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Research Paper

Parental Psychological Control and Interpersonal Dynamics: Insights from a School-Based Correlational Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study set out to understand whether parents' psychological control is linked to how adolescents get along with friends and classmates, focusing on school-going youth aged 10–18 years. **Method:** A correlational design was used with a convenience sample of 70 students (37 females, 33 males; M_age = 13.68 years, SD = 2.17). Participants completed the Psychological Control Scale–Youth Self-Report (PCS-YSR) alongside brief measures of everyday interpersonal dynamics. **Results:** The association between parental psychological control and adolescents' interpersonal dynamics was small and not statistically significant ($r = -.098$, $p = .421$), suggesting a negligible relationship in this sample. The pattern did not meaningfully differ by age or gender. **Conclusions:** In this group of adolescents, higher psychological control at home did not directly map onto day-to-day peer relationship quality. Given the small, non-significant effect, future work should include larger samples and test "in-between" processes—such as autonomy development and the quality of peer ties—that may explain when and how psychological control affects social functioning.

Keywords: *Parental Psychological Control, Interpersonal Dynamics, Adolescents, Correlational Study, Peer Relationships*

Adolescence is a turning point in life. It's when young people renegotiate their place in the family, deepen friendships, and start forming relationship patterns that often last into adulthood (Zhang et al., 2024). During this period, the parent–teen relationship usually becomes more complex. Teens want greater independence, yet they also value connection with both family and peers (Kiuru et al., 2020). One parenting style that strongly shapes this balance is psychological control—a form of influence that research has consistently linked to problems in emotional and social development (Manindjo et al., 2023; Pérez et al., 2021).

Parental Psychological Control: Concept and Impact

Psychological control goes beyond normal rule-setting. It involves parents trying to steer their child's thoughts and feelings through tactics like guilt, emotional blackmail, withdrawing affection, or personal criticism (Barber, 1996; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Unlike healthy behavioral control, which helps guide behavior with rules and structure,

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psychological control intrudes on a child's sense of autonomy and undermines their self-worth (Barber, 2002).

Barber's early research made this distinction clear and highlighted its harmful effects (Barber & Harmon, 2002). His Psychological Control Scale-Youth Self-Report (PCSYSR) (Barber, 1996) remains widely used to capture how adolescents experience this form of parenting. It focuses on areas such as invalidating feelings, restricting expression, personal attacks, and love withdrawal (Habibi Asgarabad et al., 2023; Muttaqin et al., 2024).

Across cultures, the evidence points in the same direction: psychological control is damaging. It has been linked to depression and anxiety (Nijssens et al., 2018), aggressive or delinquent behavior (Safdar & Khan, 2019), and social difficulties such as conflict or withdrawal from peers (Qian et al., 2022). These risks are particularly high during adolescence, a period when identity and autonomy are still taking shape (Loeb et al., 2021).

Self-Determination Theory and Psychological Control

Self-Determination Theory offers a down-to-earth way to understand why certain parenting tactics sting so much during the teen years: it says people do best when three needs are met—feeling free to choose (autonomy), feeling capable (competence), and feeling connected (relatedness). When those needs are supported, teens tend to lean into challenges, take healthy risks, and show up more fully in their relationships; when they aren't, motivation drops, stress rises, and everyday tasks start to feel heavier than they should (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Psychological control undercuts these needs at the root—especially autonomy—by trying to steer a teen's thoughts or feelings instead of guiding behavior, which leaves them feeling boxed in rather than genuinely guided (Costa et al., 2019). Over time, that loss of freedom spills into the other two needs: confidence wobbles (competence), closeness feels less safe (relatedness), and trust in both family and friends can erode, making it harder to build steady, mutually supportive relationships (Costa et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2024).

Interpersonal Dynamics in Adolescence

These are the years when social circles open up and get more complicated. Teens figure out who feels safe, who listens, and who sticks around. They practice being a good friend, learn when to trust, try out closeness, and make sense of conflict without burning bridges. Little by little, they find where they fit—on the team, in a group chat, at lunch, or with one or two people who really get them (Cook et al., 2015; Dietz et al., 2022).

When those relationships go well, they make a real difference. A teen who feels backed by friends usually sleeps better, shows up more, and has more energy for school and life. It's easier to focus in class, ask for help, and bounce back after a rough day when there's someone to lean on (Allen & Loeb, 2015; Anttila et al., 2017). But if friendships are tense or lonely, it can wear a teen down. Worry builds, school gets harder, and pulling away can become a habit that makes everything feel even heavier (Brendgen et al., 2005).

A lot of this starts at home. Early caregiving—being comforted, listened to, and taken seriously—teaches a child what closeness should feel like. That template doesn't disappear in the teen years; it grows with them. Teens who felt securely connected to their caregivers tend to speak up more clearly, calm themselves more effectively, and choose friends who

treat them well. Those early experiences make it easier to build the kind of peer connections that help them thrive (Bowlby, 1988; Delgado et al., 2022; Harrist & Criss, 2021).

How Psychological Control Affects Friendships

When parents try to steer a teen's thoughts and feelings, it rarely stays contained at home; it spills into how that teen shows up with friends, making trust feel fragile and sharing honestly a lot harder (Dishion et al., 2019). Without meaning to, teens often carry those same patterns into their circles—reading the room for approval, holding back feelings, or trying to manage others just to avoid conflict or rejection (Whittington & Turner, 2023).

These aren't small ripples; they can reshape daily life with peers in noticeable ways (Fu et al., 2025). Teens under heavy psychological control often go quiet in groups, pull back from people they care about, or feel a knot of worry in social situations that used to feel easy (Fu et al., 2025). Some swing the other way and push limits or take risks—not because they don't care, but because grabbing control anywhere can feel better than feeling controlled everywhere (Zhang et al., 2024).

Trust is usually the first thing to shrink, and confidence tends to thin out next, which makes keeping steady, mutual friendships much harder over time (Zhao et al., 2024). The good news is that this can change: small, repeated moments of being heard and chosen by safe friends can slowly rebuild what controlling dynamics took apart, especially when family and school supports are tuned into what teens actually need (Dishion et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2024).

Interpersonal Relationships and Social Development

Friendships are more than just hanging out—they're central to how teens grow emotionally and socially (Myloslavska et al., 2023). Kiuru et al. (2020) showed that good friends and school life are connected: supportive friendships make teens more engaged in school, and being engaged at school helps strengthen friendships (Kiuru et al., 2020).

Friendships are complicated. Aydoğdu (2021) highlights four important aspects: intimacy, popularity, trust, and insightfulness. Friendships aren't just about fun—they're about understanding each other, relying on each other, and feeling supported (Aydoğdu, 2021).

Family also plays a huge role. Teens with secure attachments to their parents are more likely to develop strong friendships, full of trust, open communication, and mutual support (Delgado et al., 2022; Radzilani, 2024). In other words, the way teens relate to their family often becomes the blueprint for how they relate to friends.

Culture and Context Shape Control

Every family has its own vibe—how love and rules mix, what's "normal," and what feels like too much. What seems like caring advice to one teenager can feel like suffocating pressure to another (Chen et al., 2024; Pu & Gan, 2025).

Think about a household where school success is a badge of honor for the whole family. Parents might remind their teen, "Your grandparents sacrificed so much for your education," or say, "Why can't you be like your cousin who's always top of the class?" In China, researchers found these three go-to moves:

1. Leaning on family pride—"Remember how hard Grandpa worked so you could go to school."
2. Pulling back affection—showing disappointment or distanced behavior when teens don't meet expectations.
3. Comparing kids—"Your friend already got an A. What's your excuse?"

In cultures that stress group success, these conversations can feel natural—part of staying connected. But in places that value personal freedom, they can feel controlling and hurtful. No matter where it happens, teens under this kind of pressure often doubt themselves and struggle to trust others.

At its heart, most parents who use these tactics believe they're motivating their kids. They want the best for their teens. The trick is finding a middle ground—honoring family traditions while giving teenagers enough breathing room to figure out who they are (Pu & Gan, 2025; Zhu et al., 2023).

Current Study

A lot is known about how parents' psychologically controlling behavior affects teens, but fewer studies have looked straight at how this type of parenting connects to everyday social life at school using standard, well-tested measures. This study set out to fill that gap by examining whether parental psychological control is linked to adolescents' day-to-day interpersonal dynamics in a school setting. The focus was on students aged 10–18 years, and the goal was to see if the two move together in meaningful ways.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal dynamics among school-going adolescents?
2. Do age and gender change (moderate) the strength or direction of the link between parental psychological control and interpersonal dynamics?

Hypotheses

Based on Self-Determination Theory and earlier studies, the study tested two ideas:

1. There would be a clear negative link between parental psychological control and interpersonal dynamics—meaning, higher psychological control would go along with more difficulty in social functioning.
2. Age and gender would shape this link, with stronger effects expected in older adolescents and potentially different patterns for girls and boys.

METHOD

Participants

This study used a convenience sample of 70 school-going students recruited from a government school in Delhi. Ages ranged from 10.0 to 18.0 years (M = 13.68, SD = 2.17). The sample included 37 females (52.9%) and 33 males (47.1%). All students were in regular schooling and none reported severe psychological or developmental challenges that would prevent them from completing questionnaires.

Inclusion criteria:

- Ages 10–18 years
- Currently enrolled in school

- Able to read and understand English well enough to complete questionnaires
- Parent/guardian consent for participants under 18 (and assent from the adolescent); consent for those 18

Exclusion criteria:

- Severe cognitive impairments that would interfere with completing questionnaires
- Ongoing family therapy or counseling specifically focused on parent–child relationship issues
- Inability to provide informed assent (for minors) or consent

Measures

- **Parental Psychological Control**: Parental psychological control was measured using the Psychological Control Scale–Youth Self-Report (PCS-YSR), developed by Barber (1996) (Barber, 1996). This brief questionnaire has eight items that ask teens how often their parents do things like make them feel guilty, criticize them personally, or act like they know exactly what they're thinking or feeling. Each item is rated on a straightforward 3-point scale, from "not like my parent" to "a lot like my parent." Past research has shown that this scale performs well, with solid reliability and consistent links to things like parental warmth and autonomy support — higher psychological control tends to show up with less warmth (Rodríguez-Menéndez et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). In this study, teens completed the scale separately for mothers and fathers, and those scores were combined to form an overall measure of parental psychological control.
- **Interpersonal Dynamics**: To capture how well teens got along with their peers, we used a combined measure based on several established questionnaires (Aydoğdu, 2021). This measure includes questions about trust, intimacy, communication, and overall social skills—things that matter for everyday friendships. Adolescents rated statements on a 5-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Higher scores mean stronger, more positive connections with friends.

Procedure

Our study followed strict ethical guidelines approved by an Institutional Review Board. Parents or guardians of participants under 18 gave permission, and the teens themselves agreed to participate. Those who were 18 or older consented themselves. We collected data at schools during regular class periods. Participants were told the surveys were voluntary, confidential, and they could stop anytime without any problems. The questionnaires started with basic background questions, moved on to the parental psychological control scale, and finished with the interpersonal dynamics measure. Trained assistants were on hand to answer questions and keep the environment calm and supportive. Completing the surveys took about 25 to 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

We analyzed all the data using SPSS version 28. First, we checked for any errors, missing values, or data that didn't seem right. Then we calculated basic summary statistics to get a sense of the sample. Our main analysis looked at how parental psychological control scores related to interpersonal dynamics scores using Pearson's correlation. We interpreted the size of this relationship using well-known guidelines that say correlations around .10 are small, .30 medium, and .50 large (Sharma et al., 2020). Beyond that, we tested whether age or gender changed how these two variables related by comparing boys and girls and looking at

how age linked to each. To back up the numbers, we reported both statistical significance at the .05 level and confidence intervals to reflect how precise our estimates were.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all study variables. Parental psychological control scores ranged from 17.71 to 31.54 (M = 22.45, SD = 2.42, indicating moderate levels of perceived psychological control in the sample. Interpersonal dynamics scores ranged from 57.19 to 88.26 (M = 72.19, SD = 7.41, suggesting generally positive interpersonal functioning among participants.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum (Min)	Maximum (Max)	Skewness	Kurtosis
Age	13.68	2.17	10	18	0.24	-0.89
Parental Psychological Control	22.45	2.42	17.71	31.54	0.51	1.18
Interpersonal Dynamics	72.19	7.41	57.19	88.26	0.15	-0.43

Primary Analysis: Correlation Between Parental Psychological Control and Interpersonal Dynamics

This analysis tested whether higher parental psychological control was linked to teens' day-to-day social functioning, and the pattern came out small and statistically non-significant, r(68) =−0.098, p=.421, 95% CI[−.338,.143]. In practical terms, the estimate sits close to zero and the confidence interval spans both negative and positive values, which means the data do not support a clear directional association in this sample. The effect size was negligible, with shared variance (R^2) indicating parental psychological control accounted for roughly 1% of the variability in interpersonal dynamics. Taken together, these results suggest no reliable linear link between the two constructs in this dataset.

Age-Related Associations

Age did not show meaningful ties to either parental psychological control or interpersonal dynamics, r(68) = -0.018, p=.885 and r(68)=.159, p=.190, respectively. Within this group, younger and older adolescents reported broadly similar levels of perceived control at home and similar patterns in peer relationships. The absence of significant age trends points to a fairly stable picture across the 10–18 year range in this sample.

Gender Differences

Group comparisons indicated no significant gender differences in parental psychological control, t(68)=0.168, p=.867, with mean scores that were very close for females (M=22.49,SD=2.51) and males (M=22.40,SD=2.35). Interpersonal dynamics also did not differ significantly by gender, t(68)=0.446, p=.657, with similarly close means for females (M=72.56,SD=7.52) and males (M=71.76,SD=7.33). Overall, the small numerical gaps were not large enough to indicate meaningful gender-based differences in this sample.

Additional Exploratory Analyses

Checks of the data quality were reassuring: visuals and residuals suggested no extreme outliers and no violations that would distort the correlation estimates. The linearity assumption appeared reasonable, supporting the use of Pearson correlations for the main tests. At the same time, a somewhat limited spread (restriction of range) in one or both variables could have dampened observable associations, which is worth noting when interpreting small effects.

DISCUSSION

This study followed 70 school-going adolescents (ages 10–18) to see whether perceived psychological control at home tracks with how teens navigate friendships and peer life, and the central association was negligible and non-significant, $r = -0.098$, $p=.421$. The pattern contrasts with expectations of a clear negative link and with some prior reports connecting psychological control to social difficulties, suggesting that the relationship may be weaker, more context-dependent, or more indirect in this particular sample. As a result, the findings encourage caution about assuming a straightforward, immediate tie between these constructs and point toward the value of testing larger samples and possible pathways that mediate or condition the link.

Interpretation of Findings

A few practical issues likely shaped what showed up in the data. First, with a modest sample size ($N = 70$), the study may simply not have had enough statistical power to pick up small or moderate effects; by standard guidance, at least 84 participants are typically needed to detect a medium correlation of $r =.30$ at 80% power and $\alpha =.05$(Sharma et al., 2020). In other words, if the real association is subtle, this study was better equipped to find only larger effects, which could explain the non-significant result. Second, the wide age range (10–18 years) brings together youth at very different developmental moments, which can blur patterns that are stronger at specific stages—especially mid to late adolescence, when autonomy becomes a bigger theme (Delgado et al., 2022; Loeb et al., 2021). Third, the interpersonal dynamics measure drew from multiple elements rather than relying on a single, fully validated instrument, which can introduce noise or miss the exact social processes most tied to psychological control; future work could lean on established tools, such as the Peer Relationship Scale, to sharpen the signal (Aydoğdu, 2021).

Theoretical Implications

Viewed through a theoretical lens, these results invite a more nuanced reading than a simple "no link." Self-Determination Theory and prior studies often point to a direct, negative tie between parental psychological control and teens' social functioning, but development rarely moves in straight lines. It is increasingly clear that mediators and moderators—what happens in between, and for whom—can shape whether an effect appears in the first place (Dietz et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). For example, shyness and interpersonal self-support have been shown to carry the impact of psychological control to trust in peers, which means the influence may be indirect and easy to miss without testing those pathways (Zhao et al., 2024). Timing matters, too: perceived control at 13 has been linked to later relationship quality and educational outcomes via mid-adolescent maturity and peer acceptance, changes that can unfold over years rather than months (Loeb et al., 2021).

Implications for Future Research

A few next steps could make the signal clearer. First, larger samples (on the order of 100–150) would better detect small to moderate correlations and stabilize estimates. Second, longitudinal designs could track how parenting and peer functioning co-evolve and whether changes in one reliably precede changes in the other. Third, using multiple validated measures of interpersonal functioning—such as the NIH Toolbox Pediatric Social Relationship Scales or other established tools—can capture the many layers of teen relationships more precisely (Anttila et al., 2017). Finally, testing mediators like autonomy development, emotion regulation, self-esteem, and social skills can show how psychological control travels into peer life, and for whom those pathways are strongest.

Clinical and Practical Implications

Even without a clear direct link in this dataset, the broader literature suggests practical steps worth taking. Clinicians can screen for psychologically controlling patterns alongside teen social stress and coach families on the difference between firm, consistent behavioral limits and tactics that intrude on a young person's inner life. Parent programs that keep boundaries intact while honoring autonomy needs often fit adolescence best. In schools, targeted social-skills and relationship-building supports—especially for teens exposed to higher control at home—can strengthen trust, communication, and emotion regulation where they matter most: in daily peer interactions.

Limitations

Several constraints frame these findings. The sample size limited power to detect smaller effects. The cross-sectional approach prevents statements about direction or causality. Self-report only can inflate shared method variance and miss perspectives from parents, teachers, or peers. The convenience sampling from a single region narrows generalizability. The composite interpersonal measure, while comprehensive, lacked established psychometrics and may not have isolated the most relevant social dimensions. Finally, key mediators and moderators were not assessed, leaving open roles for temperament, family structure, peer group features, and broader social contexts.

CONCLUSION

In this school-based sample of adolescents, perceived parental psychological control did not show a significant direct tie to interpersonal dynamics. That outcome, though, underscores complexity rather than closure: effects may be smaller, unfold indirectly through social-emotional pathways, or emerge over longer stretches of development. Larger, longitudinal, and culturally diverse studies that use validated social measures—and that test mediators and moderators head-on—are well-positioned to reveal when psychological control undermines peer life, for whom, and through which everyday processes.

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Conflict of Interest

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