



**LOVE LEARNED EARLY: HOW CHILDHOOD SOCIAL SUPPORT CAPITAL  
INFLUENCES ROMANTIC LOVE**

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**Abstract**

*Background of the Study:* It is widely believed that love is a learned behavior, with the common assumption that children who experience love and support are more likely to develop healthy, loving relationships, while those exposed to abuse may continue cycles of abuse in their own partnerships. This study aims to investigate how social support experienced in childhood influences the capacity for marital love in adulthood, addressing the potential long-term impact of early social experiences on later relational dynamics.

*Method:* A total of 114 adults (mean age = 38.4, SD = 6.15) participated in the study. Respondents completed self-administered, individual self-reported questionnaires, standardized and distributed online via Google Forms. The data focused on assessing the relationship between the level of social support perceived during childhood and the dimensions of love in adult relationships, including emotional intimacy, commitment, and passion.

*Results:* As hypothesized, the results indicated a significant positive association between the social support felt during childhood and the ability to experience and express love in adulthood. Respondents who reported higher levels of childhood social support demonstrated

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stronger love dimensions in their adult relationships, suggesting that a nurturing early environment contributes to healthier relational outcomes later in life.

*Conclusion:* The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of childhood social support in shaping an individual's capacity for love and emotional connection in adulthood. These results underscore the importance of early positive social experiences for the development of healthy, long-lasting marital relationships, providing valuable insights for interventions and strategies aimed at fostering emotional well-being from childhood through adulthood. results highlight the importance of addressing family conflict to mitigate its potential negative effects on child development.

**Keywords:** *social support, love, adults, qualitative research.*

## **1. Introduction**

Scientific research shows that parents influence children in many ways, including support and control (Marici & Turluc, 2011; Marici, 2015a; Marici, 2015b). But studies also show that social support, in general, as part of the social capital of children, matters in their evolution as adults in romantic relationships (Salvatore et al. 2011; Allen et al. 2020; Girme et al. 2021).

Research in developmental psychology highlights several theories that underscore the importance of love experienced during childhood in shaping healthier romantic relationships in adulthood. Attachment theory, suggests that secure emotional bonds formed with caregivers in early childhood lay the foundation for trusting and stable relationships later in life (Feeney, 2013). Similarly, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory posits that successfully navigating the "trust vs. mistrust" stage in infancy fosters a sense of security and emotional resilience, which positively influences adult intimacy (Oh, & Minichiello, 2013). Social Learning Theory further explains that children who observe healthy expressions of love and communication between their parents are more likely to model these behaviours in their own romantic partnerships (Stuart, 2003). What is more, Cognitive Development Theory, emphasizes that experiencing consistent care and affection helps children develop a positive self-concept and empathy, both of which are critical for forming deep emotional connections in adulthood (Soloski et al., 2013).

### *1.1. Parent-Child Relationship*

Being a good lover in romantic relationships is a learned behavior and parents are the first socializing factor that teaches children how to behave as lovers. The exposure of children to parental romantic interactions, the interactions of children with their siblings or their mother

or father are factors that teach children norms, conducts, micro skills, attitudes, emotions or even complex know-hows like sustaining a pleasant conversation or helping.

Research consistently demonstrates that warmth and responsiveness within the family of origin can have far-reaching implications for individuals' later romantic relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Seiffge-Krenke, et al., 2001). For instance, Conger et al. (2000) found that early parental affection fosters better communication skills and relational competence in emerging adulthood, whereas Seiffge-Krenke et al. (2001) reported that the marital status of parents, the parent-child quality of relationship and a sense of body competence was associated with connectedness and attraction in romantic relationships. Secure attachment to parents—often arising from consistent affection—further contributes to enhanced self-regulation and comfort with intimacy (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001).

Additional evidence underscores that nurturing mother-child interactions are linked to healthier adult romantic outcomes (Karen, 1998), while overall supportive family environments bolster socioemotional skills essential for satisfying intimate bonds (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Meta-analytic findings highlight that positive parenting practices reduce behavioural problems and facilitate healthier relationship formation (Hoeve, et al., 2009). Longitudinal work indicates that strong parental love and early attachment security predict more adaptive representations and behaviours in young adults' romantic relationships (Roisman, et al., 2005). Altogether, these studies reveal that supportive, loving relationships with parents play a pivotal role in fostering emotional stability, effective communication, and overall relational success in adulthood.

However, Love and Rejection Messages Theory (LRMT; Marici, 2025) claims that present interactions matter the most, as they produce the immediate, lived experience in the couple—what each partner actually feels, interprets, and reacts to now. It is not the distant past or even the sum of historical grievances that determines the emotional climate of the relationship, but rather the micro-messages exchanged in everyday life: the glances, words, silences, gestures of affection or absence, tiny validations or subtle rejections that accumulate and shape the present emotional tone.

Nevertheless, LRMT recognizes a crucial nuance: these present-day romantic skills, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities do not arise in a vacuum. They are, in fact, the fruits of earlier socialization—patterns and habits acquired in childhood, family of origin, and the formative years of one's first significant relationships. During the initial socialization period, individuals unconsciously absorb relational "scripts" about love, intimacy, conflict, and

vulnerability. These internalized models guide how they express needs, read their partner's signals, and interpret ambiguous behaviours.

### *1.2. Close Friends and Romantic Relationships*

Close friends add more value to children's experience in the romantic realms as these behaviors are closer and involve deeper disclosures about romantic friends and intimate facts. Close friendships provide a crucial "training ground" for relationship skills—such as perspective-taking and conflict resolution—that individuals can later apply in their romantic partnerships, thereby enhancing trust, communication, and overall relationship quality. (Fraley, & Davis, 1997) Another study presents the fact that friendships provide a space to practice communication, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution, which later enhance romantic interactions. Trust and intimacy learned in friendships shape expectations for romantic partners, fostering healthier and more resilient relationships. (Furman, 1999). More specific, another study found that both in friendships or in romantic relationships are involved the same skills regarding securing commitment in relationship such as, non-costy or costly behaviours. (Yamaguchi, et al. 2015)

### *1.3. School Colleagues and Romantic Relationships*

School colleagues may represent good chances for children to have good interactions or conflicts, which are all teachable moments. School colleagues can contribute to the development of better romantic relationships in several ways.

Interacting with a diverse group of peers at school helps individuals practice communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Turliuc & Marici, 2013), which are essential for enhancing social skills (Miller et al., 2009). Classmates offer perspectives on behaviour, social norms, and relationship dynamics, helping individuals refine their understanding of attraction, emotional expression, and partner expectations. That means that colleagues may provide social feedback (Suleiman, & Deardorff, 2015). Observing peer relationships—both friendships and romantic ones—allows individuals to learn from successes and mistakes, shaping their own approach to intimacy and commitment. Thus, there are created opportunities for relationship modelling (Furman, & Rose, 2015). Engaging in peer interactions fosters self-esteem and identity development, which are crucial for forming independent, secure, and fulfilling romantic relationships. This forms confidence and identity (Harris, & Orth, 2019).

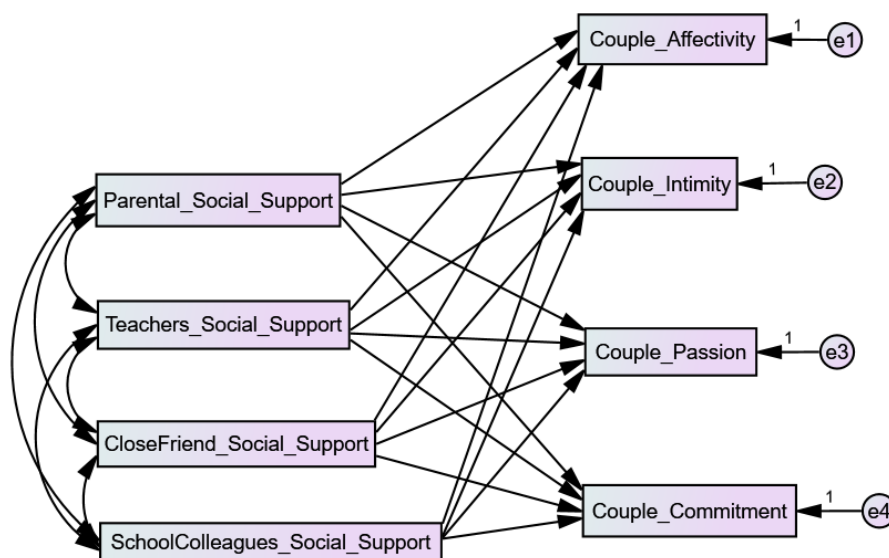
#### 1.4. Teachers and Romantic Relationships

Teachers represent the moral figures in school with whom children spent large amounts of time. Interpersonal experiences with multiple teachers can shape an adolescent's broader relationship expectations (e.g., beliefs about trustworthiness, support, and conflict), which also have implications for later romantic relationships (Martin, & Collie, 2019). Shows how the quality of a supportive adult–youth relationship can shape youths' relational capacities, empathy, and emotional openness—qualities that predict healthier romantic and peer relationships (Varga, & Deutsch, 2016). Although it doesn't focus exclusively on romantic relationships, it underscores how warm, supportive teacher–student relationships foster more adaptive “internal working models” of relationships—a concept closely related to how children later approach intimate partnerships (Davis, 2003).

## 2. The Present Study

The aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of social support capital on couple love. For that, we proposed a structural equation model to be tested (See *Graph 1*).

*Graph 1*: The model of causal relationships in AMOS



## 3. Participants

A total of 114 parents participated in the study, with ages ranging from 22 to 53 years ( $M = 38.4$ ,  $SD = 6.15$ ), and one missing age value. The sample size was determined based on established methodological recommendations for SEM analyses, which suggest a minimum of 5–10 participants per estimated parameter (Kline, 2023; Hair, 2009). Given that our model

includes 8 observed variables and 16 estimated relationships, the sample of 114 participants was considered adequate to ensure sufficient statistical power and model stability for detecting all hypothesized effects.

Most families (82.5%) had a parent working abroad (compared to 2.6% with both parents working in the country and 14.9% with both parents working abroad). Regarding monthly income ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ), over half (53.5%) earned insufficient money, followed by 28.9% earning more than they need, 11.4% exactly as they need, 5.3% less than they need, and 0.9% much more than they need. Marital status ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 0.486$ ) showed that 78.1% were married, 14.9% were divorced or separated, 6.1% were living in civil partnerships, and 0.9% had one or both parents deceased. Most participants (71.1%) came from urban settings, while 28.9% were from rural setting. Finally, 55.3% of respondents reported their child's gender to be male, and 44.7% as female.

#### **4. Hypotheses**

*H1:* Parental social support will be positively associated with (a) couple affectivity, (b) couple intimacy, (c) couple passion, and (d) couple commitment.

*H2:* Close friend social support will be positively associated with (a) couple affectivity, (b) couple intimacy, (c) couple passion, and (d) couple commitment.

*H3:* Teachers' social support will be positively associated (a) couple affectivity, (b) couple intimacy, (c) couple passion, and (d) couple commitment.

*H4:* School Colleagues social support will be positively associated (a) couple affectivity, (b) couple intimacy, (c) couple passion, and (d) couple commitment.

#### **5. Instruments**

*The Triangular Love Scale* (Sternberg, 1997) was developed by Robert J. Sternberg, who presented it in his article. This instrument measures three components of love—intimacy, passion, and commitment—through 45 items (15 per component), rated on a 9-point Likert scale (from “Not at all” to “Extremely”). An example item might be, “I can imagine my love for my partner lasting for the rest of my life.” Each subscale (intimacy, passion, commitment) targets a specific dimension of love: emotional closeness, physical/sexual attraction, and the decision or promise to maintain the relationship over time. Previous research by Madey and Rodgers (2009), Sumter, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2013, and Acker and Davis (1992) have employed this scale to examine how these components relate to relationship satisfaction and stability.

*The Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS)* (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). It contains 60 items assessing students' perceived support from parents, teachers, classmates, and close friends, often rated using a 6-point Likert scale (e.g., "Never" to "Always" for frequency, and a parallel importance rating). An example item could be, "My teacher listens to me when I'm upset." The CASSS includes distinct subscales for each support source, capturing both how frequently support is provided and how important that support is perceived to be. The instrument was adapted for retrospective coding, for adults.

The present study also measured demographic variables such as: respondents' age, income, marital status, urban or rural background and gender.

## **6. Statistical Procedure**

The study utilized IBM SPSS for preliminary statistical analyses and IBM Amos for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). SPSS was used to compute descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, and chi-square tests to assess relationships between social support and romantic love variables. Pearson correlation analysis helped identify significant associations between childhood social support (from parents, teachers, close friends, and school colleagues) and adult romantic relationship dimensions (affectivity, intimacy, passion, and commitment).

For more advanced modelling, Amos was employed to test the hypothesized Structural Equation Model (SEM). SEM allowed for the simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships between variables, incorporating both direct and indirect effects. The model was initially tested with all hypothesized paths, but a model trimming approach was used to remove non-significant paths, resulting in an optimized model with improved fit indices.

## **7. Ethics**

The present study adhered to rigorous ethical standards in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant institutional guidelines. All participants were informed about the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before completing the questionnaire, with assurances that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Data were collected anonymously, and all identifying information was removed prior to analysis to protect participants' privacy.

Furthermore, the study received approval from the ethics committee at Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Work Centre of

Research Development and Innovation in Psychology, with ID no. 77/15.06.2025, ensuring that all procedures respected participants' rights and well-being. Particular attention was given to the sensitive nature of questions regarding childhood social support and adult romantic relationships, with clear instructions that respondents could skip any questions they found distressing. The researchers maintained a commitment to transparency, integrity, and respect throughout the research process. The data were used exclusively for scientific purposes, and the findings were reported in aggregate form, ensuring that no individual could be identified.

## 8. Results

### 8.1. Corelation Matrix

The Pearson correlation indicated the following associations (see *Table 1*):

*Table 1: Pearson correlation between the main variables of the research.*

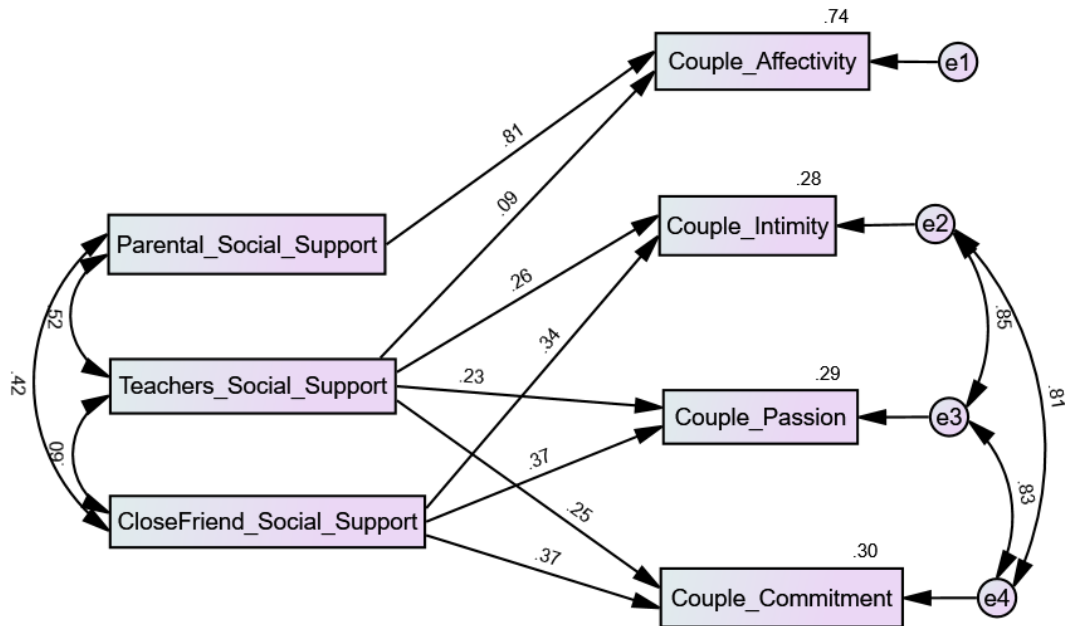
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Teachers_Social_Support	0.519* **						
3. SchoolColleagues_Social_Support	0.488* **	0.685* **					
4. CloseFriend_Social_Support	0.417* **	0.595* **	0.748* **				
5. Couple_Affectivity	0.856* **	0.507* **	0.481* **	0.445* **			
6. Couple_Intimacy	0.392* **	0.458* **	0.486* **	0.491* **	0.428* **		
7. Couple_Passion	0.338* **	0.451* **	0.510* **	0.507* **	0.387* **	0.895* **	
8. Couple_Commitment	0.371* **	0.466* **	0.515* **	0.515* **	0.417* **	0.867* **	0.882***

The highest Pearson correlation coefficient (0.895), significant at the 0.01 level, is observed between the variables Couple Intimacy and Couple Passion. The lowest correlation value, yet still significant at the 0.01 level, is 0.338, and it occurs between the variables Parental Social Support and Couple Passion. All 28 correlations are significant at a significance threshold of < 0.001.

## 8.2. SEM Analysis

The Amos analyses indicated the following results (See *Graph 2*). The results indicated that school colleagues social support has no significant effect on any of the endogenous variables, thus it was eliminated from the model.

*Graph 2: The Final Amos Trimmed Model for the Structural Equation Model Presumed*



*Note:* The graph presents only the significant relations in the model, the covariances and the path coefficients between the observed variables. The nonsignificant associations were removed from the model.

The final model shows an excellent fit to the data, as indicated by the nonsignificant chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 8.529$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = .288$ ), the very high comparative fit indices (CFI = .998, TLI = .993), and a low RMSEA (.044). Parental social support has a strong direct effect on couple affectivity (standardized estimate = .812), while teacher and close friend social support both significantly predict couple intimacy, passion, and commitment, with moderate standardized coefficients (ranging from about .23 to .37). The squared multiple correlations suggest that the model accounts for a substantial amount of variance in couple affectivity (about 74%) and moderately explains the other three couple variables (28–30%). Overall, these results underscore the importance of social support from parents, teachers, and close friends in shaping various dimensions of a couple's relationship.

The comparison from the presumed model and the trimmed model shows significant differences.

*Table 2: Comparisons of the presumed and trimmed models*

	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	p	#variables
Presumed	287.913	6	47.986	0.000	30
Trimmed	8.529	7	1.218	0.288	21

A traditional chi-square difference test suggests that the trimmed model fits significantly better than the presumed model. Specifically, subtracting the trimmed model's chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 8.53$ ,  $df = 7$ ) from the presumed model's chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 287.91$ ,  $df = 6$ ) yields a difference of 279.38, with one additional degree of freedom in the trimmed model. This  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 279.38$  is highly significant ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that the trimmed model provides a markedly better and more parsimonious fit to the data.

These results indicate that the third hypothesis is fully confirmed, the first and the second are partially confirmed and the fourth hypothesis is infirmed.

## **9. Discussions**

This study aimed to investigate how social support experienced during childhood influences the various dimensions of romantic love in adulthood. The results provide substantial evidence that both the quality and source of early social support significantly shape adult relationship dynamics, albeit in distinct ways. Specifically, parental support was identified as a powerful predictor of couple affectivity, whereas support from teachers and close friends showed significant associations with intimacy, passion, and commitment. In addition, teachers' social support has also an association with couple affectivity. In contrast, social support from school colleagues did not exhibit any meaningful connection to the variables related to romantic love, a finding that invites further exploration.

The pronounced impact of parental support on couple affectivity resonates with attachment theory and associated frameworks, which emphasize the foundational role of early caregiver relationships in fostering emotional security and the ability to form deep emotional bonds later in life (Feeney, 2013; Karen, 1998). The high standardized coefficient for parental support suggests that early nurturing and the establishment of a secure base may play a critical role in cultivating an enduring capacity for affective connection.

In contrast, teacher and close friend support demonstrated moderate yet statistically significant effects on intimacy, passion, and commitment. These outcomes align with developmental theories that highlight the importance of non-familial figures in shaping socialization processes (Davis, 2003; Martin & Collie, 2019). Teachers, often viewed as mentors who guide moral and emotional growth, may help individuals internalize values such as trust and reciprocity, which are crucial for intimate relationships. Similarly, close friendships provide opportunities to practice essential skills like communication, conflict resolution, and empathy (Furman, 1999; Yamaguchi et al., 2015), all of which contribute to sustaining the multifaceted nature of romantic love.

The lack of a significant association between school colleague support and adult romantic outcomes was surprising, considering prior research suggesting that peer interactions aid social learning.

Differences in whether peer experiences predict adult romantic outcomes often trace to how “peer support” is operationalized, when it is measured, and what controls are included. Studies that index competence with close friends and peer assertiveness (rather than broad “classmate support”) tend to find enduring links to adult romantic satisfaction; for example, a 13→30 prospective study showed that early adolescent assertiveness and mid-to-late-adolescent close-friendship quality uniquely predicted satisfaction in the late 20s (Allen et al., 2020). By contrast, effects are weaker or null when peer constructs reflect diffuse popularity/likability or general classmate perceptions; newer work suggests that broader perceived social acceptance and late-adolescent close friendships differentially forecast adult well-being, helping explain why some peer indices “work” while others don’t (Shah, et al., 2024).

A second reason is developmental timing and mechanisms. Early caregiving/attachment shapes emotion-regulation strategies carried into adult relationships, which can overshadow or mediate peer effects; longitudinal evidence from birth shows infant attachment insecurity predicting adult regulation decades later, and infant security predicting better conflict recovery with partners. If such attachment pathways are modelled (or not), peer coefficients can rise or vanish.

Third, model specification matters. When analyses include relationship-specific variables (e.g., perceived partner commitment, appreciation, sexual satisfaction), these proximal factors account for much more variance in adult relationship quality across dozens of longitudinal datasets, leaving distal peer variables with little added predictive power—yielding “no effect” conclusions despite real developmental links.

Finally, measurement and informant differences (self- vs friend- vs observer-reports), sample context (community vs risk cohorts), and outcome definition (satisfaction vs conflict recovery vs insecurity) all shift effect sizes. Reviews emphasizing multiple ecological inputs to young-adult romance underscore that changing any of these levers can flip significance.

One possible explanation is that while interactions with school colleagues are frequent, these relationships may be more fleeting or context-dependent, lacking the depth and consistency required to influence long-term romantic capabilities. Alternatively, this null result could stem from limitations within the study, such as its relatively small sample size or challenges in accurately measuring the quality of peer interactions retrospectively.

The varying impacts of different sources of social support illustrate the intricate nature of socialization in developing romantic competencies. The strong link between early parental affection and later couple affectivity underscores the pivotal role of the family environment in emotional development. At the same time, the notable contributions of teachers and close friends indicate that supportive relationships outside the family can complement and enhance relational skills acquired during childhood. These insights suggest the potential benefits of interventions targeting multiple social contexts, such as family-based programs, school counselling, and peer support initiatives, to foster healthier romantic relationships.

Overall, these results highlight the multifaceted interplay of social influences in shaping romantic competencies and emphasize the value of comprehensive approaches to promoting emotional health across the lifespan.

## **10. Conclusions**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how social support influences romantic love relationships in adulthood.

The results indicated that social support is associated with romantic love in adulthood, in eight from the sixteen paths analysed.

Some of the limitations of the study are the following. One key limitation of this study is the uncertainty regarding the proportion of respondents who were mothers versus fathers, which could have influenced the data by capturing only one partner's perspective in many cases. Additionally, the sample lacked a balanced representation of children's genders, as well as a specific focus on a particular age group, both of which may reduce the precision and generalizability of the findings. Another shortcoming concerns the absence of the children's own input, which could have provided a more comprehensive view of the parent-child dynamic. Finally, it is also worth noting that men and women may perceive or experience

certain dimensions of love differently, an aspect that might have introduced variability in how participants interpreted or responded to items related to intimacy, passion, and commitment. Another limitation is the relatively small number of participants.

Future research should investigate other variables in conjunction with these already analysed variables such as: the existence of psychological neglect, or abuse (Marici et al., 2023), parenting styles, or time spent with parents or other parental figures.

The study has implications regarding prevention and interventions in children who did not experience full parental love.

### **Author Contributions**

Conceptualization, M.M.; P.R.; R.R.; Methodology, M.M.; Software, M.M.; Validation, M.M.; Visualizations, M.M.; Formal Analysis, M.M.; Investigation, M.M.; Resources, M.M.; P.R.; R.R.; Writing-Original Draft Preparation, M.M.; P.R.; R.R.; V.L.M. Writing-Review & Editing, M.M.; P.R.; R.R.; V.L.M.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and ethically approved by the Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Work, Centre of Research Development and Innovation in Psychology with ID no. **77/15.06.2025**.

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