

The Role of Family Environment in the Psychological Well-being and Emotional Development of Adolescents in a Cross-cultural Context

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Abstract

Parenting style is regarded as the most significant factor in the family process that affects the psychological and emotional development of adolescents. Authoritative parenting features moderate support and positive, warm interactions, which usually lead to positive outcomes for children, such as high self-esteem and psychological well-being. Moreover, positive parenting styles can promote the free expression of emotions and facilitate successful emotion regulation. Since culture defines the value standards of parental parenting behaviors, parenting styles and behaviors may have different effects on children's development in different cultural backgrounds. To this end, attention should be given to adolescent development in diverse cultural contexts. Moreover, current cross-cultural research has focused mainly on the comparison of cultures among different countries, with little mention of urban and rural settings. Future research could explore how different parenting styles influence adolescents' psychological well-being and emotional regulation in rural and urban Chinese settings.

Keywords

family environment, parenting styles, psychological well-being, emotional development, cross-cultural context

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial stage of life that involves numerous physiological, emotional, and psychological changes (Smith, 1997). During this phase, an individual's ability to develop positive and healthy emotional abilities and skills plays an essential role in building interpersonal relationships, dealing with difficulties, achieving academic success, and gaining personal happiness (Stack et al., 2010). According to Gómez-López et al. (2019), psychological well-being is conducive to adolescents' successful and healthy developmental outcomes, and such an impact lasts from childhood to adulthood. According to the 2022 National Depression Blue Book, 95 million people in China have depression, and the detection rate among adolescents of 24.6% demonstrates that depression affects more young individuals as time passes. These statistics highlight the need to improve the adaptive development of adolescents' emotions and mental health, not only to help them achieve a positive and healthy life but also to promote their overall social development.

The family environment has a vital effect on adolescents' psychological and emotional development, with parenting style considered the most significant factor in this context (Shek, 1997). A positive and healthy family environment (warm, supportive parenting and productive parent–child interaction) leads to high self-esteem, happiness, hope, adaptive development, and other positive outcomes (Guedes et al., 2022). Furthermore, parenting styles and behaviours play important roles in children's emotional socialisation (Stack et al., 2010). For example, an authoritative parenting style provides support and care and positively predicts children's favourable emotional function. Conversely, negative, harsh, and authoritarian parenting styles adversely impact children's emotional development (Beck et al., 2004).

Cultural values, beliefs, and social backgrounds also influence parenting practices. Indeed, parents are likely to ensure that their children's development complies with their learned and contextual norms (Bornstein, 2012). Existing cross-cultural studies on parenting have focused primarily on the impact of countries and ethnic groups on parenting styles. For example, Western countries uphold individualistic or independent values, whereas East Asian countries hold collectivist and interdependent values. These differing parenting styles and behaviours affect children's emotional responses, emotion regulation, and psychological development in various ways. Furthermore, given the rapid economic and social changes in China, urban–rural disparities have become more pronounced, highlighting the need to examine the impact of cultural background on adolescents' development (Raj & Raval, 2013). Rural and urban areas differ in lifestyle, educational resources, and social norms, potentially influencing parenting practices and adolescents' emotional and psychological development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Adolescent Development: Psychological and Emotional Aspects

Adolescence, which typically spans ages 11 to 19 years and can be divided into early, middle, and late stages, is a critical developmental stage. It is characterised by significant physical, emotional, psychological, and social changes that have profound and sustained effects on cognitive, emotional, and social development (Choi, 2018).

Adolescents must develop the ability to recognise, express, and regulate their emotions to establish and maintain positive social relationships and actively adapt to social development goals. This emotion regulation not only is a manifestation of individuals' healthy emotional functions but also plays a crucial role in lifelong development. Adolescents must develop the ability to recognise, express, and regulate their emotions (Denham, 2019). Studies have shown that adolescents who develop positive and healthy emotional abilities tend to be happier and perform better academically (Guo et al., 2023).

Psychological well-being is a fundamental indicator of adolescents' ability to cope with life challenges (Ryff, 2017). Self-esteem, an indicator of self-worth, is closely related to life satisfaction and happiness. Longitudinal studies indicate that higher self-esteem predicts better interpersonal relationships, future life success, and a lower risk of depression (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Ryff's (2017) psychological well-being model includes autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

2.2 The Role of the Family Environment in Adolescent Development

Families play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' psychological and emotional development. More specifically, studies indicate that family processes and relationships directly and significantly impact adolescents' well-being and social competence (Peterson, 2005). Highly cohesive and supportive families are associated with higher self-esteem and happiness (Sbicigo & Dell'Aglio, 2012). Conversely, family conflict, which typically induces unfavourable emotions and stress, adversely impacts self-esteem and self-efficacy and is correlated with anxiety and depressive emotions (Paul et al., 2015).

Research on parent–adolescent relations focuses on how parenting styles or parental behaviours influence adolescent development. Baumrind (1991) categorised the most widely known parenting style patterns, including authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian styles. Authoritative parenting, characterised by high

support and positive interaction, is correlated with positive outcomes, such as higher self-esteem and psychological well-being (Francis et al., 2021). In contrast, authoritarian and permissive parenting are associated with adverse consequences, such as low self-esteem and internalisation and externalisation problems (Gracia et al., 2005). Moreover, Authoritative parenting plays a facilitative role in guiding emotional recognition and regulation. Positive parent–child interactions help children understand the appropriate standards for emotional expression and assist in developing advanced emotion regulation skills (Han et al., 2015).

2.3 The Role of Cultural Context in Parenting Style

Parenting has a cultural attribute and is influenced by diverse cultural values. Well-known and often-cited cultural models in psychology include the concepts of individualism and collectivism and the values of independence and interdependence. Individualism and independent values are linked to Western countries, whereas collectivism and interdependent values are associated with Asian societies (Thompson & Virmani, 2010). In individualistic cultures, parents focus on the socialisation goals of independence and autonomy and, correspondingly, use parenting behaviors and practices to achieve these goals. However, in collectivist cultures, they emphasise harmony and collective-interest parenting.

Authoritarian parenting functions differently in different cultures. It helps achieve individual social goals in collectivist cultures, unlike in individualistic contexts. Harsh parenting has a more significantly adverse impact on children from families with independent values (Camras et al., 2017). Moreover, Asian cultures prohibit children from expressing anger and frustration with their elders rather than from supporting and respecting them (Joshi & MacLean, 1994). Similarly, in East Asia, while Singaporean parents uphold both independent and interdependent goals in emotional socialisation, Chinese parents uphold more interdependent goals, which, in turn, have varying impacts on adolescents' emotion regulation strategies (Yeo et al., 2020).

In addition to cultural differences, other factors, such as urban or rural residence and children's gender, significantly affect parenting styles. Urban Chinese parents' concepts and methods differ markedly from those of rural Chinese parents. Parents in urban areas pay more attention to their children's independence and are more lenient than are those in rural areas (Chen & Li, 2012). Furthermore, another recent study demonstrated that urban mothers are more likely than their rural counterparts to express positive emotions (Ding et al., 2021). However, few studies have investigated the psychological and emotional development of urban and rural children. The few studies that do exist are limited by a lack of urban samples (Paul et al., 2015; Zhong et al., 2020).

3. Conclusion

Research on the impact of the family environment on adolescents has focused primarily on parenting styles, revealing both favourable and adverse effects. Specifically, the authoritative parenting style positively predicts a higher level of self-esteem and has a positive effect on adolescents' psychological well-being. An authoritative parenting approach helps children learn to distinguish different emotions, understand the standards for appropriate emotional expression, and develop sophisticated emotional regulation skills.

An increasing number of studies have investigated the impact of parents' parenting styles and behaviours on the development of adolescents in cross-cultural contexts. However, there are still some research limitations. First, existing cross-cultural studies often focus on national and ethnic comparisons, neglecting the differences between urban and rural areas. Given China's vast territory and accelerating urbanisation, urban–rural differences have become prominent. Studying the impacts on adolescents' psychological and emotional development in urban and rural cultural backgrounds can fill the gaps in relevant research. Furthermore, researchers examining parenting differences across cultures have overly used scales and quantitative research methods and neglected qualitative research, which is needed to understand various cultural aspects behind parenting behaviours. Future research could adopt a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research. Integrating these methods can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural beliefs, purposes, and meanings underlying parenting practices.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project on family parenting and child development from the perspective of positive psychology.

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