

# Emotional Bonds in Early Childhood: A Qualitative Investigation Based on Drawings and Narratives of Children and Their Mothers

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## **Abstract**

The present study focuses on the analysis of interactions between preschool children and Significant Others, focusing on the mother-child relationship, with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of their emotional and social development. The theoretical background of the research is based on the Psychopedagogical Theories of the Object Relationship, highlighting the crucial role of the early mother-child relationship in shaping children's psycho-emotional identity. The research data collection was carried out using children's drawings and their corresponding narratives from fifty children of preschool ;

primary school age, attending public kindergartens, nurseries and primary schools in the Central and Southern Sector of Athens. At the same time, the mothers of these children participated in narrative interviews, in which they described their experience of their relationship with their children. The children's narratives and mother's interviews were analyzed in the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti in order to draw conclusions. The importance of early detection, as well as strengthening the bonds between child and Significant Others, as a key factor for mental well-being and smooth socialization is emphasized.

**Keywords:** Children's drawing, Mother-child relationship, Significant others, Narrative interview

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

The emotional and social development of preschool children is a key factor in their later mental health and social integration. Early relationships with Significant Others (parents and caregivers) significantly influence the way children perceive themselves, relate to others and develop basic emotional and social skills. Particularly during the preschool period, the quality of these relationships can shape patterns of attachment and modes of emotional expression that have a crucial impact on their future lives (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Hatzidaki, 2015; Vitorou et al., 2018).

Most studies approach child drawing from a developmental or cognitive perspective (Imafuku & Seto, 2021; Long et al., 2024; Morra & Panesi, 2021; Lawyer & Goldstein, 2018). In the present research, the drawing is considered a projective tool that reveals unconscious fantasies and internal conflicts and is therefore analysed as such. It draws its theoretical basis from psychoanalytic theories according to which the quality of early relationship interactions determines later interactions. The study proposes a combination of tools that highlight these early interactions, using both the child drawing as a projective technique to understand the child's emotional representations and also the interviews with the mothers to capture their own narrative regarding their relationship to their child.

### 1.2 Theoretical Frameworks

The present study investigates the role of Significant Others in shaping the emotional and social development of preschool children. More specifically, it explores whether these relationships are reflected in children's drawings alongside the mothers' perspectives as expressed in interviews about their relationship with their child.

#### 1.2.1 The Significant Others

Significant Others (SOs) play a central role in the Psychoanalytical Theory, serving as mirrors that reflect the child's thoughts, feelings and sense of self. It is where the child seeks for confirmation of their existence, reinforcement of their desire and the possibility of finding their place in the world (Sidiropoulou-Kanellou & Schiza, 2014). The quality of the relationship with the SOs determines the child's mental health as well as its subsequent

relationships (Abuhammad, 2016; Bowlby, 1969; Klein, 1997; Kim et al., 2017; Menès, 2007; Winnicott, 1971).

According to Klein (1997), the mother-infant relationship begins long before speech or conscious memory. The mother's breast is the first target of both love and hate from the infant. In particular, the mother is not a person but an internal object, since she is the recipient of intense projections. The infant's ability to unify these dichotomous objects, to recognize that the same person can be good and bad, leads to the capacity for love. The quality of maternal presence profoundly affects whether the infant can integrate a good object within themselves, *i.e.*, an internal support for mental resilience in later life.

Bowlby (1969) is along the same lines, saying that if the caregiver is responsive and sensitive then the infant will acknowledge the caregiver as a safe base to explore. Thus a child with secure attachment will develop an internal working model of what a mutually satisfying social relationship should be like. These internal working models are mental representations that children use to guide behavior in developing successful social relationships with others in the future. Winnicott (1971) introduces the concept of a good enough mother, who is not perfect but is able to adapt to the infant's needs sensitively, providing a trusting space in which the infant feels that their mother will meet their needs. In this way, the mother acts as a mirror through which the infant begins to see and construct itself. A good enough mother allows the child to move from co-dependence to gradual self-sufficiency, supporting personality development without stifling it. Menès (2007) extends Winnicott's thinking by reporting on the way in which the other has or has not offered us pleasure or disappointment, leaving deep imprints on the child's psyche. Early experiences shape how the child will seek meaning, love and desire in later life (Cordié, 2001).

Thus, through the mother-child relationship, transference and anti-transference mechanisms are activated, with a decisive role in the formation of the child's psyche. The mother acts as a primary upon which the child projects their unconscious needs for security, love and recognition (Klein, 1997). Through transference, the child reproduces internal patterns of relationships, which arise from early experiences of attachment, and repeats them in the relationship with the mother (Winnicott, 1971). Similarly, the mother—consciously or unconsciously—responds to these psychic projections through countertransference, which carries elements of both her personal history and the dynamics of the present relationship (Ogden, 1994). In cases where countertransference is not acknowledged and remains unprocessed, it can distort communication and enhance the child's anxiety or identity confusion (Bollas, 1987). However, when the mother manages to act as an emotional container for the child's psychic experiences, she facilitates the development of autonomy and emotional regulation (Cordié, 2001; Menès, 2007).

### 1.2.2 The Children's Drawings as Projective Instrument

The child's drawing allows the child to express their view of the world, themselves and their feelings, revealing elements of their personality, emotional state and relationships with significant persons (Bekhit et al, 2005; Crotti & Magni, 2003; Panagopoulou, 2004). It is used to reveal the child's emotional state and how he interacts with the members of the

surrounding systems (Longobardi et al., 2017). According to Dolto (1939, 1947), drawing facilitates access to the child's imagined representations and emotional states. It is also used in the psychotherapy of children with emotional disorders or traumatic experiences, helping to express and process these experiences (Candy, 2000; McInnes, 2019). This tool is considered useful when addressing children coming from multicultural backgrounds or with communication deficits due to different language and culture (Gari et al., 2018; Singh & Rossouw, 2015). It is also considered particularly useful when applied to younger age groups (e.g., Kindergarten), (Andreou & Bonoti, 2010) and to preschool children, the protagonists of this research, thus making it relevant.

In the present research, the main focus is on the children and so we chose to combine the children's drawing with the children's own narrative around their drawing. The child's expression reflects an innate capacity for both verbal (narration) and non-verbal (drawing) communication, highlighting the recognition of the child's voice and underscoring that the initiative emerges from the child itself (Charalampous et al., 2024; Charalampous, 2024). As Soto (2004) points out, the integration of children's drawings into narrative contexts can serve as a valuable indicator for understanding their experiences. Through this combination, the representations that children create are not just visual representations, but carry meanings related to how they themselves live the world (Dockett & Perry, 2005). Furthermore, the connection between the drawing and the child's voice highlights the drawing not only as a tool for expression, but also as a form of agency and power, through which children manage and redefine the contexts in which they operate (Sidiropoulou, 2023). The drawing, in conjunction with the accompanying narrative, captures their ability to take an active role in representing their experience and transforming their personal experience into narrative discourse (Dockett & Perry, 2005). Thus, the multi-layered communication (verbal, non-verbal, emotional, symbolic) that develops in the preschool environment can be the subject of experiential and participatory research, respecting children's voice and their experiences (Sidiropoulou & Tsaoula, 2008).

### *1.3 Aim of Study & Research Questions*

The purpose of the present study is to investigate in depth the way in which the early relationships of preschool and primary school children with their Significant Others (*i.e.*, the mother) influence the formation of their emotional and social identity. It seeks to understand internalized representations of these relationships through children's drawings and the narratives of children and their mothers within the framework of psychoanalytic theories of object relations. Specifically, the research sets the following questions:

1. What emotional representations do children express about their relationship with their mother through their drawings and narratives?
2. How do mothers describe their own experience of their relationship with their child and how does this relate to the children's narratives?
3. What common patterns and themes emerge in representations of relationships with Significant Others, as captured in the narrative of children and in mother's interviews?

## 2. Method

In the present research, a qualitative research methodology was employed, utilizing child drawings as a tool, an insufficient technique that aims to explore emotions, relationships, and mental representations that are difficult to express verbally (Malchiodi, 1998; Papastathopoulos, 2020), in conjunction with narrative interviews with the mothers. The children's narratives and mother's interviews were processed and analyzed in the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti, a tool that offers systematic organization, coding and interpretation of discourse and representations, providing a valid mapping of thematic patterns and relationships (Friese, 2019). Overall, this approach facilitates a layered and dynamic understanding of children's experience and relationship with Significant Others within the context of object relations theories.

### 2.1 Participant (Subject) Characteristics

The subjects of the survey were 50 preschool children attending Kindergartens, Nurseries and Primary schools in the Central and South Sector of Athens and accordingly their 50 mothers.

### 2.2 Sampling Procedures

The collection of the sample was based on randomization. In the first stage of the research, children of preschool and primary school age were randomly selected and participated in educational settings (Kindergartens/Nurseries/Primary Schools) in two regions of Attica, in the Central and Southern Sector of Athens (Papanastasiou, 2016). In the second stage of the research, the mothers of these children participated. For the smooth start of the research process, the researcher contacted the staff of the Kindergartens of the Nursery and Primary Schools where the research was implemented, in order to inform them on the topic, content and process of the research. After obtaining the consent of those in charge of the educational premises (supervisors and directors), information and consent forms for the research were distributed to the parents of the children. Afterwards, the survey was implemented starting with the children and continuing with the mothers of the children who agreed to be interviewed.

#### 2.2.1 Sample Size, Power, and Precision

This survey presents a representative segment of the broader research: five drawings created by preschool children (ages 3-7), accompanied by narrative interviews with their mothers. Although the overall sample was randomly selected, these five cases were deliberately chosen based on their richness of information, following qualitative research principles (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). The goal was not to achieve statistical representation but to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon through cases with complete data and meaningful narratives. The children's drawings revealed clear emotional and narrative content, along with symbolic and transitional elements related to their experiences of change and adaptation. As Malchiodi (1998) explains, children's drawings often reflect individual, cultural, and gender-based themes. For instance, boys frequently depict scenes involving action, separation, or spatial transitions—common themes in school adjustment. Similarly, Cox (2005) notes that children's pictorial expressions vary with age and gender, though this does not preclude

selecting illustrative cases for in-depth analysis. Therefore, the focus on boys' drawings was intended to deepen theoretical understanding, rather than to achieve gender balance.

### 2.2.2 Measures and Covariates

The research tools of the present study were two: (a) the Children's Drawing and (b) the Narrative Interview.

With the preschool and primary school children, the children's drawing was used as a projective technique, *i.e.*, using the children's drawings as projection media and analyzing them on the basis of symbols and the use of colors. More specifically, we focused on some important elements which according to researchers (Kaplan & Main, 1986; Kourti & Pargana, 2017; Meredieu, 1981; Mirtseki, 2016; Mylonakou-Keke, 2022) are a. the size of the drawing, b. the location or otherwise, c. the contour, color and d. the content. The condition given to the children was: «*Draw your family*».

Narrative interviews were conducted with the children's mothers, which fall within the framework of narrative research methodology and more specifically within the narrative analysis of stories and are considered one of the most established narrative methods (Schutze, 1977; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993, cited in Issari & Karagianni, 2018). The reason why this interview format was chosen is that it focuses on generating stories and detailed descriptions rather than extracting short answers or general statements. The open-ended opening question asked was: «*How do you experience your relationship with your child*», which prompted mothers to unfold and share their perception of their relationship with their child. As in the case of the children, participants were informed about anonymity and the use of pseudonyms.

ATLAS.ti is a specialized qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the systematic processing and interpretation of qualitative data, such as transcribed interviews. Through the coding process, data are categorised into concepts and themes, allowing recurring patterns and relationships to emerge (Friese, 2019). In addition, the ability to visualize and map codes enhances the interpretive process and facilitates the generation of in-depth conclusions (Woods et al., 2016).

### 2.2.3 Research Design

The research design was implemented in two stages, in the first stage the researcher collected the preschool children's drawings along with their interview and in the second stage the interviews were conducted with the mothers of these children.

In the first stage of the research, the researcher visited the classroom immediately after the morning arrival and participated in the established routines, such as the first gathering, where the children announce the current day and weather resulting in singing the welcome song. The educator introduced her to the children, mentioning that they would later participate in a surprise activity to pique their interest. This was followed by breakfast and music and movement games. Then the researcher and the educator introduced the activity to the children, requesting them to draw their family. This was preceded by a short discussion about what

family means, with the children participating guided by the educator. Glues and drawing materials were distributed. For children whose parents had not given consent, it was envisaged that they could only participate creatively, without data collection by the researcher. Those who did not wish to draw could choose another activity, always in the presence of the educator. The educator was present in the classroom throughout the whole process. The researcher and the educator moved around the room, supporting the process and making sure that all the children had access to the materials. The children completed the drawings at their own pace and most of them came willingly forward to describe them, often without being prompted. The researcher guided the narrative based on the needs of the research, emphasizing elements such as: colors, order and size of members, spatial placement, activities, and locations.

In the second stage of the research, the researcher contacted the mothers of the children by telephone and after reminding them of the purpose and content of the research, she made an appointment for the interview to take place in person at the pedagogical spaces, depending on the age of the child, where each mother's child attended, so that it would be an intimate space for the mother. The researcher informed the mothers about the recording of the interview and formulated the opening question: *How do you experience your relationship with your child* in order to start the interview.

#### 2.2.4 Ethical Approval

The research was approved by the Ethics of the University of West Attica (No. 77009/01-09-2023). Ethical issues were considered with care at all stages of the research, from design to data sharing (Creswell, 2014). During the implementation, emphasis was placed on respecting the rights of all participants (children and mothers), as well as ensuring anonymity through the use of pseudonyms (Ch for child, M for mother). All parents signed written consent to conduct the study, and children were verbally informed and participated willingly, with the right to withdraw at any time (Burke et al., 2023). Data was stored securely and in accordance with research ethics.

### 3. Results

In this section, I present the results obtained from the content analysis of the children's drawing combined with the narrative of the mothers. Those were analyzed in ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software designed to highlight relationships and draw conclusions based on these relationships.

3.1 Children's Drawings Analysis

*Family drawing, boy 3 years old*



R: Ch1, tell us about your family.

Ch1: I'm here (points to the center), mum here ... er ... not here.

R: Dad, where is he?

Ch1: Here ... well, no ... here.

R: Where is your house?

Ch1: Here and here and here ...

R: And what do you do with mom and dad?

Ch1: With mum, I'm going on the swings!

R: And your school, where is it? (points to where he pointed the first time for home). And what do you do at school?

Ch1: I play dinosaurs.

In Ch1's drawing there is pencil tension, use of one color, a vast frame and in his narrative, inability to define his house by pointing to three different places, inability to identify or remember what he is doing with his dad. The educator speaks of a difficult divorce, confirms the existence of three different homes and alternating faces accompanying him to and from school.



The mother of Ch1, makes reference to the divorce, after the interview is over, after the researcher turns off the transcriber and asks her if she noticed anything—without specifying what—during the research on Child 1.

Some parts of the interview with the mother that illustrate the relationship with her child are quoted in excerpts:

«... *When it was in the belly, because of diabetes I had to do a very specific diet. When we were hungry—because we were both hungry—he would hit me in the belly. He was **impatient** to eat. And even now: Mom, I want to eat! **Impatient** in general! At food, at play—he wants to play something the moment he wants it. If we don't do it, he grumbles. But he does it with sweetness. He doesn't yell. He'll look at you for a moment to see the reaction and then change his ways. He's learned that good wins the game ...».*

«... *he's sweet and **compliant**. Even though he is an only child, he shares his toys. He is not possessive. I was **afraid** he would be, but he's not. On the contrary, he often **backs down** too much to avoid a fight. This has been making me a little **sad** lately. I'm **afraid** of him becoming submissive. He doesn't look like that, he's happy, but sometimes he doesn't react even when he gets hit. He needs work. He needs to learn to set boundaries. Not to be **afraid** to say no ...».*

There is a repetitiveness of the word «afraid», which indicates the dominant feeling of the mother at the given period. The mother's words reveal guilt and we could assume that she is projecting her own fears onto her child. At the same time, there is a contradiction in the image she projects of her child, describing him as «impatient», but also «compliant», often repeating the above words. The confusion felt by the mother is also reflected in the drawing of Child 1.

*Family drawing, boy 4 years old*



R: Tell us about your family, dear...

Ch2: Mum, sister, brother, dad

R: You? You, where are you?

Ch2: I don't know ... I'm at school... uh no I'm on the swings ...

R: With whom?

Ch2: With my mum and my brothers and sisters ...

R: And what do you do?

Ch2: I play slide and with water! And I turn ...

Ch2 uses a color and shows a confusion to define the context, the space he is in. Ultimately, he chooses to place himself on the swings rendering a family moment.

Ch2's mother reports that her child is shy, a trait she herself had as a child.

*«... but, in general, Ch2 is **shy**. And with acquaintances. Say, with his godmother—who he doesn't see every day—he's still **shy**. He **wants his time** to open up. At home, though, nothing like that. He's a different person! As soon as he comes home, he unravels. He'll play, **he'll** enter his world, and he'll assert himself. That's where he shows himself!».*

*«... I was like that as a child ... I didn't even want to go with my father! Very **shy** with strangers. Even with cousins, if I hadn't seen them in a while, I wasn't comfortable playing right away. I needed time to feel familiar. It took me years to get over it. And I still have it.*

*I'm a shy person. So I totally understand it. I think he'll work it out by himself. When he grows up, he'll develop it».*

Ch2s mother reports the following about his relationships with his siblings and his adjustment at school:

*«... he generally plays a lot with his siblings. He likes it, he's a quiet kid, but he's also observant. He **wants his time** to feel comfortable. He copies them in everything. In both good and bad behaviors he is the little guy of the group, but he tries to be equal. He wants to do what everyone else is doing. If you tell him something is for the grown up kids, he says: I can't? I can't do it? And at school, same thing. At first he had a lot of denial... He didn't want to go. Not just whining...he didn't want to at all. Maybe for a month, maybe longer. Maybe three months, although now that I think about it, several kids had issues even then...Our other two kids, from day one, wanted to go. I didn't want to let them and they were running to get in! But Ch2 ... no ... he was watching the games, but he wanted to stay with me ...»*

The mother repeating the word «shy» projects to her child feelings of shyness that she says she experienced in her childhood, not separating her own feelings from those of her child. Also, in the children's adjustment to daycare, the mother seems reluctant to separate, a feeling that Ch2 shares with her three children, as she reports. The child educator who had all three of her children report frequent absences and lack of consistency in the children's attendance.

*Family drawing, boy 6 years old*



R: Tell me, dear, about your family ...

Ch3: Here I am, uh no, here's dad, here's me and here's mum.

R: And what do you do?

Ch3: We watch TV and eat.

R: And where is your mouth?

Ch3: I don't know ...

R: You, why have you opened your little hands?

Ch3: I don't know ... because ... I don't know ...

In the drawing of Ch3 we observe the absence of mouths on the faces, the absence of the mother's hands, and red hands on the father. The child depicts himself, different from his parents, with open hands. The absence of body parts is problematic, as well as the red color on dad's hands. The educator speaks of an authoritarian father who encourages violence, implying tensions and voice on the father's part. About the child, she says that in the previous year he made tiny gestures, was very shy and that he still has irritable reactions: he cries, often feels wronged and repeats the phrase «... *But I'm right* ... !».

Ch3's mother states:

«... *It's hard to see him being wronged. It's really, really **hard** for me ... It was very **hard** to see him being made fun of, especially when he had some speech issues ... He used to get all worked up when I corrected him ... he would try to change a word so he wouldn't be*

*exposed ... The biggest problem was on the playground. There, on the spontaneity, the other kids might correct him without intending to hurt him, but he would take it **hard**. He would gather ... But, inside the school bus, there were children of different ages and some would make fun of him. It was very **difficult** for me. I didn't know if it was right to take him with me, I was in a **difficult** position to defend both my child and the other child. I had to explain to him how to behave. I understood then how **difficult** it is to have your own child in the classroom ...».*

Ch3's mother repeats the word «difficulty», a situation she experiences in relation to her child, introducing it in three different contexts: on the playground, on the school bus and in the classroom. The mother may be projecting onto her child feelings of vulnerability or shame that she may have experienced in her childhood, not separating her own feelings from her child's feelings. Furthermore, she may feel anxiety that she is not a good enough mother (Winnicott, 1971) and that she is not meeting her child's needs for protection from the outside world.

At another point in the interview he makes reference to the father of the child, hinting at a separation of roles, saying:

*«... He doesn't play with me so much, because he prefers boy games—he plays with his dad more ...».*

*Family drawing, boy 5 years old*



R: Tell us, Ch4, about your family.

Ch4: Here, this is mum, here is me, here is dad and here are my brothers and sisters.

R: And what do you do?

Ch4: We pick up the things, wash the toilet, clean with the broom.

R: Do you all do so many jobs together?

Ch4: Yes!

R: And this hand, here, what is it?

Ch4: My palm!

R: Why did you draw your palm?

Ch4: Because I like it!

R: And where is your school?

Ch4: Here (pointing to the brown house).

R: Did you draw something from your school, your friends, the game you like, something like that?

Ch4: No. I drew that we all go to school together.

Ch4 uses bright colors, happy faces and gives a lot of information about his family's routines.

Ch4's mother states:

*«... He is a child who is sociable, cooperative, and obedient. Really, for his age—he's five years old—he's **impeccable**. I mean, and the teachers tell me that he's obedient, cooperative, willing to help. He's a **great** kid ... I took him to the nursery when he was one year and three months old. He was already a ready child—cooperative, social, mature for his age ... Yes, big hands because we always have something to deal with. And because we also give big **hugs**. We are **huggers** too. That physical contact helps a lot with our communication, even when we are tired, irritated or angry ... those **hugs** are our peace. So, there are fights and moments of love ... Ch4 is **amazing**. Based on what I hear and see, whether it's with his cousins or with friends when we go out, he's **amazing** ... And he continues to be kind ...».*

Mother 4 repeats the words «hug» and «amazing». They use hugs as a means of releasing negative emotions and relieving them. She describes her child as amazing, giving examples from different time phases and contexts (educational settings, friends and family). It is evident that she projects feelings of joy to her child.

*Family drawing, boy 7 years old*



R: Will you tell us about your family, dear?

Ch5: Yes! I'm here. This is my mom and this is my dad.

R: And what do you all do together?

Where are you?

We are in a forest. Actually, ... No, were in the park and because I didn't have time to draw the trees, I just drew Mom, Dad and me.

Very nice. Is that Mom and Dad holding hands?

Ch5: Yes, because we're crossing the street.

R: Yes. Very good.

Ch5: I made fun of my dad!

R: You made fun of your dad, what for?

Ch5: To be funny like that and to be thin, because dad is chubby.

R: Good!

In the drawing of Ch5 there is a monochromatic pattern, startled faces and the mother in two places, between Ch5 (figure with blue shoes) and next to the father, with whom they are holding hands. Ch5 has not drawn his sister. It is interesting that the child has drawn his



mother twice, while his younger sister is absent.

Accordingly, the mother's words about her relationship with Ch5 are quoted:

*«... Ch5 needs to be pampered. While he can do it all by himself, he likes a little bit of babysitting. He's been on his own for four years, so he likes to cuddle. Coax him in general. Yeah, yeah. Tell him he's the best. Very simple, and with his sister now that he's getting older and demanding, they're kind of ... they're having a ... a competition, which isn't really a competition, he just wants what she wants. At the same time. And he's taken out a lot of times where they say ... What do you call it, it's like a regression. Because if I go back, she might cry. When he was four years old, he wanted to drink milk in the baby's mouth. Because I was nursing the baby and Ch5 was four when the baby came ... And he wanted milk lying down on a bibber too».*

Elsewhere, Ch5's mother states:

*«... **I was what he needed, he needed me.** For example, I might be the one holding the baby, and he says: I can't wash all of a sudden, I can't eat alone. I can't, I can't do many things ...»*

Regarding Ch5's personality, M5 refers to him as a demanding character, repeating the words demands and demanding. Specifically:

*«... As he gets older, he gets tougher. So he is a very energetic child, **demanding**... He doesn't easily accept to settle for anything... He wants his time a lot and he wants a certain way of being treated... And he wants to spend his time a lot. Yes. He **demand**s it. Yes. In different ways. As he gets older, he discovers new ways to **demand** it ... There is the warning to take his time. Yes, we have to prepare him first for what's going to happen ... He was like that as a baby. He always did what he wanted. The pacifier, which was a big issue for us. Two years old he held four pacifiers. One hanging, one in his mouth, two in his hands...He's a **demanding** character ...».*

According to Lacan (2006), demand is closely linked to the notion of reference to the Other and is not limited to the satisfaction of need, but is inscribed in the realm of the Other through language and embodies the demand for love and recognition. Desire arises where demand fails to fully satisfy the subject (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 286).

### 3.2 ATLAS.ti Analysis

After the qualitative content analysis of the children's drawing and the narrative interviews with the mothers of the preschool children, the analysis of the children's speech and the mothers narrative follows, which was carried out using the ATLAS.ti. Specifically, the interviews were transcribed and codes were derived based on criteria, relevance to the research questions and repetitiveness of words or phrases common to the interviews. The codes were then categorised into themes, which were organised and visualised in graphs using the Networks tool to highlight the relationships between themes and codes.

In the first graph (Graph 1) the themes that emerged are two: (a) «*Mother as a good Object*» with codes: *mothers emotions, mothers expectations, mothers emotional posture, affectionate*

*relationship between mother and child, attachment to mother» and (b) «Relationships with Significant Others» with codes: friendships, attachment to mother, affectionate relationship between mother and child, mental frame confusion, confusion of self and Significant Other, merging of self and Significant Other, school adjustment, sibling relationships».*

The first theme «*Mother as a good object*» emerged from the analysis of the mother's interviews, while the second theme «*Relationships with Significant Others*» emerged from the analysis of the children's interviews.

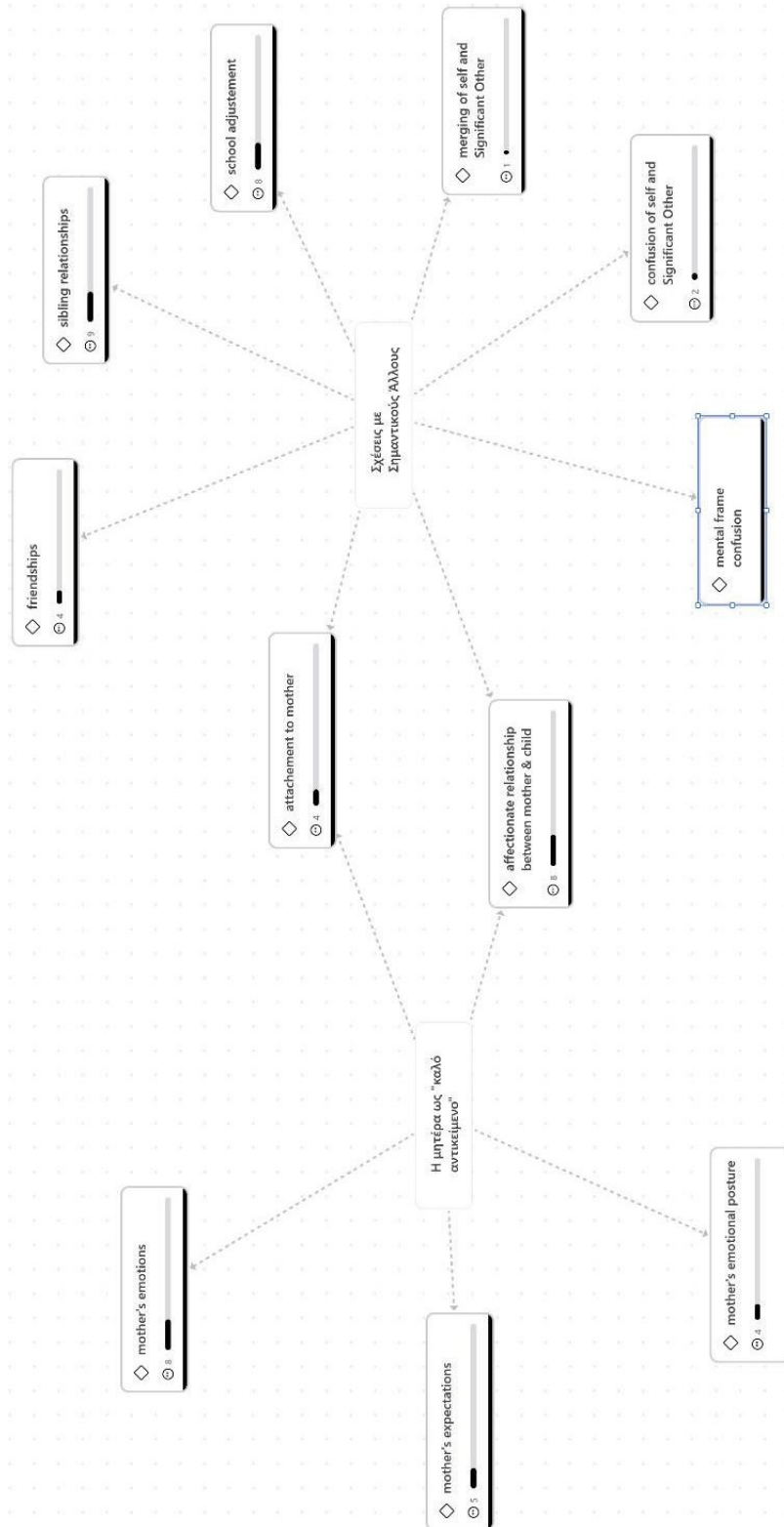
In the theme «*The mother as a good object*», the transference relationship that develops from the mother to the child, the projections she makes and the feelings she projects to her child are examined. For example, M1 projects a guilt piece: «*I am afraid of becoming compliant*», M2 projects her shame «*Ch2 is shy. He needs his time to open up ... I was like that as a child too ... Very shy ...*», M3 projects her distress: «*It was very difficult to see him being made fun of ...*», M5 projects her difficulty: «*... With me he had the claim, me ...*», while M4 projects her joy: «*Ch4 is amazing!*».

The qualitative analysis shows that the relationship with the mother plays a key role in shaping the relationships that the individual develops later in life. This early relationship is imprinted within the individual and influences how they relate to others. In subsequent important relationships, such as with friends, siblings or at school, patterns from the relationship with the mother are often repeated.

For example, Ch1 is compliant with the other children «*... On the contrary, he often gives in too much to avoid a fight ... sometimes he doesn't react even when he is hit*, Ch3 leaves the space for the other children's teasing: «*The biggest trouble was happening on the playground. There, on the spontaneity, the other children might correct him without any intention of hurting him, but he took it hard. He would gather himself ...*», Ch5 envied his sister and decided for himself when and how much time to devote to the next day's homework: «*I'm being patient. What can you do, go a little with his water so you don't ... But a bad reaction on purpose never came out ... I don't know, in the group it's a bit of an issue. And the rules are a little bit of an issue. Yeah. And at home this ... And Mrs. N. who has the afternoon, who's already tired, for the lessons, she tells me, he wants to do his thing. Once he decides he's going to do his homework, in ten minutes hell be done ...*». Ch2 appears vain towards himself regarding his relationships with his siblings: «*If you tell him something is for the grown up kids, he says: I can't? I can't do it*». And he also appears shy at school: «*At school, same thing. At first he had a lot of denial ... He didn't want to go. Not just nagging ... he didn't want to at all*», whereas Ch4 shares affectionate relationships with his peers: «*He joins groups, cooperates, plays, and makes the other kids laugh. He's a bit of the clown of the group. If he sees a little kid upset, he'll go and say it's ok, come and play and you'll forget about it. Or if he sees someone hurt, he says it's okay, it'll pass. Based on what I hear and see, whether it's with his cousins or friends when we go out, he's amazing*».

The theme «*Relationships with Significant Others*» examines countertransference, i.e., the projections that the child makes in relation to their mother, showing how they interpret their relationship with their mother. Specifically, Ch1, Ch2, Ch3 and Ch5 show a confusion in their

narrative to define where their self or home is located, with Ch3 omitting key physical features (mouth, hands) and Ch5 omitting a family person (his sister).



Graph 1

#### 4. Discussion

This approach, which integrates the child's drawing with the child's narrative, allows for a better understanding of children's feelings and experiences and provides information about their emotional state, their relationships with their Significant Others and their place in the school environment.

Regarding the first research question, the children express their relationship with their mother through their drawings and narratives. Through the analysis of the characteristics of the drawings, such as size, position and use of colors, it was evident that the children depict through their drawings their relationships with their family, school and friends. Differences in colour use, for example, can be linked to a child's state of mind, while the position of figures in the drawing can reveal their emotional evaluations and hierarchies about people who have an important place in their lives (Kaplan & Main, 1986; Kourti & Pargana, 2017; Meredieu, 1981; Mirtseki, 2016; Mylonakou-Keke, 2022).

Regarding the second research question, the findings of the present study confirm that the mother-child relationship is not only a functional parenting framework, but also activates deeper psychodynamic mechanisms, such as transference and countertransference, which mutually influence the experiences and representations of both parties (Klein, 1997; Ogden, 1994). Mother's interviews often reveal emotional responses that are not limited to the present but involve unconscious revivals from their own childhood, an element that is linked to the concepts of countertransference and projection (Bollas, 1987; Cordié, 2001).

With regard to the third research question, both in children's drawings and mother's interviews we observe repetitions of relationship patterns, which seem to be linked to early experiences of attachment, confirming the function of transference (Winnicott, 1971). The presence of common themes, such as emotional closeness, the need for security, and role confusion in some cases, highlights how the internal experience of the relationship with the mother is reflected in the way the child relates to other Significant Others. Therefore, analysis of the narratives from both sides (mothers and children) illuminates the common psychological patterns that run through the relationship and contributes to understanding of the emotional dynamics that shape it.

In conclusion, in our study, the importance of early detection, as well as the strengthening of the bonds between the child and Significant Others, is evident, as it is a key factor for the mental well-being and the smooth socialization of the young child in any educational environment.

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