

## ATTACHMENT STYLES AND PARENTAL RESPONSES TO PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

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**Abstract:** *Early socio-emotional development in children is significantly influenced by the quality of the attachment relationship and by the way parents manage children's negative emotions. The present study aims to analyze the relationship between parents' attachment styles and their ability to respond to the negative emotions of preschool-aged children. The research has a non-experimental, cross-sectional design and was conducted on a sample of 48 parents of children aged between 3 and 6 years, recruited from preschool educational institutions in the municipality of Lugoj. Data were collected through an online questionnaire using two psychometric instruments: the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS), used to assess attachment styles, and the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES), used to evaluate parental responses to children's negative emotions. The results of the Pearson correlation analyses indicate the existence of statistically significant relationships between attachment styles and parental responses. Secure attachment was negatively correlated with punitive reactions, suggesting a lower likelihood of using punishment-based strategies in managing children's emotions. In contrast, the anxious-ambivalent attachment style was positively associated with punitive reactions and with the minimization of negative emotions. In addition, parental distress reactions were strongly correlated with punitive and minimizing reactions, indicating that parents' emotional regulation difficulties may influence their response strategies to children's emotions. On the other hand, encouraging emotional expression was associated with parental responses focused on emotion and on problem-solving. The results highlight the importance of parental attachment style in the development of children's emotional regulation*

*competencies and support the need for educational interventions and parental counseling programs aimed at promoting secure attachment.*

**Keywords:** *parental attachment; parental capacity; emotional regulation; negative emotions; parenting; preschool children.*

### **Introduction**

Attachment represents a fundamental concept for understanding children's socio-emotional development, having significant implications for psychological adjustment and later interpersonal relationships. Within the parent–child relationship, attachment constitutes the foundation of early emotional development, influencing not only children's capacity for emotional regulation but also their sense of security and their way of relating to others. Secure attachment, characterized by parental sensitivity, emotional availability, and empathy, provides children with a stable framework for exploration and socio-emotional development.

In the contemporary context, parents frequently face difficulties in managing children's emotions, especially those perceived as negative, which may influence the quality of the attachment relationship. The way parents respond to these emotional manifestations represents an important factor in the development of children's emotional regulation competencies.

Drawing on attachment theory, the present study aims to analyze the relationship between attachment styles and the ways in which parents respond to the negative emotions of preschool-aged children. Investigating adaptive and maladaptive parental responses at this developmental stage may provide relevant information regarding the factors that contribute to the formation of secure attachment and may support interventions aimed at strengthening parental emotional competencies.

### **Theoretical Background**

Attachment theory represents one of the most influential explanatory frameworks of early relationships between parents and children, with major implications for later socio-emotional development. Its foundations were formulated by John Bowlby and empirically consolidated by Mary Ainsworth, who demonstrated that early bonds with primary caregivers structure the child's emotional security, emotion regulation processes, and the quality of later relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth, Blehar & Wall, 1978). Attachment is defined as “the child's tendency to seek proximity to

certain individuals and to feel protected in their presence” (Atkinson et al., 2002, p.114), being understood not only as an affective relationship but also as a fundamental behavioral system for adaptation and self-regulation.

From Bowlby’s perspective (1969), attachment has adaptive value, as the child is biologically oriented toward maintaining proximity to the caregiver, especially in stressful situations. This perspective was also supported by Lorenz’s (1953) ethological studies, as well as by the research conducted by Harlow and Harlow (1969), which showed that the need for comfort and emotional security exceeds the mere satisfaction of physiological needs. In the same theoretical line, Bowlby (1973) emphasized that early attachment experiences contribute to the formation of internal working models of the self, others, and relationships, with long-term effects on emotional and social functioning. Subsequent studies have shown that the lack of early relational security may be associated with emotional regulation difficulties, anxiety, and maladaptive relational patterns (Sroufe, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2024).

Mary Ainsworth’s contribution was essential for the empirical validation of attachment theory. Through research conducted in Uganda and Baltimore, she demonstrated the role of parental sensitivity in the development of secure attachment and developed the experimental procedure known as the Strange Situation Procedure, which enabled the identification of secure, avoidant, and anxious–ambivalent attachment patterns (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Later, Main and Solomon (1990) added the category of disorganized attachment. From this perspective, the quality of parental emotional availability and the consistency of parental responses to children’s needs constitute central elements in the development of emotional security.

In particular, secure attachment is associated with healthy socio-emotional development, active exploration, openness to relational closeness, and an increased capacity for emotional self-regulation (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children with this type of attachment tend to display empathy, psychological resilience, and stronger social competencies (Cassidy, 1994; Sroufe, 2005; Grossmann et al., 2008). These characteristics can also be understood through the presence of positive behavioral markers such as trust, emotional openness, and adaptive responses to relational contexts (Marcu et al., 2024).

In contrast, avoidant attachment is characterized by the minimization of the need for closeness and by emotional suppression strategies, often associated with parental contexts that are emotionally distant or

rejecting (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Grossmann et al., 2008; Thompson, 2016). From a behavioral perspective, this pattern may be reflected in negative markers such as emotional withdrawal, avoidance of intimacy, or diminished responsiveness to social cues (Marcu et al., 2024).

Anxious–ambivalent attachment generally emerges in relational contexts marked by inconsistency, unpredictability, and difficulties in emotional availability, being associated with relational anxiety, emotional vulnerability, and affective regulation difficulties (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Such patterns may also manifest through fluctuating behavioral indicators, including heightened sensitivity to rejection and instability in emotional responses (Marcu et al., 2024).

These attachment patterns must be understood in direct relation to parental capacity, namely the set of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources through which the parent responds appropriately to the child. In a broad sense, parenting is defined as “the process of supporting and promoting the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child from birth until adulthood” (Hendricks, n.d., apud Pânișoară, 2022, p. 27). However, the literature also emphasizes the reflective dimension of parenting, centered on parental responsibilities, actions, and internal positioning (Pânișoară, 2022, p. 28). At the same time, the family environment and the educational practices within it represent fundamental factors that shape the child’s psychological and cognitive development, as parental attitudes, emotional climate, and patterns of interaction significantly influence the child’s mental development and adaptation (Ignat, 2015). From this perspective, parental capacity can be understood as a set of abilities through which the parent recognizes, validates, contains, and appropriately manages the child’s emotions. Conceptually, ability refers to “a circumscribed set of competencies that are expressed in efficient behaviors and that generally result from learning, possibly supported by innate dispositions or aptitudes” (Doron & Parot, 2007, p. 15).

Current literature emphasizes that effective parenting does not only involve basic caregiving but also supporting children’s emotional and social development through sensitive responses to difficult situations and negative emotions (Brown, 2019; Kohn, 2006; Hoffman et al., 2024; Solter, 2013). Consistent with recent research, children’s behavioral and emotional development is also supported by participation in educational and non-formal contexts that stimulate interaction, cooperation, and parental involvement, with parents perceiving behavioral improvements when children are included in such activities (Dughi et al., 2024). At the same time, recent literature

highlights the importance of authentic and empathetic collaboration between significant adults in the child's life, showing that the teacher–parent relationship can support the development of resilience and healthy learning and adaptation strategies (Dughi & Coşarbă, 2025).

Recent research also highlights the role of parental practices and family relational dynamics in supporting children's development, emphasizing that parenting behaviors are influenced by individual psychological factors and the quality of the couple relationship, which in turn affect family functioning and child outcomes (Chiş et al., 2022). Furthermore, in the context of increasing digital exposure in early childhood, parents play a crucial role in guiding children's media use by establishing healthy habits and balanced digital practices that support cognitive, emotional, and social development (Ignat, 2025).

Applied to the emotional domain, parental capacity refers to the parent's ability to recognize, validate, understand, and respond appropriately to the child's emotions. This competence is influenced by the parent's developmental history, their own attachment style, and their representations regarding childrearing and education (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

## **Research methodology**

### **Research Objectives**

The general objective of the study is to highlight the possible correlations between parents' attachment style and their capacity to manage the negative emotions of preschool-aged children.

The specific objectives established for this research are:

Objective 1: To identify correlations between attachment style and parental capacity to manage children's negative emotions.

Objective 2: To identify attachment types among the participants.

Objective 3: To evaluate parental capacity to manage children's negative emotions.

### **Research Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1: There is a statistically significant relationship between secure attachment style and punitive parental reactions.

Hypothesis 2: There is a statistically significant relationship between anxious–ambivalent attachment style and punitive reactions and minimization reactions.

Hypothesis 3: There is a statistically significant relationship between distress reactions and punitive reactions and minimization reactions.

Hypothesis 4: There is a statistically significant relationship between encouraging emotional expression and emotion-focused and problem-focused parental reactions.

### Variables and Research Design

The present research employed a non-experimental, cross-sectional design, with the label variable being parents of preschool children.

In this study, the independent variable is the parents' attachment style (secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and anxious-ambivalent attachment), while the dependent variables are parental capacity to manage children's negative emotions, measured through six subscales (distress reactions, punitive reactions, expressive encouragement, emotion-focused reactions, problem-focused reactions, minimization reactions).

### Participants

The research was conducted on a sample of 48 participants recruited from preschool educational institutions in the municipality of Lugo. Participants were selected arbitrarily from among individuals who volunteered to participate in the study.

The inclusion criterion for participation was the status of being a parent of a preschool-aged child (3–6 years old), regardless of gender, education, or religion. These latter variables were collected but were not part of the eligibility criteria and were not used to generate research hypotheses.

In the present study, gender differences were not considered, therefore participants formed a mixed sample including both female and male respondents. No hypotheses were formulated regarding variables or possible correlations based on gender.

### Procedure for Questionnaire Administration

The data for this study were collected through an online questionnaire administered on the Google Forms platform, which included sections of all the instruments used in this research. The questionnaire was distributed to participants through a link shared on WhatsApp groups of parents associated with preschool classes.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research as well as the voluntary nature of their participation.

In accordance with ethical standards in research, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were informed that the data would be used exclusively for academic research purposes.

Informed consent was obtained through a dedicated consent form, which was made available to participants before completing the questionnaire. This form included detailed information about the purpose of the study, the data collection procedure, and participants' rights.

The questionnaires were completed anonymously, and all responses were stored in a database provided by Google Forms. Data collection took place over a three-week period (December 1–December 21, 2024), and completing the questionnaire was estimated to take approximately 20 minutes.

### **Presentation of the Research Instruments**

In this study, two psychometric instruments were used to evaluate the variables of interest forming the framework of the research: attachment styles and parental responses. These instruments were: CCNES (Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale) and AAS (Adult Attachment Scale).

These psychometric tools were selected to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the factors influencing the management of children's negative emotions and to explore the relationships between attachment styles and parental responses.

#### **a) Description of the CCNES Instrument (Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale):**

The Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES) is a psychological assessment instrument developed by Fabes, Eisenberg, and Karbon (1990) with the aim of measuring parental response styles to their children's negative emotions.

The reliability of this instrument was measured in the validation study conducted by the authors, obtaining a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ranging between 0.71 and 0.87 across the six subscales (Fabes et al., 1990). In the present study, the items of the subscales yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.93.

This instrument is based on the idea that parents' reactions to children's emotions can influence the development of children's emotional self-regulation abilities and can contribute to the formation of an emotionally secure framework essential for healthy development. The CCNES is relevant in assessing how parents approach emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness, parental behaviors being considered key factors in the development of emotional regulation during childhood (Fabes, Eisenberg & Karbon, 1990).

#### **b) Description of the AAS Instrument (Adult Attachment Scale):**

The Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) is a psychometric instrument developed by Collins and Read (1990) used to assess attachment styles in adults.

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient obtained by the authors in their studies ranged between 0.80 and 0.85 (Collins & Read, 1990). In the present study, according to the statistical software output, the

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.33, indicating relatively low reliability and items that were not strongly correlated with each other. This questionnaire is based on attachment theory initially developed by Bowlby (1969/1982) and later extended by Mary Ainsworth (1978), whose work was further developed by other researchers. The AAS has been widely used in psychological studies examining how attachment styles influence interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and various social behaviors (Collins & Read, 1990).

### Data Analysis

Hypothesis 1: There is a statistically significant relationship between secure attachment style and punitive parental reactions.

Tabel 1.

The results obtained through the Pearson correlation between secure attachment style and parents' punitive reactions to children's negative emotions.

N	SA	PR
SA	48	.296*
PR	48	-.296*

Note. N=48. \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$ . Significant correlations are indicated by asterisks (\*\*).

SA – secure attachment

PR – punitive parental reactions

According to the Pearson correlation analysis conducted to examine the relationship between secure attachment style and parents' tendency to use punitive reactions when managing children's negative emotions, an inverse relationship between the variables can be observed. The relationship is statistically significant and negative, with  $r = -.296$  and a significance level of  $p = .041$ .

Thus, parents who display a predominantly secure attachment style tend to exhibit fewer punitive reactions when their children express negative emotions.

Hypothesis 2: There is a statistically significant relationship between anxious-ambivalent attachment style and punitive reactions and minimization reactions.

Tabel 1.

The results obtained through the Pearson correlation between anxious–ambivalent attachment style and parents’ punitive and minimizing reactions to children’s negative emotions.

	<b>N</b>	<b>AAA</b>	<b>PR</b>	<b>MR</b>
AAA	48		.337*	.321*
PR	48	.337*		.861**
MR	48	.321*	.861**	

Note. N=48. \*p <.05 \*\*p < .01. Significant correlations are indicated by asterisks (\*\*).

AAA – anxious – ambivalent attachment

PR – punitive parental reactions

MR – minimization parental reactions

Regarding the correlation between anxious–ambivalent attachment style and punitive and minimizing parental reactions, the hypothesis can be considered statistically supported.

According to the Pearson correlation analysis conducted for this hypothesis, there is a statistically significant positive relationship between anxious–ambivalent attachment style and punitive reactions ( $r = .337$ ,  $p = .019$ ), as well as between anxious–ambivalent attachment style and minimizing reactions ( $r = .321$ ,  $p = .026$ ). These results indicate a direct relationship between the variables.

Based on these findings, it can be stated that parents with a predominantly anxious–ambivalent attachment style tend to use punitive reactions when managing children’s negative emotions. The more children display negative emotional responses to their experiences, the more likely parents with an anxious–ambivalent attachment style are to resort to punitive behaviors in managing those emotions. At the same time, parents with this attachment style also tend to employ minimization reactions, alongside punitive responses, when dealing with their children’s negative emotions.

Hypothesis 3: There is a statistically significant relationship between distress reactions and punitive reactions and minimization reactions.

Tabel 1.

The results obtained through the Pearson correlation between distress reactions and punitive and minimizing reactions.

	N	DR	PR	MR
DR	48		.831**	.719**
PR	48	.831**		.861**
MR	48	.719**	.861**	

Note. N=48. \*p <.05 \*\*p < .01. Significant correlations are indicated by asterisks (\*\*).

DR – parental distress reactions

PR – punitive parental reactions

MR – parental minimalization reactions

According to the data obtained in this study, there are statistically significant correlations between several types of parental responses to children's negative emotions.

Specifically, there is a strong statistically significant relationship between distress reactions and punitive reactions ( $r = .831$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and a strong statistically significant relationship between distress reactions and minimizing reactions ( $r = .719$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, there is a strong statistically significant relationship between punitive reactions and minimizing reactions ( $r = .861$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The results of the correlation analysis indicate that all three types of parental responses—distress reactions, punitive reactions, and minimizing reactions—are strongly positively correlated with one another. In other words, parents who tend to experience emotional discomfort in response to their children's negative emotions are also more likely to respond through punishment or by minimizing those emotions.

The high correlation coefficients (with  $r$  values ranging between .719 and .861) suggest that these parental responses do not appear to occur in isolation but may reflect a general maladaptive pattern of managing children's emotions, characterized by difficulties in providing emotional support.

Hypothesis 4: There is a statistically significant relationship between encouraging emotional expression and emotion-focused and problem-focused parental reactions.

Tabel 1.

The results obtained through the Pearson correlation between the encouragement of negative emotional expression and emotion-focused and problem-focused reactions.

	<b>N</b>	<b>EER</b>	<b>EFR</b>	<b>PFR</b>
EER	48		.671**	.738**
EFR	48	.671**		.908**
PFR	48	.738**	.908**	

Note. N=48. \*p <.05 \*\*p < .01. Significant correlations are indicated by asterisks (\*\*).

EER – expressive encouragement reactions

EFR – emotion-focused parental reactions

PFR – problem-focused parental reactions

Following the application of the Pearson correlation analysis, the statistical data support the validation of the hypothesis that there is a statistical correlation between the encouragement of negative emotional expression and emotion-focused and problem-focused parental reactions.

As shown in Table 1, there is a strong positive statistically significant relationship between the encouragement of negative emotional expression and emotion-focused reactions ( $r = .671$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as well as a strong positive statistically significant relationship between the encouragement of negative emotional expression and problem-focused reactions ( $r = .738$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, there is a strong, directly proportional relationship between emotion-focused reactions and problem-focused reactions, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = .908$  and a significance level of  $p < .001$ .

Based on these findings, and given the high correlation values ranging between .671 and .908, it can be concluded that parents' encouragement of children's expression of negative emotions is associated with the use of both emotion-focused and problem-focused parental responses. Thus, parents who support and validate their children's expression of negative emotions tend to adopt adaptive response strategies, oriented toward emotional regulation and the resolution of problematic situations.

Furthermore, the very strong correlation between emotion-focused and problem-focused reactions suggests that these two types of parental responses may coexist within a supportive parenting style that is sensitive to children's emotional needs.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between parents' attachment styles and their capacity to manage the negative emotions of preschool-aged children. In the current socio-educational context, where increasing attention is given to the role of emotional education in children's harmonious development, emotional regulation plays a crucial role in early childhood education. Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the parent-child relationship, which includes the factors that may influence parental responses and their tendency to manage children's negative emotional reactions either through supportive strategies or through less supportive approaches.

Building on attachment theories formulated by Bowlby (1969/1982) and later expanded by subsequent researchers such as Mary Ainsworth (1978), we hypothesized that attachment style may significantly influence the ways in which parents tend to respond to children's negative emotions. In this regard, the present research had three main specific objectives: (1) identifying the attachment styles of the participants, (2) highlighting the correlations between attachment style and parental capacity to manage negative emotions, and (3) evaluating and identifying the relationships between possible parental response tendencies to children's negative emotions.

The statistical analysis of the collected data confirmed all the hypotheses formulated in this study, highlighting significant correlations between the variables examined.

Hypothesis 1 was validated, with the results indicating a significant inverse correlation between secure attachment style and punitive parental reactions. This finding suggests that parents with a secure attachment style are less likely to respond with punitive reactions, preferring instead to adopt strategies that support and understand children's emotional experiences. These findings are consistent with the literature cited in this paper, which emphasizes that secure attachment is associated with emotional regulation within the parent-child relationship, along with higher levels of parental empathy.

Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed, revealing a positive relationship between anxious-ambivalent attachment style and parental reactions of punishment and minimization. Thus, parents with an insecure attachment style, predominantly characterized by the avoidance of emotionally uncomfortable situations, tend to respond to children's negative emotions through maladaptive strategies, either by applying punishment or by minimizing the importance of children's emotional experiences. These conclusions are supported by the theoretical framework of this study, according to which parents' own emotional regulation difficulties may negatively affect their responses to

children's emotions and may have long-term negative consequences for their capacity to support their children's emotional development.

Hypothesis 3 highlighted the existence of strongly significant correlations between parents' distress reactions and punitive and minimizing reactions. These statistical results indicate that parents who experience higher levels of distress when confronted with children's negative emotions are more likely to respond to those emotions through punitive responses or by denying or minimizing the emotions experienced by the children. This pattern likely functions as a defense mechanism aimed at reducing the parents' own emotional discomfort, as also suggested by the literature cited in this study.

Hypothesis 4 confirmed the existence of strong statistically significant correlations between the encouragement of children's expression of negative emotions and emotion-focused and problem-focused parental reactions. Therefore, parents who validate and support the expression of children's negative emotions are also more likely to use adaptive parenting strategies in managing emotions, such as recognizing emotions and identifying concrete solutions for situations that have generated emotional discomfort for children. As shown in the studies presented in this paper, this hypothesis has a strong theoretical foundation, as parental sensitivity and emotional support contribute to the healthy development of children's emotional regulation and emotional intelligence.

One of the limitations of the present study concerns the data collection method. Online data collection allows access to a wider range of participants; however, some participants may encounter difficulties in accessing or completing the questionnaires due to factors such as limited internet access or lower digital skills. In addition, this method of administering the tests presents another limitation, namely the impossibility of directly observing each participant. Such observation could be conducted in a real setting through interviews and by directly observing participants while completing the questionnaires. Both types of direct observation could provide relevant information for this study.

Label variables may also be considered a limitation of the present study. For this research, potential confounding variables that could influence the results include participants' level of education, self-declared cultural background, parents' general stress level, children's temperament, children's gender, number of children in the family, quality of the couple's relationship, and parents' socio-economic context. The cross-sectional design of the research may also be considered a limitation, as the results were obtained at a single point in time, allowing only correlations to be identified rather than causal relationships.

The present research has multiple possibilities for continuation, as the topic of attachment, emotional intelligence, and children's socio-emotional development is very broad and offers numerous possibilities for practical parental interventions.

One possible direction for future research would involve increasing the number of participants beyond 48 in order to ensure greater generalizability of the results. This could make it possible to identify more subtle statistical differences in the correlations between attachment and emotional intelligence or between attachment and parents' response tendencies to children's negative emotions.

Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews with participating parents, could be considered. These methods could provide additional information regarding the underlying reasons for parental responses to children's negative emotions, as well as insights into parents' developmental histories and their own relationships with their parents.

A further extension of the study could include additional variables such as level of education, parental stress levels, children's temperament, children's gender, number of children in the family, quality of the couple's relationship, and socio-economic context. Including these variables could generate new correlations and provide more comprehensive scientific conclusions regarding the factors that influence parental emotional reactivity.

### **Conclusions**

The results of the study highlight the existence of significant relationships between parents' attachment styles and the ways in which they respond to the negative emotions of preschool-aged children. The data analysis indicates that parents with a secure attachment style exhibit fewer punitive reactions and are more likely to use adaptive strategies when managing children's emotions. This finding supports theoretical perspectives in the literature emphasizing that attachment security promotes parental empathy, emotional availability, and the use of responses that are sensitive to children's emotional needs.

In contrast, insecure attachment styles, particularly the anxious-ambivalent type, are associated with a more frequent use of punitive reactions and the minimization of children's negative emotions. Furthermore, the strong correlations between parental distress, punishment, and minimization reactions suggest that parents' difficulties in emotional regulation may influence the way they manage children's emotional experiences. At the same time, the results indicate that encouraging emotional expression is associated with adaptive parenting strategies, such as emotion-focused and problem-focused

responses, which contribute to the development of children's emotional self-regulation competencies.

Overall, the findings of the study emphasize the importance of developing parental emotional regulation competencies and promoting a secure attachment style within the parent-child relationship. These findings have relevant implications for the development of parental education programs, psychological counseling, and educational interventions aimed at supporting children's socio-emotional development. Strengthening parental sensitivity and adaptive response strategies may contribute to creating a secure family environment that supports healthy emotional development in children.

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