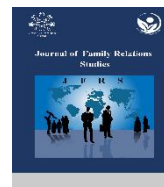




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## Research Paper

# I am living in a different world: Adolescents' Behavioral Patterns in Facing Family Challenges



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## Key words:

Adolescents, Family challenges, Parents

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study aimed to investigate adolescents' behavioral patterns when facing family challenges.

**Methods:** For the present research, a qualitative and grounded theory approach was used. The research population consisted of all female adolescents aged 14 to 18 in Tehran who were studying in the academic year 2023. The data were collected and saturated through semi-structured interviews with 17 adolescents selected via purposive and snowball sampling.

**Results:** The results extracted the 53 open codes, 11 axial codes, and 5 selective codes from interviews with participants. The findings showed that "extreme parental concerns," "ideological disagreement," and "the imposition of strict restrictions" were the main family challenges experienced by adolescents. Moreover, efficient and inefficient coping strategies were the most frequent strategies adopted by adolescents when facing family challenges. Finally, intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences were the main consequences of adolescents' behavioral patterns in facing family challenges.

**Conclusion:** Knowing the behavioral patterns of teenagers when facing family challenges can help provide family counseling services and raise awareness of the developmental characteristics of teenagers.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescents undergo various physical, psychological, and social changes, and they are often at risk of getting involved in social problems with those around them. One of the causes of the social problems faced by adolescents is interactions with parents and family members (Pauzi et al., 2023). Adolescent family conflicts are associated with dysfunctional relationship patterns in emerging adulthood (Heinze et al., 2020). Globally, about 1.2 billion adolescents (10-19 years old) account for 16% of

the world population, 90% of whom live in low- and middle-income countries, especially in Asia and Africa (Byansi et al., 2023). Some important factors underlying the development of mental disorders in adolescents probably exist in the context of the family, because the family is one of the most important contexts for the development of mental health outcomes in adolescents (Tian & Li, 2005; Javdan, 2022). The family is a vital environment for individual growth (Thariq, 2018),

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especially for high school students who experience developmental changes and higher academic expectations and loads. Second, family dysfunction reflects a systemic perspective that considers the family as a whole, which is greater than the sum of its parts (Xu et al., 2008). Third, family dysfunction is interventionable and can be detected early and affected by parents (Sandler et al., 2011). In early adolescence, people have two opposite dispositions: independence and attachment to parents. Adolescents seek to increase their independence from their parents. At the same time, they still benefit from secure attachment to their parents because they are not yet mature enough to cope with life's challenges without support. These two opposing tendencies lead to unique challenges in parent-child interactions (Xu et al., 2008), and thus, children's psychological problems are often related to the quality of their family functioning. Family dysfunction (e.g., poor problem-solving strategies and ineffective communication between family members) means that a family system does not facilitate effective functioning (Olson, 2014). According to previous studies, higher levels of family dysfunction are closely linked to higher levels of anxiety and depression in adolescents (Xu et al., 2008). Family dysfunction can be associated with individual differences in psychopathology (e.g., anxiety and depression) through adolescents' feelings about themselves (e.g., self-esteem) and their interpersonal relationships (e.g., loneliness). One of the causes of adolescent social problems is the social institution, namely, parents and family (Pauzi et al., 2023). Previous studies have indicated that family dysfunction is related to adolescent psychopathology (Chapman & Woodruff-Borden, 2009; Ferro & Boyle, 2015). According to family functioning theory (Miller et al., 2000), the overall family climate is associated with the development of anxiety and depression. Adolescent behavioral patterns have received less attention in family-related studies. Thus, conducting qualitative grounded theory studies instead of theoretical presuppositions is essential to explore participants' lived experiences. As such, to obtain deeper and context-driven information, the present study examined the behavioral patterns of adolescents in the face of family challenges. Some studies have shown that higher levels of family dysfunction are a risk factor for developing higher levels of anxiety (Katz & Low, 2004) and depression (Martin et al., 2010). During adolescence, the nature of family relationships acquires a special quality, associated with increasing conflict between adolescents and parents (Boorboor Khodabakhshi-Koolaei & Falsafinezhad, 2021).

There are a large number of adolescents living in Iran. As a result, those who deal with adolescents should be familiar with the behaviors of adolescents when facing

family challenges and know the possible consequences of these behaviors. Accordingly, an awareness of adolescents' mental and behavioral aspects can contribute to finding the best way to communicate with them more effectively. Previous studies have addressed adolescents and their behavioral problems and conflicts between parents and adolescents. However, a few qualitative studies have focused on adolescents' behaviors in the face of family challenges. Moreover, adolescent behavior in the face of family challenges and conflicts has always been one of the most important concerns for parents of adolescents. Accordingly, many studies have addressed the conflicts and challenges of adolescent parents, but they have failed to particularly focus on adolescent behavioral patterns and their consequences. Moreover, adolescence is a critical period when individual and social personality are formed, and it has a substantial influence on the future of the adolescent. As such, an assessment of behavioral patterns of adolescents in the face of family challenges can help counselors and researchers in this field to know, predict, and control these behavioral patterns more effectively, raise parents' awareness of their adolescents' behaviors, and improve parent-adolescent interactions.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted with a qualitative grounded theory approach. This method helps to produce new concepts in a large body of research literature. These concepts may have direct application to policies and professional practices in psychology and beyond (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The present study sought to examine the behavioral patterns of adolescents in the face of family conflicts and to interpret the data from the interviews with the adolescents. The research setting was all female adolescents living in Tehran. Previous studies have shown that conflicts reach their peak in mid-adolescence (the age of 14 to 18 years). Thus, the participants in this study were also selected from those in mid-adolescence, i.e., 14 to 18 years old, living in Tehran in 2023. The data in this study were collected via semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were developed per the research objectives and revised and confirmed by subject-matter experts. Additional questions were asked based on the participants' responses to extract rich information from their statements. The questions asked in the interviews focused on the participants' behavioral patterns when exposed to family challenges and conflicts.

The participants were selected based on grounded theory and using purposive sampling. However, with the progress of the study, theoretical sampling was used (Ligita et al., 2020). After choosing two study participants who met the inclusion criteria, data collection continued

with theoretical sampling. Sampling continued until reaching data saturation. The data was saturated by 17 interviews with participants. The interviews started with general questions and more detailed questions according to the participants' responses. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the respondent's cooperation, personality type, and the communication between the interviewer and the respondent. The interviews were conducted face-to-face for 3 months. Following Charmaz & Thornberg's (2021) grounded theory, the collected data

were codified and analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding phases. The validity of the findings was checked and confirmed by qualitative analysis experts. Afterward, the proposed theory was validated by comparing it with the raw data.

### 3. Results

The participants in this study were 17 girls aged 14 to 18 years. Table 1 displays the participants' demographic characteristics:

**Table 1.** The participants' demographic characteristics

Participant code	Gender	Education	Number of siblings	Birth order	Age
1	Female	Grade 10	1 brother	Second	15
2	Female	Grade 9	Single child of the family	-----	14
3	Female	Grade 10	2 sisters	Third	
4	Female	Grade 10	2 brothers	First	16
5	Female	Grade 10	3 sisters	Fourth	
6	Female	Grade 10	2 sisters	Third	16
7	Female	Grade 10	2 brothers	Second	15
8	Female	Grade 10	1 sister and 2 brothers	Third	16
9	Female	Grade 10	1 brother	First	16
10	Female	Grade 10	Single child of the family	First	16
11	Female	Grade 8	1 sister	First	15
12	Female	Grade 10	2 brothers	Third	16
13	Female	Grade 8	Single child of the family	First	16
14	Female	Grade 10	1 brother	Second	15
15	Female	Grade 10 sciences	2 brothers	Second	17
16	Female	Grade 8	1 brother	Second	14
17	Female	Grade 8	Single child of the family	----	14

Analysis of the data using the grounded theory method revealed five main categories, including adolescent challenges with parents, adolescent strategies in facing

challenges, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and consequences, 11 axial codes, and 53 open codes, as displayed in Table 2:

**Table 2.** The open, axial, and selective codes were extracted from the interviews with participants

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Extreme focus on educational issues	Extreme parental concerns	Adolescent challenges with parents
Extreme concerns about being with peers		
Excessive control		
Sensitivity in choosing a friend		
Disagreement on political issues	Ideological disagreement	
Disagreement on religious issues		
Strict regulations	Imposing strict restrictions	
Depriving the adolescent of her powers		
Strictness on the adolescent's clothing		
Strictness on the adolescent's use of mobile phones		
Not engaging the adolescent in decision-making.		
Not assigning time for fun.	Efficient coping strategies	Adolescents' strategies in facing challenges
Talking about problems with siblings		
Talking and negotiating with parents		
Expressing emotions		
Listening to music		
Walking		
Seeing a psychologist		
Phone calls with friends		
Smoking	Inefficient coping strategies	
Sulking		
Avoiding solving problems		
Suppression of emotions		
Aggressiveness		

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Disregarding the need for independence	Inefficiency of parents in facing developmental changes	Contextual conditions
Blaming the adolescents		
Disbelief in adolescent cognitive development		
Dysfunctional coping with opposite-sex friends		
Lack of emotional support for adolescents		
Parental introversion	Parent and adolescent personality traits	
The mismatch between parent and adolescent personality		
Values and beliefs		
Inability to regulate emotions		
The absence of an emotional relationship between parents	Dissatisfaction with the quality of life	Intervening conditions
Parental conflicts		
Too much school pressure		
The financial status of parents		
The interference of parents' families in parenting matters	Other people's interference	
Revealing the adolescent's secrets to the family		
Not respecting the adolescent's privacy.		
Relatives' control		
Disagreement with parents' families		
Humiliation and blame from those around you	Intrapersonal consequences	
Committing suicide		
Running away from home		
Mental and physical harms		
Academic failure	Interpersonal consequences	Consequences
Relying on the opposite sex		
Isolation		
Developing hostile relationships with parents		
Cutting off emotional contact with parents		

### Adolescent challenges with parents

**A. Extreme parental concerns:** The participants reported that the most important and unpleasant challenges are parents' extreme concerns about adolescents' daily affairs, including parents' extreme focus on educational matters and extreme concerns about being with peers.

**Parents' extreme focus on educational matters:** One of the participants said, "Our last argument was about my school performance and my mom insists that my grades must be at least above 16 [out of 20] and threatens me that if I score lower, she will take my phone from me" (Participant #17).

**Excessive concerns about being with peers:** Another parent's concern, which was very unpleasant for the adolescent, was the parents' extreme concerns about the adolescent having fun and spending time with her peers. Given the adolescent's desire for independence, this issue has created many challenges for them in communicating with their parents: "I don't like my parents' too many concerns about my friends" (Participant #9).

**B. Ideological disagreement:** One of the important issues highlighted several times by the participants was the ideological disagreement between the adolescent and the parents, including disagreements on political issues.

**Disagreement on political issues:** One of the important issues leading to parent-adolescent conflicts was disagreement on political issues and differences in political tendencies and mindsets between adolescents and

parents. Accordingly, a participant said, "Yes, we had many arguments about religious and political things, but I don't talk to my parents about my problems because I feel that they don't understand them at all" (Participant #1).

**C. Imposing strict restrictions** Another challenge reported by the participants was the restrictions imposed on adolescents by their parents, including imposing strict regulations and depriving the adolescent of her powers.

**Imposing strict regulations:** One of the issues reported by the participants was strict and authoritarian rules set out by parents for adolescents, which created many challenges for them: "It feels very bad that you have an older brother who doesn't come home for three nights in a row and he does not say where he was. However, since you are a girl, you must get your parents' permission, and with many difficulties, you must go out and come back soon" (Participant #6).

**Depriving the adolescent of her powers:** Depriving the adolescent of her powers is a very big obstacle to her development when she is ready to assume power and responsibility for decision-making. One of the participants stated, "We have no power to make any decisions. There is always someone who must decide for us" (Participant #8).

### Adolescent strategies in facing family challenges

The strategies adopted by adolescents in facing family challenges are divided into efficient and inefficient coping strategies:



**A. Efficient coping strategies:** The participants reported adopting various strategies during conflicts and challenges with their parents. The efficient coping strategies adopted by the participants were talking about their problems with siblings, talking, and negotiating with parents.

**Talking about problems with siblings:** The participants reported that one of the most effective strategies is to share and talk about their problems with a close family member, especially a sibling: *"But since I don't have a sister, I talk to my young bother. I hardly talk to my parents. My brother understands me because we are almost at the same age"* (Participant #3).

**Talking and negotiating with parents:** Another very effective strategy used by a few adolescents and parents was talking and negotiating with each other. One of the participants said, *"If it weren't for these challenges, we don't have any particular challenge with the parents, and we usually solve our problems by talking to them"* (Participant #6).

#### **Contextual conditions**

**A. Parents' inefficiency in facing developmental changes:** One of the factors underlying family challenges in adolescents is the ineffectiveness of parents in facing developmental changes during adolescence, including disregarding the need for independence, criticizing, and blaming adolescents.

**Disregarding the need for independence:** One of the important needs during adolescence is independence and autonomy, but unfortunately, many parents are not aware of these needs. One of the participants said, *"They are meddling in everything I want to buy, and my father interferes with it"* (Participant #12).

**Criticizing and blaming the adolescent:** One of the destructive behaviors on the part of parents and people around them is blaming and criticizing adolescents due to developmental changes and the need for independence in adolescents: *"I have terrible conditions. I don't feel well emotionally. My mom scolds me for my mistakes every time"* (Participant #11).

**B. Parent and adolescent personality traits:** These traits include parents' introversion and the personality differences between parents and adolescents.

**Parental introversion:** *"Another problem is that my parents are introverted, that's why I became an introvert, and I was very annoyed by this problem in social situations. We don't talk much at all, or even talk much at the dinner table. So, I feel like I'm not heard and seen as I expect"* (Participant #12).

**The mismatch between parent and adolescent personality:** *"There is a time when I don't feel well and I can't get up and stay in my room, but my mom is constantly calling me to join them and talk to them. My*

*mom is very emotional and expects us to love her. I told her that I was not in a good mood and they could not understand how I was feeling"* (Participant #9).

#### **Intervening conditions**

**A. Dissatisfaction with the quality of life:** When an adolescent faces family challenges, external control is one of the intervening factors that affects her behavioral patterns, as she has less control over the situation.

**Lack of emotional relationship between parents:** One important factor leading to family challenges for adolescents is the lack of emotional and intimate relationships between parents. One of the participants stated, *"My parents are intimate with me but not with themselves, and I do not feel any love between them"* (Participant #17).

#### **B. Other people's interference**

**The interference of parents' families in parenting matters:** *"We try to whitewash all their disgracing behavior. They talk about all family matters in the presence of others. I wish they would support me in all situations"* (Participant #6).

**Disclosing the adolescent's secret to the family:** *"Most of my challenge with my mom and dad is that they tell everything to our daughters-in-law or criticize me in family gatherings. I have told them a hundred times not to do it, but they do it again"* (Participant #10).

#### **Consequences**

**A. Intrapersonal consequences:** Consequences of family challenges for adolescents include positive and negative individual consequences, such as suicide attempts and running away from home.

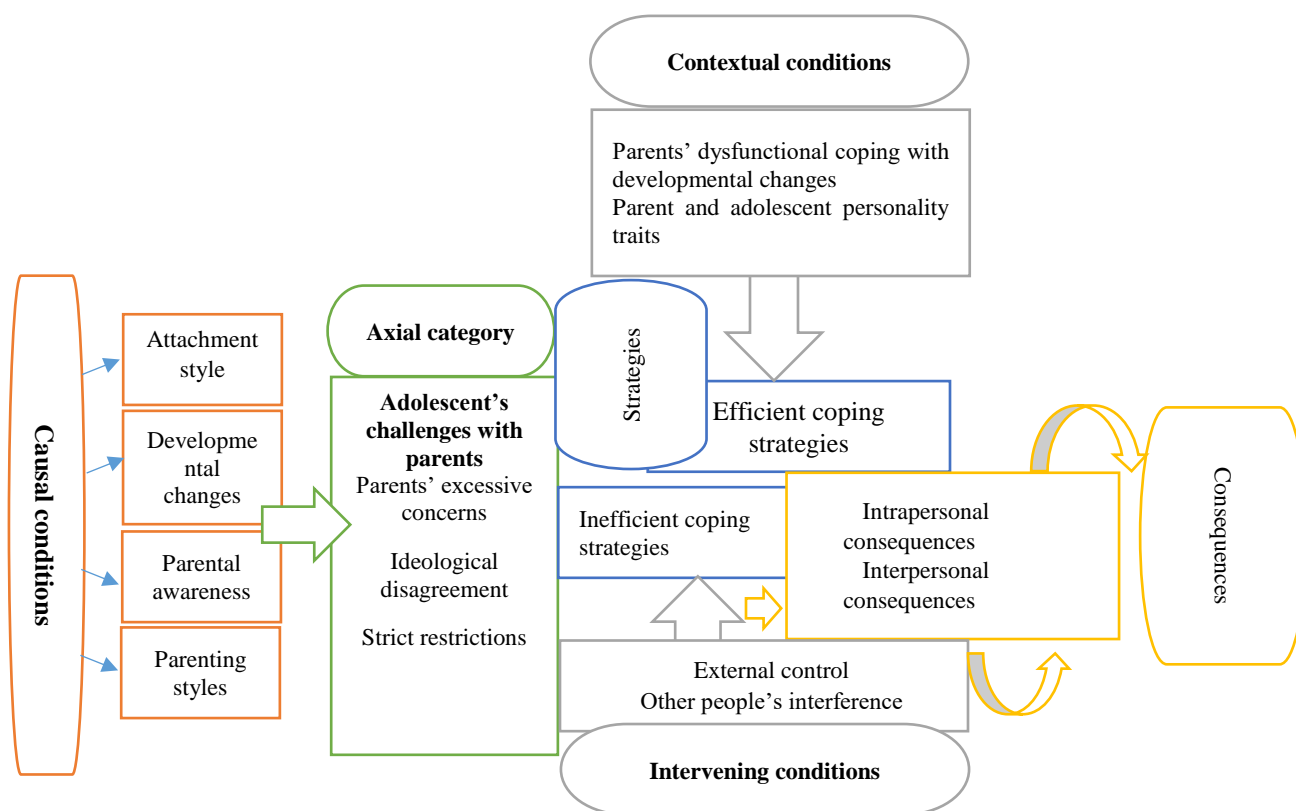
**Committing suicide:** *"I committed suicide once. Since then, my parents don't allow me to stay home alone, and we have always been fighting and arguing. They don't listen to me, and I don't listen to them"* (Participant #11).

**Running away from home:** *"I took my luggage and went to my grandmother's house and lived there for a year"* (Participant #16).

#### **B. Interpersonal consequences**

**Isolation:** *"Most of the time I'm alone. I don't feel like being with my parents and other people, and I like to be alone. I tell my mom that I want to live alone when I grow up. If I go abroad, I'll get a dog and live with it. If I lived alone, there would be nobody to get on my nerves. I can easily do what I like. I can watch movies without disturbance or noise and be more comfortable"* (Participant #2).

**Developing hostile relationships with parents:** *"No, just once last year, my dad checked my phone and realized that I have a boyfriend. He wanted to take my phone from me. I resisted and he slapped me in the face"* (Participant #5).



**Figure 1. The conceptual model of behavioral patterns of adolescents in facing family challenges**

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The finding showed the causal, contextual, and intervening conditions. The 11 Axial codes were "Extreme parental concerns", "Ideological disagreement", "Imposing strict restrictions", "Efficient coping strategies", "Inefficient coping strategies", "Inefficiency of parents in facing developmental changes", "Parent and adolescent personality traits", "Dissatisfaction with the quality of life", "Other people's interference", "Intrapersonal consequences", and "Interpersonal consequences". The family interactions with adolescents change, and some challenges and conflicts develop between parents and adolescents due to the many changes and transformations that take place during adolescence and the transition from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, parents do not consider the adolescent mature enough to fully agree with her request for independence, and they have many concerns (Boorboor Khodabakhshi-Koolae & Falsafinezhad, 2021). A study on adolescents aged 11 to 14 showed that conflicts peak in mid-adolescence (Allison & Schultz, 2004). Researchers have shown a curvilinear growth process in the frequency and intensity of parent-adolescent conflict, whereby the conflict begins and increases in early adolescence, reaches its peak in mid-adolescence, and decreases in late adolescence (Juang et al., 2018). The research showed that the situational

conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and socio-economic changes, had an impact on Family interaction challenges, Changes in the quality of family interactions (Khodabakhshi-Koolae et al., 2023).

Adolescents tend to communicate more often with their peers and believe their parents do not understand them as they expected because of generational differences. They also do not take the needs and wishes of their generation seriously. They also believe that parents are influenced by old traditions and beliefs. For this reason, they set a boundary between themselves and their parents and may disagree with parental beliefs and politics, leading to parent-adolescent conflicts. The adolescents in the present study acted differently and adopted different strategies to cope with these challenges. They stated that they feel better when they talk with their siblings or discuss conflicts and challenges with their families. Some adolescents admitted that by taking refuge in listening to music or going for a walk, they can avoid the stress caused by challenges and conflicts and find peace. Furthermore, some adolescents stated that they feel better by talking to their peers because they believe that their friends understand psychological and emotional conditions much better. Some of these adolescents used to show their anger with physical or verbal aggression to parents or people around them, and household items, or sometimes to themselves during conflicts.

According to [Weiss et al. \(2015\)](#), emotions are the source of positive and constructive behaviors; if they are not guided and used correctly, they can lead to destructive and risky behaviors. Thus, it is necessary to develop some skills during adolescence so that emotions can be directed to the correct path, because the physiological and hormonal changes during adolescence increase irritability, which, in the absence of proper skills, leads to the use of ineffective strategies in facing adolescent challenges ([Shahbazi et al., 2020](#)). Parents and adolescents who get stuck in anger or other negative emotions, or only express positive emotions towards each other and are afraid to express anger, may have more difficulties renegotiating ([Branje, 2018](#)). Coping strategies are divided into two categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. The first category accounts for effective strategies, and the second includes ineffective ones. The strategies and behaviors used by adolescents in facing family challenges have been influenced by contextual and intervening conditions. According to previous research, parents play an important role in shaping the family's emotional atmosphere and quality of life; they can bring satisfaction to the adolescent and other family members with healthy behaviors and prevent problems and disorders. In contrast, failing to pay attention to these principles and rules can cause conflict and other problems in the family. This is to argue that parents' behaviors and behavioral characteristics play a vital role in the quality of their interactions and in general their parenting style and as a result the growth and excellence of children and adolescents; That is, if the adolescent cannot freely share her feelings, anxieties, and worries with her parents without feeling fear or rejection, she may develop a kind of psychological insecurity, which is the most important cause of behavioral and emotional abnormalities. Thus, the behavioral characteristics of parents are an important factor in creating communication problems in the family. The destructive criticisms of parents are one of the underlying reasons for the problems adolescents have with their families ([Breiner et al., 2016](#); [Hancock Hoskins, 2014](#)). The childish look and misunderstanding of adolescents cause conflict between them and their parents, because the developments associated with puberty change the mental image of the body and the personal identity of the adolescent. Parents usually do not have positive attitudes toward this critical situation of adolescents, and often do not understand this situation. If parents do not understand the internal crisis and conflicts and cannot have a mutual understanding, these conflicts will turn into the rebelliousness of the adolescent ([Boorboor et al., 2021](#)). Parents' realistic attitudes will

help the adolescent to pass through this turbulent and chaotic period, and the best way to overcome these challenges is to establish a permanent and intimate relationship between adolescents and their parents. Applying key principles of social learning theory indicates that adolescents learn social interaction patterns through parental modeling, including hostility strategies and emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships ([Kim et al., 2009](#)). The ability to regulate emotions and behaviors is one aspect of adaptive social functioning, and the lack of such emotion regulation strategies may compromise a person's ability to effectively engage in non-social interactions and strengthen close relationships ([Cicchetti et al., 2009](#)). In addition, apart from contextual conditions, intervening conditions have a significant impact on adolescent behavioral patterns, making adolescents have less control over external conditions, including dissatisfaction with the quality of life and the intervention of people around them. The intervening conditions account for the absence of an emotional relationship between parents, the conflict between parents, excessive school pressure, the financial situation of parents, involvement of parents' families in parenting matters, disclosure of the adolescent's secrets to the family, disagreement with the parent's family, and relative's control. [Bai et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Brock and Kochanska \(2016\)](#) stated that conflict between parents is one of the problems faced by children and adolescents all over the world. Almost all children experience some degree of conflict between parents and identify it as a source of stress. Hence, parents' coordinated behavior and attitudes play a very important role in realizing the goals of education, especially in preventing behavioral problems and conflicts with adolescents ([Bai et al., 2023](#); [Brock & Kochanska, 2016](#)).

According to [Shahbazi et al. \(2020\)](#), the current developments caused by the policies in the communities have caused changes in the educational system and transformations in family activities, creating stress in the members of the community who play a very decisive role in the type of family programs and activities. Thus, such changes have created family issues, problems, and conflicts between parents and adolescents. Conflict resulting from marital aggression may spill over into the parent-child relationship, particularly through harsh discipline (such as yelling, threatening, hitting, beating, and pushing) and less parental support ([Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000](#)). Children's reactions to disturbed parenting practices resulting from interparental aggression may lead to marital discord and family conflict ([Busby et al., 2008](#); [Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000](#)).

The findings of this study suggested that parents do not mutually understand adolescents. Thus, family counselors and psychologists can hold workshops for parents to teach them to communicate effectively with adolescents. Given the prevalence of ineffective strategies and their consequences, life skills and problem-solving courses should be held for students in the adolescent stage. Qualitative research is highly influenced by the experiences and cultural, economic, and social background of people in society. This research was conducted in Tehran.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

The protocol for this study was approved by the Code of Ethics IR.SBU.REC. 1401.080 by Shahid Beheshti University.

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### Authors' contributions

All authors participated in the design, implementation, and writing of all sections of the present study.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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