

Research Paper

Family Problem-Solving Ability and the Influence of Gender Among Adolescents: A Preliminary Finding

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ABSTRACT

Family problem-solving ability is a critical determinant of adolescent psychosocial development. The present study aimed to examine the levels of family problem-solving ability among adolescents and to analyze the influence of gender on these abilities. A sample of 100 adolescents aged 13–15 years was selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected using a structured socio-demographic sheet and a standardized family problem-solving ability scale. Descriptive statistics, chi-square test, and independent samples t-test were employed for data analysis. Results revealed that a majority (66%) of adolescents exhibited healthy family problem-solving ability, while 34% demonstrated unhealthy levels. A significant gender difference was observed, with female adolescents showing higher mean problem-solving scores than males ($t = -2.254, p < .05$). The findings highlight the importance of gender-sensitive approaches to enhancing family problem-solving skills among adolescents.

Keywords: *Family Problem-Solving, Adolescents, Gender Differences, Family Dynamics*

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional changes, during which individuals strive for autonomy while remaining embedded within the family system. The family continues to serve as the primary socializing unit, significantly influencing adolescents' emotional regulation, decision-making, and interpersonal development (Steinberg, 2001). Among the various dimensions of family functioning, family problem-solving ability plays a central role in shaping adolescents' adjustment and well-being. It refers to family members' capacity to effectively identify, communicate, and resolve conflicts through cooperative, constructive strategies (Olson et al., 2018).

Effective family problem-solving has been consistently associated with positive developmental outcomes, including better psychological adjustment, higher self-esteem, and improved social competence among adolescents (Van Doorn et al., 2011). Families characterized by open communication, cohesion, and adaptability tend to promote adaptive

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coping and resilience. In contrast, dysfunctional problem-solving patterns—such as avoidance, hostility, and poor communication—are linked to increased emotional distress, behavioral problems, and maladjustment (Grych & Fincham, 2020). Thus, understanding adolescents' experiences within family problem-solving contexts is crucial for promoting healthy developmental trajectories. Recent research has increasingly emphasized the role of family functioning in shaping adolescents' psychosocial outcomes. According to Shek (2002), positive family processes such as communication, emotional bonding, and collaborative problem-solving significantly predict adolescent well-being and reduce behavioral problems. Similarly, Barber and Olsen (1997) highlighted that supportive parenting and effective conflict resolution contribute to better emotional regulation among adolescents.

In the Indian context, Rao (2013) found that adolescents from cohesive families demonstrated greater emotional stability and better coping mechanisms than those from conflict-prone households. Another study by Deb et al. (2015) reported that family environment, particularly problem-solving and communication patterns, plays a crucial role in reducing stress and academic pressure among Indian adolescents.

Gender is another significant factor influencing family problem-solving ability during adolescence. Socialization processes and culturally defined gender roles shape how boys and girls express emotions, communicate, and approach conflicts (Miller & Byrnes, 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that girls are more likely to adopt collaborative, communication-oriented, and emotion-focused strategies, emphasizing empathy and relationship maintenance. Matud (2004) observed that females tend to adopt emotion-focused and social support-seeking coping strategies, whereas males are more likely to use avoidance or problem-focused strategies. Supporting this, Rose and Rudolph (2006) suggested that girls' interpersonal orientation enhances their ability to engage in collaborative problem-solving, particularly in family and peer contexts. Further, Eisenberg et al. (2005) found that emotional competence, which is often higher among girls due to socialization practices, is strongly associated with effective problem-solving and conflict resolution.

In contrast, boys' lower emotional expressiveness may limit their engagement in family discussions, affecting their problem-solving outcomes. In contrast, boys tend to use more task-oriented or avoidant approaches, often minimizing emotional expression in favor of action-based solutions (Pahl & Barrett, 2021). Some studies have also highlighted the influence of family structure. Saini and Singh (2017) reported that adolescents from nuclear families tend to exhibit better decision-making skills due to increased autonomy. In contrast, those from joint families benefit from collective problem-solving experiences. These differences reflect not only biological tendencies but also societal expectations and gender norms. Family interaction patterns further reinforce these gender differences. Research indicates that parents often engage differently with sons and daughters, encouraging emotional expression and interpersonal communication in girls while promoting independence and assertiveness in boys (Hutchinson & Baldwin, 2020). Such differential socialization contributes to variations in how adolescents participate in family problem-solving processes. Additionally, studies have shown that girls are more likely to seek social support during conflicts, whereas boys tend to rely on individual coping strategies (Luria & Toren, 2020).

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Despite the growing body of literature, findings on gender differences in family problem-solving remain inconsistent and context-dependent. Some studies suggest that boys may perform better in structured or analytical problem-solving tasks, whereas girls excel in interpersonal and collaborative contexts (Okafor & Anierobi, 2017). Moreover, much of the existing research relies on cross-sectional designs and focuses predominantly on Western populations, limiting the generalizability of findings. There is also a relative lack of studies that specifically examine adolescents' perspectives on family problem-solving, particularly within diverse cultural settings.

Despite these findings, there remains a lack of integrated research examining both family problem-solving ability and gender simultaneously, particularly in culturally diverse settings. This gap underscores the importance of the present study. In this context, the present study aims to assess adolescents' family problem-solving abilities and examine the influence of gender on these abilities. By addressing existing gaps in the literature, the study seeks to deepen understanding of adolescent development and inform interventions to enhance family functioning and promote effective problem-solving skills.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Objective: To examine family problem-solving ability and its gender differences among adolescents.

Hypothesis: There is a significant gender difference in family problem-solving ability among adolescents.

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design to assess family problem-solving ability and examine gender differences and associations among adolescents.

Sample

The sample consisted of 100 adolescents aged between 13 and 15 years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Data was collected entirely from CBSE-affiliated schools in and around Guwahati city, Kamrup (M) district.

Instruments Used

1. **Socio-Demographic Data Sheet** – Used to collect information on gender, age, family type, and birth order.
2. **The Family Assessment Device (FAD):** Family problem-solving ability in the present study was assessed using the Family Assessment Device (FAD) developed by Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop (1983). The FAD is a widely used self-report instrument designed to evaluate structural and organizational properties of family functioning, based on the McMaster Model of Family Functioning. The scale consists of multiple subscales, including problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control, and general functioning. For this study, the problem-solving subscale was used to assess the family's ability to resolve problems effectively while maintaining family functioning. In the present

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study, the scale was administered in a structured format, and scores were categorized into healthy and unhealthy levels of family problem-solving ability based on established cut-off criteria. Responses are recorded on a Likert-type scale, typically ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with higher scores indicating poorer family functioning (or vice versa, depending on scoring direction).

Procedure

Data were collected after obtaining informed consent from participants and relevant authorities. Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity. The tools were administered in a structured setting.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics; the chi-square test to assess levels of problem-solving ability and the independent samples t-test to examine gender differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Sample Distribution and Socio-Demographic Characteristics

N=100

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	50	50.5
	Female	50	50.5
Age	13 yrs	16	16.0
	14 yrs	37	37.0
	15 yrs	47	47.0
Family type	Nuclear	68	68.0
	Joint	23	23.0
	Extended	9	9.0
Birth order	1 st child	57	57.0
	2 nd child	38	38.0
	3 rd child	5	5.0

The sample consisted of 50 males (50%) and 50 females (50%). The majority of participants were aged 15 years (47%), followed by 14 years (37%) and 13 years (16%). Most adolescents belonged to nuclear families (68%), while 23% were from joint families and 9% from extended families. Regarding birth order, 57% were first-borns, 38% were second-borns, and 5% were third-borns.

Table 2: Levels of Family Problem-Solving Ability

Level	Frequency (N=100)	Percent	Statistics
Healthy	66	66.0	$\chi^2 = 10.240$; $p = .001$
Unhealthy	34	34.0	

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Out of 100 adolescents, 66% demonstrated healthy problem-solving ability, whereas 34% exhibited unhealthy levels. The chi-square analysis indicated that the distribution was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 10.240$, $p = .001$), suggesting that a significantly higher proportion of adolescents fall under the healthy category.

Table 3: Influence of Gender on Family Problem-Solving Ability

<i>Gender</i>	<i>N=100</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Statistics</i>
Male	50	2.03	.47232	$t = -2.254$; $p = .026$
Female	50	2.24	.43832	

The independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between male and female adolescents. Female adolescents ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .43832$) scored higher than male adolescents ($M = 2.03$, $SD = .47232$). The difference was statistically significant ($t = -2.254$, $p = .026$), indicating that gender plays a significant role in family problem-solving ability.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined family problem-solving ability among adolescents and its association with gender. The findings revealed that most adolescents demonstrated healthy levels of problem-solving ability. This suggests that most families in the sample provide a supportive environment that encourages communication and collaborative conflict resolution. This finding aligns with Shek's (2002) emphasis that positive family interactions promote psychological well-being and adaptive functioning in adolescents. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that positive family dynamics contribute to better adolescent adjustment and coping skills (Olson et al., 2018).

The significant gender difference observed in the study indicates that female adolescents exhibit greater family problem-solving ability than males. This finding aligns with existing literature suggesting that girls tend to adopt more collaborative and communication-oriented approaches to problem-solving, whereas boys are more likely to engage in task-focused or avoidant strategies (Miller & Byrnes, 2019; Pahl & Barrett, 2021). Socialization processes may play a crucial role in shaping these differences, as girls are often encouraged to express emotions and engage in interpersonal communication. At the same time, boys are socialized toward independence and emotional restraint.

Existing literature on gender differences in adolescent problem-solving ability remains inconsistent. While some studies report superior interpersonal problem-solving skills among females (Murphy & Ross, 1987), others demonstrate male advantages in structured cognitive tasks (Nwosu & Okoye, 2017). Additionally, certain research indicates negligible gender differences, emphasizing the role of contextual and familial factors (Van Doorn et al., 2011) whereas other findings suggest that family dynamics may differentially impact males and females (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). These contradictory findings highlight the need for further research examining gender within specific family contexts. The significant chi-square result suggests that the distribution of healthy versus unhealthy problem-solving is not random, indicating a meaningful pattern in family functioning. This supports the Circumplex Model of Family Systems proposed by Olson et al. (2018), which highlights that balanced families with effective communication and adaptability tend to exhibit healthier problem-solving patterns.

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Additionally, family interaction patterns may contribute to these gender differences. Parents interact differently with boys and girls, encouraging emotional expression and discussion more with girls than with boys (Hutchinson & Baldwin, 2020). This differential treatment may enhance girls' ability to participate effectively in family problem-solving processes. This result is consistent with prior research indicating that girls are more likely to engage in collaborative and emotionally expressive problem-solving strategies (Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Matud, 2004). A study by Murphy and Ross (1987) found that female adolescents demonstrated superior social problem-solving abilities compared to males, even after controlling for variables like language proficiency. This suggests that girls may possess stronger interpersonal and adaptive problem-solving skills. In contrast, male adolescents demonstrated relatively lower problem-solving ability. This finding can be understood in light of traditional gender socialization practices, where boys are often encouraged to suppress emotional expression and adopt independent coping strategies (Eisenberg et al., 2005). Such tendencies may limit their involvement in family communication processes, thereby affecting their problem-solving skills. Additionally, Rao (2013) highlighted that supportive family environments enhance emotional maturity, which is closely linked to effective problem-solving.

The findings also highlight the importance of promoting effective problem-solving skills among adolescents, particularly among males who may benefit from interventions that encourage emotional expression and communication. Schools, counselors, and family-based programs can play a vital role in developing these skills through structured training and awareness programs.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and a relatively small sample size, which may limit generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs and include diverse populations to understand developmental changes in family problem-solving ability better.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings have important implications for educators, counsellors, and families. Programs aimed at enhancing family communication and problem-solving skills should be implemented in schools and community settings. Gender-sensitive interventions can help address differences in problem-solving approaches and promote emotional expression among male adolescents.

CONCLUSION

Family problem-solving ability plays a crucial role in shaping an adolescent's self-concept of intellectual and school status. Families that foster positive problem-solving skills provide emotional support, teach coping mechanisms, model effective communication, and offer encouragement, all of which contribute to a stronger sense of self in academic and intellectual contexts. As a result, adolescents from supportive, problem-solving families are more likely to view themselves as competent, confident, and capable in both intellectual pursuits and social standing at school. The study concludes that most adolescents exhibit healthy family problem-solving skills and that gender significantly influences these skills. Female adolescents demonstrate higher problem-solving skills than males. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to strengthen family problem-solving skills and promote healthy adolescent development.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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