paternal emotional availability. The results were compared to two measures of academic achievement, GPA and high school graduation status, in order to assess the possible relationship between emotional availability and academic achievement. The measure was determined to be psychometrically sound. Participants were also asked to

respond to a researcher-developed survey which included questions related to sources of support and involvement outside of parental relationships. Procedures and data analysis were also discussed.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between students' perceptions of parental emotional availability and academic achievement, specifically high school graduation status and grade point average (GPA). To collect the research data, the Lum Emotional Availability of Parenting Scale (LEAP; Lum & Phares, 2005) was used along with a researcher-developed survey of demographic information. The demographic survey also included questions related to support systems commonly found outside of parental relationships.

The LEAP evaluated two constructs: perceived maternal and paternal emotional availability. Although a fairly new instrument, this assessment instrument was selected based on the specific constructs it was designed to measure and the strength of its reliability and validity. The study intended to show a positive relationship between perceived parental emotional availability and academic achievement. Secondly, the study intended to provide evidence that other relationships are capable of mitigating the affects of limited parental emotional availability. The results of the data analysis are presented in this chapter. Additionally, information related to the participants involved in the study, the methodologies used, and the results of the statistical analysis are presented in this chapter.

## Participants

Of the 158 research packets that were distributed, 78 packets were returned; 3 were missing crucial data and were not included in the data analysis. Responses from 75 participants were included in this study, resulting in a final response rate of 47%. The 75 participants were high school students of senior standing attending a public charter school in the Southeastern United States. The participants were asked to indicate their gender, race and high school graduation exam results (i.e., first attempt pass or fail on four sections: English/language arts, math, science, social studies). Of the 75 participants, 33 (44%) were female, 42 (56%) were male; regarding race, 1 (1.3%) was Asian, 8 (10.7%) were Black or African American, 2 (2.7%) were Hispanic or Latino, 3 (4%) were two or more races, and 61 (81.3%) were White or Caucasian. All students who participated in the study were 18 years of age or older. Demographic information gathered is provided in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1**

*Participant Demographic Information*

Descriptor	Variable	N	%
Gender	Female	33	44
	Male	42	56
Race/Ethnicity	Asian (Not Hispanic or Latino)	1	1.3
	Black or African-American	8	10.7
	Hispanic or Latino	2	2.7
	Native American/American Indian Alaska Native/First Nations	0	--
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	--

White or Caucasian	61	81.3
Two or more races	3	4

### Reliabilities

#### *LEAP*

Using a test-retest reliability measure, Lum and Phares reported correlation coefficients at .92 ( $p < .0001$ ) for the mother form and .85 ( $p < .0001$ ) for the father form (2005) indicating a high degree of reliability. These results of the current study support Lum and Phares' study; results indicated a full scale internal consistency reliability estimate of .84 ( $p < .0001$ ). Examined separately, results indicated .98 for the mother form and .96 for the father form also supporting a high degree of internal consistency reliability (Table 4.2).

In addition to parental emotional availability, other variables of social support outside of the home and sources of participant involvement were examined to determine the relationship with academic achievement. Questions five, six, and seven (Q5-School Support, Q6-Extracurricular, and Q7-Other Support) on the demographics survey asked participants to rate levels of importance given to other variables of support and involvement (Table 4.2; Appendix B).

**Table 4.2**

#### *LEAP Reliability Analysis*

	#Items	Mean (SD)	Reliability
Full Scale	30	9.07 (2.64)	.84
Mother's EA (MEA)	15	4.58 (1.48)	.98
Father's EA (PEA)	15	4.50 (1.36)	.96
Q5-School Support	9	3.62 (1.18)	.85

Q6-Extracurricular	4	2.85 (1.34)	.66
Q7-Other Support	6	3.73 (.862)	.80

Participants were asked to respond to 30 items, 15 rating their perceptions of maternal emotional availability (MEA) and 15 rating their perceptions of paternal emotional availability (PEA). Individual items on each scale of the LEAP, MEA and PEA, were examined and described in terms of their mean and standard deviation (Table 4.3).

On average for the 15 items, participants rated mothers greater than fathers on six items; participants rated fathers greater than mothers on seven items. Participants rated items 1 “supports me” and 7 “asks questions in a caring manner” equally between mothers and fathers. Overall mean scores for MEA (4.62) were only slightly higher than those for PEA (4.54) on a 6-point scale.

**Table 4.3**

*Descriptive Statistics: MEA and PEA Scales*

Item	MEA		PEA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Supports me	5.10	1.41	5.10	1.32
2. Consoles me when I am upset	4.23	1.93	3.96	1.93
3. Shows she/he cares about me	5.12	1.43	5.17	1.25
4. Shows a genuine interest in me	4.85	1.64	4.90	1.48
5. Remembers things that are important to me	4.68	1.57	4.32	1.60
6. Is available to talk	4.82	1.63	4.71	1.57



	with me at anytime			
7. Asks questions in a caring manner	4.36	1.74	4.36	1.61
8. Spends extra time with me just because she/he wants to	3.99	1.84	4.03	1.92
9. Is willing to talk about my troubles	4.84	1.71	4.28	1.88
10. Pursues talking with me about my interests	4.34	1.81	4.45	1.75
11. Values my input	4.44	1.76	4.51	1.47
12. Is emotionally available to me	4.78	1.73	4.41	1.77
13. Makes me feel wanted	4.71	1.62	4.80	1.44
14. Praises me	4.64	1.65	4.62	1.63
15. Is understanding	4.44	1.79	4.52	1.62

### Statistical Analysis

#### *Relationship between Emotional Availability and Academic Achievement*

Regression analyses determined that emotional availability and academic achievement were not statistically related. Furthermore, emotional availability did not provide any significant measure of strength in the relationship,  $R^2 = .025$ ,  $F(2, 70) = .868$ ,  $p = .424$ . Logistic regression was used to predict the dichotomous outcome from the independent variables, perceptions of maternal and paternal emotional availability. For the participant group, the success rates reported for the high school graduation exams were too high, over 90%, to warrant the usefulness of logistical regression (Pedhazur, 1997). Therefore, only a linear regression model was used to determine the relationship

between the independent variables, parental emotional availability, and the continuous dependent variable, grade point average (GPA).

A bivariate correlational analysis (Table 4.4) revealed that although positively correlated, a statistically significant relationship did not exist between emotional availability and GPA ( $r = .031$  for MEA;  $r = .138$  for PEA). The relationship between GPA and participant involvement in extracurricular activities (i.e. clubs, community service, music, sports) was, however, statistically significant ( $r = .247$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Results concluded that the square of the correlation coefficient  $(.247)^2 = .061$  or 6.1%; therefore, approximately 6.1% of the variance in GPA can be explained by a participant's involvement in extracurricular activities. Although not a strong relationship, the relationship between the two variables, GPA and involvement in extracurricular activities, are not likely due to chance, and a statistically significant relationship does exist.

**Table 4.4**

*Linear Regression: Bivariate Correlations*

Variable	GPA	MEA	PEA	Q5	Q6	Q7
Gender	.201	.010	.045	.217	.210	.152
Race	.044	.009	.121	-.145	-.145	-.031
MEA	.031	-----	.727**	.229*	.229	.483**
PEA	.138	-----	-----	.264*	.135	.383**
Q5-School Support	.020	-----	-----	-----	.432**	.537**
Q6-Extra Curricular	.247*	-----	-----	-----	-----	.433**
Q7-Other Support	.027	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Gender and Racial Differences in Perceptions of Emotional Availability and Academic Achievement*

Regression analysis revealed that race and gender did not significantly affect the outcome of the statistical analysis involving the independent and dependent variables.

The results indicated that the relationship between emotional availability and academic achievement was not moderated significantly by gender or race; R square = .048, F (2, 70) = 1.722, p = .186 (Table 4.5).

*Parental Roles in Perceptions of Emotional Availability and Academic Achievement*

When the EA scales were added to the regression model, an additional 1.5% of the variance in GPA was explained. This increase, however, was not statistically significant (F = .531, p = .590). The overall regression model (including all 4 predictors) resulted in an R square of .063, failing to reach statistical significance (F = 1.115, p = .357) (Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5**

*Linear Regression: Summary of Results*

Variables	Beta	R Square	Standard Error of Estimate
Demographics		.048	5.701
Gender	.092		
Race	.219		
Full Model		.063	5.740
Gender	.081		
Race	.199		
MEA	-.086		
PEA	.172		

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Research related to emotional availability has gained much recognition over the last three decades. The relational construct has become widely accepted among developmental and attachment theorists as a solid measure of the quality of parent-child relations (Biringen, 2004). Grounded in Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth's et al. (1978) theories of attachment, researchers have begun to develop a strong and growing body of literature on the affects of parental emotional availability and child social and emotional development (Biringen, 2000; Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000). This has led other researchers to investigate the affects of parental emotional availability on the development of older children and adolescents (Kerns, et al., 2000; Granot & Mayseless, 2001) as well as those from diverse backgrounds (Lum & Phares, 2005).

Emotional availability describes the mutual expression and relationship between a parent and a child and falls on a continuum of strength and quality. The central tenets of emotional availability involve parental responsiveness, sensitivity, and emotional involvement (Lum & Phares, 2005). These findings follow earlier research by Biringen, et al., (2000) who outline emotional availability across four parental dimensions of sensitivity, structuring, nonintrusiveness, and nonhostility, and two child dimensions of the child's responsiveness to the parent and the child's involvement of the parent. Much of the research supports the notion that parental involvement and emotional availability are related to younger children's sense of security (Biringen et al., 2000; Easterbrooks et

al., 2000), learning and achievement (Fan, 2001), and development of healthy interpersonal relationships with others (Bosco et al., 2000). Although much of the research supports these positive findings, gaps are still present in the literature regarding the full impact and implications of parental emotional availability on academic achievement; the implications for future research involve studying the affects with older populations and the differences in physical parental involvement versus the construct of parental emotional availability which is more relational in nature and is measured in reciprocal terms.

The current study attempted to examine the relationship between perceived parental emotional availability and the academic achievement of high school students using a quantitative measure. The research involving academic achievement is profuse; results support the premise that strong attachment bonds between parent and child correlate positively with learning and development (Cutrona et al., 1994). There is also evidence to support a positive relationship between parental involvement and student academic achievement (Fass & Tubman, 2002). Because the construct of emotional availability is grounded in widely accepted theories of attachment and closely related to parental involvement, there is reason to believe that emotional availability would have a positive impact on learning and achievement. Therefore, the current study was an attempt to bridge the gap in the literature pertaining to variables impacting academic achievement. The researcher attempted to examine the relationship between an individual's perception of his or her parents' emotional availability and academic achievement. Racial and gender differences were also considered as moderating factors

when investigating the relationships. To guide the study, the following research questions were posed and investigated:

- 1) Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school graduation?
- 2) Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school GPA?
- 3) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student gender?
- 4) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student race?
- 5) Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ as a function of maternal vs. paternal emotional availability?

#### Demographics

Seventy-five high school students from one public charter high school in the Southeastern United States participated in the current study. Of the 75 participants, 33 were female and 42 were male. The participants were all of senior-standing, at least 18 years of age, and volunteered to participate in the study. As previously discussed, neither gender nor race were significant in moderating the relationship between participants' perceptions of emotional availability and academic achievement.

#### Discussion of the Findings

Each of the following research questions focused on students' self-reported perceptions of their parents', both mother and father, emotional availability and

compared those perceptions with two measures of academic achievement, grade point average (GPA) and high school graduation status. Additional demographic information was gathered to investigate moderating affects of gender, race, and other sources of support and involvement outside of parental relationships.

*Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school GPA?*

Research question 1 pertains to the relationship between perceived emotional availability and one measure of academic achievement, GPA. As stated earlier, evidence exists as to the positive relationship between parental involvement and the academic achievement and growth of adolescents (Fan, 2001). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that emotional availability would reveal a similar relationship. Although the results indicated a slightly positive relationship, the current study did not find the correlation between emotional availability and GPA to be significant.

These findings are surprising considering the strong evidence supporting a significant relationship between attachment and learning as well as parental involvement and academic achievement. One possible explanation for the discrepancy is that GPA may not be the most suitable measure of academic achievement. Some researchers believe that more specific measures of learning outcomes, such as subject-specific grades and test scores, are preferable to grade point averages and general achievement or aptitude test scores (Fan, 2001).

*Is there a relationship between parental emotional availability and high school graduation?*

Research question 2 pertains to the relationship between perceived emotional availability and a second measure of academic achievement, high school graduation

status. The status of a participant's graduation was based on self-report indicators of pass or fail for the first attempt on the state high school graduation exam.

For the participant group, the success rates reported for the high school graduation exam were over 90% and considered too high to warrant the usefulness of the logistical regression analysis (Pedhazur, 1997). The researcher was not able to determine the significance of the relationship between emotional availability and high school graduation status due to the high degree of exam success. Only the relationship between parental emotional availability and GPA was considered in the analysis.

Similar to the analysis with GPA, the dichotomous outcomes of pass or fail on the graduation exam may not serve as suitable measures for academic achievement; individual test scores on the high school graduation exam may provide more specific measures of academic achievement and learning outcomes for participants (Fan, 2001).

*Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student gender?*

Research question 3 pertains to the relationship between perceived emotional availability, student achievement and the moderating factor of gender. Student gender was not found to be significant in moderating the relationship between perceptions of emotional availability and academic achievement. These findings conflict with some of the research literature related to attachment behaviors and gender differences in infants, young children and adolescents. For example, research with infants and younger children has indicated that attachment security does not vary as a function of gender. Ziv, Aviezer, Gini, Sagi and Koren-Karie (2000) found that gender was not a moderating factor in the relationship between attachment security in infants and the emotional availability scales



developed by Biringen, Robinson, and Emde (1993). However, gender differences in attachment-related behaviors have been supported in early adolescence given the changing nature of the father-child relationship. Researchers posit that mothers tend to remain emotionally involved with both their sons and daughters during the adolescent years, but fathers' relations with their daughters tend to be "emotionally flat and distant" (Lieberman, Doyle & Markiewicz, 1999, p. 203). Another study indicates that daughters moving from early to late adolescence are more likely to use their mothers for support and proximity (Lieberman et al.). Based on this evidence, it stands to reason that female participants' perceptions of their parents' emotional availability would vary from that of males'.

Although some research supports the positive relationship between gender differences and attachment-related behaviors, high school students' perceptions of parental emotional availability as they relate to academic achievement may be less subject to gender differences. One consideration when examining how gender might moderate the relationship between emotional availability and academic achievement is the achievement variable. In the current study, academic achievement may have been less sensitivity to gender differences present in participants' responses related to parental emotional availability than other social variables such as parenting styles (Spera, 2005), family socioeconomic status, student age (Fan, 2001) or school atmosphere and support (Marchant, Paulson & Rothlisberg, 2001). Therefore, since some studies reported gender differences in emotional availability or mother-child relations (Robinson, Little, & Biringen, 1993), and others failed to find such differences (Ziv et al., 2000; Harel, Eshel,

Ganor, & Scher, 2002), a decisive conclusion cannot be derived from the results of the current study.

*Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ by student race?*

Research question 4 pertains to the relationship between perceived emotional availability, student achievement and the moderating factor of race. Race was not found to be significant in moderating the relationship between participants' perceptions of emotional availability and academic achievement in the current study.

Some researchers suggest that race/ethnicity is a variable that influences the nature and degree of parental involvement. Research indicates that parents from different cultures and ethnic groups may be involved in different ways and to varying degrees in their student's education. For instance, according to a study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 1994), "parents of African American students were more likely to visit classrooms" whereas "parents of Asian American students were less likely to communicate with students' teachers" (Fan, 2001, p. 31). However, other studies show that parents of Asian American students tended to have higher educational aspirations for their children and were more involved in their child's academic activities (Huang & Waxman, 1993).

The participant group in the current study represented the racial diversity consistent with the school population with White/Caucasian students making up just over 80% of the participant group. Although this percentage was representative of the general population within the school, the small sample size and the small number of individuals representing the four minority groups involved likely impacted the effect size. Larger

samples may have had more predictive power on the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement. Although the current study found this to be the case, further investigation with a larger, more diverse population is necessary.

*Does the relationship between parental emotional availability and student achievement differ as a function of maternal vs. paternal emotional availability?*

Research question 5 pertains to differences between participants' perceptions of maternal and paternal emotional availability and how parental roles may impact the relationship between emotional availability and student achievement. Independent of academic achievement, participants, on average, rated fathers higher on more individual items on the LEAP; however, the overall average rating for perceived emotional availability of mothers was slightly higher than that of fathers. These results are consistent with other research findings (Kenny & Sirin, 2006).

Considering parental roles in relation to academic achievement, no significant differences were found. The relationship with academic achievement was positive, and although not statistically significant, participants' perceptions of paternal emotional availability were more strongly correlated with academic achievement than that of maternal emotional availability. When maternal and paternal emotional availability were considered in the regression analysis, the addition had a slight overall impact on GPA, although not significant. These findings suggest that further investigation is warranted to determine if a relationship exists between parental emotional availability and other, more specific, indicators of academic achievement.

## Limitations of Study

The generalizability of the findings in the current study may be limited due to the homogeneity of the sample drawn from the same geographical region in the Southeastern United States. In accordance with the research design, subjects were similar in age and grade level. However, the participants represented the populations associated with this particular high school, and their responses may not be generalized to persons outside of this geographic area.

For the participant group, the success rates reported for the high school graduation exam were over 90% and considered too high to warrant the usefulness of the logistical regression analysis (Pedhazur, 1997). Similar to the results generated using GPA, the dichotomous outcomes of pass or fail on the graduation exam may not serve as suitable measures for academic achievement; some researchers recommend that individual or subject-specific test scores be used in an effort to provide more specific measures of academic achievement and learning outcomes for participants (Fan, 2001).

Also, as outlined in the literature, parental emotional availability may impact students' behaviors, and subsequently their academic achievement earlier in life. Assessing students' academic achievement in high school may not be the most sensitive time to measure the effect of parental emotional availability (Fan, 2001). Longitudinal studies tracking changes in students' academic achievement across time and developmental stages might provide additional insight into the impact of parental emotional availability.

With regard to the assessment measure, the LEAP scale is a newly-developed measure of parental emotional availability, and no reports have been published using the

LEAP to determine a relationship with academic achievement. Although tests for reliability and validity appeared sound and provide strong results, further research using the LEAP scale is necessary to provide even more support for its usefulness in measuring parental emotional availability.

Adolescent development and motivation may also explain the lack of significance in the study results. The study followed a self-report format where participants were asked to voluntarily rate their perceptions of their parents' emotional availability. It is reasonable to consider that only those students who possessed some degree of intrinsic motivation would choose to participate in a study which would otherwise provide little to no benefit. Participants who were experiencing difficulties in their parental relations might have found the subject matter too personal in nature and, subsequently chosen not to participate.

## Implications

### *Implications for Parents*

Although the current study indicated no significant relationship between parental emotional availability and academic achievement, strong evidence exists for parental involvement in the learning process. Developmentally, adolescents' need for autonomy and identity may overshadow any influence of parental emotional availability; they may not recognize this form of support as important, particularly when it relates to their academic endeavors. It is also possible that at this stage, students identify other variables (i.e. extracurricular activities) as more important influences related to their academic achievement. Parents must be cognizant of their parenting and how it could potentially

affect their student's development and functioning while supporting them through the stage of identity development.

Much research provides evidence of a positive relationship between healthy family relations and student learning and development. Parents must also understand the distinctions between parental involvement and parental emotional availability. Although related, the nuances between the two can have varying implications for students.

### *Implications for School Counselors*

School plays a significant role in the lives of children and adolescents. Counselors who work with student populations have the opportunity to learn how the unique roles of mothers and fathers impact students' learning and achievement. They are in a position to influence the school environment in which they work as well as the environment created by students and their parental relations (Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1993).

Although the relationship between parental emotional availability and academic achievement was not found to be significant, counselors do have influence over other variables related to academic achievement. School programming related to increasing students' involvement in extracurricular activities can have a profound impact on student achievement. As evidenced in this study, extracurricular involvement is important to a student's achievement, and counselors can use this information when consulting with parents about academic, personal, and career-related issues. Howard and Medway (2004) discuss the importance of involving parents in group-based education or individual consultation as a model for promoting secure attachment and social support.

Because academic achievement is the cornerstone for school funding and accreditation as well as the future well-being of the adult population, understanding the variables that impact academic achievement is essential in maintaining healthy and productive students, schools, and society. As funding for schools decreases and expectations for students increase, focusing on the most pertinent and relevant factors impacting academic achievement will become not only imperative but possible.

#### *Implications for Counselor Educators*

Regarding counselor education programs, more formalized training and practice in understanding and assessing parental emotional availability is needed. The amount of research related to emotional availability and early childhood development is plentiful; counselors-in-training should be aware of the impact this relational construct has on infant and toddler early functioning and development later in life. Assessing parental emotional availability with adolescents and young adults is a new development in the research literature and warrants more attention. Counselors-in-training, as well as professionals in the field, would benefit from specialized instruction related to assessing and addressing adolescents' emotional needs as they relate to academic achievement.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

The number of studies examining the impact of parental emotional availability on a number of child and adolescent behaviors has increased in recent years; however, little is known about the effect of parental emotional availability on students' academic achievement, particularly older students. This research attempted to bridge the gap in research findings between clinical observations in infants and attachment and the extensive research on parental involvement and academic achievement by providing

evidence of a relationship between parental emotional availability and students' academic achievement using a quantitative measure. Although a significant relationship was not found in the current study between perceived parental emotional availability and academic achievement, further research using larger sample sizes is necessary.

Because of the overwhelming increases in high school dropout rates in the US, it is critically important that parents, schools and communities develop strategies to address the variables impacting academic achievement. Additional research on the roles of schools and sources of social support and involvement may provide clearer insight into the variables impacting academic achievement. A comparison study of those students who demonstrate academic success versus those who are struggling academically may also provide additional insight into more specific learning variables that influence academic achievement.

### Summary

This chapter includes a discussion of the research study and potential implications drawn from the findings. In sum, findings in the current study suggest that 1) overall, emotional availability and academic achievement were not significantly related, 2) gender and race do not significantly moderate the relationship between perceived emotional availability and academic achievement, 3) maternal and paternal emotional availability do not vary significantly, and 4) other sources of support and involvement (i.e. involvement in extracurricular activities) have a positive impact on academic achievement. Implications for parents, school counselors, counselor educators and future research are discussed. More research is recommended to examine how the perceptions



of maternal and paternal emotional availability differ and impact more specific learning outcomes.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Lum Emotional Availability of Parents (LEAP)

## Lum Emotional Availability of Parents (LEAP)

**INSTRUCTIONS:** In this questionnaire, you will read statements about your parents/ guardians. First, you will be asked to rate your MOTHER's behavior and then you will be asked to rate your FATHER's behavior. For all questions, please answer the statement as to how each parent acted throughout your relationship. If you did not live with both of your biological parents, please rate the behavior of whomever you consider to be your mother and your father (e.g., adoptive parent, step-parent, etc.).

	Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Often 4	Very Often 5	Always 6
				<b>MY MOTHER: MY FATHER:</b>		
1. Supports me				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
2. Consoles me when I am upset (example: Makes me feel better when I am upset)				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
3. Shows she/he cares about me				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
4. Shows a genuine interest in me (example: Pays attention and is curious about me)				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
5. Remembers things that are important to me				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
6. Is available to talk with me at anytime				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
7. Asks questions in a caring manner				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
8. Spends extra time with me just because he/she wants to				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
9. Is willing to talk about my troubles				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
10. Pursues talking with me about my interests (example: Tries to talk to me about what I like)				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
11. Values my input (example: Cares about my ideas)				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
12. Is emotionally available to me				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
13. Makes me feel wanted				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
14. Praises me (example: Tells me good things about myself)				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		
15. Is understanding				1 2 3 4 5 6    1 2 3 4 5 6		

## APPENDIX B

### Demographics Questionnaire



## DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please check (√), circle or write in the response that best describes you. Please give only one response per item unless otherwise instructed.

1. Student Code: \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your gender? (Please check one)

\_\_\_\_\_ Male

\_\_\_\_\_ Female

3. What is your race/ethnic origin? (Please check one)

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian (Not Hispanic or Latino)

\_\_\_\_\_ Black or African-American (Not Hispanic or Latino)

\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic or Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native/First Nations

\_\_\_\_\_ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

\_\_\_\_\_ White or Caucasian (Not Hispanic or Latino)

\_\_\_\_\_ Two or more races

Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Please indicate the pass rate on your 1<sup>st</sup> attempt of the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHS GT). (Please mark “Yes” or “No” for each subject area)

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Did you pass on your 1<sup>st</sup> attempt?</u>
English Language Arts	_____ Yes _____ No
Mathematics	_____ Yes _____ No
Science	_____ Yes _____ No
Social Studies	_____ Yes _____ No

5. Please rate the extent to which the following have been supportive and encouraging to you during high school (1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; 5 = very often; 6 = always; N/A = not applicable):

**School or Social Support**

Teacher(s) (Lead, Assistant)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Counselor(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
School Administrator(s) (Principle, Asst Principle)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Coach(es)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Other Staff Member(s) (Media Specialist, Office Staff)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Mentor(s) (Big Brother/Big Sister, Tutor)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Sibling(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Peer(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Coworker(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A

6. Please rate the extent to which the following have been important to you during high school (1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; 5 = very often; 6 = always; N/A = not applicable):

**Extracurricular Activities**

Clubs (chess, math, yearbook, art, drama, debate)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Community Service/Involvement (volunteering, scouts, church)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Music (band, chorus, voice)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Sports (tennis, baseball, soccer, dance, volleyball, cheerleading)	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A

7. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following about your family and school settings (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree):

1. My parent(s)/guardian(s) are involved in my education (supervise/help with homework, volunteer at your school, talk with teachers)?	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is important for my parent(s)/guardian(s) to be involved in my education?	1	2	3	4	5
3. My parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage learning?	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel respected by school personnel at this school?	1	2	3	4	5
5. I feel supported by school personnel at this school?	1	2	3	4	5
6. I feel that this school's environment encourages learning?	1	2	3	4	5

8. Other than your parent(s)/guardian(s), describe someone who has been supportive and/or encouraging to you during high school (i.e. 9<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher; high school track coach; pastor - do not use names, only titles or positions):
- 

*Thank you for participating in this survey!*

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELOR EDUCATION,  
COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY, AND SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

(NOTE: DO NOT SIGN THIS DOCUMENT UNLESS AN IRB APPROVAL STAMP WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

**INFORMED CONSENT**  
for a Research Study entitled  
“The Impact of Parental Emotional Availability on the Academic Achievement of High School Students”

You are invited to participate in a research study that will determine the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. The results of this study should further our understanding of how parental involvement impacts academic achievement. This understanding will help us (and other counselors) develop more effective communications with parents and intervention programs that address students’ academic achievement. The study is being conducted by Elise Johnson, doctoral students, under the direction of Dr. Jamie Carney, Professor, in the Auburn University Department of Counselor Education, Counseling Psychology and School Psychology. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a high school student at the CEC of senior standing, are age 18 or older, and have taken the state high school graduation exam at least once.

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 5/5/08 to 5/4/09. Protocol # 08-107 E.P. 0805.

**What will be involved if you participate?** If you are eligible or decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete the Lum Emotional Availability of Parents (LEAP) measure and a personal demographic questionnaire. You are also giving me permission to obtain your GPA and scores on the high school graduation exam. Your survey results will be linked to your academic record using your student ID# only. Your total time commitment will be approximately 15 minutes.

**Are there any risks or discomforts?** I do not anticipate any foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participation in this study. While you may find that questions on the LEAP are personal in nature, they are not considered to place you at emotional or psychological risk. However, you are free not to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Participation is strictly voluntary. Furthermore, to minimize any risk of breach of confidentiality, no student names will be used in the study, and all information will be strictly confidential.

**Are there any benefits to yourself or others?** There may be no direct benefit to you if you choose to participate.

Participant’s initials \_\_\_\_\_ 90

2084 Hays Center

Auburn, AL 36849-5222

Tel: (205) 844-5160

334-844-5160

Fax:

334-844-3860

**Will you receive compensation for participating?** No compensation will be given for participation in this study.

**Are there any costs?** There are no costs associated with this study.

**If you change your mind about participating,** you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Counselor Education, Counseling Psychology, and School Psychology or the Coweta County School System.

**Your privacy will be protected.** Every attempt will be made to ensure that any information obtained in connection with this study remains confidential. Individual names will not be used in the study. Information will only be identifiable initially using the student ID#. At the conclusion of the data collection, the student ID# will be deleted from all electronic spreadsheets. Neither teachers nor the counselor will have access to individual survey results. Information obtained through your participation will be used in a doctoral dissertation, may be published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting.

**If you have questions about this study,** please ask them now or contact me, Elise Johnson, at 404-606-8290 or [johnsep@auburn.edu](mailto:johnsep@auburn.edu) or my faculty advisor, Dr. Jamie Carney, at 334-844-2885 or [carnejs@auburn.edu](mailto:carnejs@auburn.edu). A copy of this document will be given to you to keep.

**If you have questions about your rights as a research participant,** you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at [hsubjec@auburn.edu](mailto:hsubjec@auburn.edu) or [IRBChair@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBChair@auburn.edu).

**HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

*Elise Johnson May 6, 09*  
Investigator obtaining consent      Date

*Elise JOHNSON*  
Printed Name

The Auburn University  
Institutional Review Board  
has approved this document for use  
from 5/5/08 to 5/14/09.  
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