

## Providing a Model of Parental Sexual Education and Its Relationship with Attachment Styles Mediated by Early Maladaptive Schemas

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The purpose of the present study was to provide a model of parental sexual education and examine its relationship with attachment styles through the mediating role of early maladaptive schemas.

**Methods and Materials:** This research employed a quantitative-survey design and was applied in nature. The statistical population consisted of all parents (1,500 individuals) who had children aged 6 to 12 years. Based on the Morgan and Cochran sampling table, a sample of 300 participants was selected using a simple random sampling method. The research instruments included the Hazan and Shaver Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire (1987) and Young's Early Maladaptive Schemas Questionnaire (1998). The validity of the instruments was assessed through face validity, and their reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.91. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS software.

**Findings:** The findings indicated a significant relationship between parental sexual education models and attachment styles, mediated by early maladaptive schemas. Furthermore, early maladaptive schemas were shown to mediate the relationship between parental sexual education patterns and attachment styles ( $p < .05$ ).

**Conclusion:** The results of this study support the impact of parental sexual education models on both attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that early maladaptive schemas can serve as a mediating factor in the relationship between parental sexual education models and attachment styles.

**Keywords:** Parental Sexual Education Models, Attachment Styles, Early Maladaptive Schemas.

## 1. Introduction

Parental sexual education has long been recognized as a critical determinant in the developmental trajectory of children and adolescents. Rooted in early familial interactions, the transmission of sexual knowledge and attitudes from parents to children plays a pivotal role not only in sexual health outcomes but also in the psychological constructs that shape interpersonal relationships, including attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas (EMSs). Understanding how parental sexual education models interact with attachment and cognitive-emotional schemas is essential for informing preventative and developmental frameworks for youth well-being (Abdollahzadeh & Kikhosravi, 2019; Kabiri et al., 2024).

Sexual education provided by parents can be classified into multiple styles, each carrying distinct implications for psychological and behavioral development. Abdollahzadeh and Kikhosravi (2019) conceptualized these styles based on dimensions such as belief-orientation, norm-orientation, and knowledge-orientation, recognizing that parental approaches are often shaped by sociocultural values and cognitive-emotional backgrounds (Abdollahzadeh & Kikhosravi, 2019). These education styles do not occur in isolation; rather, they are embedded in the broader context of family dynamics, communication practices, and parental emotional schemas, which are heavily influenced by caregivers' own experiences and psychological structures (Fooladbend & Ejagh, 2022; Kabiri et al., 2024).

One of the most important frameworks for understanding the impact of early relationships and socialization processes is attachment theory. Initially proposed by Bowlby and later expanded by others (Holmes, 2014), attachment theory posits that the nature of early caregiver-child interactions creates internal working models that influence behavior across the lifespan. Parental attachment styles, such as secure, avoidant, and ambivalent, are not only predictive of children's emotional regulation and interpersonal competencies but are also intricately related to parenting practices, including the provision of sexual education (Atkinson, 2019; Choukan Sanbal et al., 2023).

Several studies have emphasized that insecure attachment styles in parents may hinder open and effective communication about sexual topics. Parents with avoidant or ambivalent attachment tendencies may perceive sexual discussions as threatening, resulting in limited or distorted information transfer (Shirzadi et al., 2022; Willis, 2022). Conversely, secure attachment facilitates warmth,

responsiveness, and appropriate boundary-setting, allowing for more comprehensive and developmentally attuned sexual education (Robinson et al., 2017; Sagone et al., 2023).

An emerging body of literature has started to link these processes to the development of early maladaptive schemas. EMSs, as defined by Young, are pervasive cognitive-emotional patterns that are formed during early life and elaborated throughout one's lifetime, especially when basic emotional needs are not met (Bishop et al., 2022; Miklósi et al., 2016). These schemas are shaped significantly by early parenting behaviors and can mediate the relationship between attachment styles and emotional/behavioral outcomes in children and adolescents (Ebrahimi et al., 2023; Garavand, 2022).

The interrelation of these variables—parental sexual education styles, attachment patterns, and EMSs—provides fertile ground for both theoretical and applied psychological research. Babayanad Ahari et al. (2020) highlighted the concerns and unmet educational needs of Iranian parents regarding their adolescent sons' sexual health, indicating that sociocultural and psychological factors such as shame, embarrassment, and lack of communication skills act as significant barriers to effective parental sexual education (Babayanad Ahari et al., 2020). These barriers are often manifestations of unaddressed schemas and unresolved attachment issues in the parents themselves.

Moreover, inadequate or distorted sexual education has been linked to increased risks of psychological maladjustment and risky sexual behaviors in youth. For instance, Choukan Sanbal et al. (2023) demonstrated that insecure attachment styles are associated with greater likelihood of engaging in high-risk sexual behavior, and this relationship is moderated by early experiences such as birth order and childhood sexual abuse (Choukan Sanbal et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with broader global concerns about child sexual abuse and exploitation, underscoring the importance of parental awareness and education in early childhood (Istiqomah et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2020).

In response to these risks, several scholars and policymakers have emphasized the need for context-sensitive and developmentally appropriate sexual education interventions. Díaz-Rodríguez et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative exploration of adolescents' opinions and found that youth value openness, clarity, and empathy in sexual education delivery, qualities often facilitated by secure parent-child attachment (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2024). In a similar vein, Lameiras-Fernández et al. (2021) argued that

successful sexual education programs must integrate family participation, cultural sensitivity, and psychological safety to achieve meaningful outcomes (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021).

From a policy perspective, governments in both Western and non-Western contexts have attempted to establish preventive programs aimed at reducing child sexual abuse and improving sexual health literacy. For example, Aiffah and Religia (2020) examined governmental initiatives in Indonesia and highlighted the role of early parental intervention in reducing risks of abuse and misinformation (Aiffah & Religia, 2020). Complementary findings from Jeti et al. (2024) reveal that parents perceive early childhood sexual education as a necessary tool to prevent future abuse, though many still feel ill-equipped to deliver such education effectively (Jeti et al., 2024).

In Iran, where this study is situated, the topic of sexual education remains particularly sensitive due to cultural and religious factors. Despite a growing awareness of its necessity, many Iranian parents lack the knowledge, confidence, or emotional readiness to address sexual topics with their children. Seifollahi Ooshani et al. (2022) reviewed existing Iranian studies and found substantial gaps in the literature, particularly concerning adolescents, parental schema structures, and attachment mechanisms (Seifollahi Ooshani et al., 2022). Similarly, Fooladbend and Ejagh (2022) stressed the importance of reconceptualizing indigenous models of sexual education to reflect the cultural and emotional realities of Iranian families (Fooladbend & Ejagh, 2022).

The intersection of maladaptive schemas and parenting is a particularly underexplored area in Iranian psychological research. Kabiri et al. (2024) developed a model connecting maladaptive schemas to marital conflict and parenting practices, suggesting that schema-based dysfunctions significantly influence family dynamics and educational behaviors (Kabiri et al., 2024). Shirzadi et al. (2022) added that cognitive emotion regulation strategies, shaped by maladaptive schemas, play a mediating role in sexual dysfunctions and distorted attitudes toward sexuality (Shirzadi et al., 2022).

Given the psychological, developmental, and sociocultural stakes involved, a comprehensive model is needed to explain how parents' sexual education styles relate to their attachment orientations, and how both of these variables may be mediated by their early maladaptive schemas. The present study seeks to fill this gap by integrating empirical findings and theoretical frameworks

across attachment theory, schema therapy, and sexual health education.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quantitative-survey research design and was applied in terms of its objective. The statistical population consisted of all parents (1,500 individuals) in the city of Isfahan in 2021 (Gregorian Calendar) who had at least one child between the ages of 8 and 12 and held at least a high school diploma. Based on Morgan's sampling table and Cochran's formula, a sample size of 300 individuals was selected using a simple random sampling method. The inclusion criteria were having at least one child, possessing a minimum educational level of a high school diploma, and providing informed consent to participate in the study.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Attachment Style

This is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 15 descriptive statements. Respondents evaluate the extent to which each description—which reflects a particular attachment style—applies to them, using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranges from "Very Low" = 1, "Low" = 2, "Moderate" = 3, "High" = 4, to "Very High" = 5. The questionnaire includes three subscales: secure attachment (items 6, 7, 8, 9, 10), avoidant attachment (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), and ambivalent attachment (items 11, 12, 13, 14, 15).

#### 2.2.2. Early Maladaptive Schemas

The 75-item short form of Young's Schema Questionnaire was developed by Jeffrey Young in 1998. It assesses 15 early maladaptive schemas using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "Completely True of Me" = 6 to "Completely Untrue of Me" = 1. The schemas include: Emotional Deprivation (items 1–5); Abandonment/Instability (items 6–10); Mistrust/Abuse (items 11–15); Social Isolation/Alienation (items 16–20); Defectiveness/Shame (items 21–25); Failure (items 26–30); Dependence/Incompetence (items 31–35); Vulnerability to Harm or Illness (items 36–40); Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self (items 41–45); Subjugation (items 46–50); Self-Sacrifice (items 51–55); Emotional Inhibition (items 56–60); Unrelenting Standards/Hypercriticalness (items 61–65);

Entitlement/Grandiosity (items 66–70); and Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline (items 71–75). For statistical classification and hypothesis testing, SPSS and PLS software were used.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the central tendencies and variability of the main variables. To assess the normality of the data distribution, skewness and kurtosis values were examined. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to validate the measurement model, and structural equation modeling (SEM) using Smart PLS

software was used to test the hypothesized relationships between parental sexual education styles, attachment styles, and early maladaptive schemas. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was used to evaluate the explanatory power of the model, and the Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) index was computed to assess overall model fit.

### 3. Findings and Results

In the sample of 300 participants, 50% were male and 50% were female. The highest frequency was observed among individuals with an associate or bachelor's degree (100 individuals). In terms of age, the most frequent group was between 31 and 40 years old. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation for the main research variables.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Status of Research Variables*

Variable	Component	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Parental Sexual Education	Belief-Oriented	4.530	3.228	3	15
	Norm-Oriented	6.506	2.859	3	13
	Child-Centered	7.423	2.266	3	13
	Law-Oriented	6.760	3.480	3	14
	Knowledge-Oriented	6.746	3.755	3	15
	Superficial-Oriented	4.363	3.118	3	15
Early Maladaptive Schemas	Disconnection & Rejection	54.844	10.522	28	87
	Impaired Autonomy & Performance	42.243	8.582	23	60
	Impaired Limits	21.365	4.539	11	32
	Other-Directedness	18.676	4.496	10	35
	Hypervigilance & Inhibition	19.091	3.794	12	29
	Total	261.770	23.855	97	222
Attachment Styles	Secure	12.993	6.461	5	25
	Avoidant	10.523	4.519	5	22
	Ambivalent	9.610	4.083	5	22

The results indicate that the means were: belief-oriented 4.530, norm-oriented 6.506, child-centered 7.423, law-oriented 6.760, knowledge-oriented 6.746, superficial-oriented 4.363, early maladaptive schemas total 261.770, secure attachment style 12.993, avoidant 10.523, and ambivalent 9.610.

**Table 2**

*Normality Test Results*

Variable	Component	Skewness	Kurtosis
Parental Sexual Education	Belief-Oriented	-1.321	1.081
	Norm-Oriented	0.646	-0.505
	Child-Centered	-0.017	-1.350
	Law-Oriented	0.057	-1.479

Initially, for inferential data analysis and testing research hypotheses, skewness and kurtosis tests were used to assess the normality of data distribution and determine whether parametric or non-parametric tests were appropriate.

Early Maladaptive Schemas	Knowledge-Oriented	-0.887	-0.343
	Superficial-Oriented	-1.157	0.191
	Disconnection & Rejection	0.230	0.449
	Impaired Autonomy & Performance	-0.121	-0.127
	Impaired Limits	0.367	-0.210
	Other-Directedness	0.473	1.254
	Hypervigilance & Inhibition	0.087	-0.536
	Total	0.087	0.463
Attachment Styles	Secure	0.071	-1.434
	Avoidant	0.344	-1.038
	Ambivalent	0.743	-0.372

Based on the results in Table 2, the distribution of the data for skewness at a significance level of 0.141 and kurtosis at a significance level of 0.281 is considered normal.

In this study, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to assess the initial measurement model. The factor loadings are presented in Figure 1, and the significance levels are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1

Reflective Measurement Model in Factor Loadings (PLS Software)

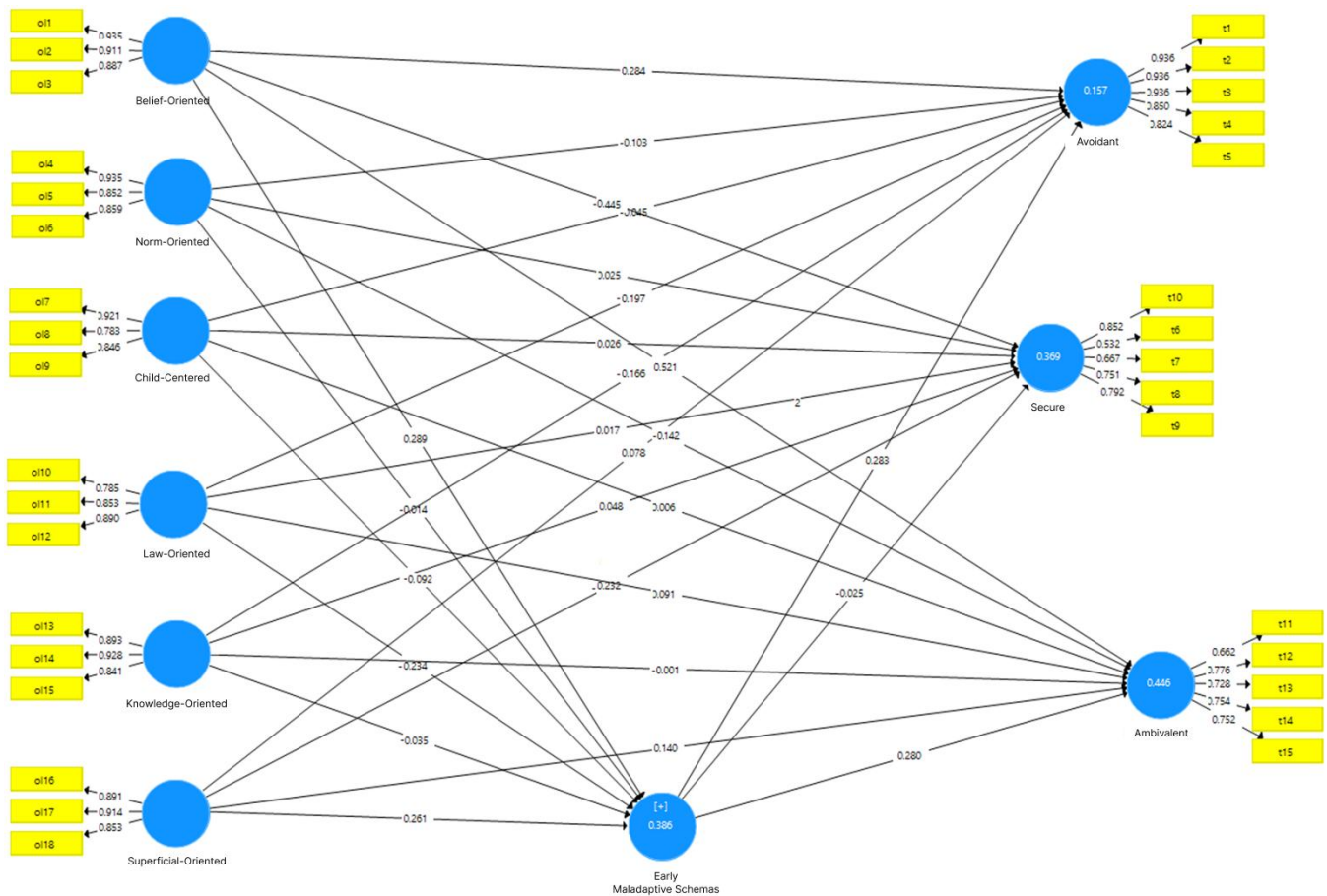
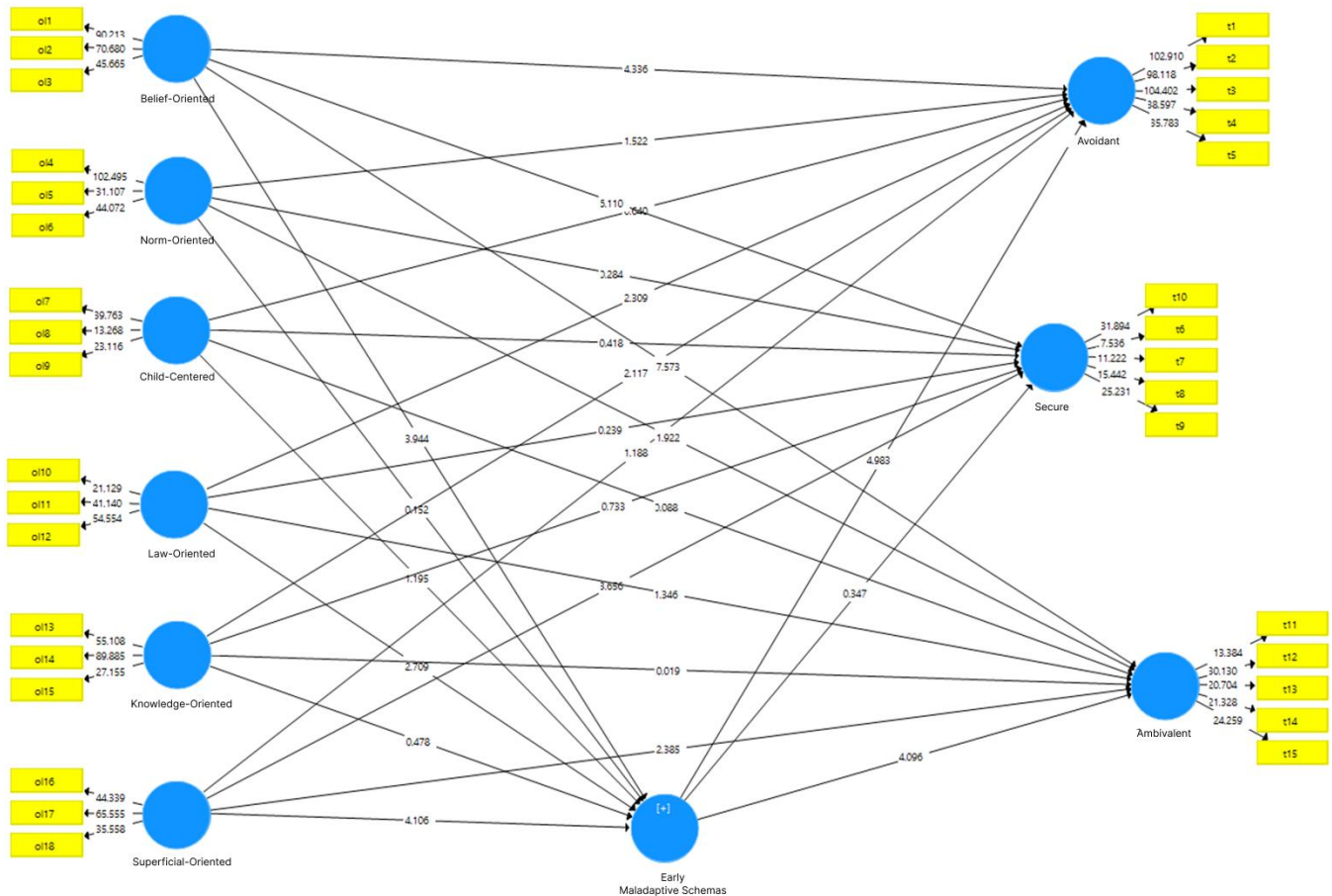




Figure 2

*Reflective Measurement Model in Significance Level Mode (PLS Software)*

To evaluate the structural model fit, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was used, which indicates the influence of an exogenous variable on an endogenous variable. The

values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 are considered benchmarks for weak, moderate, and strong  $R^2$  values, respectively, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

 *$R^2$  Criterion Results for Endogenous Constructs*

Variable	Component	$R^2$
Parental Sexual Education	Belief-Oriented	-
	Norm-Oriented	-
	Child-Centered	-
	Law-Oriented	-
	Knowledge-Oriented	-
	Superficial-Oriented	-
Early Maladaptive Schemas	-	0.311
Attachment Styles	Secure	0.154
	Avoidant	0.369
	Ambivalent	0.445

According to the results in Table 3, the  $R^2$  values for the constructs were calculated, and based on the established benchmarks, the structural model fit is considered acceptable.

Additionally, the overall model fit (Goodness-of-Fit index or GOF) was calculated. According to the literature, values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36 represent weak, moderate, and strong model fit, respectively.

Table 4

*Communality and R<sup>2</sup> for Research Variables*

Variable	Component	Communality	R <sup>2</sup>
Parental Sexual Education	Belief-Oriented	0.830	-
	Norm-Oriented	0.779	-
	Child-Centered	0.725	-
	Law-Oriented	0.712	-
	Knowledge-Oriented	0.789	-
	Superficial-Oriented	0.785	-
Early Maladaptive Schemas	-	0.787	0.311
Attachment Styles	Secure	0.806	0.154
	Avoidant	0.529	0.369
	Ambivalent	0.541	0.445

Based on the GOF value obtained (0.482), the overall model fit is confirmed to be strong and satisfactory.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between parental sexual education styles and attachment styles, mediated by early maladaptive schemas. The results supported the hypothesized model, indicating that various parental sexual education styles significantly influence attachment styles, and that early maladaptive schemas act as a mediating variable in this relationship. Among the key findings, belief-oriented, norm-oriented, and knowledge-oriented sexual education styles were positively associated with secure attachment, while superficial-oriented and child-centered approaches showed stronger associations with insecure (avoidant and ambivalent) attachment styles. Furthermore, maladaptive schemas such as disconnection/rejection and impaired autonomy mediated these relationships, illustrating the cognitive-emotional pathways through which early familial experiences are internalized and expressed in attachment behavior.

The first major finding—demonstrating that sexual education styles predict attachment orientations—is aligned with the foundational premises of attachment theory. As posited by Bowlby and elaborated by others, the quality of early parent-child interaction, especially communication regarding emotional and developmental issues like sexuality, forms the bedrock of internal working models for relationships (Atkinson, 2019; Holmes, 2014). In families where open, structured, and consistent sexual communication occurred—such as in knowledge- and belief-oriented models—children are more likely to develop secure attachment styles. This observation is consistent with findings by Robinson et al. (2017), who noted that parental

clarity, empathy, and responsiveness in sexual education practices foster trust and emotional security in children (Robinson et al., 2017).

On the other hand, superficial- and child-centered education styles, often characterized by avoidance, lack of structure, or inappropriate boundaries, were associated with avoidant and ambivalent attachment patterns. These styles may reflect parental discomfort, inconsistency, or cognitive-emotional barriers in addressing sexual topics, likely rooted in their own unresolved schemas or attachment insecurities (Choukan Sanbal et al., 2023; Shirzadi et al., 2022). As the results of this study suggest, these insecure styles of attachment are indirectly shaped by maladaptive schemas, which act as cognitive filters distorting parental perception and behavior (Ebrahimi et al., 2023; Garavand, 2022).

The mediating role of early maladaptive schemas adds a critical cognitive-emotional dimension to the understanding of this relationship. The data showed that schemas such as disconnection/rejection, impaired autonomy, and other-directedness were significant predictors in the path from parental sexual education to attachment outcomes. This is consistent with the schema theory advanced by Young and supported by empirical research, which posits that EMSs develop from unmet core emotional needs during childhood and persist into adulthood, influencing both parenting styles and interpersonal relationships (Bishop et al., 2022; Miklósi et al., 2016). Parents who were emotionally neglected, rejected, or controlled in their own childhood may develop maladaptive schemas that inhibit their ability to engage in healthy, open communication about sexuality, thereby perpetuating insecure attachment patterns in their children.

The relevance of cultural context in shaping these dynamics must also be emphasized. In Iranian society, as in many others with traditional norms, discussions of sexuality

within families are often constrained by socioreligious values and taboos. This frequently leads to inconsistent or covert educational practices, as shown in studies by Fooladbend and Ejagh (2022) and Seifollahi Ooshani et al. (2022), who pointed to significant gaps in parental competence and confidence in delivering sexual education (Fooladbend & Ejagh, 2022; Seifollahi Ooshani et al., 2022). These gaps often stem from intergenerational transmission of maladaptive schemas and attachment insecurity, reinforcing cycles of emotional inhibition and cognitive avoidance that shape parenting styles.

Furthermore, this study's findings echo the concerns raised by Babayanad Ahari et al. (2020), who found that Iranian parents experience significant confusion and concern regarding their role in their children's sexual development. These concerns are often underpinned by cognitive distortions that are reflective of schema-driven thought patterns, including shame, inadequacy, and hypervigilance (Babayanad Ahari et al., 2020). These schemas, particularly when left unaddressed, diminish parents' abilities to model healthy sexual attitudes or to respond to their children's developmental needs in emotionally attuned ways.

In global contexts, similar patterns have been observed. Díaz-Rodríguez et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of adolescent perspectives, revealing that youth desire honest, empathetic, and value-sensitive conversations about sexuality, often not provided by their parents due to schema-based limitations or rigid cultural norms (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2024). This reflects the broader conclusions from Lameiras-Fernández et al. (2021), who found that successful sexual education frameworks must integrate the emotional readiness of both parents and children, which is inextricably tied to attachment security and cognitive-emotional flexibility (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021).

The study also finds empirical support in the research of Kabiri et al. (2024), who demonstrated how maladaptive schemas mediate various family relationship patterns, including marital conflict and parenting behavior (Kabiri et al., 2024). In particular, schemas of defectiveness/shame and emotional inhibition may impair a parent's ability to initiate or sustain productive dialogue about sexuality, further weakening secure attachment bonds and reinforcing intergenerational patterns of emotional neglect and misunderstanding.

Another important implication of these findings lies in the prevention of child sexual abuse. As argued by Aiffah and Religia (2020), early parental education about sexual boundaries and safety is critical in reducing children's

vulnerability to abuse (Aiffah & Religia, 2020). Yet, when maladaptive schemas obstruct healthy sexual communication, children are not only deprived of essential knowledge but may also lack the emotional security needed to disclose abuse. This is corroborated by McElvaney et al. (2020), who emphasized that attachment security significantly predicts children's likelihood of disclosing abuse in a timely and coherent manner (McElvaney et al., 2020).

Therefore, addressing parents' underlying schemas through therapeutic or educational interventions may not only improve their attachment relationships with their children but also strengthen their capacity to deliver effective, safe, and emotionally attuned sexual education. As Salcun (2015) argues, extending attachment theory into new domains, such as sexuality education, reveals previously overlooked dimensions of relational and developmental health (Salcun, 2015). This study advances that effort by empirically modeling a pathway that links parents' early cognitive-emotional structures with their current behaviors and their children's psychological outcomes.

Finally, the results of this study reinforce the findings of Jeti et al. (2024), who reported that although parents understand the importance of early sexual education in abuse prevention, they often feel ill-equipped to deliver it without guidance or training (Jeti et al., 2024). Schema-informed education programs, which address both content knowledge and underlying cognitive-emotional barriers, may offer a promising direction for both policy and practice.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the valuable insights yielded by this study, it is not without limitations. The reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces potential biases, such as social desirability and recall inaccuracies, particularly in sensitive domains like sexuality and parenting. The cross-sectional nature of the research also prevents the establishment of causal relationships. Additionally, the cultural specificity of the Iranian sample limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts with differing sociocultural norms around sexuality and family dynamics. Finally, the study focused exclusively on parents with a minimum educational level of a high school diploma, potentially excluding more vulnerable populations with lower literacy and access to psychoeducation.

Future studies should consider longitudinal designs to explore how changes in parental schemas or attachment



orientations over time affect the evolution of sexual education practices and children's attachment outcomes. Including diverse samples across different regions and cultural settings would enrich our understanding of how context influences the schema-attachment-education nexus. Moreover, integrating qualitative methods—such as in-depth interviews or observational studies—would provide deeper insights into the emotional and narrative processes through which parents transmit sexual knowledge and values to their children. Finally, investigating the impact of targeted schema-focused interventions on improving sexual education delivery among parents would be a practical extension of the current findings.

Training programs for parents should incorporate schema-awareness modules that help individuals identify and reframe maladaptive beliefs that hinder open sexual communication with their children. Schools and health organizations can collaborate to offer culturally sensitive, developmentally appropriate resources and workshops that support both knowledge acquisition and emotional preparedness. Clinicians and counselors working with families should assess attachment styles and cognitive-emotional schemas when addressing sexual development concerns, as these variables significantly influence parenting behaviors. Overall, a more integrated, psychologically informed approach to family-based sex education is essential for fostering both individual well-being and public health.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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