

**Exploring the mediating role of self-compassion in the link between attachment-related anxiety and avoidance and mindful parenting**

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## Abstract

**Objective.** Mindful parenting has been described as a set of parental practices or skills that seek to enhance moment-to-moment awareness in the parent-child relationship. Although it has been suggested that adopting a mindful approach in parenting may foster positive parent-child relationships and promote the psychological functioning of children and parents, little is known about the factors that may be associated with this parental skill. In the present study, we aimed to examine whether attachment-related anxiety and avoidance were associated with mindful parenting through self-compassion. **Design and Methods.** The sample included 290 mothers of school-aged children and adolescents recruited in school settings, who completed self-reported measures of adult attachment (Experiences in Close Relationships – Relationships Structures), self-compassion (Self-compassion Scale) and mindful parenting (Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting scale). **Results.** Structural equation modelling was used to test the proposed mediation model and to ascertain direct and indirect effects among study variables. Whereas attachment avoidance had a direct effect on mindful parenting, attachment anxiety was indirectly associated with mindful parenting through self-compassion. Specifically, higher levels of anxiety were associated with lower self-compassion, which, in turn, was associated with lower levels of mindful parenting. Higher levels of avoidance were directly associated with lower levels of mindful parenting. **Conclusions.** These results demonstrate that mothers' attachment dimensions play an important role in their levels of mindful parenting, although through different pathways. Interventions aimed at promoting mindful parenting skills should attempt to promote parents' self-compassion and consider parents' levels of attachment insecurity.

**Keywords:** adult attachment; attachment anxiety; attachment avoidance; mindful parenting; self-compassion; mothers.

## **Practitioner Points**

- The results underline the important role of mothers' attachment on levels of mindful parenting and evidence different pathways through which attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are associated with this parental skill;
- Higher levels of attachment avoidance were directly associated with lower levels of mindful parenting, whereas higher levels of anxiety were indirectly associated with lower levels of mindful parenting through lower levels of self-compassion;
- Mothers who are more self-compassionate are more able to adopt a mindful stance in the parent-child relationship;
- Parenting interventions aimed at promoting mindfulness skills in the parenting context can benefit from including self-compassionate exercises and are particularly important for insecurely attached parents.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, it has been proposed that bringing mindful attention to parent-child interactions may foster a more positive parent-child relationship and promote the psychological functioning of children and their parents (Cohen & Semple, 2010; Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009). Mindful parenting can be broadly defined as a set of parental practices or skills that seek to enhance moment-to-moment awareness in the parent-child relationship (Duncan et al., 2009). Specifically, being a mindful parent entails being fully present in the parent-child interactions with an attitude of acceptance, compassion and kindness as well as being sensitive and responsive to the child's needs (Bögels & Restifo, 2014) while exerting self-regulation to be able to interact with the child in accordance with parenting values and goals (Duncan et al., 2009).

Although this parenting approach was presented almost twenty years ago by Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (1997), the scientific community has only recently become notably interested in its study (e.g., Bögels, Lehtonen, & Restifo, 2010; Duncan, 2007; Singh et al., 2006). Grounded in theoretical and empirical research on mindfulness and mindfulness-based interventions (Baer et al., 2006; Kabat-Zinn, 2003), Duncan et al. (2009) proposed a theoretical model of mindful parenting to explain the positive effects of intentionally bringing mindful awareness to the context of the parent-child relationship. According to this model, mindful parenting is hypothesized to be accomplished through the development of five interrelated dimensions: (1) listening with full attention to the child; (2) adopting a non-judgmental acceptance attitude towards the self and the child; (3) developing emotional awareness of the self and the child; (4) exerting self-regulation in the parenting relationship; and (5) directing compassion for the self as a parent and the child.

The empirical research on mindful parenting has essentially focused on the development and efficacy study of mindfulness-based parenting interventions. Despite the

promising results of these interventions in promoting the quality of parenting and the psychological functioning of children and parents within a range of adverse contexts (e.g., Altmaier & Maloney, 2007; Singh et al., 2006, 2007; Van der Oord, Bögels, & Peijnenburg, 2012), future studies are warranted to identify correlates and determinants of mindful parenting. These studies are crucial to advance the empirical research in this field and to identify key factors to target in intervention programs. One of the most important determinants of parenting behaviors is the parents' attachment style (Jones & Cassidy, 2014; Jones, Cassidy, & Shaver, 2014), although its association with mindful parenting and the mechanisms through which this association may occur have not yet been investigated.

It has been suggested that parents' attachment (in)security, particularly in relation to their own parents, whether measured through interviews or self-reports, has a significant influence on parental caregiving behaviors (Cowan, Cowan, & Mehta, 2009; Jones et al., 2014). In a comprehensive literature review of the links between parents' self-reported attachment styles and parenting outcomes, Jones et al. (2014) concluded that secure attachment is consistently related to a wide range of positive parenting characteristics and outcomes, such as higher parental sensitivity, responsiveness, and supportiveness, less parenting stress, and stronger feelings of closeness to children. Conversely, parents' insecurity (anxious and avoidant attachments) is associated with more negative parental caregiving behaviors, emotions and cognitions. It has been suggested that because avoidant individuals have more difficulty in assuming caregiving roles (George & Solomon, 1996; Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005; Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006), they tend to feel more uncertainty about (Rholes, Simpson, & Blakely, 1995) or less desire to have children (Rholes et al., 2006; Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, & Allen 1997), lack confidence about their parenting abilities (Rholes et al., 1995), experience more stress in their parenting roles (Moreira, Gouveia, Carona, Silva, & Canavarro, 2014; Rholes et al., 2006), feel that

parenthood is less meaningful and satisfying (Rholes et al., 2006) and behave in a less warm, close, and supportive manner towards their children (Edelstein et al., 2004; Rholes et al., 1995). On the other hand, anxiously attached individuals tend to be more self-centered and to worry about their own attachment needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) as well as to feel extremely distressed when other people need their assistance (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005), which likely interferes with the provision of sensitive care to their children. Some studies have found that anxious parents may also be less close to their children (Rholes et al., 1995), experience parenting stress (Moreira et al., 2014), have more hostile behaviors towards their child (Jones & Cassidy, 2014) and endorse more negative attitudes towards parenthood than securely attached parents (Rholes et al., 1997).

Although the association between attachment styles and mindful parenting has not been investigated, recent studies have shown that attachment security is associated with higher levels of dispositional mindfulness (Caldwell & Shaver, 2013, 2014; Pepping, Davis, & O'Donovan, 2013; Shaver, Lavy, Saron, & Mikulincer, 2007). Some authors suggested that this association can be explained by the strategies of emotion regulation. For instance, Pepping et al. (2013) found that difficulties in emotion regulation mediated the association between attachment anxiety or avoidance and mindfulness. Similarly, Caldwell and Shaver (2013) found that attachment avoidance was indirectly associated with mindful awareness through thought suppression and attentional control, whereas the relationship between attachment anxiety and mindful awareness was found to be mediated by rumination and attentional control. According to these authors, both rumination and suppression can disrupt or deplete cognitive resources and attentional control, limiting the individual's capacity for mindful awareness. Therefore, it is plausible that anxious or avoidant parents are also less able to bring mindful awareness into interactions and relationships with their children.

The mechanisms underlying the association between parental attachment styles and parenting outcomes are still poorly understood. However, the identification of such mechanisms is fundamental to understand how attachment (in)security leads parents to behave, feel and think in certain ways in the relationship with their children as well as to discover potential therapeutic targets that are easier to change than relatively stable attachment patterns. Considering that a secure attachment is not only an important determinant of a caring and supportive relationship with one's children (Gillath et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2014) but is also the foundation of a caring and supportive relationship with oneself (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005; Neff & Beretvas, 2012; Neff & McGehee, 2010) and that a caring relationship with oneself may affect the parent-child relationship (Moreira et al., 2014), we may suppose that self-compassion can function as a mediator between parental attachment styles and mindful parenting.

Self-compassion is an adaptive way of self-to-self relating (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2009, 2012) that can be viewed as compassion towards the self (Neff, 2009), acceptance of one's mistakes, failures, and inadequacies, or self-acceptance in moments of pain (Germer, 2009). According to Neff (2003a), self-compassion is a construct that consists of three bipolar and interrelated dimensions: self-kindness versus self-judgment (i.e., facing difficulties, failures, and suffering with a caring and understanding attitude instead of being self-critical and judgmental), mindfulness versus over-identification (i.e., mindful awareness of painful emotions or experiences instead of ignoring, avoiding, or ruminating on negative events), and common humanity versus isolation (i.e., acknowledging that one's painful experiences are part of a common human condition instead of feeling isolated, ashamed, or different).

It has been suggested that the development of self-compassion is associated with early experiences of care with attachment figures (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff & Beretvas, 2012; Neff & McGehee, 2010). Positive and reassuring experiences with sensitive

and responsive attachment figures contribute to the development of attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and allow the individual to cultivate a compassionate way of self-relating (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Gillath et al., 2005). Conversely, inconsistent or unavailable attachment figures foster the adoption of hyperactivating (for anxious individuals) or deactivating (for avoidant individuals) strategies of emotion regulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), leading to insufficient development of the soothing system of affect regulation and the emergence of self-criticism rather than self-compassion (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Accordingly, Neff and McGehee (2010) and Neff and Beretvas (2012) found that self-compassion was positively associated with secure attachment and negatively associated with preoccupied and fearful attachment styles in a sample of adolescents and young adults and in a sample of adult couples, respectively.

Self-compassion has been shown to be associated with several positive individual (e.g., Neff, 2003a; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejithirat, 2005; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007) and interpersonal outcomes (Neff & Beretvas, 2012; Yarnell & Neff, 2012). It has also been shown that self-compassionate individuals tend to be more compassionate towards other people (Crocker & Canavello, 2008; Gillath et al., 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005; Neff & Pommier, 2012). For instance, Neff and Pommier (2012) found that among adults from the general community and practicing meditators, higher levels of self-compassion were associated with higher levels of other-focused concerns (i.e., greater compassion for humanity, empathetic concern for others, perspective taking, altruism, forgiveness, and less distress when others are suffering). In addition, Longe et al. (2009) demonstrated that compassion towards the self and the others stimulates identical parts of the brain, which suggests that a common process underlies both self-compassion and compassion towards other people. Surprisingly, the influence of self-compassion on parenting behaviors has received almost no attention in the literature. Recently, Moreira et al. (2014) found that higher



levels of self-compassion were associated with decreased parenting stress. Similarly, Neff and Faso (2014) found that self-compassion predicted positive adjustment, including less parental stress, of parents of children with autism.

### **The Present Study**

The main goal of the current study is to explore the association between parents' attachment-related avoidance and anxiety and mindful parenting and the mediating role of self-compassion in a sample of parents of children and adolescents from the community. Because there is a substantial variability in individuals' working models and it has been demonstrated that the association between attachment dimensions in different relational domains is not as strong as expected (Fraley, Hefferman, Vicary, Brumbaugh, 2011; Moreira, Martins, Gouveia, & Canavarro, 2014; Klohnen et al., 2005), we adopted in this study a contextual assessment of attachment by focusing on one specific attachment figure. We opted to assess parents' attachment towards their mother or maternal figure because the mother is usually the main attachment figure and several studies have proposed that parental behaviors are mainly influenced by parents' attachment orientations towards their own parents (Cowan et al., 1996, 2009).

We hypothesize that lower levels of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance would be associated with higher levels of mindful parenting through higher levels of self-compassion. This hypothesis is based on the evidence that attachment security is a crucial foundation for self-compassion (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff & McGhee, 2010) and positive parenting behaviors (Jones et al., 2014) and that self-compassion plays an important role in parenting outcomes (Moreira et al., 2014; Neff & Faso, 2014). This hypothesis is also based on the assumption that being a mindful parent entails a certain degree of compassion for the child (i.e., being caring and supportive towards the child and having the genuine desire to alleviate the child's distress) and for oneself as a parent (i.e., being able to accept one's

limitations and imperfections as a parent and to avoid self-blaming when parenting goals are not met) (Duncan et al., 2009). Although mindful parenting is not limited to this dimension, we can assume that individuals who have a more general tendency to be self-compassionate, are also able to be more compassionate in the context of parenting.

We have not established a specific hypothesis about the differential effect of anxiety and avoidance in mindful parenting because both dimensions have been associated with various parenting outcomes. In addition, research has revealed inconsistent results about how each dimension relates to particular facets of parenting (Jones et al., 2014) and no previous study has investigated the association between attachment dimensions and mindful parenting, which would make it premature to propose such a specific hypothesis. Similarly, no hypothesis was established about the differential effect of attachment dimensions in self-compassion since inconsistent results have been reported in the literature. For instance, while Moreira et al. (2014) found that both attachment anxiety and avoidance were negatively and significantly associated with self-compassion, Neff and Beretvas (2012) found a nonsignificant association between self-compassion and the dismissive attachment style.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample included 290 mothers of school-aged children/adolescents. Mothers were included if they were the main caregiver of a child or adolescent between the ages of 8 and 19 years at the time of recruitment who did not have serious chronic health conditions or developmental delays. The mean age of mothers was 41.66 years old ( $SD = 5.42$ ; range: 27-57), and the majority were married or living with a partner ( $n = 251$ ; 86.6%). Mothers had, on average, 1.97 children ( $SD = 0.91$ ; range: 1-8). With regard to education levels, 198 (68.3%) had completed basic or secondary studies, and 92 (31.7%) had completed graduate or post-graduate studies.

## Procedure

The sample was collected between January and April 2014 in six public schools of all grades from two School Units in Portugal. Authorization for sample collection was first obtained from the Portuguese Data Protection Authority and from the Board of Directors of the two School Units. After authorization was received, 24 classes from the six schools were randomly selected. Teachers were contacted by the researchers, informed about the study, and asked to collaborate as intermediaries between the researcher and the parents. The parents were given a letter explaining the study, the informed consent form, and the questionnaires to be completed at home and returned a week later. A total of 581 children/adolescents and their parents were invited to participate, and 371 (63.86%) completed the questionnaires. Of these, 45 questionnaires were excluded because only the child ( $n = 31$ ) or the father ( $n = 14$ ) completed the assessment protocol. In addition, 36 questionnaires were excluded due to ineligible and/or incomplete answers, resulting in a final sample of 290 mothers. Fathers only have been excluded due to the low number that participated in the study as main caregivers.

## Measures

**Self-compassion.** Levels of self-compassion were assessed by the Portuguese version of the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Castilho & Pinto-Gouveia, 2011; Neff, 2003b). This instrument has 26 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*) and measures six components of self-compassion (Self-kindness, Self-judgment, Common Humanity, Isolation, Mindfulness and Over-identification). After reverse-coding negative items, it is possible to obtain a global measure of self-compassion by estimating the mean of the 26 items, with higher scores indicating higher self-compassion. In the current study, the total score of self-compassion was used as a latent variable. The original SCS (Neff 2003b) has shown good psychometric properties, including adequate reliability ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), temporal stability ( $r = .93$ ), and construct validity (convergent and discriminant). The

Portuguese version of SCS (Castilho & Pinto-Gouveia, 2011) has also exhibited adequate reliability ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), temporal stability ( $r = .78$ ), and construct validity (convergent and discriminant).

**Mindful Parenting.** The Portuguese version of the Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting Scale (IM-P; Duncan, 2007; Moreira & Canavarro, 2015) was used to assess mindful parenting. This self-report questionnaire has 31 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (*never true*) to 5 (*always true*) and measures the five dimensions of mindful parenting proposed by Duncan et al. (2009). The total score was obtained by estimating the mean of the 31 items and was used as a latent variable of mindful parenting, with higher scores indicating higher mindful parenting. The IM-P has shown adequate reliability and construct validity in American and Dutch samples (de Bruin et al., 2012; Duncan, 2007; Duncan, Coatsworth, Gayles, Geier, & Greenberg, 2015). The Portuguese version has also evidenced good psychometric properties, including adequate reliability and construct validity (Moreira & Canavarro, 2015).

**Attachment.** The Portuguese version of the Experiences in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures questionnaire (ECR-RS; Moreira et al., 2014; Fraley et al., 2011) was used to assess maternal attachment-related anxiety and avoidance towards the respondent's own mother or mother-like figure. Although this self-report instrument was designed to measure attachment dimensions in different close relationships (mother or mother-like figure, father or father-like figure, romantic partner, and best friend), for the purposes of the current study, only attachment to the mother/mother-like figure was used. Participants were instructed to respond the questions considering their current relationship with their mother/mother-like figure or, if their mother/mother-like figure had passed away, considering the way they felt when she was alive. The ECR-RS is composed of nine items rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The subscale score consists of

the mean of the items, with higher scores indicating higher attachment avoidance and anxiety. The psychometric qualities of the ECR-RS are well established. Fraley et al. (2011) provided evidence of its reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranged from .85 to .92) and validity. The Portuguese version (Moreira et al., 2014) revealed adequate reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranged from .72 to .91) and confirmed the original two-factor structure.

### **Data Analyses**

Data analyses were conducted using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS, version 20.0). Descriptive statistics were computed for all socio-demographic and study variables. Pearson's bivariate correlation coefficients were computed to assess associations between variables, and their strength was classified according to the following guidelines: "small" for correlations around .10, "medium" for those near .30, and "large" for correlations at .50 or higher (Cohen, 1988). Correlations between the socio-demographic variables and the dependent variable were analyzed to select the appropriate covariates for introduction into the model (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

To test the proposed mediation model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with latent variables was conducted using AMOS© 20 with maximum likelihood estimation. The analyses followed a two-step procedure (Bollen, 1989). Initially, a confirmatory analysis (CFA) was performed to examine the quality of the measurement model testing the hypothesized links between the latent variables and their observed indicators. Subsequently, we examined the structural model testing the direct and indirect links of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance on mindful parenting through self-compassion. The statistical significance of the indirect effects was estimated using bootstrap resampling procedures with 2000 samples and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (BC95%CI). The overall fit of the measurement and structural models was evaluated based on the main goodness-of-fit indices, including the comparative fit index (CFI), the root-mean-square error of approximation

(RMSEA) with its associated 90% confidence interval, and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). Criteria for good model fit were a non-significant  $\chi^2$  ( $p > .05$ ),  $CFI \geq .95$ ,  $RMSEA \leq .06$ , and  $SRMR \leq .08$ , and the criteria for acceptable fit were  $CFI \geq .90$ ,  $RMSEA \leq .08$ , and  $SRMR \leq .10$  (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The  $\chi^2/df$  ratio was examined, with a ratio between 1 and 3 indicating a good fit (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999). The construct reliability of the latent variables was assessed using composite reliability values, and values  $\geq .70$  were deemed adequate (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The empirical power tables proposed by Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) for mediation models suggest that the sample size of this study is sufficient to find a mediated effect including small-to-medium  $a$  and  $b$  paths (.26) with a .80 power.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**

Descriptive statistics and Pearson's inter-correlations for the study variables are presented in Table 1. With regard to the correlations, attachment avoidance and anxiety were both negatively and moderately correlated with mindful parenting and self-compassion. Conversely, mindful parenting and self-compassion were positively and strongly correlated. Bivariate associations between socio-demographic variables (mother's age, education, marital status, and number of children) and mindful parenting were also analyzed to identify potential covariates. Significant correlations were only found between mindful parenting and mother's education (0 = basic or secondary; 1 = graduate or post-graduate;  $r = .15$ ,  $p = .010$ ) and number of children ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p = .007$ ).

(Table\_1\_about\_here)

### **Mediation model**

Before conducting the main analysis, multicollinearity was analyzed through Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) statistics. No evidence of multicollinearity was detected, with tolerance and VIF values above 0.10 and below 10, respectively.

Prior to the examination of the hypothesized mediation model, a CFA was performed to ascertain whether the measured variables used to construct the latent variables were adequate. Consistent with the procedure used in the validation of the Portuguese version of the ECR-RS (Moreira et al., 2014), we specified that errors belonging to items 1 and 4, 2 and 3, and 5 and 6 of the ECR-RS scale were allowed to correlate. These pairs of items have similar content and belong to the same dimension. The measurement model presented an adequate fit to the data, with  $\chi^2(158) = 344.96, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.18; CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.06 (p = .007; 90\%CI = 0.06/0.07);$  and SRMR=0.07. The loadings of each observed indicator onto the relevant latent variable were all significant at  $p < .001$ , with the exception of the common humanity indicator ( $p = .016$ ). The majority of standardized regression weights were above .50 (see Figure 1). The construct reliability of the latent variables was good, with all composite reliability values above the threshold of 0.70 (0.79 for anxiety; 0.86 for avoidance; 0.79 for self-compassion; and 0.71 for mindful parenting). With data supporting the hypothesized structure of the measurement model, we proceed to the test of the structural model.

The structural model testing the direct and indirect effects, via self-compassion, of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance on mindful parenting, controlling for parents' education and number of children, presented an adequate fit to the data, with  $\chi^2(197) = 421.96, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.14; CFI = .916; RMSEA = .063 (p = .006; 90\%CI = 0.06/0.07);$  SRMR=0.073 and explained 9% and 52% of the variability of self-compassion and mindful parenting, respectively. As presented in Figure 1, the standardized direct effect of attachment avoidance on mindful parenting was significant ( $\beta = -.15, p = .036, BC95\%CI = -.28/-.01$ ),

contrary to the standardized direct effect of attachment anxiety ( $\beta = -.06, p = .432, \text{BC95\%CI} = -.21/.09$ ). The total effects of attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety were both significant ( $\beta = -.22, p = .017, \text{BC95\%CI} = -.17/-.01$ ;  $\beta = -.20, p = .019, \text{BC95\%CI} = -.10/-.01$ , respectively). Additionally, attachment anxiety had a significant indirect effect on mindful parenting via self-compassion ( $\beta = -.16, p = .001, \text{BC95\%CI} = -.28/-.06$ ). Conversely, the standardized indirect of attachment avoidance on mindful parenting through self-compassion did not reach statistical significance ( $\beta = -.06, p = .312, \text{BC95\%CI} = -.16/.06$ ).

To investigate whether a model excluding the nonsignificant path between attachment avoidance and self-compassion would have a better fit, we re-estimated the model by eliminating this path. The re-estimated model had an equally good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(198) = 423.41, p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.14$ ; CFI = .916; RMSEA = .063,  $p = .006$ ; 90%CI = 0.06/0.07; SRMR = 0.077. The  $\chi^2$  difference test,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.45, p = .228$ , indicated that the overall fit of the trimmed model is statistically equal to the non-trimmed model. Therefore, the model including all the paths was retained and presented in Figure 1.

(Figure\_1\_about\_here)

## Discussion

The results of the current study showed that maternal attachment dimensions play an important role in levels of mindful parenting, although they do so through different pathways. Whereas attachment avoidance has a direct effect on mindful parenting, attachment anxiety is indirectly associated with this parenting dimension through self-compassion. These results represent an important and novel contribution to the literature by demonstrating a differential effect of avoidance and anxiety on mindful parenting and identifying an important mechanism through which anxiety is linked to this parental dimension.



The observation that attachment avoidance is directly associated with mindful parenting is in line with most studies assessing self-reported attachment styles, which have consistently found a link between avoidance and negative parental outcomes (Jones & Cassidy, 2014). This association may be explained by the consequences of using deactivating strategies of emotion regulation. Because of the effort to maintain their attachment system deactivated or down-regulated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007), avoidant individuals usually attempt to maintain a safe emotional distance from others and feel uncomfortable when others are distressed and need support (Gillath et al., 2005), which leads them to have increased difficulties in assuming caregiving roles (Rholes et al., 1997; 2006). In this case, parenting may represent an “approach-avoidance conflict” (Rholes et al., 2006, p. 282) because although avoidant parents wish to maintain emotional distance and turn off their attachment system, caring for a child requires a sensitive and supportive response to the child’s needs that keeps their attachment system activated. In addition, the increased difficulty of avoidant individuals in bringing mindful awareness into the relationship with their child may be related to the enduring use of strategies of suppression or inhibition of thoughts and feelings that could activate their attachment system. By using these maladaptive strategies of emotion regulation, these individuals may be less able to develop mindfulness skills, particularly in the relationship with their child. This finding is in line with previous studies showing that lower levels of dispositional mindfulness are associated with higher levels of thought suppression (Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007) and attachment avoidance (Caldwell & Shaver, 2013, 2014; Shaver et al., 2007). Furthermore, it is likely that avoidant individuals have learned and internalized a parenting model characterized by emotional distance and reduced availability, due to the repeated experiences with cold and unavailable attachment figures, particularly the mother (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Consequently, they may interact with their children in the same distant and cold manner that

their mothers or other attachment figures interacted with them, adopting a parenting model that is probably very different from mindful parenting.

Interestingly, although attachment avoidance was significantly correlated with self-compassion, in the mediation model this association was not significant. This can be explained by the tendency of avoidant individuals to suppress or deny attachment-related thoughts and emotions that could activate feelings of vulnerability and dependence on others (Caldwell & Shaver, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), which consequently leads these individuals to have more difficulty paying attention to emotionally loaded material and understanding and expressing internal emotional states (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Following the same reasoning, Neff and Beretvas (2012) argued that the nonsignificant association between self-compassion and a dismissive attachment style was possibly due to a lack of self-insight and, consequently, increased difficulty among these individuals in reporting internal emotional states. This hypothesis is in line with the study of Caldwell and Shaver (2012), which showed that attachment avoidance, in contrast to anxiety, was significantly associated with the active suppression of and reduced attention to emotions and that avoidance predicted emotion dysregulation and impaired resilience through higher levels of emotion suppression and a less clear understanding of emotional states. Since Neff and Beretvas (2012) employed a categorical measure of attachment and that the only study in which a dimensional measure was used (Moreira et al., 2014) found different results, future studies are needed to clarify the nature of the association between attachment avoidance and self-compassion.

In contrast to avoidance, attachment anxiety and mindful parenting were indirectly associated through self-compassion. The significant association between anxiety and self-compassion may be explained by the chronic activation of the attachment system of anxiously attached individuals, which may make it particularly difficult for them to access the soothing

system of affect regulation and to adopt a compassionate attitude towards themselves. Their threat system may have been probably over-stimulated due to early negative experiences with inconsistent attachment figures, especially the mother, which may have impeded them from learning to self-soothe and be kind to themselves (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). In addition, anxious individuals usually ruminate about their flaws and limitations and ways of changing themselves or their circumstances to obtain the desired closeness in relationships and to avoid being abandoned (Caldwell & Shaver, 2013). In fact, anxious individuals possess a negative view of the self, doubting their worth, lovability, and capacity to obtain the desired support and love from others. They also tend to feel unable to cope with stressors and threats autonomously and rely on others as a source of support, validation and acceptance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This negative model of self and increased focus on personal flaws and self-critical rumination likely impedes anxious individuals from being self-compassionate. Accordingly, Neff and McGehee (2010) argued that fearful individuals may not have the emotional foundation that is needed to have a compassionate attitude towards the self, whereas preoccupied individuals, because of their excessive dependency on others' approval and validation, may not be able to develop an attitude of acceptance towards themselves.

So, this study suggests that secure mothers are more able to be self-compassionate and, consequently, more likely to be mindful in the relationship with their children. As described, we found that higher levels of self-compassion were associated with higher levels of mindful parenting. Because self-compassionate mothers have higher levels of self-kindness, they may be less self-critical in relation to their parenting behaviors and feel more confident in their ability to care for a child. In addition, their greater sense of common humanity might contribute to greater acceptance of their shortcomings as parents and their child's imperfections and limitations. This caring and non-judgmental attitude towards

themselves is an important facet of mindful parenting. Indeed, being a mindful parent implies a nonjudgmental acceptance of one's limitations and imperfections as a parent, of the attributes, traits, or limitations of the child and of the fact that parenting can be a very demanding task at times (Duncan et al., 2009). The greater capacity of self-compassionate individuals to be mindful of painful emotions and thoughts instead of denying them, suppressing them, or ruminating about them (Neff, 2003a) may help parents to have a greater emotional awareness of their internal states and of the emotions and thoughts of their child as well as to more easily exert self-regulation in the interactions with the child by intentionally pausing before responding to their child instead of automatically reacting. So, this study clearly suggests that a more secure attachment in the relationship with the maternal figure fosters the development of self-compassion, which, in turn, is fundamental to help parents develop a mindful parenting approach in the relationship with their children.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

The current study presents several limitations that should be noted. First, its cross-sectional design does not allow the identification of causal mechanisms and the establishment of directions between variables. Although the proposed associations are strongly supported by theory and previous research, we cannot rule out the possibility that, for instance, changes in mindful parenting lead to changes in self-compassion or even in attachment patterns. Future longitudinal studies are warranted to determine the direction of these associations over time. Second, because of the low number of fathers participating in the current study, we opted to exclude them from the analyses, which impedes the generalization of the results to fathers. Third, the representativeness of the sample cannot be guaranteed because parents were recruited only at two school units in Portugal. Fourth, although the contextual assessment of mothers' attachment allowed for a relatively unambiguous evaluation, some caution is needed in interpreting and generalizing the results to other attachment figures.

Despite the limitations, the current study also has important strengths and clinical implications. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to focus on the association between attachment dimensions and mindful parenting and to explore a mechanism underlying this association. The identification of factors that could explain the adoption of these parenting practices, particularly those that are amenable to change in a therapeutic context, is essential to stimulate this area of research and to improve existing mindful parenting programs. The results of this study suggest that interventions aimed at promoting parents' mindful abilities in parenting should also focus on promoting parents' general self-compassion. Specific exercises of compassionate mind training (Gilbert & Procter, 2006) or mindful self-compassion training (Germer & Neff, 2013) may be very useful to help parents develop self-compassion skills. Recognizing the importance of developing a self-compassionate attitude, Bögels and Restifo (2014) included a session in their mindful parenting program devoted to cultivating compassion through loving-kindness meditation. Our findings also suggest that mindful parenting interventions may be particularly beneficial for insecurely attached parents and for those with more children and lower levels of education, who may find it more difficult to adopt a mindful approach in parenting.

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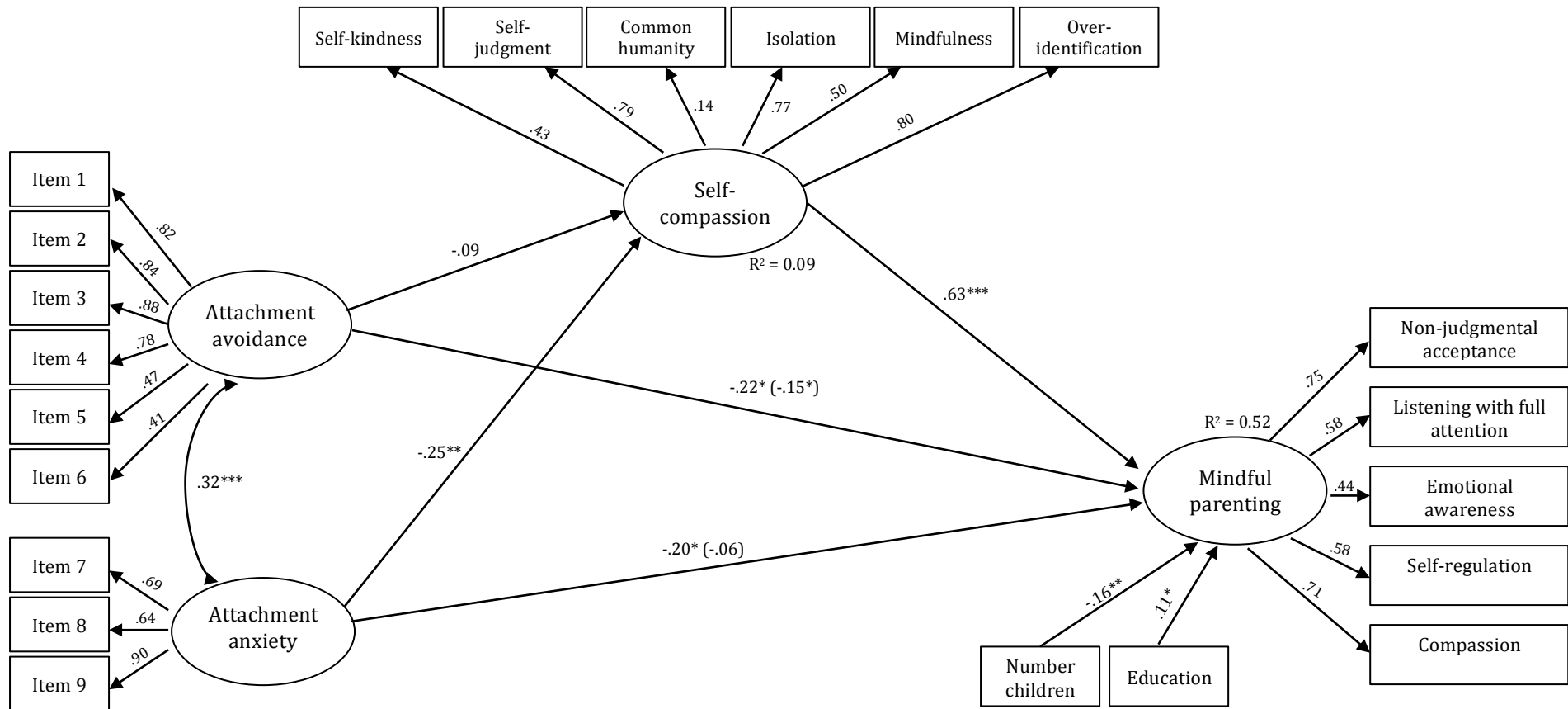
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Table 1. *Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alphas, and correlations among study variables*

		<i>N</i> = 290			Correlations			
Variables		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Observed range</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3
1	Self-compassion	3.32	0.47	1.81 – 4.73	.88	--		
2	Mindful Parenting	3.67	0.37	2.45 – 4.71	.80	.61**	--	
3	Attachment anxiety	2.53	1.66	1.00 – 7.00	.78	-.18**	-.22**	--
4	Attachment avoidance	2.69	1.32	1.00 – 7.00	.87	-.21**	-.22**	.30**

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.



## Figure Caption

Figure 1. *Structural equation model testing the direct and indirect effects of attachment dimensions on mindful parenting through self-compassion.*

*Note.* Values are standardised regression coefficients. In the arrows linking attachment dimensions and mindful parenting, the value outside parentheses represents the total effect of attachment anxiety or avoidance on mindful parenting before the inclusion of self-compassion. The value in parentheses represents the direct effect, from the bootstrap analysis, of attachment anxiety or avoidance on mindful parenting after the inclusion of the mediators. All observed variables loaded significantly on the respective latent variable, but, for simplicity,  $p$  values are not displayed. For simplicity, measurement error terms are not shown.

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$