

Family Dynamics and Psychological Adjustment Among Adolescents

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the complex relationship between family dynamics and psychological adjustment in adolescents, with a focus on how variations in family functioning, parent–child relationships, and coping processes predict adolescent mental health outcomes. By quantitatively analyzing these associations, this paper aims to clarify contentious theoretical and empirical debates surrounding the family context as an agent of risk or resilience.

Methodology: A cross-sectional quantitative design was adopted using validated psychometric instruments administered to a large adolescent sample (N > 1,000). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and multiple regression analysis were used to test hypothesized direct and mediated pathways linking family dynamics to multiple indicators of adolescent psychological adjustment. Detailed tables present effect sizes, confidence intervals, and model fit indices.

Findings: Results demonstrate that functional family dynamics (e.g., cohesion, communication) are robustly associated with lower levels of internalizing symptoms and better overall psychological adjustment. Parent–child conflict and poor parent–child relationships significantly predict higher depressive symptoms, and coping strategies mediate portions of these effects. Gender moderates several pathways, suggesting differential vulnerability patterns.

Value: This paper moves beyond descriptive correlations by employing rigorous quantitative modeling to unpack mechanisms linking family dynamics to adolescent adjustment. It integrates mediation and moderation effects that challenge simplifications in extant research, highlighting interactions among multiple family process variables.

Keywords: family dynamics, adolescent adjustment, psychological well-being, parent–child relationships, quantitative analysis.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a formative developmental period marked by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social changes that render youth both vulnerable and resilient to environmental influences (Shek, 1997). Among contextual forces shaping this transition, family dynamics remains one of the most consistent predictors of psychological outcomes in adolescents (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985). Yet, despite decades of research, theoretical and empirical disagreements persist regarding *which aspects* of family life matter most — and *through what mechanisms* these effects materialize. Some theories privilege structural features such as family composition, while others emphasize process variables, including communication patterns, emotional support, and conflict resolution (Laursen & Collins, 2009). Crucially, it remains unresolved whether family influence functions primarily as a direct determinant of adolescent adjustment or operates indirectly through mediators such as coping, resilience, or internal psychological traits. Family systems theory posits that the family operates as an interconnected whole — changes in one relationship ripple through others, influencing individual adjustment (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Empirical work broadly supports this view, illustrating that high family cohesion and adaptability are associated with improved adolescent well-being and reduced psychopathology (Shek, 1997; Wang et al., 2022). At the same time, parent–child relationships characterized by high conflict or low support correlate with increased depressive and anxiety symptoms (Wang & Tang, 2025). These findings raise questions about *how* conflict and communication failures contribute to maladjustment: Are they independent predictors, or do they interact with adolescents’ cognitive and emotional processes in producing adverse outcomes?

A critical line of research foregrounds the mediating role of adolescents’ own psychological resources. For example, coping strategies and character strengths have been shown to partially mediate the impact of family functioning on stress responses (Yang, Liu, & Wang, 2025). Such mediation effects challenge simplistic causal models that treat family dynamics as unidirectional forces acting on passive adolescents. Instead, they suggest that adolescents’ internal appraisal mechanisms and behavioral responses play essential roles in shaping outcomes. This raises deeper theoretical issues about agency such as; to what extent are adolescents active constructors of their own adjustment trajectories in the face of family stressors?

Moreover, parental control and boundary practices themselves have heterogeneous implications depending on relational quality. In contexts of supportive parent–child relationships, appropriate parental control can bolster mental health, whereas in strained relationships it may intensify psychological harm (Wang et al., 2022). This complexity problematizes interventions that promote standardized parenting practices without accounting for relational context. Consequently, questions about moderation, for instance, whether gender, age, or personality traits influence these family–adjustment pathways demand rigorous quantitative probing. A central challenge in the literature is methodological: many studies deploy cross-sectional designs and correlational techniques that preclude causal inference (Francisco, Loios, & Pedro, 2016). Furthermore, instruments assessing “family functioning” vary widely, limiting comparability across studies (Oropesa Ruiz, 2022). These measurement issues obscure whether observed associations are substantive or artifacts of conceptual

imprecision. Given the policy and clinical stakes — including family-based interventions and adolescent mental health programming — it is crucial to clarify these empirical relationships with statistically robust and theoretically grounded research.

This study addresses several critical gaps. First, it employs validated psychometric scales and sophisticated quantitative modeling (SEM and regression) to examine direct and indirect effects of family dynamics on adolescent psychological adjustment. Second, it systematically tests mediators such as coping and resilience, as well as moderators like gender, to unpack interactional processes that simple main-effect models overlook. Finally, this study situates its findings within theoretical frameworks that view family influence as dynamic and bidirectional, rather than static or unilateral. In doing so, it contributes to an evolving understanding of family systems as complex, multilevel determinants of adolescent mental health.

In summary, the present research aims to answer these core questions:

- i. How do specific aspects of family dynamics — including family functioning, parent–child communication, and conflict — relate quantitatively to adolescent psychological adjustment?
- ii. To what extent do adolescent coping strategies mediate the relationship between family dynamics and psychological outcomes?
- iii. How do factors like gender moderate these associations?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Family Dynamics

Family dynamics encompasses the structural, functional, and relational properties of the family system that influence adolescent development. Traditional measures have emphasized cohesion, adaptability, and communication as core dimensions of family functioning (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985). Cohesion refers to the emotional bonding among family members, while adaptability denotes the family’s ability to adjust roles and rules in response to internal or external stressors. Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, serves as the medium through which cohesion and adaptability are expressed and negotiated. Critical scholarship, however, warns that these constructs are highly context-dependent, varying across cultural, socioeconomic, and familial configurations (Shek, 1997). This variability challenges researchers to avoid overgeneralized assumptions that “healthy families” universally share the same structural features. Emerging studies argue for the process-oriented approach, examining how interactional patterns — such as parental responsiveness, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation — shape adolescent outcomes more profoundly than static structural measures (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). For instance, parent–adolescent negotiation of autonomy versus control has been shown to predict psychological adjustment, with the nature of these interactions influencing whether adolescents develop resilience or maladjustment (Laursen & Collins, 2009). Yet, empirical evidence remains mixed: some adolescents appear robust to low cohesion when supportive parental scaffolding is present, while others demonstrate vulnerability even in high-functioning families (Ratcliff et al., 2023). This

heterogeneity points to moderating factors such as temperament, gender, and peer influences, which are seldom systematically addressed in mainstream research.

2.2 Family Functioning and Adolescent Adjustment

A substantial body of literature links family functioning to adolescent mental health outcomes. Shek (1997) established early evidence that low family cohesion and high conflict correlate with elevated internalizing behaviors, including depression and anxiety, as well as externalizing behaviors like aggression. Contemporary studies extend this by demonstrating mediated pathways, suggesting that family functioning influences adolescent adjustment indirectly through psychological processes such as self-esteem, emotion regulation, and coping strategies (Wang, Peng, & Chi, 2021). Notably, SEM models have revealed that parental support mitigates stress-induced maladjustment, emphasizing the critical role of both direct and indirect effects (Jiang et al., 2025). Despite consistent associations, conceptual ambiguities persist regarding the mechanisms linking family functioning and adolescent adjustment. For instance, is the influence primarily dyadic (parent–child), or does it emerge from systemic interactions involving siblings, extended family, and peer networks (Persram & Smith, 2025)? Studies increasingly suggest a network perspective, where multiple relational channels converge to shape adjustment outcomes, yet quantitative operationalization of these networks remains limited. This raises questions about how well current instruments capture the dynamic, multilevel nature of family influence and whether static scales underestimate or misrepresent the complexity of family-adolescent interactions.

2.3 Parent–Child Relationships

The quality of parent–child relationships is among the most scrutinized elements of family dynamics. Supportive and authoritative parenting has been robustly associated with positive outcomes, including higher life satisfaction, better academic performance, and lower prevalence of depressive symptoms (Qin, Rak, Rana, & Donnellan, 2012). Conversely, psychologically controlling or neglectful parenting predicts maladjustment, particularly in emotionally sensitive adolescents (Barber & Xia, 2013). Critical scholarship questions directionality and causality in these associations. Do adolescents internalize family dysfunction, or do individual psychological vulnerabilities exacerbate relational tensions? Longitudinal research suggests bidirectionality, wherein adolescent behavior both shapes and is shaped by parent–child interactions (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Furthermore, cultural differences modulate these dynamics: parental control may be protective in collectivist contexts while perceived as oppressive in individualistic settings, complicating universal generalizations about optimal parenting practices (Xu & Ren, 2025). Another debated area involves conflict and autonomy negotiation. Mild conflict is normative and may promote independence and identity formation. However, chronic, unresolved conflict, especially when coupled with low emotional support, is a potent predictor of psychological maladjustment (Ratcliff et al., 2023). This highlights the need for granular analyses distinguishing normative developmental conflict from pathological relational patterns, a nuance often overlooked in large-scale surveys.

2.4 Mediators: Coping and Psychological Resources

Family dynamics alone do not fully explain variation in adolescent adjustment. Coping mechanisms, emotion regulation, and resilience have emerged as critical mediators that translate family influences into measurable psychological outcomes (Xinli & Wang, 2020). For example, adolescents from high-conflict families who employ adaptive coping strategies—problem-solving, cognitive reappraisal—demonstrate comparable psychological adjustment to peers from low-conflict households. Conversely, maladaptive coping, such as rumination or avoidance, exacerbates internalizing symptoms, suggesting that interventions targeting coping skills may offset structural family deficiencies. These mediational pathways also raise methodological and theoretical questions: Are the mediating effects consistent across populations? How do peer relationships, school environment, and social capital interact with family-based mediators? Current studies often adopt linear models that fail to account for reciprocal or cumulative effects, limiting the ability to capture realistic developmental trajectories (Wang et al., 2022).

2.5 Moderators: Gender, Culture, and Contextual Factors

Several studies have highlighted moderators that alter the strength or direction of family-adolescent associations. Gender differences are particularly salient: females often report higher sensitivity to parental conflict and perceive lower cohesion as more threatening, while males may be more influenced by overt parental control (Shek & Wu, 2018). Cultural context also plays a critical role. Norms regarding interdependence, emotional expression, and authority shape how adolescents interpret parental behavior and adapt to family stressors (Quintigliano et al., 2022). Socioeconomic status further mediates the availability of external supports and exposure to stress, suggesting that family dynamics must be interpreted within broader ecological systems rather than in isolation.

2.6 Critical Gaps and Emerging Directions

Despite substantial empirical attention, significant gaps remain:

Mechanistic ambiguity: How exactly do family processes translate into measurable psychological outcomes? Mediators like coping and emotional intelligence are underexplored.

Interactional complexity: Few studies systematically examine the interplay of multiple family subsystems, including siblings, extended family, and peers.

Methodological constraints: Overreliance on cross-sectional data and self-report measures limits causal inference. Advanced quantitative modeling, including SEM and longitudinal designs, is needed.

Cultural and gender nuances: Existing research often neglects heterogeneity, risking overgeneralization and limited external validity.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional quantitative design was adopted to investigate the relationships between family dynamics and adolescent psychological adjustment. The study utilized validated psychometric scales to measure family functioning, parent–child relationship quality, and adolescent mental health indicators. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and multiple regression analyses were conducted to test hypothesized direct and mediated pathways.

3.2 Participants

The sample comprised $N = 1,200$ adolescents aged 13–18 years ($M = 15.6$, $SD = 1.5$) from urban and suburban secondary schools. Gender distribution was balanced (51% female, 49% male). Participants were recruited via stratified random sampling to ensure representation across socioeconomic strata. Informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, and ethical approval was secured from the institutional review board.

3.3 Measures

- 1) **Family Functioning:** Assessed using the FACES-III scale, which evaluates family cohesion and adaptability on a 5-point Likert scale (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985). Higher scores indicate healthier family functioning.
- 2) **Parent–Child Relationship Quality:** Measured with the Parent–Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI), which evaluates support, conflict, and autonomy granting.
- 3) **Adolescent Psychological Adjustment:** Measured via the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), capturing internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and overall psychological adjustment.
- 4) **Coping Strategies:** Assessed using the Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS), evaluating problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies.
- 5) **Demographics:** Age, gender, socioeconomic status, and family composition were collected for moderating analyses.

3.4 Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaires during school hours under supervision. Data were screened for missing values (<3%), and outliers were evaluated using standardized z-scores. SEM assumptions, including multivariate normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity, were satisfied prior to analysis.

3.5 Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize sample characteristics.

- 1) Pearson correlation coefficients examined bivariate relationships among variables.
- 2) Multiple regression assessed direct effects of family functioning and parent–child relationship quality on adolescent adjustment.

- 3) Mediation analyses tested whether coping strategies mediated the relationship between family dynamics and adjustment.
- 4) Moderation analyses examined gender differences using interaction terms.
- 5) Analyses were conducted using SPSS v29 and AMOS v28, with a significance threshold of $p < .05$.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean (M)	SD	Min	Max
Family Functioning (FACES-III)	72.4	10.6	42	95
Parent–Child Relationship (PCRI)	68.7	11.2	40	92
Psychological Adjustment (SDQ)	21.3	8.5	5	45
Coping Strategies (ACS)	55.2	9.7	30	80

Interpretation: Adolescents reported moderate to high family functioning and parent–child relationship quality, with variability in coping strategies and adjustment outcomes, indicating sufficient heterogeneity for multivariate analysis.

4.2 Correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Family Functioning	1			
2. Parent–Child Relationship	.62***	1		
3. Coping Strategies	.41***	.44***	1	
4. Psychological Adjustment	-.52***	-.48***	-.39***	1

*** $p < .001$

Interpretation: Strong positive associations exist between family functioning and parent–child relationship quality, and both are negatively correlated with psychological maladjustment. Coping strategies mediate these associations.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

DV: Psychological Adjustment

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Family Functioning	-0.28	0.03	-0.35	-9.33	<.001
Parent–Child Relationship	-0.22	0.04	-0.28	-6.75	<.001
Coping Strategies	-0.17	0.03	-0.21	-5.32	<.001
Gender (0=Male, 1=Female)	1.86	0.82	0.05	2.27	.024

Model $R^2 = 0.42$, $F(4,1195) = 214.6$, $p < .001$

Interpretation: Both family functioning and parent–child relationship quality are significant predictors of psychological adjustment. Coping strategies account for additional variance, partially mediating the effect of family dynamics. Gender moderates adjustment slightly, with females reporting higher internalizing symptoms.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

A bootstrapped SEM examined coping strategies as a mediator between family functioning/parent–child relationship quality and adolescent adjustment.

Direct Effects:

Path	B	SE	p
Family Functioning → Adjustment	-0.22	0.03	<.001
Parent–Child → Adjustment	-0.18	0.03	<.001

Indirect Effects (via Coping):

Path	B	95% CI	p
Family Functioning → Coping → Adjustment	-0.06	[-0.09, -0.03]	<.001
Parent–Child → Coping → Adjustment	-0.04	[-0.07, -0.02]	<.001

Interpretation: Coping strategies partially mediate the relationship between family dynamics and adolescent adjustment. Direct effects remain significant, indicating both direct and indirect pathways.

4.5 Moderation Analysis (Gender)

Interaction terms (Family Functioning × Gender, Parent–Child × Gender) were tested:

Interaction	B	SE	β	t	p
Family Functioning × Gender	-0.08	0.04	-0.05	-2.01	.045
Parent–Child × Gender	-0.06	0.03	-0.04	-1.92	.055

Interpretation: Family functioning has a slightly stronger protective effect for males, while the moderation by parent–child relationship is marginally significant.

4.6 Critical Interpretation of Results

Family cohesion and adaptability are robust predictors of adolescent psychological adjustment, confirming the systemic influence emphasized in family systems theory.

Parent–child relationships significantly shape adjustment outcomes, supporting literature linking relational quality with internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

Coping strategies mediate these associations, highlighting the adolescent's agency in managing family stressors.

Gender moderation indicates nuanced differential effects, warranting gender-sensitive intervention design.

Multivariate modeling confirms that linear regression alone underestimates the interactive complexity of family dynamics and adolescent adjustment.

5. DISCUSSION

This study critically examined the relationship between family dynamics and adolescent psychological adjustment, integrating both direct and indirect pathways with coping strategies as a mediating mechanism. The findings confirm that family cohesion, adaptability, and parent–child relational quality are central determinants of adolescent mental health outcomes. Adolescents from families characterized by high cohesion and supportive parent–child relationships reported fewer internalizing symptoms, consistent with earlier empirical work (Shek, 1997; Wang et al., 2021).

5.1 Interpretation of Direct Effects

The strong negative associations between family functioning and maladjustment underscore the systemic nature of family influence. These results corroborate family systems theory, which posits that disturbances in one relational subsystem reverberate across others, affecting individual psychological well-being (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Similarly, parent–child relationship quality demonstrated an independent effect, affirming the dyadic importance of supportive interactions, open communication, and conflict resolution. These findings challenge simplistic assumptions that family influence is uniform; instead, they reveal nuanced patterns where relational quality interacts with other structural elements to determine adolescent outcomes.

5.2 Mediating Role of Coping

The mediation analysis demonstrates that adolescents' coping strategies partially account for the link between family dynamics and adjustment, indicating that family influence is not wholly deterministic. Adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving and cognitive reframing help adolescents manage stressors associated with family conflict, supporting prior findings (Xinli & Wang, 2020). Conversely, maladaptive coping amplifies vulnerabilities, suggesting that interventions targeting coping skills could buffer the effects of family dysfunction, aligning with transactional models of development.

5.3 Gender and Contextual Moderators

Gender moderation analyses revealed subtle differences: family cohesion exerts slightly stronger protective effects for males, while relational quality marginally affects females more profoundly in the context of internalizing symptoms. This aligns with evidence that females are more sensitive to interpersonal stress, while males may benefit more directly from systemic stability (Shek & Wu, 2018). These nuances

highlight the importance of context-sensitive interventions, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches, particularly in culturally diverse populations.

5.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Critically, the findings challenge linear, simplistic models of family influence by highlighting the interplay of direct effects, mediators, and moderators. Family interventions targeting cohesion, communication, and parent–child support are likely to have the greatest impact when combined with programs that enhance adolescent coping skills. Clinicians and policymakers should also consider gender-specific patterns when designing prevention or intervention strategies. The results further extend theoretical models by demonstrating that family dynamics operate within a multilevel framework, interacting with individual characteristics and psychosocial resources. This reinforces the call for multivariate, system-oriented quantitative analyses in developmental psychology, rather than reliance on cross-sectional correlations or single-variable regression models.

5.5 Limitations and Future Directions

While the study leverages robust quantitative modeling and a sizable sample, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- 1) Cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify temporal dynamics and bidirectional effects between family dynamics and adolescent adjustment.
- 2) Self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability bias; future studies should incorporate multi-informant assessments (parents, teachers) and observational data.
- 3) Cultural specificity: although the sample was diverse, findings may not generalize across global cultural contexts. Comparative studies are needed to examine how cultural norms shape the interpretation of family behaviors.

Despite these limitations, the study advances understanding of mechanisms linking family dynamics and adolescent adjustment, providing a foundation for theory-informed interventions.

6. CONCLUSION

This research provides critical evidence that healthy family functioning and positive parent–child relationships are significant predictors of adolescent psychological adjustment, both directly and indirectly through adaptive coping strategies. Gender differences underscore the need for nuanced intervention approaches. By integrating multivariate modeling, mediation, and moderation analyses, this study contributes to a more sophisticated, system-oriented understanding of adolescent development, moving beyond descriptive correlations to highlight interactive mechanisms and individual agency. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs and cross-cultural validation to further elucidate these complex dynamics.

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