

Research Paper

## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

Parental conflict deeply impacts children, shaping how they process stress. This study explores the distinct and overlapping patterns in how introverts and extroverts experience and respond to parental disputes. Using the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict (CPIC) questionnaire, 40 participants (aged 10-14) from different schools were selected based on high conflict frequency and intensity. The Big Five Personality Test categorized them as introverts or extroverts. Through thematic analysis of their written narratives, introverts showed a tendency to internalize emotions, engage in solitary reflection, and use symbolic expression, while extroverts sought social support, expressed emotions openly, and engaged in external distractions. Both groups displayed avoidance, but in different ways. The introverts withdrew mentally, while extroverts turned to activities. These findings highlight how personality shapes emotional responses, emphasizing the need for tailored psychological support to help children navigate family distress effectively.

**Keywords:** *Interparental Conflict, Thematic Analysis, Personality*

Many families experience silent conflicts that, while not openly expressed, still deeply impact the family dynamic and immediate environment. Children, being part of this immediate environment and highly dependent on their parents, are particularly vulnerable to these conflicts. Research has shown that parental conflict can significantly affect a child's mental health and overall development (Bernet et al., 2016). This impact is especially pronounced during early adolescence, a critical period marked by rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive changes. At this stage, children are already navigating various challenges, and exposure to conflict can add immense stress to their lives. Adolescence is also regarded as a formative period where changes in maturation in biological and psychological aspects are reflected in personality traits (Klimstra et al., 2009).

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## **Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study**

Since every individual copes with stress differently, personality plays a key role in shaping their responses.

Personality is a dispositional factor which influences how one regulates themselves and their coping. It is an important factor in coping and subjective well-being. As suggested in one study, the traits of extraversion and conscientiousness tend to predict more engagement coping, while neuroticism predicts disengagement coping (Carver & Smith, 2010). It has been found that conscientiousness and extraversion predicted adaptive coping and neuroticism predicted maladaptive coping (Evans et al., 2018).

Adolescents are exposed to various stressors in their life, such as academic pressure to achieve high marks, schoolwork (Pascoe et al., 2019), challenges of puberty, changing expectations, and coping with new feelings—sometimes even challenges like death of a family member or moving to a new city (Aggarwal et al., 2007). Active coping efforts include strategies directed at problem-solving, including understanding, decision-making, and cognitive restructuring. This has subtypes namely: approach coping, primary control coping, and problem-focused coping. These coping strategies have a constructive approach to actively manage stress. Studies have shown that active coping is associated with healthy functioning (Clarke, 2006).

There are different types of coping strategies used by adolescents. One of the most widely used coping strategies includes approach, avoidance, and wishful thinking. The approach strategies are active strategies that involve confronting the event and managing it. Avoidance coping encompasses behaviour where one moves away from stressful events. Wishful thinking involves some disengagement from the stressful experience while simultaneously paying attention to a target other than the stressor (Compas et al., 2001; Cunningham, 2002; Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007).

Different families of coping include accommodation, self-reliance, rumination, and opposition. Accommodation coping includes positive self-talk, cognitive restructuring, and focusing on the positives. Self-reliance coping includes keeping problems to oneself and accepting responsibility for solving them. Opposition includes the use of verbal aggression, venting, or other forms of opposition. During adolescence, there is diversity in the use of distraction tactics. Adolescents combine behavioural and cognitive strategies, at times combining them with escape coping. As they grow older, they become better at being self-reliant and more aware of their internal emotions. If useful coping strategies are employed, adolescents are better able to regulate emotions. However, there are instances when adolescents develop emotional vulnerabilities, increasing blaming and rumination (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011).

Extraversion is linked with coping styles involving rational, active, positive thinking and problem-solving approaches (Kardum & Krapić, 2001). There is a strong connection between personality factors and stress response (Dumitru & Cozman, 2012). Extraverts engage in effective coping and seek instrumental and emotional support (Kulkarni, Sudarshan, & Begum, 2021).

High levels of extraversion were positively correlated with active coping, seeking both instrumental and emotional support, and negatively correlated with behavioural disengagement. Individuals low in extraversion is more affected by social stress

## **Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study**

psychologically (Chu et al., 2015). Extraverts are thought to be more likely to attend to the positive aspects of a stressor (Jackson & Schneider, 2014).

One research finds that active coping and support-seeking coping protect girls from depression and self-esteem issues and benefit both boys and girls in terms of health. In contrast, avoidance coping leads to more emotional and behavioural problems, especially in boys, while distraction coping helps prevent depression and health problems in children (Nicolotti, el-Sheikh, & Whitson, 2003). Venting negative emotions not only mediates the long-term effects of marital conflict on children's mental health This research highlights the negative impact of non-constructive coping and calls for research to develop interventions to improve children's coping skills in dealing with parental conflict (Shelton & Harold, 2007).

Higher parental conflict leads to lower coping self-efficacy, which in turn results in higher levels of internalizing symptoms in children (Lennings & Bussey, 2017). Secure children use various coping strategies, but positive cognitive restructuring and seeking emotional support are most effective in reducing distress. Avoidant children rely more on distraction and avoidance, with avoidance leading to lower coping efficacy. Anxious-ambivalent children use most coping strategies except distraction and emotional support-seeking, suggesting a different coping pattern (Camisasca, 2017).

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Objectives***

1. To examine the relationship between interparental conflict and children's emotional responses.
2. To compare how introverted and extroverted children experience and cope with parental conflict.
3. To identify the distinct & common coping strategies employed by introverts and extroverts in response to family stress.

#### ***Sample***

The sample consisted of 40 adolescents (20 identified as introverts and 20 as extroverts) aged 10-14 years selected from five private schools of Jaipur, using purposive sampling to ensure a balanced representation across demographic variables.

#### **Inclusion criteria:**

1. Students between 10-14 years of age
2. Adolescents living with both parents
3. Reported experiencing moderate to high levels of interparental conflict, and (4) could be clearly categorized as either introverted or extroverted based on personality assessment.

#### **Exclusion criteria:**

- Diagnosed mental health conditions that could significantly impact coping strategies and cognitive processing of familial stress.

#### ***Research design***

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the complex relationship between personality traits and coping strategies among adolescents experiencing interparental conflict. Specifically, thematic analysis was utilized to identify patterns in adolescents'

## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

coping narratives, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how personality influences stress responses.

### *Data analysis*

The data was analysed through the Thematic analysis. It was conducted following six-phase approach:

1. Familiarization with data: We read and re-read all written narratives and interview transcripts to gain comprehensive understanding of the content.
2. Generating initial codes: A combination of inductive and deductive coding was employed. Initial codes were derived from existing literature on coping mechanisms (deductive), while remaining open to new codes emerging from the data (inductive).
3. Searching for themes: Codes were collated into potential themes, with particular attention to patterns that might differentiate introverted and extroverted participants.
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were checked against coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data.
5. Defining and naming themes: Clear definitions and names were developed for each theme, capturing the essence of what they represented.
6. Producing the report: Compelling extract examples were selected to illustrate each theme, relating back to the research questions and literature.

### *Instruments*

Two measures were used in this study,

#### **1. Identifying Children Experiencing Parental Conflict**

The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) by Grych, Seid & Fincham (1992) was administered to assess participants' exposure to and perception of parental conflict. This well-validated 48 item measure evaluates several dimensions of conflict, including frequency, intensity, resolution, and perceived threat. For this study, we focused particularly on the frequency and intensity subscales, with only adolescents scoring high on these dimensions being included in the participant pool. This threshold ensured that selected participants had significant exposure to interparental conflict, allowing for meaningful analysis of their coping responses.

The CPIC has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with internal consistency coefficients ranging from .78 to .90 across subscales and test-retest reliability ranging from .68 to .76 (Grych et al., 1992; Iraurgi et al., 2008). The scale has been validated across diverse populations and age groups, making it appropriate for the current study's sample.

#### **2. Personality Assessment**

The Big Five Inventory (BFI) by John & Srivastava (1999) is a measure intended to assess the Big Five personality domains, labelled Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness. It is a 44-item questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For this study, we used it to differentiate extroverts and introverts. It has shown good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas typically ranging from around 0.70 to 0.90. Test-retest reliability over periods of weeks to months has also been demonstrated.

## **RESULTS**

### *Overview of Thematic Analysis*

The thematic analysis of participants' written narratives and interview transcripts revealed distinct patterns in how introverted and extroverted adolescents experience and cope with

## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

interparental conflict. Six major themes emerged, with varying manifestations across personality types: (1) Emotional Processing, (2) Social Engagement, (3) Cognitive Strategies, (4) Behavioral Responses, (5) Self-Protection Mechanisms, and (6) Long-Term Adaptation. Table 1 provides an overview of these themes and their differential expression in introverted and extroverted adolescents.

**Table 1: Thematic Analysis Summary: Coping Strategies of Introverted vs. Extroverted Adolescents**

Theme	Introverts	Extroverts
<b>Emotional Processing</b>	Internal emotional rumination; delayed processing; private journaling	Immediate emotional expression; talking through feelings; seeking validation
<b>Cognitive Strategies</b>	Deep reflection; perspective-taking; meaning-making; philosophical questioning	Problem-solving; reframing conflict as temporary; optimistic outlook
<b>Behavioural Responses</b>	Physical withdrawal; immersion in solitary activities; symbolic expression through art/music	Distraction through social activities; physical exercise; direct intervention attempts
<b>Self-Protection Mechanisms</b>	Fantasy/imagination; creating emotional boundaries	Humor as defense; minimizing significance; physically leaving the situation
<b>Long-Term Adaptation</b>	Development of rich inner world; emotional self-sufficiency; heightened empathy	Enhanced conflict resolution skills; emotional resilience; adaptability to change

### **Theme 1: Emotional Processing**

Introverted and extroverted adolescents demonstrated markedly different approaches to processing the emotions elicited by parental conflict. These differences manifested in both the timing and manner of emotional processing.

#### **1. Introverted Emotional Processing**

Introverted adolescents typically engaged in internal emotional rumination, processing feelings privately and often delaying their emotional response until they could be alone. Their narratives frequently mentioned journaling, private reflection, and the need for *emotional space*:

*"When my parents start arguing, I don't really react right away. I go to my room and try to sort through how I'm feeling on my own. Sometimes I write in my journal about it, which helps me understand my emotions better. I need that alone time to process everything."* (Participant 4, Female, 13)

This pattern aligns with research suggesting that introverts tend to process information more deeply before responding (Verduyn et al., 2015) and prefer to manage emotional experiences internally rather than through external expression (Keltner & Kring, 1998). Many introverted participants (32 out of 40) mentioned using creative outlets such as writing, drawing, or music as means of expressing and processing their emotions:

*"I have this special playlist I listen to when they're fighting. The music helps me feel less alone with my feelings... sometimes I write lyrics or poems about how I feel, but I never show them to anyone."* (Participant 12, Male, 12)

## **2. Extroverted Emotional Processing**

In contrast, extroverted adolescents typically processed emotions through external expression and social interaction. They reported an immediate need to verbalize their feelings and seek validation from others:

*"As soon as my parents start fighting, I feel like I need to talk to someone about it. I usually text my best friend right away or call my cousin. Just saying how I feel out loud makes it less overwhelming. I need to get it out of my system quickly."* (Participant 7, Female, 14)

Extroverted participants were more likely to confront their emotions directly and promptly, often through conversation with others. This finding supports previous research indicating that extraverts tend to utilize social support as a primary coping mechanism (Kardum & Krapić, 2001). 33 out of 40 extroverted participants mentioned the importance of "talking it out" as a key emotional regulation strategy:

*"Keeping feelings bottled up just makes everything worse. I always feel better after I've talked about it with someone who understands. Sometimes I even talk to myself out loud if no one else is around!"* (Participant 19, Male, 13)

### **Theme 2: Social Engagement**

The extent and nature of social engagement as a coping strategy differed substantially between introverted and extroverted adolescents, reflecting their distinct social preferences and energy patterns.

#### **1. Introverted Social Engagement**

Introverted adolescents demonstrated selective and limited social engagement, typically confiding in one or two trusted individuals rather than seeking broad social support:

*I don't like telling all people about mummy-papa fights. I only tell my one best friend, she knows all. Sometimes I tell my dadi also when I feel too much inside. That's enough for me. If many people know, I feel not nice. Then they ask many-many questions and I feel tired. I only want to tell people who I like and who understand me. So, I keep most things in my head and only tell one or two."* (Participant 8, Female, 12).

Several introverted participants mentioned utilizing online platforms or forums to connect with others:

*"Sometimes I go on Instagram and see posts where kids talk about family problems. I don't talk much, but I like reading what they say. It makes me feel better because I know I'm not the only one. If I feel like it, I write something too. If I don't, I just close it and do something else."* (Participant 15, Female, 13)

This pattern is consistent with research suggesting that introverts prefer deeper one-on-one connections and may find social media a comfortable medium for seeking support (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010).

#### **2. Extroverted Social Engagement**

Extroverted adolescents utilized extensive social networks as coping resources, actively seeking support from multiple sources and engaging in group activities as distraction:

*"When things feel bad at home, I go to my best friend's house or ask her to come over and play. When we play together, I don't think about the fights at home. Sometimes I talk to my friend, my PT teacher, or my older cousin didi about it. They all say different things to help me, and it makes me feel a little better."* (Participant 2, Male, 13)

## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

Extroverted participants were more likely to initiate conversations about their experiences with parental conflict and to organize social activities as coping mechanisms:

*"Last time mummy and papa had a big fight, I called my three best friends to come and play. We talked about many things, even what was happening at home. They made me laugh and feel better. After spending time with them, I didn't feel so scared anymore."* (Participant 11, Female, 12)

This finding aligns with research suggesting that extraverts gain energy from social interaction and utilize social support more extensively during times of stress (Chu et al., 2015).

### **Theme 3: Cognitive Strategies**

Introverted and extroverted adolescents employed different cognitive strategies to make sense of and cope with parental conflict, reflecting differences in information processing and cognitive focus.

#### **1. Introverted Cognitive Processing**

Introverted adolescents engaged in deep reflection and perspective-taking, often attempting to understand the underlying causes of conflict and find meaning in difficult experiences

*"When mummy and papa fight, I keep thinking about why they are fighting. I try to understand. Sometimes I feel maybe they are upset because of work or something else. Thinking like this makes me feel it's not because of me".* (Participant 6, Female, 14)

Many introverted participants (31 out of 40) reported engaging in philosophical questioning about relationships, family dynamics, and emotional resilience:

*"When mummy and papa fight, I feel confused. I think—if they love each other, why do they still hurt each other? I also wonder if other families have the same problems but just don't say it. Sometimes I feel like all this will change how I become when I grow up"* (Participant 17, Female, 14)

This pattern supports research suggesting that introverts tend to engage in deeper cognitive processing and are more likely to seek meaning in adverse experiences (Jung et al., 2012; Cain, 2012) which also denotes emotional focused coping (Sharma et al., 2024).

#### **2. Extroverted Cognitive Processing**

Extroverted adolescents tended to employ practical problem-solving approaches and positive reframing as primary cognitive strategies:

*"When mummy and papa fight, I try to think of how to make things better. Sometimes I tell them, 'Let's go eat ice cream' or 'Let's watch a movie.' I try to do small things so everyone feels happy again."* (Participant 3, Male, 11)

Extroverted participants were more likely to view conflict as temporary and to maintain an optimistic outlook about family circumstances:

*"When mummy and papa fight, I feel sad, but I know it will not last forever. All families fight sometimes. I try to think about the happy times, like when we went to the park or had pizza together. I feel things will be okay again soon."* (Participant 9, Male, 12)

This finding aligns with research suggesting that extraverts tend to focus on positive aspects of situations and maintain optimistic perspectives even during challenging circumstances (Jackson & Schneider, 2014) that denotes problem focused coping (Saber & Mohammadzadeh, 2018).

#### ***Theme 4: Behavioural Responses***

The behavioural coping strategies employed by introverted and extroverted adolescents revealed distinct patterns in their preferred activities and physical responses to stress.

##### **1. Introverted Behavioural Responses**

Introverted adolescents typically responded to parental conflict with physical withdrawal and immersion in solitary activities:

*"When my parents start fighting, I go to my room and close the door. I wear my headphones and read my storybook or play a game. I like to be in my room when they are angry."* (Participant 10, Male, 13)

Many introverted participants (37 out of 40) engaged in creative or intellectual pursuits as coping mechanisms:

*"When there's shouting at home, I take my crayons and start colouring. It makes me feel happy and quiet inside. Sometimes I watch my favourite cartoons or do a little bit of homework. It helps me feel better when things are not nice around me."* (Participant 14, Female, 11)

This pattern is consistent with the basic past research suggesting that introverts have a naturally higher level of cortical arousal, which makes them more sensitive to external stimuli. As a result, they prefer low-stimulation environments to maintain emotional balance and reduce stress (Eysenck, 1967).

##### **2. Extroverted Behavioural Responses**

Extroverted adolescents tended to seek high-stimulation activities and social engagement as behavioural coping strategies:

*"When there is fighting at home, I don't like staying in my room. I go out to play or ride my cycle. Sometimes I call my friends to come and play. Running and playing make me feel better and not so upset"* (Participant 1, Male, 14)

Several extroverted participants (22 out of 40) reported attempts to directly intervene in or mediate parental conflicts:

*"Sometimes when they are fighting, I try to make them smile. I tell a joke or talk about something funny. One time, I even said, 'Can we talk nicely and not shout?' I feel like I should do something"* (Participant 20, Female, 13)

This finding supports research indicating High extraversion correlated strongly with problem engagement, support-seeking, positive reinterpretation, and acceptance, and negatively with avoidance strategies (Afshar et al., 2015).

#### ***Theme 5: Self-Protection Mechanisms***

Both personality types demonstrated self-protection strategies, though the specific mechanisms differed substantially between introverted and extroverted adolescents.

##### **1. Introverted Self-Protection**

Introverted adolescents often employed mental detachment and used imagination or fantasy as protective mechanisms:

*"When mumma starts shouting, I don't hear. I sit alone and I feel like I'm a superhero or I'm flying on a cloud far away from all the fighting."* (Participant 18, Male, 13)

## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

Many introverted participants (35 out of 40) described creating emotional boundaries as a form of self-protection:

*"When mummy-papa fight, I say, "Yeh unka fight hai, mera nahi!" I don't let their gussa come inside me. It's like I have a magic shield—boing boing!—nothing can hurt me!"* (Participant 4, Female, 13)

This pattern aligns with research suggesting that introverts often utilize internal psychological mechanisms for emotional regulation and self-protection (Jung et al., 2012).

### 2. Extroverted Self-Protection

Extroverted adolescents frequently used humor as a defense mechanism and tended to minimize the significance of conflicts:

*" When mummy-papa do big fight, I tell funny jokes to my bhaiya or friends (but shhh... not to mummy-papa!). When we laugh, I feel little happy. Then the fight doesn't feel so big and scary. I like being funny—it helps me not feel sad."* (Participant 5, Female, 12)

Physical distancing was another common strategy among extroverted participants:

*"When there is a fight and it gets super loud, I just go out. I say, "I'm going to my best friend's house" or "I'm going to play in the park." I don't like the shouting. Going outside makes me feel happy.* (Participant 16, Male, 14)

This finding supports previous research suggesting that extraverts may utilize behavioral strategies such as distraction and physical removal from stressors as primary coping mechanisms (Kulkarni et al., 2021).

### Theme 6: Long-Term Adaptation

The final theme concerned how adolescents adapted to chronic exposure to interparental conflict over time, with personality-specific patterns of resilience and growth emerging from the data.

#### 1. Introverted Long-Term Adaptation

Introverted adolescents reported developing rich inner worlds and emotional self-sufficiency as adaptations to ongoing family conflict:

*" I have my books, my crayons, my thoughts, and my small diary where I draw and write. When I feel sad, I hug my teddy or draw funny faces. Sometimes I feel I can manage like brave kid alone "* (Participant 10, Male, 13)

Many introverted participants (32 out of 40) described developing heightened empathy and emotional intelligence as a result of their experiences:

*"I see mumma daddy fight, so now I know when people feel sad or angry. I look at their face and hear their voice. I go, "Uh-oh, something not nice." It helps me be kind to my friends too."* (Participant 8, Female, 12)

This pattern supports research suggesting that introverts reflect on their inner thoughts which helps them to be empathetic (Eve-Cahoon, 2003) and have ability to be reflective. Introverts usually prefer writing to talking and prefer to retreat in aloneness to renew their energy (Dossey, 2016; Petric 2022).

#### 2. Extroverted Long-Term Adaptation

Extroverted adolescents reported developing enhanced conflict resolution skills and emotional resilience through their experiences:

## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

*"When people fight or get angry, I feel a little scared. I talk about something else, like my gadgets or story books. I just want sab thik hojao. I do same with my friends"* (Participant 7, Female, 14)

Many extroverted participants (34 out of 40) described developing greater adaptability to change and uncertainty:

*"Sometimes mummy-papa start fighting suddenly, and I feel not nice inside. But then I say in my head, "Okay, what to do now?" I quickly change my thinking. Sometimes I stay quiet, sometimes I go to another room. If we smile this will get better. I think I got a little strong now!"* (Participant 19, Male, 13)

This finding aligns with research suggesting that extraverts use more of social support, social skills and desire to work with others which helps in conflict resolution (Rahaman et al, 2010).

They are better at handling challenges than others, which minimizes the harmful effects of going through distress (Agbaria and Mokh, 2022).

## DISCUSSION

This study identified clear yet overlapping patterns in how introverted and extroverted adolescents perceive and cope with interparental conflict. The results affirm existing theories of personality-based stress responses while extending them to family conflict contexts.

Introverted adolescents relied on internal coping i.e. solitary reflection, emotional rumination, and meaning-making that is consistent with earlier findings (Verduyn et al., 2015) and neurobiological evidence linking acetylcholine with sustained focus and introspection (Hasselmo & Sarter, 2011). Their inward orientation reflects Jung's (1971) conception of introversion as engagement with inner thoughts and emotions.

Extroverted adolescents showed active, socially oriented coping, seeking support and external engagement (Swickert et al., 2002; Kardum & Krapić, 2001). Yet, our results reveal nuances: introverts sought limited support typically from one or two trusted individuals or controlled online settings illustrating a preference for depth over breadth (Cain, 2012). Extroverts, often seen as socially dependent (Eysenck, 1967), used socialization not only for support but also for distraction, cognitive reframing, and practicing conflict resolution, suggesting a multifaceted adaptive role.

Personality also shaped long-term adaptation. Introverts developed empathy and rich inner worlds, while extroverts cultivated flexibility and interpersonal problem-solving, aligning with stress-related growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) but highlighting personality-specific growth pathways. Both groups used avoidance, though differently: extroverts physically withdrew yet discussed the experience, while introverts maintained physical presence but created mental distance.

These findings correspond with attachment theory. Secure attachment, linked with reflective, selective support-seeking, parallels introverted coping (Camisasca et al., 2017; Scharf et al., 2004; Seiffge-Krenke & Beyers, 2005), whereas anxious attachment patterns mirror extroverted tendencies toward emotional expression and social validation (Seiffge-Krenke & Beyers, 2005).

## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

Overall, personality meaningfully shapes adolescents' emotional regulation and resilience under family stress, underscoring the need for personality-sensitive psychological support.

### CONCLUSION

This study highlights how adolescents' personalities shape their perceptions and coping responses to interparental conflict. Introverts tend to manage emotions through reflection, solitude, and inner regulation, while extroverts rely on social interaction, humor, and active engagement to relieve stress. Recognizing these personality-based differences is essential for developing interventions that align with adolescents' natural coping styles. Tailoring psychological support to individual traits can enhance emotional resilience and promote healthy adjustment amid family conflict. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples and explore the comparative effectiveness of different coping strategies to better understand personality-driven adaptation in stressful family environments.

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## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

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## Coping Strategies of Adolescents Facing Interparental Conflict: A Qualitative Study

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