

# The relationship between parental psychological control and social avoidance: the mediating role of parent-child relationship

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**Keywords:** psychological control, social avoidance, parent-child relationship, mediating role, adolescent development

**Abstract:** The current research has investigated the relationship of adolescent social avoidance with parental psychological control, paying particular attention to the mediating role of the parent-child relationship in this relationship. The results from a questionnaire survey among 300 middle school students and their parents prove that the parents' psychological control behavior is significantly positively correlated with the social avoidance tendency of adolescents, meaning that the more obvious or intense the parental control behaviors, the more obvious the social avoiding of adolescents will be. It is also discovered that the parent-child relationship has played a partially mediating role between psychological control and social avoidance; that is, the higher the quality of the parent-child relationship, the less the negative impact of psychological control on social avoidance. This conclusion mainly emphasizes the important function of the parent-child relationship in family education and adolescent social adaptation. The findings from the research could be a way to understand better how family factors relate to adolescents' social behavior; at the same time, it will support theoretical improvements in family education methods and enhance adolescents' social skills.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research background and importance

With the development of social stays, and increase in life pressure, adolescents' mental health problems gradually became a socially relevant issue. Social avoidance belongs to common psychological problems in adolescents' life and is paramount in revealing their social adaptability, hence having a great influence on future career development and interpersonal relationships [1]. Previous studies have found that family environment has some important impacts on the psychological development of adolescents, especially on the parenting style and behavior of parents, which might directly or indirectly affect the social behavior of adolescents [2]. Among family factors, parental psychological control behavior was proved to be tightly related to different types of adolescent psychological problems, notoriously including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, meaning the realization of goals through manipulating and controlling children's thoughts and emotions. Although a host of studies have looked into the relationships between parental psychological control and adolescent mental health, relatively few studies conducted this research on parental psychological control and adolescent social avoidance [3].

In recent years, the in-depth study of the role of parent-child relationship in adolescent mental health development has revealed increasingly sufficient evidence that good parent-child relationships could mitigate to a large extent the adverse impact of family-related unfavorable factors on adolescents [4]. This quality of relationships with their parents besides being important for adolescents' performance regarding emotional and behavioral problems, may also play a mediating role between parental psychological control and social avoidance. Hence, the mediating role that a parent-child relationship would play in the relationship between parental psychological control and adolescent social avoidance needs to be investigated to further elucidate this intricate psychological mechanism and provide theoretical support for improving family education methods to enhance adolescents' social adaptability.

## **1.2 Research objectives**

The present study shall seek to evaluate the current relationship between parental psychological control of adolescents in general and social avoidance; it pays special emphasis on examining the mediating role of the parent-child relationship in that relation. Some key issues to be basically covered by this paper will include the following: firstly, whether parental psychological control behavior is related very significantly to adolescent social avoidance; secondly, whether the quality of the relationship between parent and child could mediate this relationship or, in other words, whether improving the quality of the relationship between them can mitigate the negative effect of parental psychological control on adolescent social avoidance. Key issues such as these results emanate from verifying a questionnaire survey among 300 middle school students along with their parents. The current research findings will provide a new perspective of understanding regarding family factors in the social behavior of adolescents and provide empirical support to improve family education and adolescent social ability.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Related research on psychological control**

Psychological control, as a parenting style, has attracted widespread attention in recent years. The association between psychological control and adolescent mental health problems has been verified in many studies [5]. For example, Stone et al. (2013) found that parents' use of emotional manipulation, guilt and threats to influence their children's thoughts and behaviors may lead to depression, anxiety and low self-esteem in adolescents during their development [6]. Psychological control not only has adverse effects on individual emotional regulation, but may also have a profound impact on adolescents' social cognition and behavior. Although the negative impact of psychological control has been widely recognized, research on its specific mechanism still needs to be further explored. In particular, how psychological control indirectly leads to adolescent social problems by affecting the quality of parent-child relationships has been an important research direction in recent years [7]. Understanding this mechanism is of great significance for designing more effective family education intervention measures.

### **2.2 Related research on social avoidance**

Social avoidance, as a typical social behavior problem, is common among adolescents. Studies have shown that social avoidance is not only related to an individual's social skills, but may also be affected by the family environment and individual psychological state [8]. Clark and Wells (1995) proposed that social avoidance often stems from an individual's excessive negative cognition and self-focus on social situations, which may further lead to a vicious cycle of social isolation and psychological problems [9]. In addition, studies have pointed out that family parenting style, especially parental psychological control behavior, is significantly associated with adolescent social avoidance [10]. Specifically, parents' high-pressure control and emotional manipulation may make adolescents feel insecure in social interactions, and thus more inclined to avoid social interactions. Understanding the multiple influencing factors of social avoidance is crucial for developing targeted psychological intervention measures.

### **2.3 Related research on parent-child relationship**

As an important factor in adolescent psychological development and behavioral performance, parent-child relationship has always been one of the core topics of psychological research. Studies have shown that a good parent-child relationship can effectively alleviate adolescent psychological stress and promote the development of their social adaptability [11]. For example, Smetana et al. (2005) found that high-quality parent-child communication and emotional connection help adolescents maintain a positive attitude and behavior when facing life pressure [12]. In addition, the quality of parent-child relationship has also been shown to play a mediating role in various

psychological and behavioral problems. Specifically for this research topic, parent-child relationship is believed to play a moderating or mediating role between parental psychological control and adolescent social avoidance, that is, a good parent-child relationship can partially offset the negative impact of psychological control [13]. These findings provide important theoretical basis for understanding the role of parent-child relationships in adolescent development.

### **3. Theoretical Basis and Hypothesis**

#### **3.1 Theory of the relationship between psychological control and social avoidance**

It is that method of education by which parents can manipulate their children's emotions and behaviors about their targets. It is usually manifested as emotional deprivation, over-interference, and excessive mental pressure on children. The control behavior may impede the sound development of adolescent autonomy, leading to internal insecurity with low self-esteem, thus showing avoidance in social interactions. It means that if the basic psychological needs of a person are not satisfied according to the self-determination theory, then it is easy to induce a series of undesirable psychological and behavioral reactions. Under this kind of psychological control from parents, this research holds that adolescents will undermine their self-efficacy and autonomy, feel more anxious before social situations, uneasy during social interaction, and therefore choose to avoid it. Therefore, there may be a direct positive relationship between psychological control and social avoidance.

#### **3.2 The role of parent-child relationship in the relationship between psychological control and social avoidance**

The quality of the parent-child relationship forms a vital component in family interaction. A good parent-child relationship can positively influence adolescents' mental health and social adaptability. It is noticed that parental psychological control may have negative effects on adolescents' social behavior; however, quality in the parent-child relationship might play a buffering role herein. According to Family Systems Theory, interaction is the real key to the psychological and behavioral development of each member in the family. In most cases, the higher quality of the relationship between a parent and his or her child is distinguished by better communication, emotional support, and mutual understanding. These positive interactions help adolescents reduce their negative reactions to social situations when facing parental control behaviors. In addition, a good parent-child relationship can enhance adolescents' self-worth and emotional stability, further reducing social avoidance caused by psychological control. Therefore, the parent-child relationship may play a mediating role between psychological control and social avoidance. By improving the parent-child relationship, the negative impact of psychological control on social avoidance can be weakened.

#### **3.3 Research Hypothesis**

The latter theories and literature review can thus derive the following hypotheses: First, hypothesis 1: Paternal psychological control behavior is significantly positively related to adolescent social avoidance. That is to say, the more obvious the parental control behavior, the tendency of the teenager towards social avoidance will become clearer. Hypothesis 2: The parent-child relationship has a partially mediating function in the psychological control and social avoidance. That is to say, higher quality of the parent-child relationship may ease the negative effect of psychological control on social avoidance. This hypothesis aims to explore the moderating effect of the parent-child relationship as a mediating variable and verify its mechanism of action between psychological control and adolescent social behavior. By testing these hypotheses, this study hopes to reveal the deep connection between family education and adolescent social adaptation, and provide theoretical support for family education intervention and policy formulation.

## 4. Research Design

### 4.1 Questionnaire Design and Variable Definition

The core variables of this study include psychological control, social avoidance, and parent-child relationship. In order to measure these variables, we used mature scales and revised them appropriately to ensure that they are applicable to the specific context of this study.

① Psychological Control: The Psychological Control Scale developed by Barber et al. (1994) was used, which contains 8 items and uses Likert 5-level scoring (1=completely disagree, 5=completely agree).

② Social Avoidance: The Social Avoidance and Distress Scale developed by Watson and Friend (1969) was used, which includes 28 items and also uses Likert 5-level scoring.

③ Parent-child relationship: The Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI) was used, which contains 24 items and is divided into multiple dimensions, such as intimacy, conflict, communication, etc., and also uses Likert 5-level scoring.

The total score of each scale is calculated by the mean of the scores of each item. The formula is as follows:

$$\text{Total Score} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \text{Item Score}_i}{n} \quad (1)$$

Among them, Total Score is the total score of the scale, Item Score<sub>*i*</sub> is the score of the *i* th item, and *n* is the total number of items.

### 4.2 Sample selection and questionnaire distribution

This study adopted a random sampling method and selected 300 adolescent middle school students and their parents as the research sample. The samples were all from medium-sized middle schools in a province or city in eastern China. The sample distribution was relatively balanced, covering students of different genders, grades and family backgrounds.

The questionnaire was distributed in a combination of online and offline methods. In terms of online questionnaire distribution, the school's education platform was used to send the questionnaire link; in terms of offline distribution, the research team personally went to the school to distribute paper questionnaires, and entered and cleaned the data after collection.

In order to ensure the validity of the data, attention checks were set up, such as "Please select 'completely agree' here" to screen out samples that did not answer seriously. In addition, in order to protect the privacy of the respondents, all questionnaires were filled out anonymously.

### 4.3 Data collection and analysis methods

After data collection, the data was first cleaned and incomplete or significantly abnormal questionnaires were removed. Then, the internal consistency of each variable was tested, and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to measure the reliability of each scale.

The Cronbach's Alpha formula is as follows:

$$\alpha = \frac{N \cdot \bar{c}}{\bar{v} + (N - 1) \cdot \bar{c}} \quad (2)$$

Among them,  $\alpha$  is Cronbach's Alpha coefficient,  $N$  is the number of items,  $\bar{c}$  is the average covariance between items, and  $\bar{v}$  is the average variance of items.

In terms of data analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis are mainly used to verify the hypothesis. Descriptive statistics are used to understand the basic situation of the sample, such as gender, age, family background, etc. Correlation analysis is used to explore the simple correlation between psychological control, social avoidance and parent-child relationship. Regression analysis is used to test the mediating effect of parent-child relationship between psychological control and social avoidance.

Specifically, the mediation effect test adopts the three-step method of Baron and Kenny (1986).

First, test the direct effect of the independent variable (psychological control) on the dependent variable (social avoidance); second, test the effect of the independent variable on the mediating variable (parent-child relationship); finally, under the condition of controlling the mediating variable, test whether the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is significantly weakened. The data analysis results are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1:

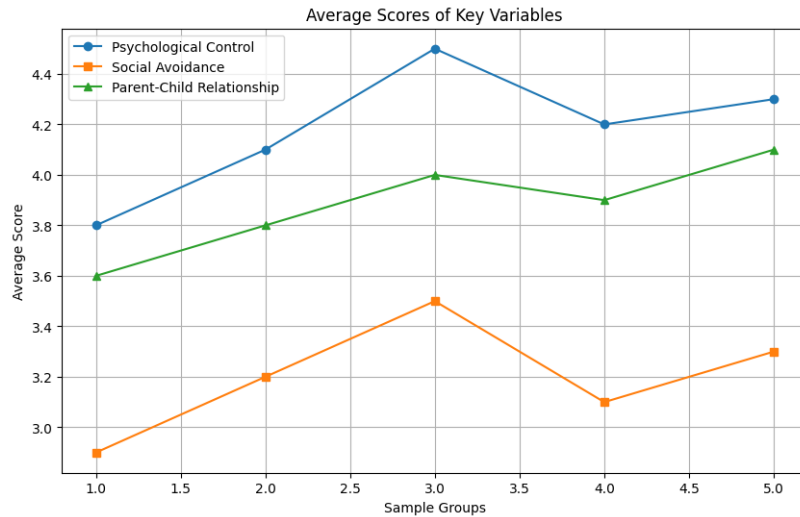


Figure 1: Average Scores of Key Variables

Figure 1 shows the average scores of psychological control, social avoidance, and parent-child relationship in different sample groups. The scores of psychological control were high in all sample groups, indicating that the psychological control behaviors of parents in the sample were common and strong. The scores of social avoidance were relatively low, indicating that the students' social avoidance tendency was not significant. The parent-child relationship scores were at a medium-to-high level, suggesting that in these families, despite the existence of certain psychological control behaviors, the parent-child relationship still maintained a relatively positive state. This phenomenon provides preliminary support for the hypothesized mediating effect, indicating that the parent-child relationship may play a certain buffering effect between psychological control and social avoidance.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Psychological Control	4.18	0.63	0.82
Social Avoidance	3.22	0.74	0.87
Parent-Child Relationship	3.88	0.58	0.85

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and reliability analysis of psychological control, social avoidance, and parent-child relationship. The mean of psychological control is 4.18, the standard deviation is 0.63, and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is 0.82, indicating that the scale has good internal consistency in this study and that psychological control is relatively common in the sample. The mean of social avoidance is 3.22, the standard deviation is 0.74, and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is 0.87, indicating that social avoidance is at a medium level in the sample and the scale reliability is high. The mean of parent-child relationship is 3.88, the standard deviation is 0.58, and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is 0.85, indicating that the parent-child relationship scale also has good measurement consistency.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between parental psychological control and adolescent social avoidance, and further examined the mediating role of parent-child relationship in this relationship. Through a questionnaire survey of middle school students and their parents, the results showed that there was a significant positive correlation between parental psychological control behavior and

adolescent social avoidance, that is, the higher the degree of parental psychological control, the more obvious the tendency of social avoidance shown by adolescents. In addition, the study found that the parent-child relationship played a partial mediating role in this relationship, and the improvement of the quality of parent-child relationship could weaken the negative impact of psychological control on social avoidance to a certain extent. This conclusion supports the hypothesis of this study, indicating that the parent-child relationship plays an important moderating role in the impact of psychological control on adolescent social behavior, and emphasizes the key role of family relationship quality in adolescent social adaptation.

## 6. Research Limitations

Although this study has reached certain conclusions, there are still some limitations that need attention. First, the cross-sectional questionnaire survey method used in the study can only capture the phenomenon at a specific time point and cannot reveal the dynamic process of causal relationship, which may limit the generalizability of the conclusion. Second, the sample is limited to middle school students in eastern China, and the sample representativeness is limited, which cannot fully reflect the situation in other regions or cultural backgrounds. In addition, this study relied on self-report data collection methods, which may be affected by the social desirability effect, resulting in a deviation in the authenticity of the answers. Finally, although this study examined the mediating role of parent-child relationships, it failed to explore other possible mediating or moderating variables, such as individual self-esteem or social support, which may also have an important impact on the relationship between psychological control and social avoidance.

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