

Interparental Conflict and Adolescent Adjustment: A Systematic Review of Internalizing and Externalizing Pathways

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Abstract. Interparental Conflict (IPC) is an important family variable that affects the psychological adaptation of adolescents. Early studies often equated it with domestic violence or divorce, but recent evidence shows that even daily verbal disputes and emotional apathy can have a profound impact on teenagers. This article conducts a systematic review of relevant empirical research by integrating the cognitive-contextual framework, the emotional security hypothesis, and social learning theory. Research results show that frequent or destructive IPC significantly increases the risk of internalized problems such as anxiety and depression in adolescents, among which children's subjective feelings are more predictive of psychological risks than reports from parents. Longitudinal studies have further found that early and repeated exposure to verbal disputes gradually accumulate effects as the development stage progresses, significantly increasing anxiety levels during school age and adolescence. On the other hand, IPC can also weaken prosocial behavior and increase externalized issues such as aggression and hostility. Its mechanisms of action include the decline of parental emotional warmth, the imitation of negative communication patterns, and the regulation of gender differences and cultural factors. Overall, the impact of IPC does not only depend on whether conflicts exist, but is also closely related to their frequency, intensity and resolution methods. This article finally points out that future research should enhance multi-method measurement, cross-cultural comparison and intervention exploration, with a focus on improving children's emotional security and coping capacities.

Keywords: Interparental Conflict, Adolescent Adjustment, Internalizing and Externalizing Problems, Emotional Security, Cross-Cultural Research

1. Introduction

Globally, adolescent psychological adaptation issues (such as anxiety, depression, aggression and disciplinary violations) have become core topics in public health and educational governance. Interparental conflict (IPC) within the family system has long been proven to be closely related to the negative development of adolescents: not only is the existence of conflict important, but more crucially, the frequency, intensity and handling methods of the conflict [1,2]. The theory of emotional security points out that repeated and destructive conflicts may erode children's sense of

security and increase the risk of anxiety and depression; The cognitive-contextual framework further emphasizes that children's sense of threat and self-blame attribution to conflicts are the key factors for external events to transform into internal distress; Social learning theory reveals that children imitate their parents' hostile interactions and externalize them as aggression and rule-breaking behavior [1,3-5]. Therefore, understanding the impact of IPC from the dual dimensions of "internalization and externalization" not only holds theoretical value but also has practical significance for education and intervention.

Recent empirical studies have deepened the understanding. A three-level meta-analysis (38 studies, 12,380 samples) found that IPC was significantly associated with adolescent anxiety, and overt conflict was the most harmful. The correlation under children's self-assessment is higher, suggesting that subjective feelings are more predictive [6]. In a Japanese preschool sample, a three-wave longitudinal study suggested that children's behavioral dysregulation plays a key role in their response to parental conflict, as it predicted internalizing problems at the third wave, though its association with externalizing problems was not significant [7]. Longitudinal evidence also highlights the early exposure effect: A large-sample study in Australia found that frequent daily verbal disputes in the early stage can predict internalizing problems during school age, while physical conflicts weaken their effect after controlling for mothers' psychological distress and upbringing [8]. Cultural studies have shown that in the context of collectivism, children are more likely to view conflicts as threats to family harmony, thereby intensifying their anxiety experiences [9]. At the mechanism level, poor marital quality can indirectly increase anxiety by enhancing rejection sensitivity (RS) ; Clinical research shows that reducing the perception of conflict threats can effectively enhance the effectiveness of family therapy [10,11]. Recent longitudinal evidence also suggests that there may be a bidirectional association between externalization behavior and family conflicts [12]. In the externalization dimension, the frequency of parental conflicts can predict a decline in prosocial behavior. This effect is entirely mediated by parental emotional warmth and is stronger in mother-child/father-daughter gender matching [13].

Despite this, the existing research still has three types of deficiencies: First, internalization and externalization are often examined separately, lacking parallel comparisons within the same framework; Second, although cultural differences and children's subjective feelings have been mentioned, there is a lack of systematic integration. Thirdly, key variables such as conflict style, exposure time point, and social learning and parenting mediation lack cross-study comparisons [6,8,13]. Therefore, the theme of this article is to systematically review the relationship between IPC exposure and psychological adjustment in adolescents, focusing on parallel evidence in two dimensions: internalized problems (anxiety, depression) and externalized behaviors (aggression, disciplinary violations). Methodologically, this paper integrates meta-analysis, longitudinal and intervention studies, combines representative empirical evidence from Chinese and Western cultural contexts, adopts a narrative systematic review, summarizes the consistency and differences of evidence, and evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of the methodology. The objective is to theoretically integrate a multipath model that combines emotional security, cognitive assessment, rejection sensitivity, social learning, and parenting mediation. Empirically, it presents a dual-channel effect of internalization and externalization in parallel. In application, emphasis is placed on children's subjective feelings and constructive conflict handling as adjustable points, providing practical implications for cross-cultural research and school/family intervention.

2. Introduction to core concepts

Interparental Conflict (IPC) is an important family variable that has long received attention. It not only refers to quarrels or disagreements between parents but is also defined by the academic community as a multi-dimensional interactive process. Early studies often equated it with domestic violence or divorce, but empirical research over the past three decades has gradually pointed out that the harm of IPC is not only present in extreme circumstances, but also repeated verbal disputes and emotional apathy in daily life may have a profound impact on children's psychological development [1,3]. Therefore, the definition of IPC has gradually expanded to include the frequency of conflicts (the number of times conflicts occur), intensity (whether they are accompanied by hostility, emotional outbursts or even physical attacks), content (involving topics such as parenting, economic issues or family responsibilities), and resolution methods (whether it is to reach an agreement through communication or to end with indifference, silence, hostility or even escalation). In terms of classification, researchers usually distinguish between overt conflict (such as public quarrelling, shouting, abusing and even physical violence) and covert conflict (such as cold war, avoidance, satire) [6]. Meanwhile, the research also proposed the concept of cooperative conflict, arguing that if parents can resolve conflicts in a respectful and cooperative manner, they can instead set an example of communication and negotiation for their children, thereby playing a positive role [2,14]. Cross-cultural studies further emphasize the potential benefits of constructive conflicts. In Western families, open communication and negotiation are often regarded as important components of parent-child relationships. In collectivist cultures, the "respect-reconciliation" message conveyed by parents through constructive conflicts can reduce children's concerns about family breakdown, thereby promoting the development of psychological security and emotional regulation [6]. In other words, the nature and quality of IPC are far more predictive of teenagers' mental health than "whether there is a conflict or not".

In the research of children and adolescents' psychology, internalization problems and externalizing problems are two commonly used psychological adaptation indicators. Internalization problems refer to the emotional manifestations where an individual turns stress and conflicts inward, mainly including symptoms such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal, social anxiety and low self-esteem. Such problems are often not easily detected by parents and teachers, but research has found that they are closely related to long-term exposure to IPC. The theory of emotional security points out that frequent and destructive parental conflicts can weaken children's emotional security, keeping them in a state of constant tension and unease, and thereby increasing the risk of anxiety and depression [3].

In contrast, externalization problems are manifested as individuals venting their emotions and stress outward. Common behaviors include aggression, hostility, confrontation, rule-breaking, and conduct disorders [1]. Research shows that the high frequency and intensity of IPC can prompt children to imitate their parents' hostile interaction patterns and exhibit more problem behaviors in their interactions with peers or schools [8]. Furthermore, externalization issues not only undermine parent-child and peer relationships but may also be associated with poor academic performance, substance abuse, and violence in future intimate relationships [2]. More importantly, persistent aggressive and antisocial behaviors can seriously undermine the social adaptability of children and adolescents. For instance, aggressive behavior not only may lead to interpersonal conflicts and peer exclusion, but also trigger classroom discipline issues, thereby affecting academic performance and a sense of belonging to the school [5]. It can be seen from this that internalization and externalization issues constitute the two core dimensions for understanding the impact of IPC on the psychological adaptation of adolescents.

3. IPC exposure and internalizing problems

When exploring the relationship between IPC and psychological adaptation in adolescents, a large number of studies have consistently pointed out that exposure to parental conflicts significantly increases the risk of internalized problems such as anxiety in adolescents. This effect is not only manifested in extreme violent conflicts, but also in daily verbal disputes or emotionally indifferent situations. In addition, children of different age groups exhibit different anxiety symptoms when facing conflicts: children before puberty is more likely to exhibit separation anxiety or attachment restlessness, while those entering puberty are more likely to present with generalized anxiety, social anxiety and other problems [2,3,15]. Longitudinal studies also show that children who were repeatedly exposed to IPC in the early stage experienced significantly higher levels of anxiety during adolescence than the control group, indicating that the cumulative effect of conflict intensifies with the stage of development [8]. This ages difference suggests that children's responses to IPC not only depend on the nature of the conflict itself, but are also regulated by their levels of cognitive and emotional development.

A three-tier meta-analysis covering 38 studies and 12,380 adolescents provided robust quantitative evidence for this conclusion [6]. The results showed that there was a significant positive correlation between IPC and adolescent anxiety ($r = 0.170$, $p < 0.001$). Further analysis reveals that this relationship is most significant when parents use explicit conflict styles ($r = 0.159$), while the relationship between cooperative conflict styles and anxiety can almost be ignored ($r = 0.031$). More notably, when conflicts were reported by children themselves, the correlation between IPC and anxiety was stronger ($r = 0.239$), significantly higher than that reported by parents ($r = 0.076$). This result indicates that children's subjective feelings are more capable of predicting their psychological risks than parents' self-reports [1]. This not only reminds researchers to pay more attention to children's self-perception when designing measurement tools, but also suggests that clinical interventions should be adjusted in a targeted manner from the perspective of children. In other words, children's self-reports can more directly reveal their true psychological states and inner experiences. In contrast, parents' reports may underestimate the severity of the problem due to defense, bias or cognitive blind spots.

Longitudinal evidence also reinforces the impact of IPC exposure on internalization issues. A large-scale longitudinal sample based on Australia ($N = 3,696$), which tracked children from 0-1 years old to 10-11 years old, found that even daily verbal disputes, if repeatedly exposed in the early stage of growth, would significantly increase internalization problems during school age [8]. Contrary to intuition, the effect of physical conflict weakens or even disappears after controlling for the mother's psychological distress and parenting style. This indicates that compared with occasional intense conflicts, verbal conflicts that occur repeatedly on a daily basis are more destructive in the long term. The methodological advantage of longitudinal studies lies in their ability to track the changes of variables over time, reducing the common causal inversion problem in cross-sectional studies, and thus providing more powerful support for the causal effect of IPC on internalization issues.

Also, according to the assumptions of the emotional security hypothesis, repeated verbal arguments will keep undermining the emotional security of children and place them in the long-term sense of threat and uncertainty. It is this instability in the emotional environment that is more likely to precipitate the internalized problems including anxiety and withdrawal. Additional attention should be paid to cultural behaviors: Within the framework of the collectivistic culture, physical conflicts within their families can be avoided or hidden on purpose to preserve their family image and peace. That is why verbal arguments, cold wars or emotional avoidance are the most frequent

and persistent conflict situations among children, and their long-term effects on psychological development can be even more important.

The research by Wang et al. used both cognitive-contextual framework and the emotional security hypothesis to examine the functions of IPC perception, cognitive assessment and emotional security in adolescent anxiety within the Chinese setting [9]. Research results reveal that parental conflict perception does not directly translate into depressive and social anxiety, but instead has an indirect relationship with psychological adaptation of adolescents via the mediation of "cognitive assessment (threat, self-blame) - emotional insecurity. This finding augurs well with Western studies, which point towards the fact that in collectivist societies, people tend to perceive conflict in the sense of endangering the overall well-being of the family thus exacerbating their anxiety levels. In the classic Chinese culture, in particular, family harmony is perceived as one of the paramount values. As such, children will magnify the experience of insecurity and danger it involves when this harmony is disrupted and therefore, they are likely to experience anxiety reactions.

Moreover, experimental and clinical research studies have shown the mediating actions through which interparental conflict (IPC) exposure influences anxiety. In the article by Liu et al., it was revealed that, the poor quality of marital relationships has an indirect effect of increasing anxiety among children through amplifying their rejection sensitivity (RS) [10]. RS is a mental inclination, i.e. over adaptation and anticipated rejection by the individual during social interaction. Not only does this heighten anxiety, but it also promotes social withdrawal and problems with interpersonal communication, and teenagers thus face more problems with adjusting to peer relationships and in the larger social world. These results imply that IPC effect on anxiety is not only the direct effect of the external family dynamics but also preserved by inner cognitive development processes of children. Meanwhile, the study by ZHU-Li et al., published in a clinical study, found that the perception of conflict intensity and danger in adolescents substantially predetermined the level of anxiety, and family therapy is effective in minimizing this impact [11]. Experimental and clinical designs are in a better position to prove the causal links between variables as compared to cross-sectional designs which use self-report questionnaires. This further offers stronger support in the understanding of the mechanisms through which IPC is associated with adolescent anxiety as well as provides further support of the fact that subjective perception is an important entry point to interventions aimed at addressing the IPC anxiety relationship.

Finally, the similarity of the studies is that the frequent or destructive exposure of children to the conflicts between their parents or subjective feelings of children are significant predictors of anxiety symptoms among adolescents. The variations lie in the focus on the mechanism level: in the study by Ran et al. the emphasis is put on the style of conflict, in the study by Westrupp et al. the focus is made on the long-term effects of daily verbal conflicts and in the studies by Wang et al., and Liu et al. the focus is made on the mediating role of cognitive and emotional mechanisms [6,8-10]. The limitations of the research are only self-assessment questionnaires, inadequate causal inferences, and a small amount of cross-cultural and longitudinal studies. Future intervention and studies must focus more on regulatory techniques of the subjective perception of children, which include decreasing the threat of anxiety because of conflicts by improving their emotional security and cognitive re-evaluation skills.

4. IPC exposure and externalization behavior issues

Compared with internalized issues such as anxiety, there are relatively fewer studies on the externalized behaviors of IPC. However, existing evidence shows that frequent exposure to parental

conflicts not only weakens prosocial behaviors in adolescents but also increases the risk of externalized problems such as aggression and confrontation.

This mechanism was clearly shown in a longitudinal study on German pairfam data ($N = 1,157$) [13]. The study established that a rise in the rate of parental conflicts was a significant predictor of a drop in prosocial behavior in children ($b = -0.052$, $p < 001$) which was completely mediated by the level of emotional warmth of parents. Stated differently, it is also true that frequent conflicts erode the positive responses and emotional investment of parents with their children and undermine the likelihood of their children exhibiting pro social behaviors of helping and understanding. In more specific results, the effects of negative parental communication are stronger in gender matched situations: mothers negative communication is more likely to raise the peer problems in boys whereas when a father communicated negatively, it has a more devastating impact on girls. It means that the children of the opposite sex react to their parents differently and gender roles can strengthen or diminish the intensity of the conflicts in the relations between parents and children.

Recent research also indicates that children who are exposed to daily verbal conflicts at an early stage and continuously are more likely to exhibit externalized behaviors such as aggression, confrontation, and disobedience in their subsequent development [8]. Corresponding to Hess's study, he further emphasizes that compared with occasional physical conflicts, repeated verbal disputes have a more significant predictive effect on externalization problems [13]. This contrasts with the traditional research that overly emphasizes extreme conflicts, highlighting the importance of "everyday conflicts" in predicting long-term psychological adaptation.

In addition to the emotional security hypothesis and the cognitive-situation model, social learning theory also provides a key explanatory path for the relationship between IPC and externalized behavior. According to Bandura's study, children learn social behavior by observing and imitating the way their parents interact during conflicts [4]. Review studies also provide theoretical support. Harold and Sellers's study pointed out that destructive IPC can reduce the quality of parenting through the "emotional spillover" effect, such as reducing supervision and consistent discipline, thereby indirectly increasing externalized behavior. If parents frequently resort to abuse, threats, violence or avoidance, children will not only view these patterns as feasible means to handle conflicts, but may also replicate these aggressive and confrontational behaviors in interactions with peers or teachers [2]. In this process, parents' interaction patterns not only shape their children's direct coping styles but may also amplify their effects through peer influence mechanisms: when children interact with their peers, they tend to transfer and reinforce these negative patterns, thereby leading to broader interpersonal conflicts and social adaptation difficulties. Wang et al.'s research also indicates that when teenagers perceive their parents' destructive conflicts, they tend to form negative attributions and exhibit more hostility and avoidance in social interactions, further exacerbating the externalization problem [9]. More importantly, this kind of interaction pattern formed through observational learning may have an intergenerational transmission effect. After children grow into parents, they may continue similar aggressive and avoidant coping patterns, thus causing destructive family interactions to repeat across generations. This indicates that the impact of the externalization of IPC is not only the result of weakened emotional security, but also stems from the negative conflict coping strategies that children have acquired during their social learning process.

Overall, existing research has revealed the dual destructive effects of IPC on prosocial behavior and externalization issues. Longitudinal data indicate that an increase in the frequency of parental conflicts can predict a decline in children's prosocial behavior levels, and this relationship is entirely mediated by parental parenting behaviors, which is a novel finding [13]. For instance, when parents

frequently quarrel, their responses and emotional investment in their children decrease, ultimately leading to children showing less helpful or understanding behaviors. The research also suggests that the role of parent-child gender matching in IPC cannot be ignored, which may explain the gender differences in some externalization problems among adolescents. Meanwhile, social learning theory reveals the "demonstration effect" of destructive conflicts and emphasizes the crucial role of the imitation mechanism in externalizing problems. However, the current research still has some deficiencies. For instance, the samples are mostly limited to two-parent families, which restricts the promotion to single-parent or reconstituted families. Furthermore, the measurement tools for prosocial behavior are still limited, and future research needs to develop more refined and cross-cultural applicable measurement methods. For instance, in Chinese research, some scales focus on collective honor and compliance with rules, while in Western research, prosocial studies place more emphasis on individual autonomous helping or voluntary behaviors. This suggests that future research should not only improve the precision of tools but also clarify the significance of cross-cultural comparisons, as the standards and manifestations of "prosocial" may vary in different cultural contexts.

5. Discussion and suggestion

Existing research consistently indicates that the negative impact of parental conflict (IPC) on adolescent adaptation mainly unfolds through two pathways: internalization and externalization. In terms of internalization, impaired emotional safety, threat perception, self-blame attribution, and rejection sensitivity are key mechanisms [3,9,10]. Longitudinal studies have found that early repeated exposure to daily verbal conflicts significantly predicts anxiety and withdrawal during school age, and children's subjective feelings are more predictive of anxiety levels than parents' reports [6,8].

Externalized, IPC can weaken parents' emotional warmth and consistent discipline, leading to aggressive, hostile and confrontational behaviors [2,13]. Social learning theory suggests that children transform their parents' hostile interactions into problem behaviors among peers or at school by imitating them [4,5]. The research also found that negative communication from mothers is more harmful to boys, while that from fathers has a more significant impact on girls [13]. In addition, cultural background also plays a moderating role: in collectivist cultures, conflicts are more likely to be regarded as a threat to family stability, intensifying anxiety experiences [9]. Clinical evidence shows that family therapy can effectively alleviate adolescents' perception of conflict threats and anxiety levels, suggesting that intervention should emphasize the reconstruction of emotional security [11].

Based on these findings, intervention needs to be carried out at three levels: family, school/community and policy. At the family level, parents should learn to communicate constructively, avoid verbal attacks and belittling, and resolve differences through consultation to reduce children's sense of threat and set a good example [2,14]. At the same time, maintain emotional warmth and consistent discipline, as their absence will completely mediate the relationship between IPC and the decline in prosocial behavior; At the school and community levels, social-emotional learning (SEL) programs can enhance children's emotional regulation and nonviolent communication, reduce externalization problems and strengthen prosocial behaviors [13,16]. Schools should also incorporate IPC perceptual and emotional security indicators into mental health screenings to facilitate the early identification of high-risk individuals; At the policy level, conflict management and parenting education should be integrated into family education and marriage courses, and stratified intervention should be implemented among high-risk groups [2,6].

Cross-cultural research suggests that collectivist cultures should emphasize mediation within the framework of family harmony, while individualistic cultures place more emphasis on children's autonomy and expression [9]. In conclusion, the impact of IPC on the psychological development of teenagers is multi-level and multi-mechanism. Only through the multi-dimensional collaboration of families, schools and policies can its negative effects be effectively alleviated and the healthy growth of teenagers be promoted.

Although this review provides important insights, there are still several limitations. To begin with, the vast majority of the studies included in it was largely based on self-reported questionnaires to parents or children, which are susceptible to reporting bias [6-11,13]. Secondly, most of the existing evidence consists of correlational studies, with relatively few cross-cultural and longitudinal designs [7-9,12]. This not only constrains causal inference between parental conflict (IPC) and the adaptation of the adolescent, but also, to some extent, compromises the validity of the research findings in various cultural and developmental settings. Finally, this review mainly focuses on indicators such as anxiety, depression, aggression and prosocial behavior, while offering limited examinations of other important developmental outcomes such as academic achievement and long-term intimate relationships [2,5,16].

6. Conclusion

This article reviews the impact of parental conflict (IPC) on the psychological adaptation of adolescents, with a focus on internalization issues (anxiety, depression, withdrawal) and externalization issues (aggression, hostility, disciplinary violations). Research shows that the frequency, intensity and solutions of IPC, as well as children's subjective feelings and cultural background, are key factors in predicting psychological adaptation. The emotional security hypothesis, cognitive-situation model, and social learning theory jointly reveal how conflict functions by weakening emotional security, reinforcing threat perception and self-blame attribution, reducing parental emotional warmth, and demonstrating hostile behavior.

Existing evidence indicates that early and sustained exposure to destructive conflicts significantly increases anxiety and externalization problems among adolescents, while constructive conflicts may play a positive role. Cross-cultural research further indicates that in collectivist cultures, conflicts are more likely to be regarded as a threat to family harmony, thereby magnifying their negative impacts. Based on this, this paper proposes multi-level intervention suggestions: constructive communication and emotional support should be promoted in families, schools and communities should strengthen social and emotional learning and early identification, and at the policy level, parent education and culturally sensitive intervention should be promoted.

Overall, understanding the multi-dimensional impact of IPC not only broadens the theoretical perspective but also provides important inspirations for promoting the mental health and social adaptation of teenagers.

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