

Exploring the Influence of Parental Romantic Vulnerability: A Study of Child Behaviour in Middle Childhood Years

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Abstract

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This research investigates how parental expressions of romantic vulnerability—such as hugging, kissing, and verbal affection—affect children aged 8–13 within Pakistani households. Using interviews with both parents and children, the study explores children’s cognitive, emotional, and social responses to witnessing such interactions. Findings reveal a spectrum of reactions: while many children associate affectionate behavior with emotional safety, others experience discomfort, particularly when behaviors are perceived as overly intimate. Cultural expectations and family communication patterns strongly influence these responses. The study highlights a gap between parents’ intentions to model love and children’s developmental readiness to interpret such behaviors. By addressing this gap, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how parental romantic behaviors shape children’s emotional development and their conceptualization of relationships.

Keywords: Parental love, child growth, family life, cultural rules, Pakistan, emotional understanding, parent-child interaction, social knowledge



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INTRODUCTION

The home environment plays an essential role in shaping children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. It serves as the earliest context in which children learn how relationships operate, how emotions are expressed, and which behaviors are socially appropriate. Parents' behavioral patterns—deliberate or unintentional—directly influence children's internal working models of love, trust, and relational boundaries (Bowlby, 1969).

One underexplored dimension of this environment is children's exposure to parental romantic vulnerability, defined in this study as overt displays of emotional intimacy—such as hugging, kissing, affectionate teasing, or loving conversation—performed in the presence of children. Although these behaviors may be considered natural expressions of marital closeness, children aged 8–13 may interpret them differently due to their developmental stage.

Middle childhood is a period marked by increasing social awareness, moral reasoning, and abstract thinking (Piaget, 1965; Erikson, 1963). Children in this age group are especially attentive to adult behavior and may internalize parental affection as a model for future relationships. While research shows that witnessing healthy affection can promote emotional security (Cummings & Davies, 1994), excessive or developmentally inappropriate intimacy may lead to confusion or discomfort (Collins et al., 2000).

Despite the importance of this topic, limited research examines how children interpret non-conflictual, everyday romantic behaviors between parents. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how such behaviors are perceived by children aged 8–13 and how cultural expectations, family communication, and developmental maturity shape their reactions.

Research Objectives

- To determine the nature of romantic behaviors (e.g., physical touch, loving words, teasing) that parents exhibit in the presence of children aged 8–13.
- To determine how children in this age group perceive and emotionally react to these behaviors.
- To investigate the possible advantages of such exposure, such as emotional safety, positive role modeling, and enhanced family bonds.
- To investigate any undesirable effects, such as discomfort, confusion, or premature exposure to mature themes.
- To contrast the views of parents and children on these affectionate acts and identify any gaps in knowledge.
- To examine how cultural expectations, parenting styles, and communication patterns affect children's reactions to romantic behavior between their parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on family dynamics consistently emphasizes the importance of parental behavior as a model for children's emotional and relational development. While substantial literature explores the effects of marital conflict, divorce, or emotional neglect, far less attention has been given to the influence of positive romantic expressions witnessed by children in middle childhood.

Developmental theories suggest that children aged 8–13 are transitioning from concrete to abstract reasoning, making them highly sensitive to social cues regarding relationships and emotional boundaries (Piaget, 1965). Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) further posits that children internalize and imitate behaviors they observe in their immediate environment, particularly parental models. Consequently, witnessing affectionate behaviors may shape children's early conceptualizations of love, intimacy, and respect.

Research indicates that affection within families can foster security and emotional closeness (Floyd & Morman, 1998). However, other studies caution that exposure to suggestive, confusing, or developmentally inappropriate intimacy—whether through media or adult interactions—may lead to distortions in children’s understanding of relational norms (Ward et al., 2005). Family systems research similarly highlights that any shift in the parental relationship influences children’s emotional experiences and behavior.

Cultural and social norms strongly influence how parental affection is interpreted. While moderate affection may be acceptable in some cultures, others consider even minimal romantic displays inappropriate. Children’s responses therefore depend not only on the behavior itself but also on the cultural meaning attached to it by the family (Collins & Russell, 1991).

Taken together, these findings suggest that parental romantic behavior can promote healthy emotional development when modeled sensitively, but may also create confusion or discomfort without appropriate boundaries or communication. This study contributes to the limited literature examining this nuanced “middle ground” of everyday romantic behavior in families.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four theoretical perspectives: Attachment Theory, Social Learning Theory, Cognitive Development Theory, and Family Communication Patterns Theory.

Attachment Theory posits that children’s early interactions with caregivers create internal working models that guide their understanding of love and relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978). Observing parental affection may strengthen children’s sense of emotional security, whereas ambiguous or overly intimate behaviors may challenge their understanding of relational norms.

Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1977) argues that children learn by observing and internalizing behaviors modeled by significant adults. Parental romantic vulnerability therefore becomes a relational script that children may adopt in their own future relationships.

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development (1965) highlights that children aged 8–13 are developing the capacity for abstract reasoning. Their ability to interpret romantic behavior depends on their developmental readiness. Behaviors that lack contextual explanation may lead to confusion or misinterpretation.

Finally, the Family Communication Patterns Theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002) emphasizes that families differ in openness and expressiveness. In families where emotional communication is encouraged, children may understand parental affection more positively, whereas restrictive communication climates can heighten embarrassment or uncertainty.

These frameworks collectively explain why children’s perceptions of parental romantic behavior vary widely.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative exploratory design was employed to understand how children aged 8–13 interpret parental expressions of romantic affection. This design allows for deep exploration of emotional experiences, family contexts, and subjective meaning-making processes.

A purposive sample of 15–20 parent–child dyads was selected from urban and semi-urban households. Eligibility required that the child reside with both parents, fall within the specified age range, and have regularly observed parental romantic behaviors such as hugging, kissing, or affectionate teasing. Informed parental consent and child assent were obtained.

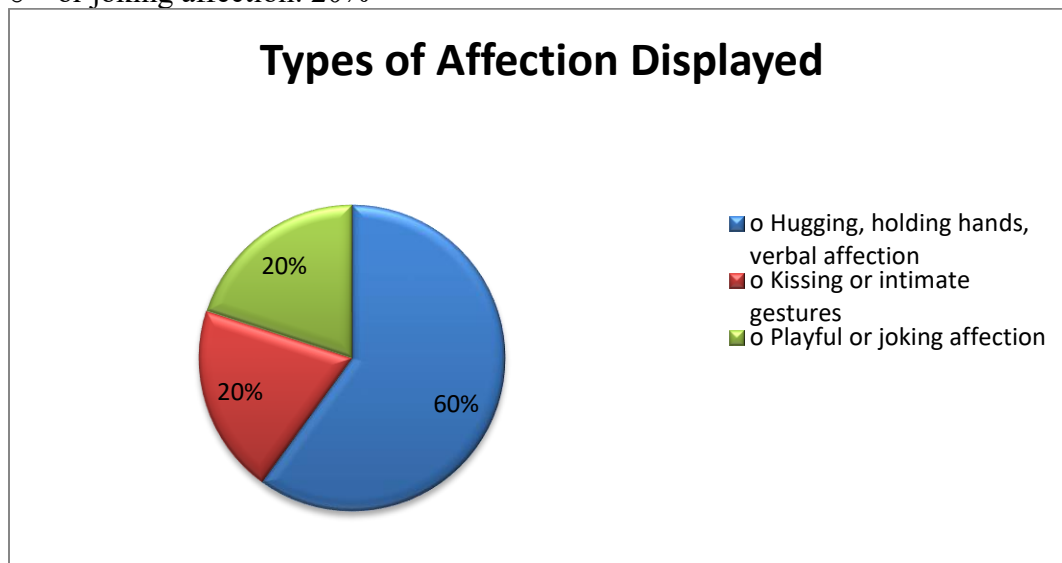
Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted separately with parents and children to ensure comfort and honesty. Interviews explored the types of behaviors displayed, perceived appropriateness, emotional reactions, and broader family communication dynamics. Child interviews were conducted in age-appropriate language with rapport-building strategies to ensure emotional safety.

FINDINGS

Categories for Parents' Responses

1. Types of Affection Displayed

- Hugging, holding hands, verbal affection: 60%
- Kissing or intimate gestures: 20%
- or joking affection: 20%

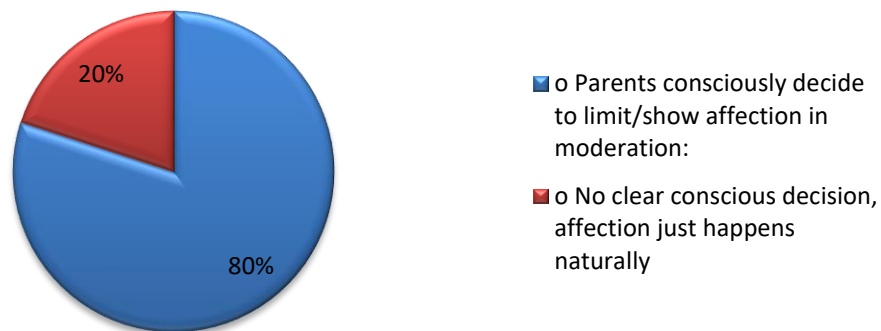


Most parents (60%) show affection by hugging, holding hands, or using kind words. A smaller number (20%) prefer kissing or more intimate gestures, and another 20% use playful ways to express love. This shows that simple, everyday acts of affection are the most common among parents.

2. Conscious Decision to Show Affection

- Parents consciously decide to limit/show affection in moderation: 80%
- No clear conscious decision, affection just happens naturally: 20%

2. Conscious Decision to Show Affection

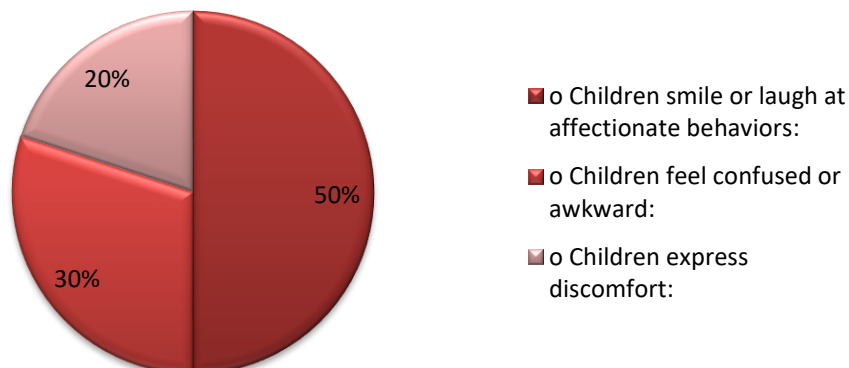


The majority of parents (80%) make a conscious choice about how much affection they display around their children. Only 20% say their affection happens naturally without thinking much about it. This reflects that most parents are mindful of setting emotional boundaries.

3. Child's Reaction to Affection

- Children smile or laugh at affectionate behaviors: 50%
- Children feel confused or awkward: 30%
- Children express discomfort: 20%

Child's Reaction to Affection

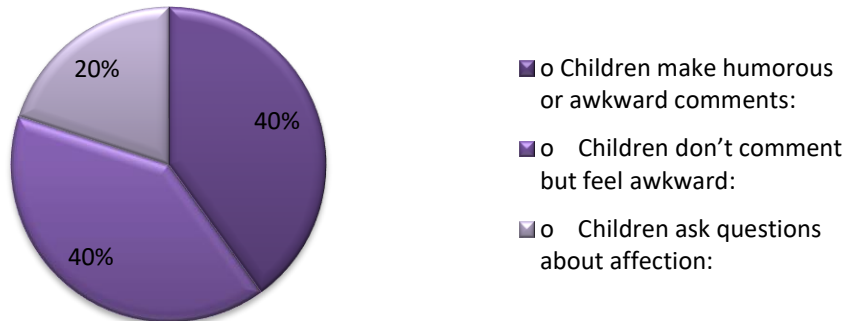


Half of the children (50%) respond positively to their parents' affection by smiling or laughing. However, 30% feel confused, and 20% feel uncomfortable. This highlights that while many children react happily, others might find it confusing or awkward.

4. Children's Comments on Parental Affection

- Children make humorous or awkward comments: 40%
- Children don't comment but feel awkward: 40%
- Children ask questions about affection: 20%

Children's Comments on Parental Affection

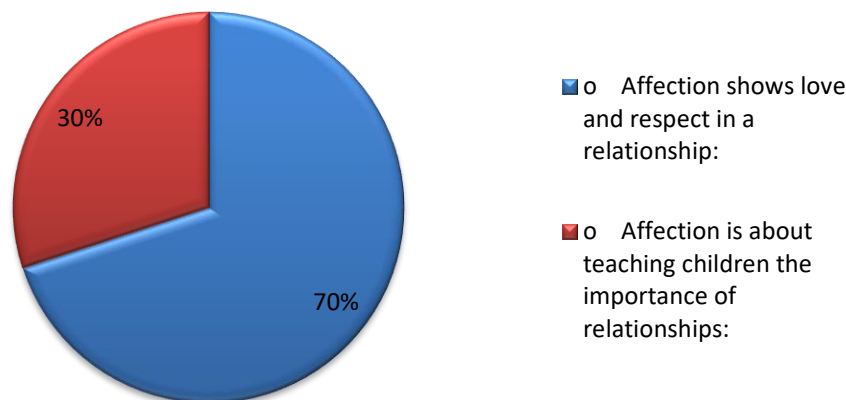


About 40% of children react with humorous or awkward remarks when they see their parents being affectionate. Another 40% stay silent but feel uncomfortable, while 20% ask questions. This suggests that even if children don't always speak up, they are often aware of these moments.

5. Message of Romantic Behaviors

- o Affection shows love and respect in a relationship: 70%
- o Affection is about teaching children the importance of relationships: 30%

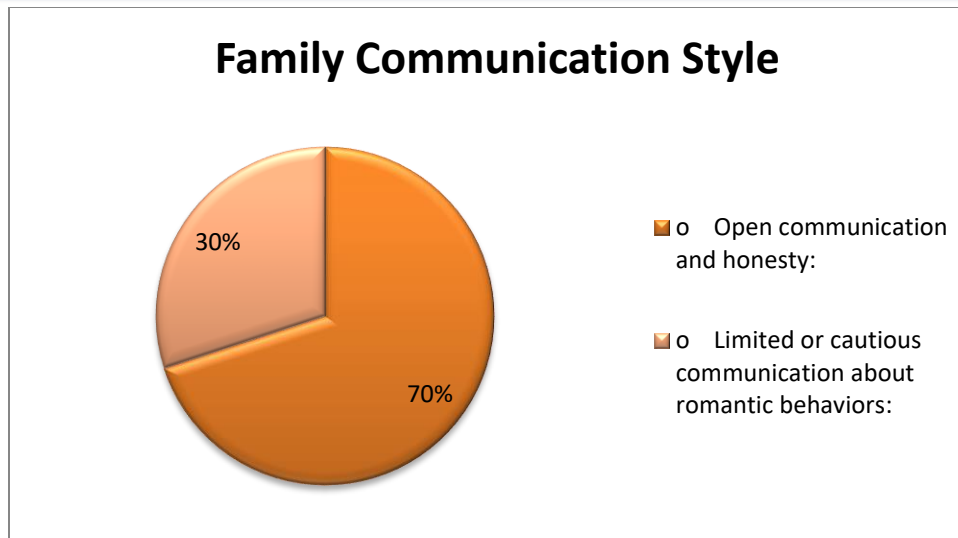
Message of Romantic Behaviors



A large group of parents (70%) believe that showing affection teaches children about love and respect. Meanwhile, 30% think it's a way to show the importance of relationships. Overall, parents view affection as an important lesson for their kids.

6. Family Communication Style

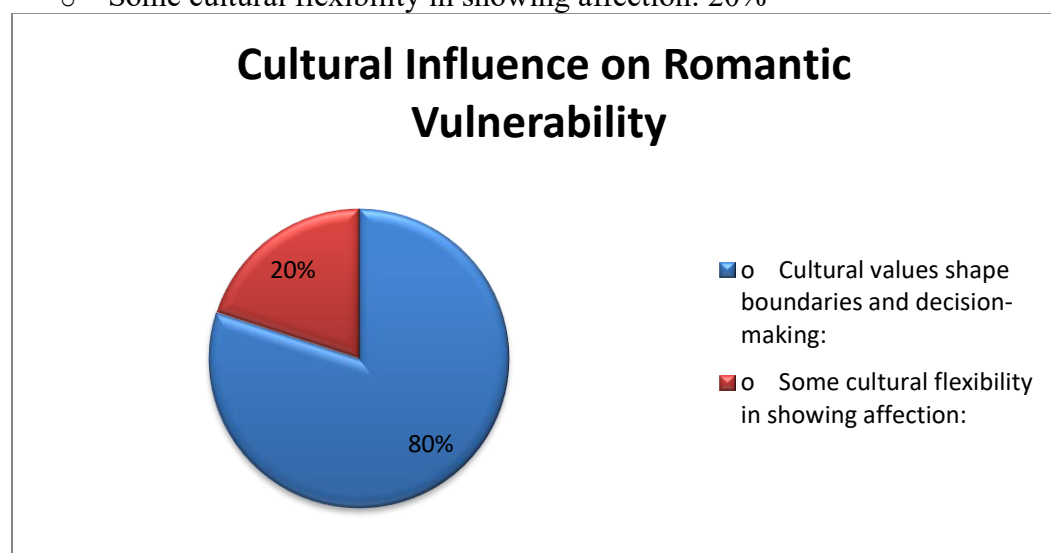
- o Open communication and honesty: 70%
- o Limited or cautious communication about romantic behaviors: 30%



Most parents (70%) feel comfortable having open and honest conversations about romantic behaviors with their children. The rest (30%) are more cautious and prefer to limit such discussions. This shows that while open communication is common, some families still prefer a reserved approach.

7. Cultural Influence on Romantic Vulnerability

- Cultural values shape boundaries and decision-making: 80%
- Some cultural flexibility in showing affection: 20%



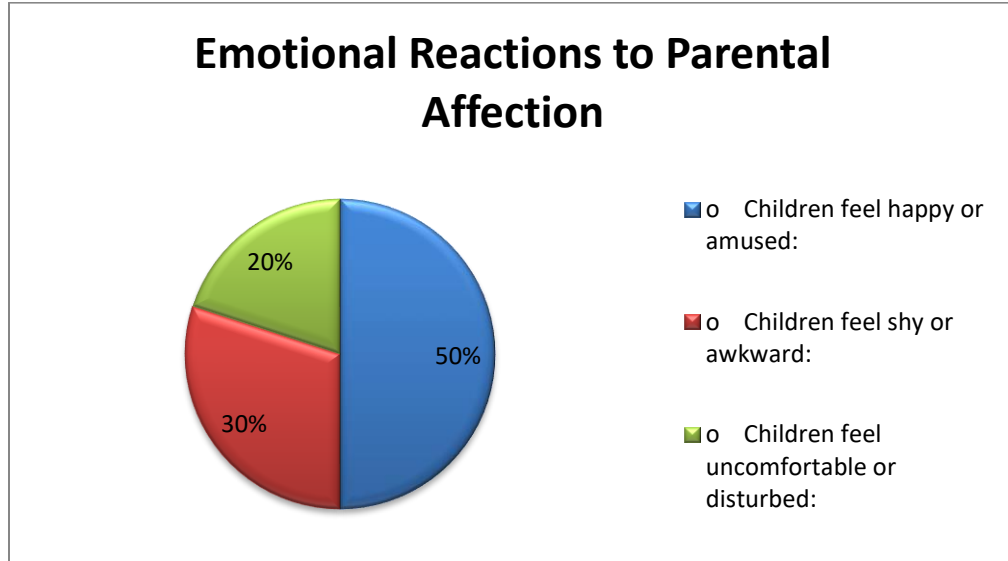
The data shows that for 80% of parents, cultural values play a major role in shaping how they set boundaries and make decisions about showing affection. Meanwhile, 20% feel there is some flexibility within their culture when it comes to expressing affection. This highlights how deeply traditions and cultural norms influence family behaviors, although a smaller group is more open to adapting those traditions.

Categories for Children's Responses:

1. Emotional Reactions to Parental Affection

- Children feel happy or amused: 50%

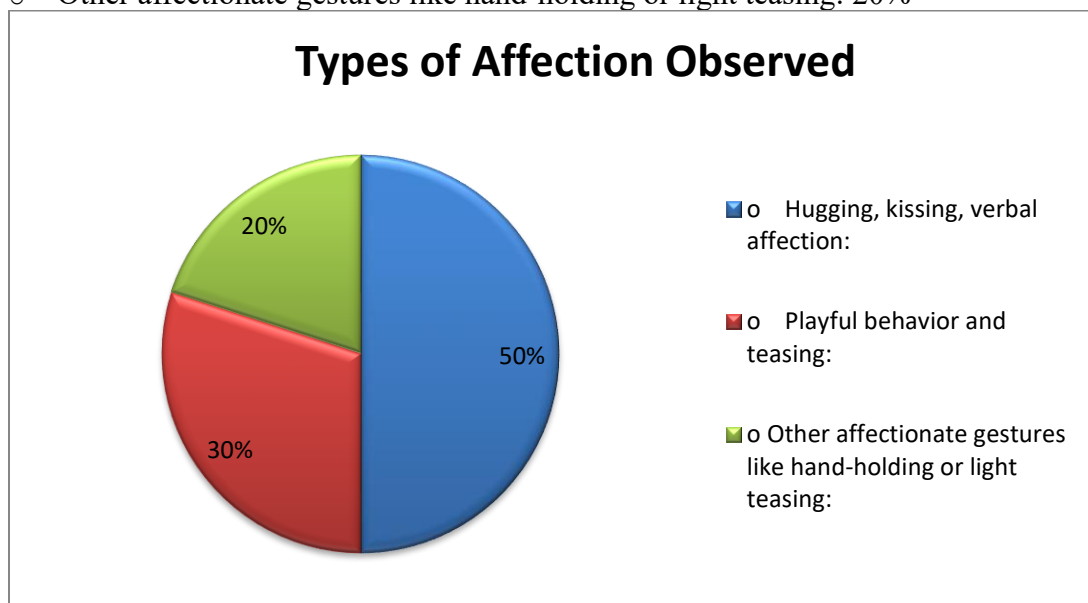
- Children feel shy or awkward: 30%
- Children feel uncomfortable or disturbed: 20%



○ Half of the children (50%) feel happy or find it funny when they see their parents showing affection. About 30% feel shy, and 20% feel uncomfortable. This shows that while most children react positively, not all feel the same way.

2. Types of Affection Observed

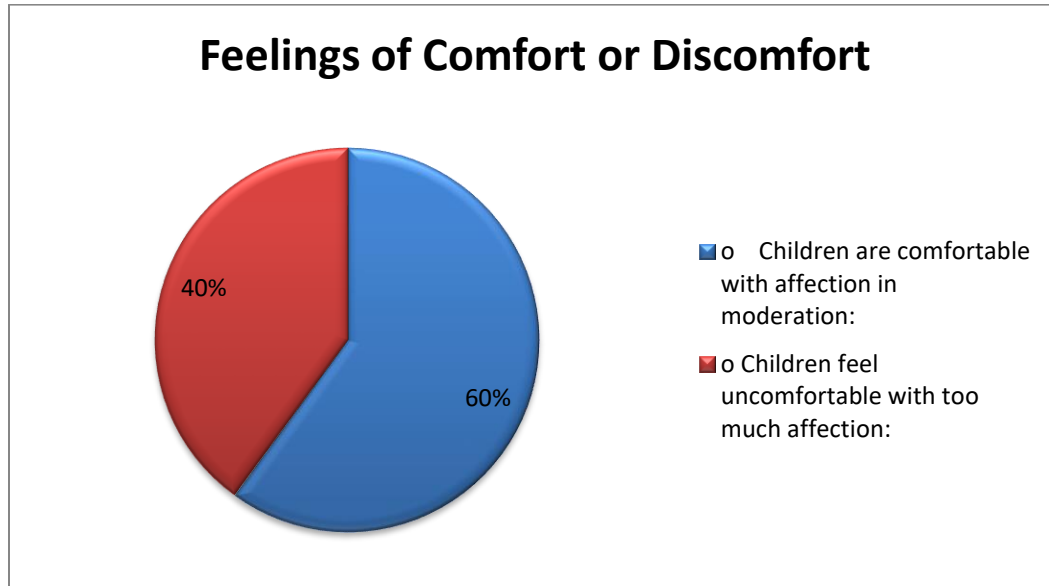
- Hugging, kissing, verbal affection: 50%
- behavior and teasing: 30%
- Other affectionate gestures like hand-holding or light teasing: 20%



Most children (50%) notice their parents showing affection through hugging, kissing, or speaking lovingly. Around 30% observe playful behaviors like teasing, while 20% notice smaller gestures like holding hands. It shows that affectionate actions are very visible to children.

3. Feelings of Comfort or Discomfort

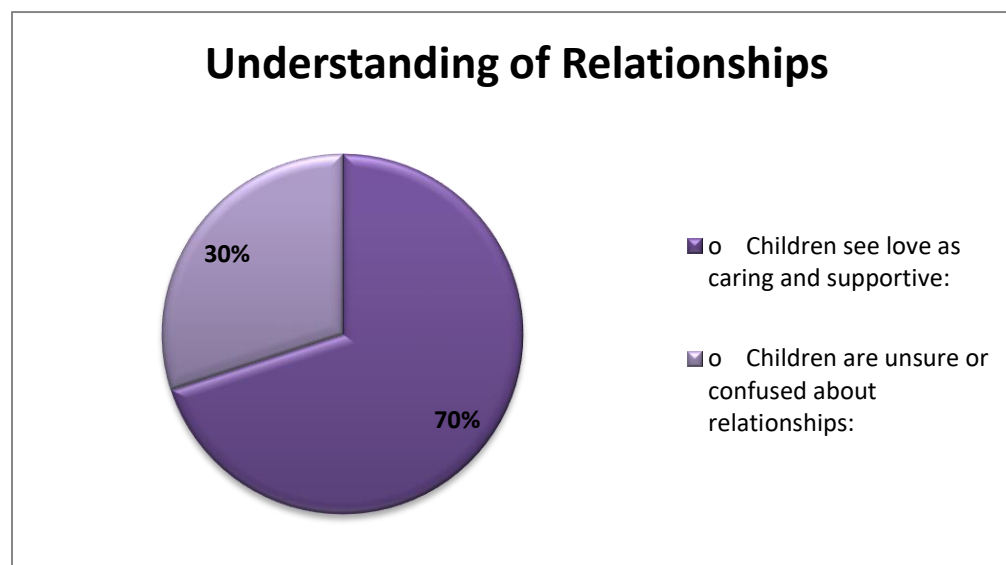
- Children are comfortable with affection in moderation: 60%
- Children feel uncomfortable with too much affection: 40%



Around 60% of children are comfortable with their parents showing affection — but only when it's moderate. On the other hand, 40% feel uneasy when the affection seems too much. This suggests that balance is important to make children feel secure.

4. Understanding of Relationships

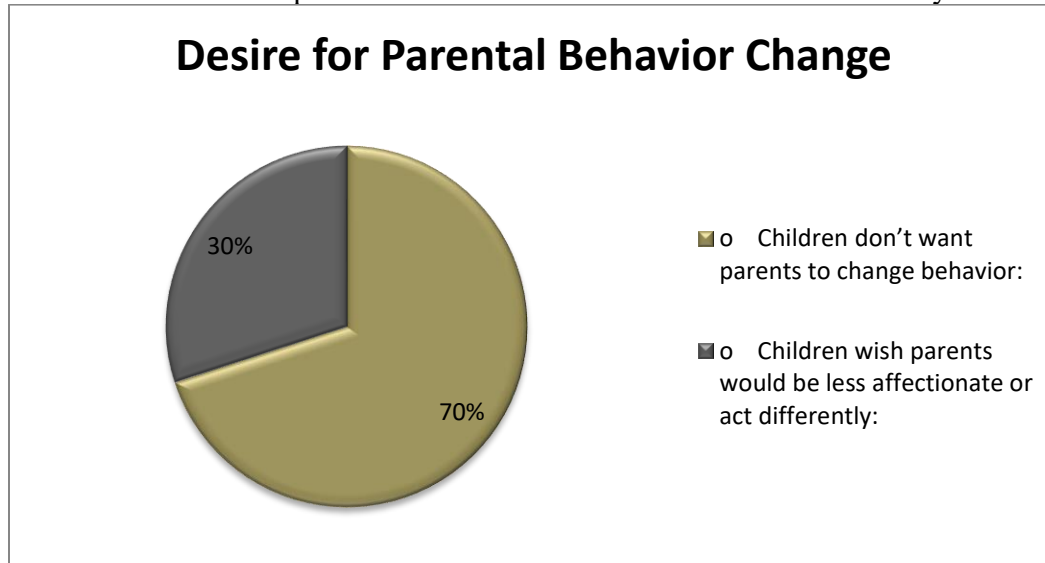
- Children see love as caring and supportive: 70%
- Children are unsure or confused about relationships: 30%



A majority (70%) see relationships as being about caring and supporting each other. Meanwhile, 30% are unsure or confused. This shows that many children are forming healthy ideas about relationships early on.

5. Desire for Parental Behavior Change

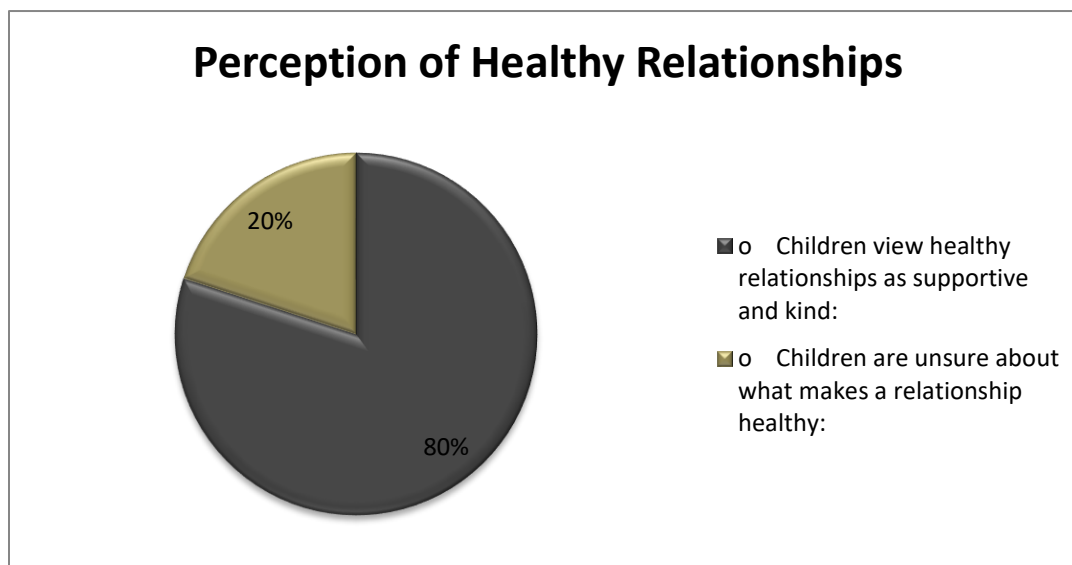
- Children don't want parents to change behavior: 70%
- Children wish parents would be less affectionate or act differently: 30%



Most children (70%) are happy with how their parents act and don't want any change. About 30% wish their parents would be less affectionate. This suggests that most kids are comfortable with the way affection is shown at home.

6. Perception of Healthy Relationships

- Children view healthy relationships as supportive and kind: 80%
- Children are unsure about what makes a relationship healthy: 20%



A big majority (80%) believe that healthy relationships are built on kindness and support. Only 20% feel unsure. This shows that children have a strong understanding of what a good relationship should look like.

Conclusion

This study examined how children aged 8–13 perceive parental romantic vulnerability within Pakistani families. Findings demonstrate that children's emotional reactions are shaped not only

by the type of affectionate behavior displayed but also by cultural norms and family communication patterns. Moderate expressions of affection generally promoted positive emotional climates and offered children healthy relational models.

However, children often felt embarrassed or uncomfortable when behaviors appeared excessively intimate or when communication about affection was limited. Parents largely attempted to regulate their displays of affection, reflecting cultural expectations of modesty and respect.

Overall, the study reveals that parental affection can foster emotional security and healthy relationship models when expressed sensitively and within clear boundaries. Encouraging open family communication about affection may help children interpret such behaviors more confidently and contribute to healthier emotional development.

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Appendix A

Parent Interview Questions

1. Can you give an example of the kinds of affectionate or romantic behaviors that you and your partner exhibit around your child?
2. Do you deliberately select which romantic behaviors to display or withhold in your child's presence? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe that your child responds in a particular way when you and your partner are being affectionate with each other?
4. Has your child ever asked or remarked on your romantic overtures? If so, how did you answer them?
5. In your view, what sort of message do you think it sends to your child when parents express affection openly?
6. Do you and your partner ever discuss establishing boundaries around how you express intimacy in front of your children?
7. Have you ever been uncertain or conflicted about the amount of romantic vulnerability you can show your child?
8. How would you characterize overall communication style in your household? For instance, is it open, reserved, emotionally expressive, etc.?
9. Do you believe that your affectionate behavior affects the way your child interprets relationships? If so, how?
10. Do you believe that family or cultural values are a factor in how you display romantic behavior in front of your children?

Appendix B:

Children's Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me what you observe when your mom and dad are being kind or affectionate with one another?
2. How do you feel when you observe your parents hug, kiss, or speak kindly to each other?
3. Do you ever feel glad, strange, embarrassed, or puzzled when your parents are lovey-dovey?
4. Do your parents ever joke or tease each other in a humorous or loving manner? What does that do to you?
5. Have you ever discussed with your parents how they behave when they display affection around you?
6. Is it okay for parents to show love in front of children? Why or why not?
7. How do you envision being in a relationship or in love, in terms of what you observe around the house?
8. Do you think that you learn something about relationships based on how your parents treat each other?
9. Are there times when you wish your parents would behave differently towards you? Why?
10. If you were asked to define what a "healthy relationship" is, based on what you observe between your parents, what would you say?

Appendix C:

Parent Responses

1. "We normally hug or hold hands, occasionally compliment each other or tease. We don't kiss or anything too intimate in front of the children."
2. "Yes, we're cautious. We think children shouldn't be exposed to some things too early. We keep things respectful and avoid anything that they could misinterpret."
3. "My child sometimes smiles or teases us when we hug. But I've also seen them look confused or awkward when we get too."
4. "Yes, my daughter once said 'Ewww' when we hugged in front of her. I just laughed it off and told her that it's okay for parents to show love."
5. "It teaches them that love and respect are key to marriage. I want my kids to know as they grow up that affection is natural, as long as it's respectful."
6. "We don't sit down and talk about it, but we both know where the line is. If we think something would make the kids uncomfortable, we steer clear of it."
7. "Yes, particularly when the children or visitors are present. Sometimes we don't know whether it is appropriate to make jokes or display affection in their presence."
8. "We have a relatively open style of communication. Our children ask questions, and we attempt to reply truthfully, but we're careful not to burden them with adult issues."
9. "Yes, I think children learn to treat their future husbands or wives by observing us. If we are kind and loving, they will learn the same."
10. "Our values are very important to us. We're from a background where public display of affection is not appreciated, so we are always careful, even at home."

Appendix D:

Child Responses (Age 8–13)

1. "Sometimes, they hug or talk nicely to one another. My mom smiles, and my dad teases her."
2. "It's okay. Sometimes I laugh, but sometimes I get embarrassed and turn around."
3. "When they hug me, it makes me happy. But if they hug too many times, I feel awkward. It's weird when they joke around too much."
4. "Yes, my dad jokes with my mom and tells things I don't really get. I laugh, but I don't know what it means."
5. "No, I don't think we ever discuss that. I'd feel embarrassed to ask them about it."
6. "It's okay when they just hug or tell nice things. But when they get too close or are too romantic, it seems like it's not something children should witness."
7. "Love is caring and being kind. Such as when one of them makes tea for the other or says thank you. I've seen that done at home."
8. "Yes, like when they apologize, help one another out, or show respect. I think that's what a healthy marriage is."
9. "Sometimes, yeah. I feel uncomfortable when they're too close. I wish they'd just behave like normal parents."
10. "A good relationship is when mom and dad assist one another, don't fight, and are kind to each other. That's principally what I witness at home."