

Parenting and Self-Esteem Among Adolescents: A Theoretical Examination

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between parenting and adolescent self-esteem. Focusing on authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting styles, it analyzes how the emotional and disciplinary dimensions of parenting influence adolescents' evaluations of self-worth. Drawing upon classical and contemporary theoretical frameworks, particularly attachment theory and self-concept development, this paper argues that parenting is a central, formative context for the development of stable self-esteem in adolescence. The discussion reviews conceptual linkages and outlines implications for future research. By synthesizing insights from developmental and social psychology, this paper underscores the centrality of the parent-adolescent relationship in shaping one of the most fundamental aspects of psychological health. As adolescence is a sensitive period for identity formation and emotional maturation, understanding the impact of parenting on self-esteem not only enhances theoretical models of development but also informs practical approaches to parenting education, family intervention, and youth mental health promotion.

Keywords: *Parenting, Self-Esteem, Adolescents, Parenting Styles, Self-Concept*

Self-esteem is a central construct in adolescent development, playing a pivotal role in shaping psychological well-being, academic success, and social functioning. As adolescents navigate the transitional period from childhood to adulthood, they undergo significant emotional, cognitive, and social changes that require the consolidation of a coherent self-concept (Mastorci, et. al., 2024). This process is neither automatic nor isolated; rather, it is deeply embedded in the adolescent's relational environment. Adolescents actively seek to understand who they are, what they value, and how they are perceived by others (Lewis, et. al., 2021). In this evaluative process, self-esteem emerges as a key psychological indicator of how individuals judge their own worth and capabilities (Zhao, et. al., 2021).

During adolescence, the formation of self-esteem becomes particularly salient due to increased autonomy, heightened sensitivity to social feedback, and the internalization of broader societal norms and expectations. Unlike in earlier childhood, where self-evaluations are heavily dependent on concrete feedback from parents and teachers, adolescents begin to form abstract, internally regulated assessments of their own worth. These assessments are

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Received: September 27, 2025; Revision Received: September 28, 2025; Accepted: September 30, 2025

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shaped not only by personal achievements and peer relationships but also by the foundational interactions that occur within the family unit. Among the various interpersonal contexts that contribute to the development of self-esteem, parenting remains one of the most significant and enduring influences.

Parenting, broadly defined, encompasses the behaviors, emotional tones, and interactional patterns that characterize the parent-child relationship. These behaviors convey to the adolescent implicit and explicit messages about their value, competence, and belonging (Lewis, et. al., 2021). Over time, these messages are internalized and become the foundation for self-evaluative beliefs (Galbo, 1983). The influence of parenting on self-esteem is not merely behavioral but also deeply psychological, influencing how adolescents interpret and assign meaning to their experiences (Gecas, 1972). Parental actions, whether supportive or critical, involved or detached, serve as reflective surfaces through which adolescents perceive themselves.

The nature and quality of parenting that adolescents receive can either nurture or undermine their developing sense of self-worth (Openshaw, Thomas & Rollins, 1984). High-quality parenting—marked by emotional warmth, consistent support, and appropriate levels of control—has been associated with the development of robust, stable self-esteem (Putnick, et. al., 2008). Conversely, parenting characterized by rejection, overcontrol, neglect, or inconsistency has been linked to low self-esteem, emotional insecurity, and a diminished sense of self-efficacy (Putnick, et. al., 2008). Adolescents who perceive their parents as responsive, accepting, and respectful of their autonomy are more likely to develop a positive self-concept and to carry these self-evaluations into adulthood (Mastorci, et. al., 2024).

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding the influence of parenting on self-esteem is the typology of parenting styles introduced by Diana Baumrind (1967) and later refined by Maccoby and Martin (1983). This model categorizes parenting into four styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—based on the dimensions of warmth (responsiveness) and control (demandingness). Authoritative parenting, which combines high responsiveness with high demandingness, is widely regarded as the most conducive to positive developmental outcomes, including high self-esteem (Pinquart & Gerke, 2019). In contrast, authoritarian parenting (low responsiveness, high demandingness), permissive parenting (high responsiveness, low demandingness), and neglectful parenting (low responsiveness, low demandingness) have been associated with less favorable self-esteem trajectories.

This paper critically examines the relationship between parenting and adolescent self-esteem by focusing specifically on how variations in parenting style influence adolescents' self-perceptions. Drawing upon key psychological theories, most notably attachment theory and self-concept theory, it explores the mechanisms through which parenting behaviors contribute to the construction, maintenance, or erosion of self-esteem during adolescence. The paper maintains a focused lens on these two central constructs: parenting as the independent variable and self-esteem as the dependent variable. In doing so, the aim is to offer a clear and coherent theoretical explanation for how and why parenting plays such a crucial role in adolescent self-esteem development.

Parenting as a Developmental Context

Parenting constitutes a central domain of influence in a child's social and emotional development, serving as the primary context in which norms, values, emotional regulation,

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and self-perceptions are cultivated (Elshanum, 2024). At its core, parenting involves a constellation of behaviors, attitudes, and emotional climates that caregivers provide in their interactions with their children. These behaviors are not confined to disciplinary practices but encompass emotional support, communication style, expectations, and the broader affective tone within the family unit (Khanum, et. al., 2023). The quality of parenting experienced during childhood and adolescence plays a formative role in shaping the way young individuals perceive themselves and navigate their social environments.

One of the most enduring frameworks for categorizing parenting practices is the typology developed by developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind (1967), which identified two key dimensions of parenting: responsiveness (often operationalized as warmth) and demandingness (or behavioral control). These dimensions were later elaborated upon by Maccoby and Martin (1983), who extended Baumrind's model to articulate four distinct parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. These classifications remain widely used in both developmental theory and empirical research, offering a comprehensive lens through which to examine how parenting differentially influences child and adolescent outcomes.

Authoritative parenting, characterized by high responsiveness and high demandingness, is widely regarded as the most developmentally supportive style (Khanum, et. al., 2023). Authoritative parents exhibit emotional warmth and acceptance while maintaining consistent expectations and boundaries. They engage in open, bidirectional communication and encourage age-appropriate autonomy, thus allowing the adolescent to develop independence within a secure framework (Elshanum, 2024). This balance of structure and support is thought to foster self-regulation, academic achievement, and, crucially, a stable and positive sense of self-worth.

In contrast, authoritarian parenting reflects high levels of demandingness paired with low levels of responsiveness. This style emphasizes obedience, discipline, and conformity, often enforced through strict rules and punitive measures (Chukwumezie, 2010). Adolescents raised in authoritarian households may learn to comply behaviorally but often do so out of fear or obligation rather than internalized values. As such, these adolescents may struggle with low self-esteem, particularly if their individuality or emotional needs are dismissed.

Permissive parenting, defined by high responsiveness but low demandingness, provides emotional support and warmth but lacks sufficient structure, expectations, or behavioral guidance (Prasana, & Sam, 2024). Permissive parents tend to avoid confrontation, enforce few rules, and rarely hold their children accountable. While such adolescents may feel emotionally accepted, the absence of boundaries can result in difficulties with self-discipline, frustration tolerance, and internalized standards (Chukwumezie, 2010). Over time, this may translate into an inflated or unstable self-esteem that is not grounded in personal competence or achievement.

Finally, neglectful or uninvolved parenting is characterized by low responsiveness and low demandingness. These parents are emotionally detached and minimally engaged in their children's lives. Whether due to stress, mental health issues, substance abuse, or other factors, neglectful parenting deprives adolescents of the emotional scaffolding and behavioral structure necessary for healthy psychosocial development (Khanum, et. al., 2023). The resulting emotional void can profoundly impair the adolescent's sense of self-worth, leading to feelings of rejection, isolation, and chronic insecurity.

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Each of these parenting styles communicates implicit and explicit messages to the adolescent regarding their value, competence, and position within the family hierarchy. Adolescents, in turn, internalize these messages, which become core elements of their self-concept. For example, an adolescent whose parents consistently respond to their emotional needs and encourage their voice in family decisions is likely to develop a self-view that includes worthiness, agency, and competence (Nadarajah, 2020). Conversely, an adolescent subjected to criticism, neglect, or emotional unavailability may interpret these interactions as indicative of personal inadequacy or unworthiness (Elshanum, 2024). Thus, parenting styles do not merely influence behavior; they shape the very lens through which adolescents come to understand themselves.

Self-Esteem in Adolescence

Self-esteem, broadly defined, refers to an individual's overall evaluative judgment of their personal worth. It is a fundamental psychological construct that encompasses both affective and cognitive components, including self-acceptance, self-respect, and confidence in one's abilities. Unlike self-concept, which refers to descriptive beliefs about oneself (e.g., "I am a good student" or "I am introverted"), self-esteem represents the value an individual places on those self-descriptions (Ishaq, et. al., 2025). It reflects the degree to which individuals feel satisfied with themselves and believe that they are deserving of love, respect, and success.

During adolescence, the development of self-esteem takes on heightened importance due to the numerous psychological and social changes that define this life stage. Adolescents begin to engage in more complex forms of social comparison, grapple with identity issues, and seek autonomy from their caregivers (Schmidt, & Padilla, 2003). This period also marks a shift from external validation to more internalized self-evaluations, although peer and parental feedback remain influential. The development of self-esteem in adolescence is thus an interactive process that integrates internal experiences and external affirmations.

High self-esteem in adolescence has been consistently associated with a broad range of positive outcomes, including emotional resilience, social competence, academic engagement, and overall psychological well-being (Singh & Dubey, 2019). Adolescents with high self-esteem are better able to cope with stress, navigate peer relationships, and persist in the face of challenges (Newman, et. al., 2000). They tend to exhibit higher levels of motivation, goal orientation, and assertiveness, all of which contribute to a greater likelihood of achieving developmental milestones.

Conversely, low self-esteem is a known risk factor for a wide array of negative psychological and behavioral outcomes. Adolescents with low self-esteem often experience heightened levels of anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and susceptibility to peer pressure (Zhou, et.al., 2020). They may demonstrate poor academic performance, engage in risk behaviors, or develop maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use (Harter, 1993). Moreover, low self-esteem during adolescence can have long-term implications, predicting difficulties in romantic relationships, employment, and mental health well into adulthood.

Importantly, self-esteem is not a fixed trait but a dynamic construct that can fluctuate across contexts and over time (Hank & Baltes-Götz, 2019). Nonetheless, research suggests that a foundational sense of self-worth, formed in part through early relational experiences, tends to persist and influence future self-perceptions (Moneta, G. B., Schneider, B., &

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Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2017).). For adolescents, the family environment—and particularly the quality of parenting—plays a pivotal role in shaping this foundational sense of worth.

Self-esteem should also be understood as a relational construct. It is not solely the product of internal reflection but is continuously shaped and reinforced by interactions with significant others. Among these, parents are the earliest and often the most influential sources of feedback and validation. Parental behaviors such as expressions of affection, attentiveness, criticism, or indifference—convey powerful messages about a child's value and capabilities. Over time, these messages are internalized, forming the basis of how adolescents view themselves. For instance, consistent parental encouragement and validation contribute to a sense of competence and security, whereas frequent criticism or emotional neglect may foster self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy.

In sum, self-esteem in adolescence is the outcome of a complex interplay between individual reflection and relational experience. It is constructed over time, through both moment-to-moment interactions and cumulative relational patterns. Parenting, as a central component of the adolescent's social world, serves as a primary context in which self-worth is either affirmed or undermined. Understanding the nuances of how parenting affects self-esteem is therefore essential for both developmental theory and practical interventions aimed at fostering adolescent mental health.

Theoretical Framework Linking Parenting to Self-Esteem

The association between parenting and adolescent self-esteem is well documented both theoretically and empirically. Theoretical models provide essential insights into the psychological mechanisms that connect specific parenting practices with the development of self-evaluative processes. Among the most influential frameworks informing this link are attachment theory and self-concept theory, both of which emphasize the foundational role of close relationships—especially the parent-child bond—in shaping how individuals perceive themselves.

Attachment Theory Perspective

Attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby (1969/1982), posits that early relational experiences with primary caregivers lay the groundwork for individuals' internal working models of self and others. These internal working models—mental representations of attachment relationships—serve as templates for interpreting social interactions and assessing one's self-worth. When caregivers are reliably responsive, emotionally available, and sensitive to the child's needs, secure attachment develops. This security fosters the belief that the self is valued, lovable, and capable of eliciting care and support from others.

Secure attachment functions as a protective factor in adolescent development, promoting both emotional regulation and self-confidence. Adolescents who internalize a secure relational template are more likely to interpret challenges as manageable and to view themselves as competent agents within their social environments. This, in turn, contributes to the development of robust self-esteem. As the adolescent matures and navigates increasingly complex social networks, the foundational sense of worth instilled by early secure attachments continues to serve as a psychological anchor.

Conversely, insecure attachments—whether avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized—can disrupt the formation of a stable self-concept. When caregivers are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, overly controlling, or rejecting, children may come to believe that their needs

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are unworthy of attention, or that affection must be earned through compliance or achievement. Such beliefs can persist into adolescence, undermining the development of self-esteem and predisposing the individual to self-doubt, hypersensitivity to rejection, or over-reliance on external validation.

Parenting styles provide a structural context through which attachment-related dynamics are enacted and reinforced. Authoritative parenting, which balances warmth with appropriate control, most closely aligns with the relational features that promote secure attachment. Authoritative parents tend to validate their child's emotions, encourage independence, and remain available during moments of distress. These behaviors affirm the adolescent's inherent worth and support the internalization of positive self-beliefs.

In contrast, authoritarian parenting, characterized by emotional coldness and high control, may promote conditional self-esteem. Adolescents raised in authoritarian households often receive approval only when they meet specific standards of behavior or achievement, leading them to associate self-worth with compliance, perfectionism, or external rewards. Such adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to self-esteem instability, especially when their performance does not meet internalized expectations. Neglectful parenting, lacking both responsiveness and structure, presents perhaps the greatest risk to self-esteem development. In the absence of affirming relationships and behavioral guidance, adolescents may form fragmented or negative self-concepts, rooted in feelings of invisibility, rejection, or emotional abandonment.

Self-Concept Theory

In addition to attachment perspectives, self-concept theory offers a compelling account of how parenting shapes self-esteem during adolescence. According to early social theorists such as Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), self-evaluations are significantly influenced by *reflected appraisals*—that is, the way individuals perceive others to be evaluating them. Within the family, parents are the first and often the most influential sources of such appraisals. Adolescents derive critical self-relevant information from their interpretations of parental behavior, language, attention, and emotional tone.

When parents engage in supportive, affirmative interactions, adolescents are likely to interpret these as signs of personal worth, competence, and belonging. For example, authoritative parents, who offer constructive feedback, unconditional acceptance, and encouragement, reinforce a sense of self as capable and valuable. These experiences are internalized into a stable and coherent self-concept that supports the development of self-esteem over time. In such households, adolescents are also encouraged to take on responsibilities, explore interests, and voice their opinions, all of which promote autonomy and internalized standards of self-worth.

On the other hand, authoritarian parents, though often well-intentioned, may create a context in which love and approval appear contingent upon compliance, obedience, or achievement. The adolescent's self-worth in such contexts becomes externally anchored and performance-dependent. When mistakes occur, or when adolescents deviate from parental expectations, they may experience a sharp decline in self-esteem, fueled by feelings of guilt, shame, or inadequacy. Similarly, permissive parenting, despite being high in emotional warmth, often fails to provide adolescents with the behavioral scaffolding necessary to build a sense of mastery or discipline. As a result, adolescents may develop inflated but fragile self-esteem, lacking the internalized regulation needed to maintain self-worth under pressure.

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In the case of neglectful parenting, the lack of both validation and guidance deprives adolescents of critical opportunities to develop self-concept clarity. These adolescents may struggle with identity diffusion, low self-awareness, and emotional insecurity—factors that strongly predict low or unstable self-esteem. The absence of parental input can also create a vacuum in which adolescents rely excessively on peers or media for self-definition, further exacerbating identity confusion and social vulnerability.

Empirical Patterns Supporting the Theoretical Link

Although the focus of this paper is primarily theoretical, a substantial body of empirical research supports the propositions outlined above. Numerous studies have demonstrated a consistent relationship between parenting style and adolescent self-esteem across diverse populations and methodologies. In particular, authoritative parenting has repeatedly been associated with higher levels of global self-esteem (Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg, 2001). The combination of emotional responsiveness and behavioral structure appears to offer adolescents the dual benefits of security and autonomy—both essential components of healthy self-esteem.

By contrast, authoritarian parenting is frequently associated with lower self-esteem, particularly in Western cultural contexts where independence, assertiveness, and emotional expression are emphasized. Adolescents raised under authoritarian regimes may struggle with internalized self-criticism, fear of failure, or emotional suppression, which erode self-confidence and resilience. In cross-cultural research, however, the negative effects of authoritarian parenting may be attenuated in collectivist societies where parental control is interpreted as a sign of care and involvement (Chao, 1994), suggesting the importance of culturally nuanced interpretations.

Permissive parenting yields more complex outcomes. While adolescents may feel emotionally accepted, the absence of clear expectations or consequences can limit their opportunities to develop self-efficacy and personal discipline. This may lead to self-esteem that is either overly inflated or highly sensitive to external evaluations. Neglectful parenting, on the other hand, is almost universally associated with the poorest outcomes. Adolescents in these environments often report feelings of worthlessness, social alienation, and emotional dysregulation—factors that directly impair self-esteem.

These empirical findings not only validate theoretical predictions but also underscore the importance of examining parenting as a multifaceted and culturally embedded construct. They also highlight the need for longitudinal designs that can capture the developmental trajectories of self-esteem in response to evolving parenting behaviors.

Developmental Considerations

The influence of parenting on self-esteem is not static but evolves across the adolescent developmental period. In early adolescence, parental feedback remains a dominant force in shaping self-concept. Adolescents at this stage are still highly attuned to parental approval and use it as a primary reference point for self-evaluation. As they transition into middle and late adolescence, the salience of peer feedback, personal achievement, and emerging identity issues increases. Nevertheless, the foundational self-beliefs formed in the family context continue to shape how adolescents interpret these new experiences.

For example, adolescents with a history of emotionally supportive and structured parenting may exhibit greater resilience in the face of peer rejection or academic setbacks, drawing

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upon internalized self-worth to maintain a stable self-view. In contrast, adolescents from neglectful or authoritarian environments may lack this internal buffer and exhibit more dramatic fluctuations in self-esteem in response to external feedback.

Another developmental consideration concerns the consistency of parenting practices over time. Research suggests that adolescents benefit not only from specific parenting behaviors but also from a stable and predictable emotional environment. Frequent changes in parenting style—such as shifting between indulgence and harsh discipline—can create confusion and insecurity, impairing the adolescent's ability to develop coherent and stable self-concept representations. Adolescents require not only warmth and structure but also reliability in their relational environments to construct a cohesive identity and enduring self-esteem.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretically, the robust link between parenting and adolescent self-esteem underscores the central role of relational processes in personality and identity development. This relationship challenges overly individualistic models of self-esteem, which view it as an intrinsic trait or outcome of solitary cognitive processes. Instead, self-esteem emerges from the interplay of intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal validation, particularly within the family system. Theoretical models must therefore account for both structural parenting behaviors and the emotional meanings ascribed to them by the adolescent.

Practically, these insights offer important guidance for intervention and prevention efforts. Programs aimed at enhancing adolescent well-being should prioritize parent education, particularly in promoting authoritative practices. Teaching parents how to combine warmth with consistent expectations—while avoiding punitive or permissive extremes—can significantly improve adolescents' self-perceptions and emotional functioning. Additionally, interventions targeting at-risk families should address not only behavioral management but also the emotional climate of the home. For example, supporting parental emotional regulation, empathy, and communication skills may have downstream benefits for adolescent self-esteem.

Furthermore, culturally sensitive approaches are critical. In multicultural societies, parenting interventions must be tailored to recognize varying cultural norms regarding authority, affection, and individualism. What fosters self-esteem in one cultural context may not function identically in another, necessitating both theoretical and practical flexibility.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the clarity of the theoretical connection between parenting and adolescent self-esteem, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, self-esteem is a multidimensional construct. The current discussion has largely focused on global self-esteem, yet adolescents also develop domain-specific evaluations (e.g., academic self-esteem, social self-esteem, physical self-esteem) that may be differentially influenced by parenting behaviors. Future research should aim to disentangle how various parenting dimensions—such as autonomy support or emotional attunement—impact specific facets of self-worth.

Second, while this paper emphasizes the dyadic relationship between parent and adolescent, real-world development occurs in a multisystemic context. Peer relationships, school environments, digital media, socioeconomic conditions, and genetic predispositions all interact with parenting to shape adolescent outcomes. Future theoretical models should

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adopt ecological and biopsychosocial perspectives to account for these complex interdependencies.

Lastly, cultural variability plays a critical role in moderating the effects of parenting. In collectivist cultures, for instance, authoritarian parenting may be interpreted as caring and normative, thereby reducing its potentially harmful effects on self-esteem. Therefore, cross-cultural validation and refinement of existing theories are necessary to avoid ethnocentric bias and ensure broader applicability.

CONCLUSION

Parenting is a foundational influence on adolescent self-esteem. The quality of the parent-adolescent relationship—especially in terms of emotional warmth and behavioral control—provides the psychological context in which self-evaluations are constructed, maintained, or disrupted. Authoritative parenting, by balancing emotional support with clear expectations, consistently promotes stable and positive self-esteem. In contrast, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting styles undermine self-esteem development in distinct ways, either by imposing conditional worth, failing to provide structure, or withdrawing emotional involvement.

This theoretical analysis, centered on the interaction between parenting and adolescent self-esteem, reaffirms the enduring impact of the parent-child relationship. As adolescence unfolds with increasing psychological complexity and social demands, the internalized messages from early caregiving experiences continue to shape how individuals view themselves. Further theoretical refinement, culturally sensitive research, and evidence-based parenting interventions are essential to support youth in developing the self-esteem necessary for healthy psychosocial functioning across the lifespan.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Rashi, K. (2025). Parenting and Self-Esteem Among Adolescents: A Theoretical Examination. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(3), 4389-4399. DIP:18.01.401.20251303, DOI:10.25215/1303.401