

REGULAR ARTICLE

When protection leads to insecurity: Examining the cross-lagged relationship between overparenting and attachment style

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Abstract

Adolescence marks an important stage in attachment development, during which parental parenting plays a significant role in shaping adolescent outcomes. This study explored the bidirectional relationship between parental overparenting and adolescents' attachment style. To this end, we used a two-wave cross-lagged model over a 6-month interval with a sample of primary and middle school students ($N = 1897$) from Sichuan Province, China. Results showed that maternal and paternal overparenting positively predicted both attachment anxiety and avoidance. Adolescents' attachment anxiety and avoidance also predicted parental overparenting. In addition, paternal overparenting did not predict maternal attachment style, and maternal overparenting did not predict paternal attachment style. These findings indicated that overparenting may link to the reinforcement of adolescents' attachment styles, which may in turn encourage further overparenting. The results of this study not only deepened our understanding of attachment theory but also provided guidance for optimising family educational practices.

KEY WORDS

adolescence, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, cross-lagged effects, overparenting

1 | INTRODUCTION

Attachment and caregiving are two distinct but related behavioural systems (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Attachment behavioural system is supposed to be activated under stressful situations to obtain support and security (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2023). According to attachment theory, Attachment style is theoretically described via two dimensions: attachment anxiety and avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). These two dimensions not only capture the features of adult attachment but fit well to data from infants

(Ainsworth et al., 1978; Brennan et al., 1998). And compared to categorical approaches, dimensional measurement can more sensitively detect individual differences in attachment style and better explore the antecedents and consequences of attachment (Thompson et al., 2021). Specifically, attachment anxiety is featured as adopting hyperactivating strategies that amplify negative emotions, trying hard to obtain support, as well as being sensitive to potential threatening cues. This kind of attachment internal working model is termed a sentinel schema (Ein-Dor et al., 2011). In contrast, attachment avoidance is described as adopting deactivating strategies

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that put emphasis on self-sufficiency, ignoring their own needs for intimacy, as well as feeling uncomfortable with closeness. This refers to a rapid fight-flight schema (Ein-Dor et al., 2011).

Many efforts have been made to explore the impacts of insensitive caregiving on attachment style (Out et al., 2009; Van Ee et al., 2016). According to attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969), insensitive caregiving is likely to lead to insecure attachment. Generally speaking, consistent insensitivity leads to attachment avoidance, while inconsistent insensitivity leads to attachment anxiety (Bosmans et al., 2020; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). However, times have changed. Unlike Western cultures that emphasise the cultivation of independence, East Asian cultures typically place greater value on highly involved caregiving, which may contribute to overparenting (Leung & Shek, 2024). So, in modern Chinese society, overparenting may be more prevalent than neglecting children's needs (Hong & Cui, 2023). Some studies have shown that parental overparenting predicts insecure attachment in adulthood (Scharf et al., 2017). These findings suggest that if parental overparenting can impact adult insecure attachment, it may also have negative effects on attachment style at earlier developmental stages (e.g., adolescence). Despite this, less is known regarding the effects of hyperactivated caregiving on children's insecure attachment. Is it true that the more protection parents provide, the more insecure children will become? Meanwhile, according to family systems theory (Bowen, 1971), family members' interactions are cyclical rather than unidirectional. Thus, do children with a more insecure attachment style also lead to parents providing more overprotection?

Caregiving can be understood in a similar vein to the behavioural system approach (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). According to an expanded perspective of attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012), the goal of the caregiving behavioural system is assumed to be the reduction of others' suffering, protecting them from harm and fostering their healthy growth and development. Similar to the attachment behavioural system and other behavioural systems, dysfunctions of the caregiving system can involve either hyperactivation or deactivation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Deactivating strategies of the caregiving system involve insufficient empathy, lack of a desire to help, withdrawal from caregiving, offering only half-hearted assistance and insisting on emotional distance when someone wants care and comfort (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). The aforementioned insensitive caregiving can be conceptualised as a form of this deactivating caregiving behaviour. On the other hand, hyperactivated caregiving is intrusive, poorly timed and effortful. It may be motivated by a wish to make oneself indispensable to a relationship partner or a wish to feel competent and admirable as a caregiver (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). This hyperactivated caregiving is widely studied via the construct

of overparenting (Chen et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2022; Van Ingen et al., 2015). However, the association between overparenting and attachment style remains unexplored.

1.1 | Bidirectional relationship between overparenting and attachment style

Overparenting, also named helicopter parenting, describes parents' excessive affection, involvement, protection and control toward their offspring during late adolescence and early adulthood (Cline & Fay, 2006). Existing research has begun to address the relationship between overparenting and attachment style, mainly focusing on adulthood (Jiao et al., 2025; Jiao & Segrin, 2021, 2022). Adolescence, which can refer to individuals aged from 10 to 18 years old (Sumter et al., 2009), may be another interesting period to examine this attachment-overparenting association. In adolescence, individuals are still using their parents as a safe haven and secure base (Heffernan et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2021). However, they also seek autonomy by not depending on their parents. If the infant's model of others asks, 'Can I get help from my caregiver when I'm threatened or distressed,' the adolescent's model likely adds an element: 'Can I get help when I need it in a way that doesn't threaten my growing need for autonomy?' (Thompson et al., 2021). This change presents a challenge to parents in that they must manage attachment needs while also potentially handling significant conflict in their relationship with their teens (Thompson et al., 2021). Thus, the change in adolescents' attachment behaviours is likely to influence parental caregiving behaviours. Specifically, higher levels of attachment anxiety are often manifested as heightened dependence and emotional sensitivity (Ein-Dor et al., 2011), which may arouse parental concern for the adolescents' vulnerability, prompting parents to provide more protection. Moreover, higher levels of attachment avoidance are typically expressed as emotional detachment and self-isolation (Ein-Dor et al., 2011); this denial of emotional needs may lead parents to further increase control in an attempt to bridge the emotional gap with their children (Thompson et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, parental overparenting may, in turn, predict adolescents' attachment style. According to attachment theory, individuals gradually form internal working models of self and others' reliability through early interactions with primary caregivers, which in turn shape their attachment patterns (Thompson et al., 2021). On the one hand, overparenting is characterised by excessive care and protection, often accompanied by strong controlling intentions, which may lead adolescents to feel incapable of accomplishing tasks independently and to rely on their parents for problem-solving (Segrin et al., 2015). This perception may result in adolescents excessively

worrying that others in close relationships will abandon them, prompting constant reassurance-seeking and ultimately manifesting as attachment anxiety. On the other hand, adolescents who experience chronic overparenting may lose opportunities and the ability to make independent decisions, suppressing their need for autonomy (Segrin et al., 2015) and ultimately develop a tendency to overemphasise independence and reject dependence on parents, thus forming attachment avoidance.

Therefore, parental overparenting and adolescents' attachment style may constitute a bidirectional process, in which both parties continuously reinforce existing cognitive and behavioural patterns through their interactions.

1.2 | The goal of the current study

According to a behavioural system approach (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012), there appears to be a similar internal working model between the attachment and caregiving systems. While much attention has been given to the impact of insensitive caregiving on attachment style (Out et al., 2009; Van Ee et al., 2016), the current study extended the existing literature by exploring the bidirectional relationship between attachment style and overparenting. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the bidirectional relationship between attachment style and overparenting through a longitudinal research design. This not only provides empirical support for attachment theory and deepens our understanding of attachment but also offers practical guidance for caregivers' behaviours in real life.

Based on this reasoning, the current study aimed to test the following hypotheses to examine the relationship between overparenting and attachment style in adolescence. The first two hypotheses regard the impact of caregivers' overparenting on adolescents' attachment style. By providing unnecessary protections, overparenting may harm self-efficacy and predict more negative self-perceptions and evaluations among adolescents (Segrin et al., 2015). Therefore, both maternal and paternal overparenting were expected to positively predict adolescents' attachment anxiety (H1a). Then, overparenting is likely to harm individuals' sense of autonomy, which makes them reluctant and motivates them to seek independence. Moreover, offering too much help may make adolescents feel overloaded and cause them to adopt deactivating strategies of attachment avoidance to take a break. Thus, both maternal and paternal overparenting were supposed to positively predict adolescents' attachment avoidance (H1b).

The next two hypotheses regard the impact of adolescents' attachment style on caregivers' overparenting. First, considering their hyperactivating strategies, anxiously attached people may constantly express more worries and unmet needs to their parents. In turn, their

parents may provide much more assistance in case their children demand them. Therefore, maternal and parental overparenting may be understood as one strategy to calm down adolescents' hyperactivated attachment behavioural systems. Given this, we hypothesised that adolescents' attachment anxiety positively predicts maternal and paternal overparenting (H2a). As for attachment avoidance, their deactivating strategies that suppress their needs and emotions may drive parents to worry about them. Consequently, parents may try too hard to open adolescents' hearts. In this way, overparenting can be regarded as one strategy to cope with avoidant adolescents' deactivated attachment behavioural system. Therefore, we expected attachment avoidant to predict maternal and paternal overparenting (H2b).

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants and procedures

The participants for this study were primary and middle school students from Sichuan Province, China, using a cluster sampling method. Schools in Sichuan Province, China, were selected as the primary sampling units to conduct two time points (Wave 1 and Wave 2) longitudinal questionnaire survey (two time points over a 6-month interval). The data collection process was conducted using an online questionnaire distributed via an online survey platform (<https://www.wenjuan.com/>). To ensure a controlled and focused environment for completing the questionnaire, students were brought to the computer lab. Teachers supervised the students during this time to facilitate the process and ensure that each student completed the questionnaire independently without any external influences. A total of 2055 adolescents participated (978 boys and 1077 girls; $M_{\text{age}}=10.978$, $SD=1.008$) in Wave 1, 1897 adolescents participated (891 boys and 1006 girls; $M_{\text{age}}=11.395$, $SD=1.102$) in Wave 2. A total of 158 adolescents attrited between Wave 1 and Wave 2. Independent-sample *t*-tests revealed no significant differences in Wave 1 variables between those who were retained and those who attrited ($p>0.05$).

Among the adolescents who completed both surveys, 1016 were from one-child families (53.6%) and 881 were from non-one-child families (46.4%). The mean subjective socioeconomic status (SSS) of the province and school (Range=1–10) was 6.635 ($SD=1.499$) and 6.693 ($SD=1.623$), respectively, suggesting that the sample was generally from families with above-average socioeconomic status (Zou et al., 2020). Additionally, all participants lived in nuclear families with both their father and mother.

Adolescents' parents provided consent for their children to participate in the study. All adolescents and their parents signed an informed consent form before completing the questionnaire and received a certain amount

of compensation afterward. All the contents of this study have been approved by the Ethics Committee of the authors' affiliated institution.

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Attachment style

The nine-item Chinese version of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures Scale (Zhang et al., 2022) was adopted to measure adult attachment in the present study. Participants were required to answer the items on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The ECR-RS contains two subscales: attachment anxiety (e.g., 'I worry that my mother/father won't care about me as much as I care about him or her') and avoidance (e.g., 'I prefer not to show my mother/father how I feel deep down'). Adolescents responded to this scale according to their father and mother, respectively. Mean scores were calculated for attachment anxiety and avoidance. A higher mean score represents a higher level of attachment anxiety or avoidance, respectively. The α s of maternal attachment anxiety were 0.788 (Wave 1) and 0.816 (Wave 2). The α s of maternal attachment avoidance were 0.681 (Wave 1) and 0.740 (Wave 2). As for paternal attachment style, the α s of attachment anxiety were 0.803 (Wave 1) and 0.858 (Wave 2). The α of paternal attachment avoidance was 0.750 (Wave 1) and 0.802 (Wave 2).

2.2.2 | Overparenting

Overparenting was measured by the 10-item helicopter parenting scale (Luo et al., 2024; Schifffrin et al., 2019). This scale contains only one factor (e.g., 'My mother/father supervised my every move growing up.'). Adolescents responded to this scale according to their father and mother, respectively. Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). A higher mean score indicates a higher level of overparenting. The α s of maternal overparenting were 0.794 (Wave 1) and 0.827 (Wave 2). The α s of paternal overparenting were 0.784 (Wave 1) and 0.811 (Wave 2).

2.3 | Data analysis

We first examined potential common method bias with the Harman's single-factor test, as all data were self-reported. Then, descriptive and correlational analyses were carried out, using JASP 0.19.1, to examine the basic statistical properties of the variables and the relationships between them. Third, a cross-lagged panel model was employed to analyse the relationships between parental overparenting and attachment style using *Mplus* Version

8.3. The cross-lagged model included autoregressive paths of all variables, and every variable measured at Wave 1—including maternal and paternal attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance and overparenting behaviours—was used to predict all variables at Wave 2, while controlling for adolescents' gender, age, only-child status and SSS at both the school and provincial levels. The maximum likelihood method was utilised to analyse our model. Moreover, the percentage of missing data in this study was 7.7%. Little's MCAR test was non-significant, $\chi^2=40.566$, $df=41$, $p=0.490$, indicating that the data were missing completely at random. Thus, full information maximum likelihood estimation was used to handle the missing data (Enders & Bandalos, 2001).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Preliminary analysis

Considering all data in the current study were collected through self-report measurements, we conducted Harman's single-factor test to examine the common method bias before the data analysis (Podsakoff et al., 2003). All measures included in the current study were subjected to exploratory analysis, and the unrotated factor solution was examined to determine the number of factors necessary to account for the overall variance. This procedure suggested that no single factor accounted for the majority of the covariance among the variables (Factor 1 accounted for 26.5% of the covariance).

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations between variables in the current study. Maternal attachment anxiety and avoidance (Wave 1) positively correlated with maternal overparenting (Wave 1 and Wave 2) and paternal overparenting (Wave 1 and Wave 2). Likewise, paternal attachment anxiety and avoidance (Wave 1) positively correlated with maternal overparenting (Wave 1 and Wave 2) and paternal overparenting (Wave 1 and Wave 2).

Additionally, repeated-measures ANCOVAs that included covariates were conducted to test for mean-level changes in the main variables across the two measurement waves (see Table 2). Results showed that maternal attachment avoidance decreased, maternal overparenting increased from Wave 1 to Wave 2, while the remaining variables showed no significant change. This pattern also highlights the necessity of controlling for autoregressive effects in the cross-lagged model.

3.2 | Cross-lagged relationships of maternal overparenting and maternal attachment style

The results of cross-lagged panel model (the cross-lagged path coefficients see Table 3, and the control variable estimates see Table 4) indicate that maternal

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	1.543	1.168	-													
2. Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	2.269	1.159	0.343***	-												
3. Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	1.437	1.067	0.703***	0.244***	-											
4. Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	2.368	1.310	0.325***	0.665***	0.347***	-										
5. Maternal overparenting (Wave 1)	2.023	0.989	0.441***	0.479***	0.347***	0.414***	-									
6. Paternal overparenting (Wave 1)	2.107	1.006	0.379***	0.415***	0.411***	0.490***	0.682***	-								
7. Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 2)	1.572	1.182	0.516***	0.288***	0.428***	0.290***	0.352***	0.312***	-							
8. Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 2)	2.262	1.210	0.322***	0.529***	0.235***	0.421***	0.408***	0.318***	0.423***	-						
9. Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 2)	1.498	1.139	0.415***	0.257***	0.457***	0.335***	0.302***	0.327***	0.689***	0.306***	-					
10. Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 2)	2.425	1.395	0.280***	0.454***	0.291***	0.583***	0.360***	0.410***	0.372***	0.691***	0.406***	-				
11. Maternal overparenting (Wave 2)	2.053	1.048	0.379***	0.407***	0.295***	0.328***	0.641***	0.465***	0.429***	0.532***	0.362***	0.411***	-			
12. Paternal overparenting (Wave 2)	2.128	1.040	0.337***	0.370***	0.324***	0.418***	0.503***	0.612***	0.395***	0.404***	0.423***	0.519***	0.687***	-		
13. Gender (Wave 1)	-	-	-0.001	0.014	0.027	0.005	0.046*	0.112***	-0.006	0.011	0.002	-0.022	0.041	0.116***	-	
14. Age (Wave 1)	10.978	1.008	0.054*	0.079***	0.043	0.080***	0.071**	0.065**	0.071**	0.120***	0.100***	0.107***	0.111***	0.086***	-0.003	-

Note: Gender coded by 1 = boys, 0 = girls. *N* (Wave 1) = 2055, *N* (Wave 2) = 1897.
p* < 0.05. *p* < 0.01. ****p* < 0.001.

TABLE 2 Results of repeated-measures ANCOVAs with covariates.

Variables	Wave 1		Wave 2		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
Maternal attachment anxiety	1.540	1.171	1.572	1.182	0.247
Maternal attachment avoidance	2.266	1.159	2.262	1.210	6.256*
Paternal attachment anxiety	1.439	1.075	1.498	1.139	3.801
Paternal attachment avoidance	2.361	1.308	2.425	1.395	1.816
Maternal overparenting	2.020	0.996	2.053	1.048	6.700*
Paternal overparenting	2.103	1.016	2.128	1.040	2.814

Note: $N=1897$.

* $p<0.05$.

overparenting (Wave 1) predicted both maternal attachment anxiety and avoidance (Wave 2). On the other hand, both maternal attachment anxiety and avoidance (Wave 1) predicted maternal overparenting (Wave 2). Further examination of the differences between these bidirectional relationships (e.g., the difference between $A \rightarrow B$ and $B \rightarrow A$) revealed that the predictive effect of maternal overparenting on maternal attachment avoidance was significantly stronger than the reverse effect (Wald $\chi^2=5.763$, $p=0.016$), while the other differences were not significant ($p>0.05$).

3.3 | Cross-lagged relationships of paternal overparenting and paternal attachment style

Parental overparenting (Wave 1) predicted both paternal attachment anxiety and avoidance (Wave 2). Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1), but not anxiety, predicted paternal overparenting (Wave 2).

3.4 | Cross-lagged relationships of maternal and paternal overparenting and attachment style

Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1) not only predicted maternal overparenting (Wave 2) but also predicted paternal overparenting (Wave 2). Moreover, though paternal overparenting (Wave 1) did not predict maternal overparenting (Wave 2), maternal overparenting (Wave 1) positively predicted paternal overparenting (Wave 2). It is noteworthy that paternal overparenting (Wave 1) did not predict maternal attachment style, while maternal overparenting (Wave 1) did not predict paternal attachment style.

3.5 | Effect sizes

Additionally, the standardised cross-lagged path coefficients in the present study ranged from 0.056 to 0.175. According to Orth et al. (2024), who proposed effect

size benchmarks for cross-lagged panel models (0.03 indicates a small effect, 0.07 a medium effect and 0.12 a large effect), these results indicate medium-to-large effect sizes in the present study. Meanwhile, the autoregressive paths ranged from 0.268 to 0.535, reflecting higher temporal stability (Orth et al., 2024). Compared with previous studies on overparenting and attachment insecurity (Jiao & Segrin, 2021, 2022), the numerical values of effect sizes observed in this study were relatively smaller. This discrepancy may be attributable to methodological differences, as previous research has noted that the numerical values of effect sizes in cross-lagged panel models tend to be smaller (Orth et al., 2024). Nevertheless, according to the standards proposed for cross-lagged panel models, the effect sizes observed in the present study still fall within the medium-to-large range, indicating that the effects remain substantively meaningful rather than weak associations between constructs.

4 | DISCUSSION

The current study adopted a two-wave cross-lagged model to examine the relationship between attachment style and overparenting. Overall, the findings support a novel bidirectional association between adolescents' attachment style and parental overparenting. Specifically, overparenting positively predicted attachment's style (attachment anxiety and avoidance), and adolescents' attachment style positively predicted overparenting. These findings are compatible with previous cross-sectional results in adults that parental overparenting was positively associated with parental attachment anxiety and avoidance (Jiao & Segrin, 2022; McGinley, 2018). There may be a vicious cycle: the more protection parents provide, the more insecure adolescents become; in turn, the more insecure adolescents are, the more protection parents will offer.

First, the cross-lagged model revealed that parental overparenting positively predicted both adolescent attachment anxiety and avoidance, supporting H1a and H1b. This finding extends previous research by

TABLE 3 Estimates of the cross-lagged path coefficients.

Dependent variables	Independent variables	β	95% CI
Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 2)	Maternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.088**	[0.032, 0.144]
	Paternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.025	[-0.031, 0.081]
	Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.358***	[0.304, 0.413]
	Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.039	[-0.015, 0.092]
	Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.101***	[0.046, 0.156]
	Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.056*	[0.002, 0.110]
Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 2)	Maternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.175***	[0.121, 0.230]
	Paternal overparenting (Wave 1)	-0.044	[-0.099, 0.011]
	Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.104***	[0.049, 0.159]
	Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.359***	[0.308, 0.410]
	Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	-0.009	[-0.063, 0.045]
	Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.086**	[0.033, 0.139]
Maternal overparenting (Wave 2)	Maternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.535***	[0.488, 0.582]
	Paternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.009	[-0.042, 0.059]
	Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.083**	[0.032, 0.133]
	Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.124***	[0.076, 0.172]
	Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.019	[-0.031, 0.068]
	Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	-0.022	[-0.070, 0.027]
Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 2)	Maternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.032	[-0.025, 0.090]
	Paternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.068*	[0.011, 0.126]
	Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.137***	[0.079, 0.194]
	Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	-0.010	[-0.065, 0.045]
	Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.268***	[0.212, 0.323]
	Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.148***	[0.093, 0.203]
Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 2)	Maternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.027	[-0.026, 0.080]
	Paternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.115***	[0.062, 0.168]
	Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.021	[-0.032, 0.075]
	Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.077**	[0.026, 0.128]
	Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.048	[-0.004, 0.100]
	Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.428***	[0.379, 0.477]
Paternal overparenting (Wave 2)	Maternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.097***	[0.046, 0.149]
	Paternal overparenting (Wave 1)	0.435***	[0.386, 0.484]
	Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.070**	[0.018, 0.121]
	Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.034	[-0.015, 0.084]
	Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 1)	0.012	[-0.038, 0.063]
	Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 1)	0.108***	[0.059, 0.158]

Note: Estimates were standardized results.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

demonstrating that parental overparenting not only leads to insecure attachment to parents in adulthood (Jiao & Segrin, 2022) but also predicts insecure attachment to parents during adolescence. Adolescents already develop needs for autonomy and independence, yet overparenting parents may refuse to support their children's striving for autonomy and independence (Thompson et al., 2021). Such excessive protection, in turn, may trigger adolescents' negative self-perceptions and heightened fears of abandonment, manifesting as

attachment anxiety toward parents, or rebellious resistance to parental control, manifesting as attachment avoidance.

Second, the results revealed that adolescents' attachment anxiety and avoidance significantly increased parental overparenting, supporting H2a and H2b. These findings align with attachment theory, emphasising the role of parental overparenting in shaping adolescents' internal working models (Thompson et al., 2021). For adolescents, the ongoing need for care keeps parents

TABLE 4 Estimates of control variables predicting Wave 2 dependent variables.

Dependent variables	Control variables	β	95% CI
Maternal attachment anxiety (Wave 2)	Gender (Wave 1)	-0.021	[-0.139, 0.041]
	Age (Wave 1)	0.029	[-0.010, 0.081]
	Only-child status (Wave 1)	-0.006	[-0.104, 0.075]
	SSS at the provincial levels (Wave 1)	-0.048	[-0.083, 0.007]
	SSS at the school levels (Wave 1)	0.001	[-0.041, 0.042]
Maternal attachment avoidance (Wave 2)	Gender (Wave 1)	0.001	[-0.088, 0.092]
	Age (Wave 1)	0.070***	[0.040, 0.131]
	Only-child status (Wave 1)	-0.029	[-0.160, 0.019]
	SSS at the provincial levels (Wave 1)	-0.018	[-0.060, 0.031]
	SSS at the school levels (Wave 1)	-0.019	[-0.056, 0.027]
Maternal overparenting (Wave 2)	Gender (Wave 1)	0.007	[-0.057, 0.087]
	Age (Wave 1)	0.059**	[0.027, 0.100]
	Only-child status (Wave 1)	0.024	[-0.022, 0.121]
	SSS at the provincial levels (Wave 1)	0.020	[-0.022, 0.050]
	SSS at the school levels (Wave 1)	-0.033	[-0.055, 0.012]
Paternal attachment anxiety (Wave 2)	Gender (Wave 1)	-0.019	[-0.133, 0.044]
	Age (Wave 1)	0.061**	[0.026, 0.115]
	Only-child status (Wave 1)	-0.014	[-0.121, 0.056]
	SSS at the provincial levels (Wave 1)	-0.047	[-0.080, 0.008]
	SSS at the school levels (Wave 1)	0.011	[-0.033, 0.049]
Paternal attachment avoidance (Wave 2)	Gender (Wave 1)	-0.042*	[-0.218, -0.017]
	Age (Wave 1)	0.051**	[0.022, 0.124]
	Only-child status (Wave 1)	-0.008	[-0.123, 0.077]
	SSS at the provincial levels (Wave 1)	-0.036	[-0.084, 0.017]
	SSS at the school levels (Wave 1)	-0.014	[-0.058, 0.035]
Paternal overparenting (Wave 2)	Gender (Wave 1)	0.055**	[0.042, 0.187]
	Age (Wave 1)	0.036*	[0.001, 0.075]
	Only-child status (Wave 1)	-0.015	[-0.103, 0.041]
	SSS at the provincial levels (Wave 1)	0.024	[-0.020, 0.053]
	SSS at the school levels (Wave 1)	-0.032	[-0.054, 0.014]

Note: Estimates were standardised results.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

emotionally engaged; for Chinese parents especially, close monitoring and emotional involvement, characteristic of overparenting, are interpreted as diligent caregiving (Leung et al., 2018). Insecure attachment behaviours in adolescents may serve as cues that activate parental hyperactivated caregiving systems. Regardless of whether adolescents overexpress or suppress their needs, parents may respond with increased protectiveness.

Moreover, the predictive effect of maternal overparenting on maternal attachment avoidance was significantly stronger than the reverse effect. This may suggest that while adolescents do influence how their parents treat them, mothers have a greater impact on their children due to their more dominant position (Thompson et al., 2021). Additionally, we found that paternal overparenting did not predict maternal overparenting, but

maternal overparenting positively predicted paternal overparenting. This may reflect a cultural and family pattern observed in Sichuan Province, where fathers often yield to maternal authority in family matters—a dynamic colloquially known as *qiguanyan* or *paerduo* (Ke & McLean, 2023; Li, 2015), resulting in mothers having relatively greater influence within the family. However, considering this is not the focus of the current study, future research is required to validate this additional finding.

Interestingly, maternal overparenting only predicted maternal attachment style, and paternal overparenting only predicted paternal attachment style. These findings support the idea that each relationship possesses unique experiences that contribute to a specific internal working model of that particular interpersonal relationship (Thompson et al., 2021).

4.1 | Implications

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, guided by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), this study confirms that not only insensitive caregiving promotes the development of adolescents' insecure attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Out et al., 2009; Van Ee et al., 2016) but also that overparenting likewise contributes to the development of adolescents' insecure attachment. Moreover, by integrating perspectives from family systems theory and attachment theory (Bowen, 1971; Bowlby, 1969), our results indicate that parents and adolescents mutually influence one another: adolescents' insecure attachment can communicate increased needs for care to their parents, which in turn predicts parental overparenting.

Practically, the study provides guidance for parenting practices. On the one hand, parents could avoid excessive intervention in their adolescents' autonomous development and cultivate a balanced approach of responsive caregiving—meeting adolescents' reasonable needs while encouraging them to solve problems independently. At the same time, adolescents could learn to express their needs appropriately within safe boundaries, neither overly relying on parents nor completely rejecting parental support.

4.2 | Potential limitations and future directions

The current study has several limitations. First, data on maternal and paternal overparenting were collected through adolescents' reports rather than from the parents themselves. This could bias our explanations of the impacts of attachment style on overparenting. Specifically, the association between attachment style and overparenting may be attributed to the biased perceptions of insecurely attached adolescents regarding their parents, rather than the adolescents' attachment style actually predicting parental overparenting. Second, while the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the relationship between attachment style and overparenting, the sample was drawn from a specific population in Sichuan Province, China, which is characterised by unique cultural and social dynamics. Consequently, the extent to which these findings apply to rural populations or those in different cultural contexts remains to be explored. Third, we only considered parental attachment in the current study. Given that adolescence is a stage in which those who undertake attachment functions shift from parents to peers (Thompson et al., 2021), it would be interesting to explore how overparenting influences this transition process.

Fourth, this study employed the traditional observed-variable cross-lagged panel model to examine the bidirectional relationships between parental overparenting and adolescents' attachment style. Future research could further apply the random intercept cross-lagged panel model or latent variable approaches to replicate and extend the present findings. Fifth, given the negative effects of parental overparenting on adolescents, it is crucial to further investigate relevant protective factors (moderators), such as school-related factors or peer relationships, to better support adolescents' healthy development (Luo et al., 2024). Sixth, this study adopted a two-wave longitudinal design. While this allows for examination of bidirectional relationships, it is insufficient to fully reveal the dynamic processes underlying parental overparenting and adolescents' attachment style. Future studies could employ multi-wave longitudinal designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these relationships develop and change over time.

Seventh, parental overparenting and their children's attachment styles may be influenced by parental attachment styles. Future studies could further consider incorporating parental attachment styles into the model to explore this potentially interesting direction. Lastly, this study did not collect school-level identification information from adolescents. Future research could consider collecting such identifiers to enable multilevel analyses and better assess the representativeness and nested structure of the sample.

5 | CONCLUSION

The current study provided evidence of the bidirectional relationship between parental attachment style and overparenting with a large-scale Chinese sample. This study highlights how overparenting may contribute to the development of insecure attachment. In turn, this may create a vicious cycle where insecurity leads to more overparenting. These findings have practical implications by emphasising the need for parenting practices that promote balanced caregiving. It is the quality or appropriateness, not the amount of support or protection, that matters to the positive development of adolescents.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Xiaohang Luo: Conceptualization; methodology; resources; supervision. **Ziyan Zhou:** Conceptualization; methodology; resources. **Fan Yang:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; methodology; resources; visualization; writing—original draft; writing—review and editing. **Yuting Wang:** Conceptualization; writing—review and editing. **Menghao Ren:** Methodology; resources; validation; writing—review and editing. **Ling Zhou:** Conceptualization; methodology; resources.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. Data used in the present study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

PRE-REGISTRATION STATEMENT

This study was not pre-registered.

RESEARCH MATERIALS AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Not applicable.

ETHICS APPROVAL

All the contents of this study have been approved by the Ethics Committee of Hunan Normal University.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Adolescents' parents provided consent for their children to participate in the study. All adolescents and their parents signed an informed consent form before completing the questionnaire and received a certain amount of compensation afterward.

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