From Trauma to Growth: Theoretical Pathways of Childhood Adversity's Impact on Adolescents' Emotional Regulation from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore in depth how childhood adversity, especially emotional neglect within the family, influences adolescents' emotional regulation abilities, and proposes repair mechanisms from the perspective of positive psychology. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, the paper reveals the negative impact of emotional neglect on adolescents' emotional recognition and expression abilities, leading to the rigidification of emotional regulation strategies. However, positive psychology offers new theoretical perspectives, such as the PERMA model and psychological resilience theory, which provide pathways for recovery from adversity. External resources such as support from schoolteachers and peers, as well as internal resources such as the development of psychological resilience, are seen as buffering mechanisms against the rigidification of emotional regulation strategies. The paper introduces a "dual-path model" that incorporates elements of positive psychology, emphasizing the role of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement in building adolescents' resilience. Moreover, by enhancing social support and self-efficacy, adolescents can develop cognitive reappraisal abilities to effectively cope with the challenges posed by emotional neglect. The theoretical significance of this paper lies in filling the gap in positive psychology research on childhood adversity, while its practical significance provides family and school-based, strength-based intervention strategies, guiding the construction of healthier emotional support systems and psychological educational environments to help adolescents move from adversity to growth and enhance their emotional regulation abilities.

Keywords: childhood adversity, family emotional neglect, emotional regulation, positive psychology, psychological resilience

1. Introduction

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to various traumatic events or circumstances that individuals undergo before the age of 18, with the most common types of ACEs being physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect [1,2]. In recent years, issues such as family dysfunction and low socioeconomic status have become increasingly prominent. Positive psychology theory suggests that fostering positive traits such as psychological resilience can promote the holistic development of adolescents. Research indicates that positive coping strategies and social support

systems can mitigate the negative effects of adversity [3]. However, existing literature has yet to thoroughly explore how family emotional neglect affects adolescents' emotional regulation mechanisms, particularly among Chinese adolescents. This study aims to construct a "dual-path model" to explore how adolescents can enhance their emotional regulation abilities by optimizing both internal resources and external environments.

Existing research has primarily focused on the direct relationship between adversity and psychological problems, with insufficient depth in the theoretical analysis of repair mechanisms from a positive perspective. The significance of this study lies in investigating the influence of positive psychology in the context of childhood adversity research, especially regarding the impact of family emotional neglect on adolescents' emotional regulation abilities. Theoretically, this study aims to expand the scope of positive psychology, revealing its potential mechanisms in adversity recovery. On a practical level, this study proposes strength-based intervention strategies aimed at promoting adolescents' emotional health and psychological growth. The results of this study will guide families and schools in creating more positive and supportive environments, facilitating adolescents' learning and growth from adversity, and improving their emotional regulation abilities.

This research deepens the application of positive psychology theory in adversity coping, providing a scientific basis for practical interventions and offering new pathways and methods for promoting adolescents' mental health and social adaptability. By combining theoretical analysis with practical guidance, the aim is to establish a bridge for adolescents to transition from adversity to recovery and growth, fostering the comprehensive development of their emotional regulation abilities.

2. How Does Childhood Adversity Affect Adolescents' Emotional Regulation Abilities

2.1. Emotional Neglect and Its Impact

Childhood adversity, as a key risk factor influencing adolescents' psychological and emotional development, has become an important research topic in the field of psychology. Existing studies show that childhood adversity is significantly heterogeneous, encompassing deprivation of material resources (such as nutritional deficiencies and poor living conditions), emotional interaction deficits (such as parent-child attachment disorders), behavioral control imbalances (such as physical abuse), and family emotional neglect (Family Emotional Neglect, FEN). Each type of adversity shapes the individual's inner world in a unique way [4].

Among the various types of adversity, family emotional neglect has attracted significant attention from the academic community due to its prevalence, subtlety, and long-term effects. It is characterized by the failure of parents or individuals in positions of responsibility and trust to meet the child's basic developmental needs for emotional connection, secure attachment, and cognitive stimulation. This neglect manifests in long-term emotional response delays, lack of empathetic interaction, and developmental deficiencies. This parenting style not only directly restricts the socialization of children's emotions [5,6], but may also influence the function regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis through epigenetic mechanisms, increasing susceptibility to physical and mental health issues in adulthood.

It is noteworthy that multiple longitudinal studies have confirmed that emotional neglect has the highest incidence among all types of childhood adversity. However, its clinical identification rate is significantly lower than that of other trauma types ($p < 0.01$). This diagnostic paradox can be attributed to three main factors: first, the symptom representation of emotional neglect has internalized characteristics; second, existing assessment tools lack sensitivity to latent neglect; and third, there is a cognitive bias in social perception that neglect is a form of "inaction and non-harm" [7]. This multidimensional covert nature often leads to the long-term impact of emotional neglect

continuing into adulthood, manifesting as emotional regulation disorders, interpersonal trust issues, and disruptions in self-worth.

2.2. Core Mechanism: Chronic Imbalance of the Stress System

When children are unable to receive emotional support for extended periods, their bodies remain in a state of "chronic stress," which causes dysregulation in the secretion of stress hormones (such as cortisol) at the physiological level. As a result, the brain's "alarm center" (such as the amygdala), which is responsible for processing emotions, becomes overly sensitive, while the "brake system" (such as the prefrontal cortex), which controls rational thinking, becomes weaker. This imbalance makes it easier for children to become overwhelmed by negative emotions and difficult for them to calm down and adjust their emotions. Behaviorally, such adolescents may display tendencies like "suppressing emotions or suddenly exploding." For example, when facing setbacks, they may choose to withdraw into silence or engage in heated arguments over minor issues [7]. Research in positive psychology suggests that external support (such as stable teacher-student relationships) and internal training (such as mindful breathing) can help rebalance the stress system. For instance, 15 minutes of relaxation exercises daily can gradually reduce the overactivity of the "alarm center" and enhance the ability to control emotions rationally.

2.3. Emotional Regulation Failure and Repair

Adolescents who grow up in adversity are more likely to focus on negative information, as their brain's "alertness mode" is excessively reinforced. When they attempt to calm down, they may find that their "toolbox" only contains limited strategies, such as forcibly suppressing emotions, and lack healthier ways of regulation. By providing cognitive flexibility training and empowering social support to rebuild their "emotional toolbox," adolescents can be guided to interpret situations from multiple perspectives. Gradually, this can alter automatic negative thinking patterns, while establishing peer support groups and trusted teacher-student relationships to offer safe spaces for emotional expression. This process helps adolescents practice new regulation strategies, transforming from "passive injury" to "active growth."

3. Theoretical Model Construction: The "Dual-Pathway Model"

3.1. Model Overview

This study proposes the "Dual-Pathway Model" to explain how childhood adversity, particularly emotional neglect, affects adolescents' emotional regulation abilities. It also introduces a recovery mechanism from the perspective of positive psychology. The model comprises two pathways: (1) the internal resource pathway, which emphasizes the development of psychological resilience, the stimulation of positive emotions, and the enhancement of self-efficacy; and (2) the external resource pathway, which focuses on building social support systems, including support from teachers and peers. By integrating both the negative and positive pathways into a unified framework, and incorporating the PERMA model (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment), this approach forms a three-tiered recovery system of "prevention-intervention-consolidation."

3.2. Mechanism Analysis and the Correspondence to the Dual-Pathway Model

3.2.1. Negative Pathway: Family Emotional Neglect → Neuropsychological Mechanism of Emotional Regulation Deficits

Family emotional neglect often leads to insecure attachment styles (avoidant or disorganized), manifesting in a paradoxical attitude of craving yet fearing intimacy. From a neurobiological perspective, prolonged neglect heightens hypervigilance toward emotional cues, reduces gray matter volume in the right anterior prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex, and weakens cognitive reappraisal abilities. As a result, individuals fall into a "silence-suppression" cycle, exhibiting diminished cognitive flexibility. Kumpfer posits that the formation and development of psychological resilience result from the interaction and integration of multiple systems, proposing a personal-process-environment model of resilience. This model includes three key components: environmental characteristics, personal traits, and the reorganization of individual psychological resilience. Therefore, in exploring resilience-based recovery from emotional neglect, a systemic and ecological developmental perspective should be adopted, emphasizing the interactive influence of individuals, families, and society [8]. Correspondingly, the Dual-Pathway Model is divided into:

Internal Resource Pathway – Recovery Targets:

① Cognitive Restructuring (CBT Techniques): Breaking the negative core belief of "My emotions don't matter" and replacing it with a growth-oriented mindset, such as "I need to learn to express my emotions so that others take me seriously." This approach disrupts the vicious cycle of "emotional suppression → behavioral avoidance/extremes → cognitive reinforcement."

② Emotional Recognition Training (IAAA Four-Step Method): Enhancing emotional granularity through labeling exercises. This involves a step-by-step process of Identification → Acceptance → Attribution → Action. For example, when experiencing anxiety, the individual first identifies the emotion ("I feel anxious") instead of suppressing it. Next, they accept it ("This emotion is normal; I acknowledge my emotional changes"), then attribute it ("This anxiety stems from feelings of neglect"), and finally take action (emotion regulation and expressing their needs).

External Resource Pathway – Intervention Measures: Building Alternative Safe Bases: Establishing trust through consistent and responsive interactions with teachers and social support networks.

3.2.2. Positive Pathway: Resource Buffering → Dynamic Process of Strategy Diversification

Deepening the Social Support Theory of External Resource Buffering:

① The Multifaceted Role of School Teachers: Teachers serve as emotional containers, offering emotional validation through listening and empathy, and expressing understanding with phrases like "I understand your frustrations" to the adolescents. They also act as cognitive scaffolds, guiding adolescents in analyzing their emotions over time and understanding the true needs behind conflicts, thus promoting strategy shifts.

② Group Dynamics Effect of Peer Support: On November 8, 2024, the Chinese version of the WHO Guidelines for Promoting Adolescent Mental Health and Preventive Interventions was released in Nanjing. The guidelines highlighted that schools are key venues for addressing adolescent mental health issues. Schools provide a space for adolescents to interact with peers, develop social relationships, and cultivate emotional abilities. Peers can promptly identify and help adolescents cope with risk factors and emerging mental health problems [9]. Adolescents can promote emotional regulation by observing and imitating effective regulation strategies from peers (such as using humor

to ease awkwardness). Social comparison in mutual support groups also helps reduce feelings of loneliness when adolescents realize others share similar struggles.

3.2.3. Neuroconstructive Effects of Positive Emotions

Positive psychology suggests that positive emotions (such as joy, satisfaction, and gratitude) enhance an individual's ability to act and improve the effectiveness of behaviors. According to Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory, studies have shown that when the ratio of positive to negative emotions reaches 3:1, individuals are more likely to recover from trauma [10]. Positive emotions activate the prefrontal cortex through dopamine release, enhancing cognitive flexibility [11]. Correspondingly, in the Dual-Pathway Model:

Internal Resource Pathway – Strategy Deepening:

① Art Therapy: Non-verbal expressions through art forms such as painting and music help release suppressed emotions and activate the right hemisphere's emotional processing areas. Studies have shown that students who undergo art therapy demonstrate increased confidence and ability in communication with others. They are also able to consider problems from multiple dimensions, no longer displaying rigidity in thinking. Some children who were previously reluctant to express themselves are now more willing and proactive in conveying their emotions, gradually opening up to others [12].

② Exercise Intervention: Aerobic exercise enhances emotional regulation self-efficacy. Research shows that exercise (such as skipping or running) significantly improves the emotional regulation self-efficacy of left-behind children (a group prone to emotional neglect in families), enhancing their ability to manage frustration and anger [13]. Aerobic exercise has a significant positive impact on emotional regulation [14].

Expansion of the External Resource Pathway System:

Home-School-Community Collaboration: Collaborative efforts between psychological resource institutions and community centers to provide continuous support. In May 2023, the Ministry of Education and 17 other departments jointly issued the Special Action Plan for Strengthening and Improving Student Mental Health Work in the New Era (2023-2025). The plan emphasized the principle of "systematic governance" in student mental health work, calling for the establishment of a multi-departmental and collaborative mechanism involving schools, families, and society. The focus is on addressing the core factors, key areas, and critical links that influence student mental health, strengthening weaknesses, and reinforcing the overall mental health work system for students [15].

3.3. Theoretical Integration: Constructing the Dual-Pathway Model

3.3.1. The Synergistic Mechanism Between the PERMA Model and the Dual Pathway

The PERMA model, as the core theoretical framework of positive psychology, emphasizes the role of five key elements—Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—in the psychological recovery process from individual trauma. In the dual-pathway model, the elements of PERMA form a dynamic and complementary synergy with both internal and external resource pathways, working together to support the emotional regulation and recovery process in adolescents, as shown in Table 1. Within this synergistic system, the sense of meaning in events becomes the core force driving the recovery process. Taking "meaning" as an example, the internal pathway helps adolescents reconstruct the meaning of adversity through trauma narratives (e.g., "The experience of being neglected made me more independent"), while the external pathway provides a practical context for meaning through activities such as volunteering or

community contributions (e.g., participating in environmental protection activities or caring for vulnerable groups). This enables adolescents to perceive their self-worth through meaningful actions. This internal-external collaboration not only breaks the "victim" narrative but also transforms trauma into a driving force for growth. Neuroscientific research shows that when adolescents gain a sense of meaning through volunteer work, functional connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and limbic system is enhanced, promoting cognitive reappraisal and emotional integration [11]. For example, a teenager involved in animal protection volunteer work might transform feelings of loneliness from family neglect into a motivation to protect vulnerable life forms. By working with peers to rescue animals and raise awareness about protection, they engage in meaningful actions. This process not only brings joy from helping others, generating positive emotions, but also fosters good interpersonal relationships through cooperation and interaction with peers, gaining their recognition and creating a positive feedback loop.

Additionally, the activation of the "Relationships" element in the PERMA model is bidirectional. The internal resource pathway gradually enhances adolescents' willingness to express emotions through self-exposure exercises (e.g., writing emotional diaries), while the external resource pathway constructs supportive relationship networks through peer support groups and family therapy. This "inside-out" interaction model strengthens individuals' social connection abilities and validates their internal emotional needs through external feedback, forming a positive cycle of "expression-acceptance-strengthening." For example, in school psychological drama activities, adolescents express their neglected feelings of loneliness (positive emotional release) through role-playing (engagement), while receiving emotional resonance from peers (interpersonal relationship support), ultimately completing the meaning reconstruction of trauma in group creation (accomplishment).

Table 1: Synergistic Mechanism Between the PERMA Model and Dual Pathway

PERMA Element	Contribution of Internal Resource Pathway	Contribution of External Resource Pathway
Positive Emotion	Gratitude journals, sensory anchoring training	Teacher encouragement, peer affirmation
Engagement	Interest activities (e.g., sports, art)	Club participation, teamwork tasks
Relationships	Self-exposure exercises (e.g., sharing emotional diaries)	Peer support groups, family therapy
Meaning	Trauma narrative reconstruction (e.g., "Neglect made me more independent")	Volunteering, community contributions
Accomplishment	Enhanced self-efficacy (achieving small goals)	Academic progress, social skills certification

3.3.2. Systematic Design of Intervention Strategies

The dynamic interaction model incorporates the negative pathway (emotional neglect → loss of security → emotional regulation defects) and the positive pathway (resource compensation → diversified strategies → emotional regulation optimization), integrating perspectives from neuroscience, developmental psychology, and pedagogy. This results in a three-tiered restoration system: "Prevention-Intervention-Sustaining," as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Three-Stage Restoration System

Level	Objective	Specific Strategies
Prevention	Reduce the incidence of emotional neglect	Parental education courses (e.g., emotional response skills training), community parent-child activities
Intervention	Repair emotional regulation defects	School CBT group counseling, art therapy workshops, peer support groups
Sustaining	Maintain long-term psychological resilience	Regular communication mechanisms between family, school, and community, dynamic tracking of adolescent mental health files

Specifically, the Prevention stage aims to reduce the incidence of emotional neglect through early identification and intervention. Families play a crucial role in this stage. For example, through family education training, parents learn to sensitively detect their children's emotional signals, provide timely and appropriate emotional feedback, and improve the quality of emotional interactions between parents and children, thus reducing the likelihood of emotional neglect from the outset.

The Intervention stage focuses on providing specific strategies and techniques to help adolescents address existing emotional regulation issues. For instance, schools can offer CBT group counseling, where cognitive behavioral therapy helps adolescents identify and challenge negative thought patterns, learning to cope with emotional issues using positive cognitive strategies. Art therapy workshops provide a non-verbal emotional expression channel, allowing adolescents to release suppressed emotions through artistic forms such as painting, music, and dance, thereby activating the right brain's emotional processing area and enhancing their emotional perception and expression abilities. Peer support groups leverage group dynamics, allowing adolescents to share experiences and learn from each other. They observe and imitate effective emotional regulation strategies used by peers, such as using humor to resolve conflicts or rational communication to solve problems, gradually enriching their emotional regulation strategies. The Sustaining stage focuses on providing ongoing support and resources to ensure that adolescents maintain long-term psychological resilience. A regular communication mechanism between the family, school, and community is essential. The three parties maintain close communication, timely share the adolescent's psychological dynamics and behavioral performance, and create a comprehensive support network.

4. Conclusion

4.1. The Perspective of Positive Psychology Offers Possibilities for Adolescents' Emotional Regulation Restoration

Family emotional neglect, as a form of childhood adversity, has a profound impact on adolescents' emotional regulation abilities. Its core feature lies in the long-term indifference of parents or primary caregivers toward their children's emotional needs, which weakens the adolescents' psychological sense of security, thereby hindering the development of emotional expression and regulation. Psychological security, as the foundation of emotional health development, when compromised, leads adolescents to tend toward avoidance or suppression strategies when facing emotional challenges, limiting the healthy development of emotional expression.

Positive psychology provides a new perspective for repairing the harm caused by emotional neglect. This theory emphasizes the role of individual internal resources and external support systems in adversity recovery, viewing adversity as an opportunity for individual growth and the building of

psychological resilience. Psychological resilience is the ability of an individual to recover and grow when facing adversity, and positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (the five elements of the PERMA model) are key resources that promote psychological recovery.

Within the framework of positive psychology, support from school teachers and peers becomes an important buffering mechanism for adolescents' emotional regulation. Positive interactions in the school environment not only compensate for emotional deficiencies in the family but also provide practical guidance, helping adolescents establish healthier emotional regulation mechanisms. Teachers not only impart knowledge but also serve as providers of emotional resonance and cultivators of psychological resilience. Through a supportive learning environment, teachers can encourage students to share their feelings, provide problem-solving strategies, enhance their emotional regulation self-efficacy, and alleviate the negative impacts of adversity.

At the same time, cultivating internal resources is also crucial. Self-efficacy is enhanced through setting and achieving small goals, and is a key factor in adversity recovery. Positive coping strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, encourage individuals to interpret adversity from a more positive perspective, reducing the impact of negative emotions. Additionally, positive emotional regulation strategies such as mindfulness meditation and gratitude exercises can improve emotional regulation abilities and promote the development of psychological resilience.

The "Dual Pathways Model" emphasizes the integrated application of positive psychology elements in adversity recovery. By activating the five elements of the PERMA model and cultivating self-efficacy and positive coping strategies, adolescents can find growth opportunities in adversity, improving their emotional regulation abilities. This model provides comprehensive theoretical guidance for adversity recovery, highlighting the practical value of positive psychology and offering family and school-based intervention strategies grounded in strengths.

In summary, while family emotional neglect harms adolescents' emotional regulation abilities, positive psychology offers a pathway for restoration. By strengthening the five elements of the PERMA model and cultivating internal resources, adolescents can rebuild emotional regulation abilities in adversity, achieving psychological growth and reshaping their path toward healthier, more positive psychological development.

4.2. Future Research Prospects

Future research should deepen the understanding of the mechanisms by which childhood adversity affects adolescents' emotional regulation abilities through interdisciplinary theoretical integration (psychology, education, neuroscience), and design more precise and effective intervention strategies. Additionally, research from a cross-cultural perspective will provide more psychologically attuned intervention strategies for adolescents from different cultural backgrounds around the world.

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