

RESEARCH

Spiraling down: Fearful attachment style moderates the link between parental burnout and violence

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Funding information

A.S. is a FRESH grantee of the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique–FNRS. This fund did not exert any influence or censorship on the present work.

Abstract

Objective: The aim of the current preregistered cross-sectional study was to examine whether in parents with high anxious (characterized with a negative model of self), dismissing (characterized with a negative model of others), and fearful attachment styles (characterized with a negative model of self and of others), the link between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring is stronger.

Background: Past research has shown that parental burnout exacerbates violence toward the offspring, but the correlation is not perfect ($r = .49$), which suggests that not all parents in burnout are violent, and that moderators might therefore be at play.

Method: Participants ($N = 794$) answered an online questionnaire one time, through Prolific. Parental burnout, violence, and attachment styles were measured through the Parental Burnout Assessment, the Parental Violence Scale, and the Relationship Questionnaire. Multiple regression analyses were performed to test the moderating role of anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles.

Results: Parental burnout and all attachment styles are significantly related to violence. However, only fearful attachment style significantly potentiated the relation between parental burnout and violence.

Conclusion: In parents with high fearful attachment style, the link between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring is stronger. Results are discussed in light of the role of internal models of self and others.

Implications: Anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles should systematically be investigated when dealing

Author note: Data of the study can be consulted on Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/5zgw9/?view_only=6e4046897ade44fb85f414dd2ae31179).

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with burnt out parents, as some may be associated with a higher risk of violence toward the offspring.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children can be defined as being a type of child maltreatment that occurs to children under age (World Health Organization, 2022a, 2022b) and that can take different forms (e.g., physical, psychological and verbal; see Norman et al., 2012). Violence against children is a serious matter, not only because of its widespread prevalence (i.e., one of two children worldwide; for a systematic review, see Hillis et al., 2016), but also because it has serious and persistent effects. Whether violence is physical (e.g., slaps, blows, throwing objects at the child) or emotional (e.g., screams, insults, humiliations, threats of abandonment), its effects are visible in the short, medium, and long term (for meta-analyses, see Evans et al., 2008; K. Hughes et al., 2017; Wolfe et al., 2003) and across a wide range of important life spheres. On a psychological level, experiencing violence as a child has been linked with negative emotional and behavioral outcomes in childhood (for a meta-analysis, see Wolfe et al., 2003) and adolescence (for a meta-analysis, see Evans et al., 2008), as well as mental illness in adulthood (for a meta-analysis, see K. Hughes et al., 2017). On a physical level, the experience of violence is related to higher stress reactivity in adolescents (Peckins et al., 2012), substance use, disease, and risk-taking behaviors in adulthood (K. Hughes et al., 2017). On an academic and professional level, authors have identified that experiencing violence in childhood and adolescence is related to academic drop out and school absenteeism (for a meta-analysis, see Fry et al., 2018), and it is linked with less stability in the occupational domain (i.e., less regularity in employment, more precariousness, less retirement; Romito et al., 2003).

The serious consequences of childhood violence have led researchers to devote strenuous efforts to uncovering its predictors, which have proven to be numerous (for an umbrella review, see Van IJzendoorn et al., 2020; for a review, see Austin et al., 2020). Some are trait-like predictors (e.g., parental personality, parent's experience of maltreatment, attachment style; Van IJzendoorn et al., 2020; Waters et al., 2002), others are state-like predictors (e.g., maternal depression and posttraumatic stress disorder, paternal stress, parental substance abuse; Austin et al., 2020). Among state-like predictors, parental burnout has recently been shown to be a strong predictor of child violence (Mikolajczak et al., 2020; Schitteck et al., 2023). Parental burnout is a stress-related syndrome specific to the parental role, which can develop when the parent does not have enough resources to face the stressors related to their parenthood. It can manifest up to four symptoms, such as exhaustion in the parental role, perceiving that they are not the parent they used to be, feeling fed up with parenting, and feeling emotionally distant from their offspring (Mikolajczak et al., 2021; Roskam et al., 2018).

Parental burnout strongly increases violence toward one's children (Mikolajczak et al., 2019; Szczygieł et al., 2020), as shown in its concerning large correlation ($r = .49$; for a meta-analysis, see Mikolajczak et al., 2023). This link is robust, as it has been observed in correlational (Szczygieł et al., 2020), cross-lagged (Mikolajczak et al., 2019), and experimental (Brianda et al., 2020) designs. The link between parental burnout and violence is causal because when parental burnout is treated, violence and neglect toward the offspring decreases proportionally to the decrease in burnout symptomatology (Brianda et al., 2020).

To what extent, if any, do trait-like predictors of violence strengthen the effect of state-like predictors such as parental burnout? Considering that not all burned out parents are violent ($r = .49$; if burned out parents were all violent, the correlation would be closer or equal to 1; for a meta-analysis, see Mikolajczak et al., 2023), it might suggest that moderators are at play. In this paper, we examined the hypothesis that in parents with high anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles, the link between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring

could be stronger. Bowlby (1973) formulated the first theory on attachment as a lasting psychological and emotional link between individuals, and it translates into a pattern of behaviors that activate in relational situations. In Bowlby's (1973) bidimensional model, individuals have two internalized models: the *internal model of self* that can be positive or negative (e.g., a positive model reflecting the belief that the self is capable of being autonomous and is worthy, whereas a negative model would be characterized by the difficulty of being autonomous and believing to be unworthy), and the *internal model of others*, which can also be positive or negative (e.g., the positive model reflecting a trust in others' intentions, whereas the negative indicates an untrusting nature toward others).

From the bidimensional model, three insecure attachment styles can be identified: anxious, dismissing, and fearful (Bartholomew, 1990). Anxious attachment has a negative model of self, but positive model of others, which results in a preoccupied state with relationships. Dismissing attachment is characterized by a positive model of self, but negative model of others, resulting in lack of interest in intimate relationships. Fearful attachment has a negative model of self and negative model of others, thus neither trusting themselves nor others, translating into a fear of intimacy and social avoidance (Bartholomew, 1990). Interestingly, Bartholomew's (1990) model does not categorize individuals in one type of attachment style, as Bowlby's (1973) does. Bartholomew's (1990) model considers attachment styles in a continuous manner, meaning that one individual can have varying degrees of anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles. However, more often than not, one type of attachment style will be more predominant in individuals compared to the others.

Considering that attachment style is quite stable across time (Fraley & Roisman, 2019; Jones et al., 2018); that some individuals are more anxiously, dismissively, and fearfully attached than others (Bartholomew, 1990); that anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles can exacerbate the link between stress and detrimental parental behaviors (Mills-Koonce et al., 2011); and that anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles are strong predictors of violence (for a meta-analysis, see Ogilvie et al., 2014), we hypothesized that in parents with high anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles, the link between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring would be stronger. Considering that no prior research in parental burnout literature has investigated this hypothesis, we are unable to disentangle between the hypothesized moderating role for each attachment style. Also, because the causal relation between parental burnout and violence has already been established, we have chosen a cross-sectional method to unveil the links between variables and their roles.

METHOD

Procedure

The study and the statistical analyses have all been preregistered on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/5zgw9/?view_only=6e4046897ade44fb85f414dd2ae31179). There was one deviation from the preregistration: instead of performing simple-slope analyses on IBM SPSS, they were performed on jamovi (The jamovi project, 2021) because it allows more in-depth analyses (such as significance for each level of the moderator on the link between parental burnout and violence). There was no other deviation from the protocol or planned analyses. The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc (Belgium), and it is part of a larger project on the moderators of the consequences of parental burnout. Sample size calculations were done using G*Power prior to recruiting participants in order to ensure enough power for analyses. The achieved sample size allows detection of even small effects with a power of .80. Participants were recruited on Prolific (<https://www.prolific.com/>), which is a participant recruitment website created in Oxford, United Kingdom. Prolific

allows researchers to connect to reliable participants, and it is now widely used around the world by top-ranked universities. It allows fast, high-quality, and reliable data for the researcher. They can enter their research proposal and select screening criteria for specific participants to participate (e.g., only participants who have children). Parents on Prolific all had an equal chance to participate to the study. In order to avoid self-selection bias, participants were not informed that the study was about parental burnout, but rather on parenthood in general. The data were collected between June and July 2022. Participants who did not meet the following criteria were excluded from all analyses: participants who were under 18 years old, participants who were not parents (even though Prolific allows for filtering participants, we added this question in order to ensure that the participants were indeed parents), and participants who wrongly answered at least one attention check.

Participants

Of the 914 people who responded to the study, 794 met the inclusion criteria mentioned above and were included in the analyses. Parents (mean age = 38, $SD = 10.04$) were 64.4% women, 35.4% men, 0.1% nonbinary/third gender, and 0.1% preferred not to say. Participants reported the number of children they lived with ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .91$) and the age of their youngest ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 6.91$) and oldest child ($M = 11.1$, $SD = 8.63$). Most parents had completed an undergraduate degree (47.2%), followed by higher secondary education (28.2%), graduate education (16%), postgraduate (4.5%), lower secondary education (3.1%), and primary education (.9%). Most parents worked full-time (65.9%), part-time (19.3%), or were stay-at-home parents (8.8%). Most of the parents reported having a biparental family type (73%), followed by single parents (13.9%), blended family (9.6%), or other (2.4%). Of the biparental family type, 98.9% were other-sex and 1.1% were same-sex parents. The net monthly income was mostly between USD 1,092.26 and 2,727.92 (37.8%), between USD 2,729.02 and 4,364.68 (29.3%), and between USD 0 and 1,091.17 (20.2%).

Measures

After signature of informed consent, the following sociodemographics were collected: age and gender of the respondent, being a parent, number of children they live with (biological and non-biological), number of children they have in total (biological and nonbiological), age of the youngest child still living at home, age of the oldest child, educational level (primary education; lower secondary education; higher secondary education; undergraduate education, graduate education, postgraduate education), working status (unemployed, part-time, full-time, stay-at-home parent, pensioner, on a break, unable to work), country of residence (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, other), family type (biparental, single parents, blended family, other), and net monthly household income (between USD 0 and 1,091.17; between USD 1,092.26 and 2,727.92; between USD 2,729.02 and 4,364.68; between USD 4,365.77 and 6,001.43; between USD 6,002.53 and 7,638.19; above USD 7,638.19).

Parental burnout was assessed using the Parental Burnout Assessment (Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .93), which is a 23-item self-reported questionnaire (Roskam et al., 2018). Parents rate each item on the following response scale: *never* (0), *a few times a year* (1), *once a month or less* (2), *a few times a month* (3), *once a week* (4), *a few times a week* (5), *every day* (6). The items form four factors: exhaustion (e.g., "I'm so tired out by my role as a parent that sleeping doesn't seem like enough"), contrast (e.g., "I don't think I'm the good father/mother that I used to be to my child(ren)"), feeling fed up (e.g., "I can't stand my role as a father/mother anymore"), and emotional distancing (e.g., "Outside the usual routines [lifts in

the car, bedtime, meals], I'm no longer able to make an effort for my child[ren]"). Higher scores reflect a higher level of parental burnout.

Violence toward offspring was measured using the Parental Violence Scale (Mikolajczak et al., 2018; Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .78), which is a 15-item questionnaire. Participants respond to each item on an 8-point frequency scale: *never* (1), *less than once a month* (2), *about once a month* (3), *a few times a month* (4), *once a week* (5), *several times a week* (6), *every day* (7), *several times a day* (8). The scale measures verbal (e.g., "I sometimes denigrate my child"), physical (e.g., "When I am angry, I sometimes throw things at my child"), and psychological violence (e.g., "I sometimes threaten to abandon my child if s/he is not good"). Higher scores reflect a higher presence of violent behaviors.

Attachment style was measured using the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which is a three-item questionnaire, to which participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale: *it does not describe me at all* (1) to *it describes me very much* (7). Each item represents a paragraph describing one of the four attachment styles (e.g., for dismissing attachment style, "I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me"). Each participant has three scores for attachment styles. Higher scores on a given paragraph reflect the predominant attachment style in the participant.

Considering that these questionnaires were part of a much larger study, three attention checks were introduced in the general survey (e.g., "In the following question, select the number between three and five") to make sure that participants did not respond randomly or inattentively to the questions. The attention-check items consisted of statements to which the participant had to give the correct response and were dispersed in questionnaires, allowing for the detection of the person's attention when answering the variables' questionnaires.

Statistical analyses

Participants were excluded based on prior mentioned criteria before performing any data processing or analysis. Only participants who had answered to all the questionnaires were kept for the analyses. Scores were centered before performing the analyses by subtracting the variable's mean from the participants' scores. Assumption checks, such as linearity, multicollinearity, independent residuals, homoscedasticity, normal distribution of residuals, and outliers were tested and dealt with as prescribed by statistical guidelines (Field, 2017). Considering the expected deviations in normality, analyses were performed using bootstrapping of 1,000 samples (Field, 2017). Descriptive statistics and moderation analyses using multiple regressions were performed using IBM SPSS (Version 28). For moderation analyses, parental burnout; anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles; and control variables were introduced in a multiple regression in which child violence was the dependent variable. If interaction terms in the multiple regression were significant, jamovi's MedMod package was used to perform simple slope analyses (The jamovi project, 2021). Simple slope analyses allow us to (a) visually see how the moderator interacts in the link between the dependent and independent variable and (b) statistically gauge how the link between the dependent and independent variables statistically changes (significance and size) at different levels of the moderator.

RESULTS

Pearson's correlations among the variables are shown in Table 1. As expected, parental burnout was positively and strongly correlated with violence. Although anxious and dismissing attachment styles were positively but somewhat weakly correlated with violence, fearful attachment

TABLE 1 Pearson's correlations between study variables.

Variable name	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Parental burnout	794	32.4	26.8	—				
2. Violence	794	23.2	7.91	.40***	—			
3. Dismissing	794	4.45	1.60	.03	.17***	—		
4. Anxious	794	3.28	1.59	.15***	.17***	-.15***	—	
5. Fearful	794	3.94	1.69	.20***	.25***	.22***	.32***	—

Note. Parental burnout: skewness = 1.19; kurtosis = 0.93. Violence: skewness = 2.09; kurtosis = 6.79. Dismissing: skewness = -0.16; kurtosis = -0.65. Anxious: skewness = 0.32; kurtosis = -0.64. Fearful: skewness = -0.04; kurtosis = -0.90.
p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

TABLE 2 Moderation analyses controlling for sociodemographic variables.

Effect	Standardized estimate	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>		
Parental burnout	.34	.01	.27	.40	10.12	<.001***
Dismissing attachment style	.14	.16	.08	.21	4.35	<.001***
Anxious attachment style	.09	.17	.02	.15	2.62	.001**
Fearful attachment style	.08	.16	.02	.15	2.43	.02*
Parental burnout × Dismissing attachment style	.07	.01	.01	.14	2.19	.03*
Parental burnout × Anxious attachment style	.06	.01	-.01	.13	1.61	.11
Parental burnout × Fearful attachment style	.11	.01	.04	.18	3.00	.003**
Age of parent	-.29	.04	-.40	-.18	-5.30	<.001***
Number of children living with parent	.05	.29	-.01	.12	1.62	.11
Income	-.08	.22	-.14	-.01	-2.33	.02*
Age of youngest child	.06	.07	-.06	.18	0.99	.32
Age of oldest child	.07	.06	.03	.28	2.36	.02*
Gender of parent	-.13	.52	-.19	-.06	-3.97	<.001***
Educational level	.11	.28	.05	.17	3.55	<.001***

Note. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit. The predictor is parental burnout in the three multiple regressions, and the outcome variable is always violence toward the offspring. The analyses have been performed with bootstrapping of 1,000 samples. Interaction term is constituted by multiplying parental burnout with the moderator (both previously centered).
p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

was moderately correlated with it. Anxious and fearful attachment styles were positively yet weakly correlated with parental burnout.

As shown in Table S1 (see supplemental material), moderation analyses showed that when no control variables were included in the model, only fearful attachment style significantly interacted with parental burnout in the prediction of violence. When controlling for the main sociodemographic variables predicting child maltreatment (see Table 2; namely age of the parent, number of children living with parent, age of the youngest child, age of the oldest child, income, gender, and educational level), fearful attachment style still significantly interacted with parental burnout in the prediction of violence. Dismissing attachment style also showed a weak (but significant) moderating effect, which only appeared when gender and/or educational level were included in the controls, and disappearing in any other case. Thus, the moderating hypothesis is consistently corroborated only for one of the three attachment styles—fearful attachment style. Considering that all attachment styles were also introduced in the model, we can safely suggest that it is the individual variance in fearful attachment style that has a moderating role

TABLE 3 Simple slope analyses for the interaction between fearful attachment style and parental burnout, predicting violence.

Levels of the moderator	Unstandardized estimates	SE	95% CI		Z	p
			LL	UL		
Low (−1 SD)	.06	.02	.03	.09	4.13	<.001***
Average (Mean)	.10	.01	.08	.12	8.84	<.001***
High (+1 SD)	.14	.02	.10	.18	6.74	<.001***

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit. Simple slope analyses for three levels of fearful attachment (low, average, high), and its effect on the relation between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring.

*** $p < .001$.

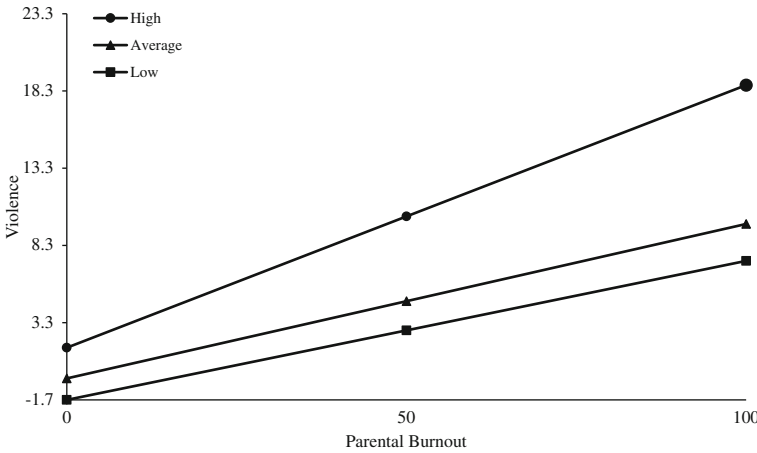


FIGURE 1 Moderating role of fearful attachment style in the link between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring

Note. This figure shows the link between parental burnout and violence at different levels of fearful attachment style (low, average, high).

in the link between parental burnout and violence, rather than its shared variance with the other attachment styles.

Simple slope analyses (see Table 3 and Figure 1) revealed that the interaction was significant at all levels of fearful attachment style, meaning that in parents with high fearful attachment, the link between parental burnout and violence is stronger. Thus, when a parent exhibits a *highly* fearful attachment style, the link between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring is *particularly* stronger. As shown in Figure 1, parents at highest risk to be violent toward their offspring are those combining a high level of parental burnout with a highly fearful attachment style.

DISCUSSION

The present study first suggests that parental burnout as well as anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles are all significant predictors of violence toward the offspring. In addition, and in accordance with our hypothesis, fearful attachment potentiates the relation between parental burnout and violence: the higher the levels of fearful attachment, the higher the link between parental burnout and violence toward their children. However, in contradiction to our

hypothesis, anxious and dismissing attachment styles did not significantly moderate the link between parental burnout and violence toward offspring: anxious and dismissing attachment did not potentiate the link between parental burnout and violence. Importantly, these results cannot be attributed to a lack of statistical power as our sample size would have been sufficient to detect very small effects.

The fact that anxious and dismissing attachment styles were nonsignificant moderators could be an indicator of the implication of the internal models, and more broadly internal resources. In fact, anxious attachment style has a positive internal model of others, meaning that they trust others and can rely on them (Ognibene & Collins, 1998), whereas dismissing attachment style has a positive internal model of self, meaning that they trust and rely on themselves (e.g., higher sense of self-competence, see Brennan & Morris, 1997; Bylsma et al., 1997; and higher sense of self-esteem, see Huntsinger & Luecken, 2004). We can hypothesize that parents experiencing burnout and having anxious or dismissing attachment styles would resort to less violence than those with fearful attachment style because they would have at least a possible source of help, either from others or themselves. In the case of fearful attachment, both internal models were negative. With a negative image of both self and others, the exhausted parent has few options for dealing with the stress of parenthood and the violent impulses that can result. Because they do not trust other's intentions, fearfully attached parents may not seek help when in need (Ognibene & Collins, 1998). They may thus spiral down, with the first outburst of violence resulting from parental burnout increasing their negative self-image, which may further strengthen their stress; yet, they may refuse to seek help to break the spiral because they do not trust others.

The present study adds findings to the literature, but its limitations must also be acknowledged. First, the study relies on a cross-sectional design precluding to infer causality. Intervention studies should be conducted in which an experimental group undergoing therapy aimed at securing the parents' attachment style would be compared to a waiting list control group. This would allow researchers to determine whether the treatment of fearful attachment style reduces violence in burned out parents, which would therefore causally corroborate the moderating role of attachment styles. Second, the length of the study might have biased the responses of participants who wished to finish the study hastily. However, three attention checks (one being at the very end of the study) were introduced to assess the participant's attention when answering the questions. This enabled us to only keep participants who had been attentive until the very end. Third, measuring anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment style with only one scenario item does not enable us to test the reliability of the item. However, we selected the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) because it is one of the most widely used questionnaires assessing adult attachment style and it has shown good validity (Wongpakaran et al., 2021).

In spite of its limitations, the present findings open many avenues for both research and practice. Research wise, studies should for instance go deeper into the role that seeking help plays in the relation between parental burnout, attachment styles, and violence. In fact, to our knowledge, studies often focus on the parents' perceived social support rather than their ability to ask for help when they need it (e.g., for parental burnout, see Lin et al., 2022; e.g., for attachment style, see Florian et al., 1995). It could be a fruitful research avenue, especially if the study also covers help-seeking behaviors concerning violent outbursts toward the offspring. Furthermore, based on prior literature, anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles should also be tested as potential precursors in parental burnout. In fact, insecure attachment styles have been associated with an enhanced the risk of burnout (for a systematic review, see West, 2015), and attachment styles have been associated with an increase in child maltreatment (for a meta-analysis, see Lo et al., 2019). It would be fruitful to investigate whether anxious, dismissing, and fearful attachment styles strengthen the risk of child maltreatment because of an increase in parental burnout (the authors can be contacted to request mediation analyses conducted on the

current data set). The present findings also have implications for prevention. Knowing that fearful attachment style can exacerbate the risk of violence in burned out parents, clinicians should try to spread the word where they could meet help-avoiding parents, for example at school events. Knowing that parents could struggle to ask for help, finding ways to spread the word is crucial. If fearfully attached parents desire to get help, then implementing attachment-focused therapy for families would be suitable (D. Hughes, 2007).

In conclusion, parental burnout and dismissing, anxious, and fearful attachment styles predict violence. Fearful attachment has a moderating role in the link between parental burnout and violence. The higher the fearful attachment, the stronger the link between parental burnout and violence toward the offspring. Future studies and interventions may need to more systematically consider the attachment style when working with parents in parental burnout.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Schitteck, A., Roskam, I., & Mikolajczak, M. (2025). Spiraling down: Fearful attachment style moderates the link between parental burnout and violence. *Family Relations*, 74(1), 565–575. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.13108>