

# PREADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: DETERMINING THE ASSOCIATION WITH MATERNAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL AND FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

N Roman (PhD)

## Corresponding Address

Dr Nicky Roman  
Senior Lecturer  
Social Work Department  
Programme Manager: Child and Family Studies  
University of the Western Cape  
Email:nroman@uwc.ac.za

## Abstract

**Background:** The family and parents could either provide protective factors or initiate vulnerability for children who are exposed to a high-risk environment such as crime in a community. The aim of this study was to examine the relationships between maternal psychological control, family environment (cohesion and conflict) and the psychological well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction with life) of preadolescents.

**Methods:** A quantitative approach with a cross-sectional correlational design was used to obtain self-reported data from 412 preadolescents. The mean age of participants was 11 years with the majority being female (60%) in Grade 5. The Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory and the Satisfaction with Life Scale were used to assess the psychological well-being of preadolescents, the Parent Psychological Control Questionnaire for psychologically controlling parenting practices and the Family Environment Scale for family functioning.

**Results:** The results suggest that scores were relatively high on both self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Mothers were not perceived as applying strong psychologically controlling parenting practices. Families were perceived as being more cohesive and had less conflict. Regression analysis results show that the combination of family environment and maternal psychological control accounted for 22% of the variance in self-esteem and 12% of the variance in satisfaction with life.

**Conclusion:** The findings provide an understanding of how enhancing and hindering environments could predict psychological well-being of children. Interventions for parents should include a broad family-based perspective so as to show parents the implications of their choice of parenting on child well-being.

**Keywords:** maternal psychological control, preadolescence, family environment, well-being

## Introduction

Family environment is crucial to child well-being. Children living in supportive and organized families are more likely to have increased self-confidence, social competence, and be more self-sufficient, with decreased anxiety (Moos & Moos, 2002). Child-parent and family functioning can either provide protective factors or initiate vulnerability for children who are exposed to a high-risk environment such as crime in a community (Chipman et al., 2000; El-Sheikh & Buckhalt, 2003). Family risk factors could include family stress, family conflict, low socio-economic status and poor parenting. Alternatively, family protective factors could include family

cohesion, family social support and family moral-religious orientation and positive parenting. Family risk and protective factors have been found to be related adaptive and maladaptive child outcomes respectively (Prevatt, 2003). Thus the family, as the first socializing agent in the child's development, could provide an environment from which children could evolve as adaptive or maladaptive adults.

According to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) environments such as the family, school and peer interactions, can play a crucial role in a child's psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 95; Vansteenkiste, 2005). These environments can

either be enhancing or hindering and can be experienced as controlling or autonomy-supportive. Controlling events in the environment are experienced “as pressure to think, feel or behave in specified ways” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 95). This study focuses on psychologically controlling parenting which could provide a hindering family environment.

Psychologically controlling parenting is defined as “control attempts that intrude into the psychological and emotional development of the child (e.g. thinking processes, self-expression, emotions and attachment to parents)” (Barber, 1996, p. 3296). It is “insidious” and impacts on the psychological development of the individual at all levels. In other words psychological control is hindering and restraining as well as imposing, creating an image of enforcing suffering or misery. Psychologically controlling parenting creates this image by either overtly or covertly applying love withdrawal, guilt induction, disappointment and shame and possessiveness and protectiveness (Barber, 1996, p. 3297).

Research studies have linked psychological control to lowered self-esteem levels, higher drop-out rates at school and maladaptive learning attitudes (Bean, Bush, McKenry & Wilson, 2003; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens & Soenens, 2005). Psychological control has also been positively associated with harsh

parenting and children's externalising problems such as substance abuse and theft as well as internalising symptoms such as anxiety/depression for girls and for teens who were high in preadolescent anxiety/depression (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005; Soenens, 2006). Soenens (2006) found psychological control to be stronger related to self-concept functioning than to external behaviour. In other words when parents are psychologically controlling, the direct effects for the child are more with regard to feelings of worthlessness, anxiety and depression than committing crime.

Parenting plays a major role in the family environment (Hill, 1995). For example, when parenting is too controlling, the family environment could make children feel stifled, incompetent and unaccepted. This could eventually result in conflicts between parents and children. In terms of Self Determination Theory, psychological control could result in conflict because the individual is unable to act in a self-determined way (Grolnick, 2003, p. 20).

Mandara and Murray (2002) conducted a study to identify different types of African American families and found there were three types of African-American families by linking family environment and a particular parenting style. Mandara and Murray (2002) used the family environment scale of Moos and Moos (2002) which suggests that there are three family environment dimensions within the family.

Dimension	Subscale	Aim
Relationship	Cohesion Conflict Expressiveness	These subscales examine how families are perceived based on the expressions of concern and commitment in the family, anger, conflict and feelings
Personal growth	Independence-Autonomy Achievement Intellectual-Cultural activities Active Recreational activities Moral-Religious family functioning	These subscales aim to determine the importance family members place on these family factors.
Systems Maintenance	Family Organization Control	These subscales determine how organised and structured activities in the family are perceived, and additionally the extent to which family members exert control over each other.

Mandara and Murray (2002) found that the most salient African-American family types were Cohesive-Authoritative, Conflictive-Authoritarian, and Defensive-Neglectful. The cohesive-authoritative family type was found to exhibit high quality family functioning and high adolescent self-esteem. The conflictive-authoritarian type exhibited controlling and rigid discipline and placed high emphasis on achievement, while the defensive-neglectful type was mainly headed by single mothers and displayed chaotic family processes and low adolescent self-esteem. Hill (1995) found similar relations between family environment and parenting styles. These studies use a more global perspective on parenting in relation to the family environment. The emphasis of this study is to argue that attention needs to be focused on more specific dimensions within parenting, such as psychological control, as an important constituent of the family environment.

Although family environments and psychologically controlling parenting practices have been linked to self-esteem (Soenens, et. al., 2005), more information is needed as to their relationship to satisfaction with life. Additionally, more research needs to examine the effects of psychologically controlling parenting on the family environment. As

mothers are often the primary caregivers of children, due to the length of caring time spent with children as compared to fathers, the interest of this study was to focus on the influence of maternal psychological control on the study variables. The aim of this study was therefore to (1) establish the relationship between maternal psychological control and family environment, and (2) determine how maternal psychological control and family environment is related to preadolescent psychological well-being (as indicated by self-esteem and satisfaction with life).

#### **METHOD**

A quantitative approach with cross-sectional correlational research design was used to conduct the study. Children (aged 10 to 12 years) attending eight primary schools in the northern suburbs of Cape Town were invited to participate in the study. School registers were used as the sampling frame which accounted for a total population of 5500 primary school children. Once permission had been obtained from parents and informed assent from learners, the final sample consisted of 412 participants.

*Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI)*

(Coopersmith, 2002): The SEI was developed to assess a person's self-evaluation. The School Short Form-scale is a self-administered questionnaire which can be used from the age of eight to adulthood. SEI requests participants to respond to twenty-five items with either "Like Me" or "Unlike Me". Items included were "Things usually don't bother me"; "I give in easily"; "I have a low opinion of myself" and "Most people are better liked than me". The total score for the SEI is 100. Scores below 50 were considered to indicate an individual agreement with more negative than positive items thus indicating negative self-esteem. The data the cronbach alpha for the SEI in this study was .64.

*The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985): The SWLS is a self-report assessment of satisfaction with the respondent's life as a whole. The SWLS is a short, 5-item instrument designed to measure global judgments of one's life. The scale takes about one minute to complete. The SWLS has been scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied. Examples of the items are "I am satisfied with life" and "The conditions of my life are excellent". The SWLS is suited for use with different age groups (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) and has been previously used in a South African context (Wissing & Van Eeden, 2002). For the current study the chronbach alpha for the SWLS was .60.

*Family Environment Scale* (3rd ed.) (Moos & Moos 2002): The Family Environment Scale (FES) is a self-administered test that assesses the social climate and functioning of all types of families.

*Three subscales in the family relationships dimension* were deemed relevant for the present study (i.e., cohesion, expressiveness and conflict). Examples of some items were "Family members really help and support one another"; "We fight a lot in our family"; "Family members often keep their feelings to themselves" and "Rules are pretty inflexible in our household". The scale is scored by means of a scoring key to achieve a raw score. The raw score is then converted to a standard score by using a standard score conversion table (refer to the manual). The maximum standard score for cohesion is 65, expressiveness is 71 and conflict is 80. The cronbach alphas for the present study ranged from

.60 to .75.

*Parental Psychological Control* (Barber, 1996): Mothers' use of psychological control was reported by children. Barber's (1996) eight-item scale, which was a revised version of the Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Schaefer, 1965), was used in this study. Children were asked to describe their mothers by choosing responses on a 3-point Likert scale with "not like her" = 1; "somewhat like her" = 2 and "a lot like her" = 3. Examples of items are: The higher the scores the more controlling mothers are perceived. Examples of items include: *My mother is a person who is always trying to change how I feel or think about things. My Mother is a person who changes the subject whenever I have something to say.* The children were asked to circle their response. The cronbach alpha for maternal psychological control was .73.

### **Procedure**

The Higher Degrees Committee at the University of the Western Cape, Western Cape Education Department, principals and educators provided permission to conduct the study. A coordinator was appointed by the principals and was responsible for the general arrangements during the data collection process so that minimum disruption occurred at the schools. Consent forms were issued to the children for the mothers to complete. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires to the children after obtaining informed assent and consent from both the children and their parents or mother. The questionnaire was administered during convenient class time and all participants completed the questionnaire within 30 minutes. The children were asked to choose a "funny" name such as Britney Spears, Spiderman, or any other name which they felt they wanted to choose. This was done for the purpose of anonymity. The next step was to ask the children to write about the relationship between them and their mother. The children were asked not to write about the physical appearance of their mothers, but rather to write about how they felt about her. This step was used to place the children in a frame of reference for the completion of the questionnaires. The data of this step were not used as part of the study. The children were provided with two to three minutes to write their stories and once completed, they completed the questionnaires.

The questionnaires were coded and data was analysed with the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Descriptive statistics was used to indicate the prevalence of children's perceptions of the variables under study. Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted between family environment subscales (cohesion, expressiveness and conflict), maternal psychological control and psychological well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction with life). Two separate hierarchical regression analysis were done to predict family environment and maternal psychological control on self-esteem and satisfaction with life respectively.

## RESULTS

The mean age of the participants was 11 years with the mean grade level being 5. There were more female (60%) than male (40%) participants. The participants were from mixed socio-economic environments and ethnicity. In Table 1 the majority of participants scored positive (50 or higher) on self-esteem ( $M = 58.46$ ,  $SD = 15.60$  (maximum is 100). Participants scored relatively higher for life satisfaction ( $M = 25.33$ ,  $SD = 5.89$  (on a scale from 5 to 35). Family environments were perceived as cohesive ( $M = 49.52$ ,  $SD = 11.78$ ), with less conflict ( $M = 48.53$ ,  $SD = 9.30$ ) and less expressiveness ( $M = 39.19$ ,  $SD = 11.67$ ). Mothers were not perceived as highly psychologically controlling ( $M = 12.76$ ,  $SD = 3.50$ ). This was slightly above the midpoint of 12.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the study variables (n= 412)

Variables	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Self-esteem	58.46	4	92	15.60
Satisfaction with life	25.33	5	35	5.89
Family Cohesion	49.52	4	65	11.78
Family Expressiveness	39.19	6	71	11.67
Family Conflict	48.53	33	75	9.30
Psychological Control	12.76	8	24	3.50

Table 2 shows no significant relationships found between the subscale family expressiveness and any of the study variables. Maternal psychological control was positively related to family conflict and negatively to family cohesion and psychological well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction with life). Self-

esteem was also significantly positively related to cohesion and satisfaction with life. Family conflict was found to correlate negatively with psychological well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction with life) and family cohesion. Self-esteem was positively related to how satisfied children were with their lives.

Table 2: Correlation table of the study variables (n= 412)

Variables	1. Psycho-logical Control	2. Cohesion	3. Expressiveness	4. Conflict	5. Self- esteem
2. Cohesion	-.22**				
3. Expressiveness	.04	.03			
4. Conflict	.32**	-.45**	.08		
5. Self-esteem	-.34**	.33**	-.01	-.35**	
6. Life satisfaction	-.17**	.28**	-.09	-.22**	.37**

\*\* p < .01 (2-tailed)

Two separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted for predicting self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Results for the regression analyses (Table 3) show that the F statistic was significant for self-esteem  $F(3, 408) = 38.97$ ;  $p < .000$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .22$  and satisfaction with life  $F(3, 408) = 14.63$ ;  $p < .000$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .09$ . For self-esteem the multiple correlation coefficient R was .47, R Square was .22 and adjusted R square was .22. This showed that the common variance between predictor variables and the criterion variable was 22%. Additional regression analyses showed that maternal control was a significant predictor of both

family cohesion (beta= -.25,  $p < .01$ ) and family conflict (beta= .35,  $p < .01$ ).

In the first step of the regression analysis with self-esteem as the dependent variable (see Table 3) maternal psychological control was entered and was found to be a significant negative predictor of self-esteem. In step two family cohesion and family conflict were added. The results show that family cohesion is a significant positive and family conflict a significant negative predictor of self-esteem. The beta for maternal psychological control decreases but remains significant.

Table 3: Standardized Beta-coefficients of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Psychological Well-being Correlates on the basis of Family Environment and Maternal Psychologically Controlling Parenting Practices

Predictors	Psychological Well-being Correlates	
	Self-esteem	Satisfaction with life
Step 1		
1. Maternal Psychological Control	-.37**	-.21**
F change in $R^2$	64.23	18.64
Adjusted $R^2$	.13	.04
Step 2		
1. Maternal Psychological Control	-.26**	-.13**
2. Family Cohesion	.20**	.19**
3. Family Conflict	-.17**	-.09
F change in $R^2$	22.91	12.11
Adjusted $R^2$	.22	.09

Note \*\* p < .01

For satisfaction with life, the multiple correlation coefficient  $R$  was .31,  $R$  Square was .10 and adjusted  $R$  square was .09. This showed that the common variance between predictor variables and the criterion variable was 9%. Maternal psychological control was found to be a significant negative predictor of satisfaction with life (see Table 3 - step 1). In step 2, it was found that also the beta coefficient for family cohesion was significant and in the predicted direction, but not for family conflict. Entering family cohesion and family conflict in the second step significantly decreases the effect of maternal psychological control, although it stays significant.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to determine the relationships maternal psychological control, family environment (as indicated by cohesiveness, conflict and expressiveness) and psychological well-being (as indicated by self-esteem and satisfaction with life). Firstly, with regard to the relationship between maternal psychological control and family environment, this study shows that (a) families of participants are cohesive, less expressive and less conflict was present in the family; (b) maternal psychological control is positively associated with conflict in the family and negatively associated with cohesiveness in the family. This is the first study to examine the relationship between maternal psychological control and family environment. Previous research indicates that global parental style (authoritarian, authoritative and permissive) has been significantly related to the different dimensions of the family environment. Specifically, negative parenting, such as psychological control, could be related to negative family environments such as family conflict (Hill, 1995; Mandara & Murray, 2002). Parenting may create environments within the family which can either enhance or hinder the psychological well-being of children (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Grolnick, 2003; Hill, 1995).

Secondly, with regard to the relationship between family environment, maternal psychological control and psychological well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction with life), this study suggests that (a) participants reported relatively high levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with life; (b) family cohesion was positively related to psychological well-being, while family conflict was negatively related to

psychological well-being; (c) maternal psychological control was negatively related to psychological well-being. These findings are consistent with findings in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which emphasize the role of the environment and controlling parenting, which would hinder the child's psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, 2005). Psychologically controlling parents do not allow their children to take responsibility for and initiate their own actions but rather coerce, force or pressurise them to do something (Grolnick, 2003; Grolnick, Deci & Ryan, 1997). Psychological control intrudes upon the self, which could result in the person feeling less secure and positive and could possibly decrease the person's self-esteem.

Thirdly, with regard to predicting self-esteem and satisfaction with life of participants combined maternal psychological control and family environment accounted for (a) 22% of the variance for self-esteem and (b) 12% of the variance for satisfaction with life. The findings are consistent with previous studies, which propose that family environments and positive parenting could encourage psychological well-being (DeGenova & Rice, 2002; Moos & Moos, 2002). Family environments, and possibly parenting, may act as protective or risk factors for children's psychological well-being (Prevatt, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

Families are the supportive base from which children become well-adjusted adults. The environment in the family could have positive or negative implications for the psychological well-being of children. In addition, parenting also plays a role in the family environment, although the role is unclear. In this study, the findings suggest that family environment and psychologically controlling parenting predict psychological well-being of preadolescents. Psychologically controlling parenting has been described as insidious, a negative approach to raising children and has been described in terms of being inhibitive, intrusive, guilt and shame-inducing, possessiveness, over-protectiveness, nagging, negative evaluation, strictness and punishment. Perhaps psychologically controlling parenting could create an environment which would have more conflict and less cohesion between family members and thus influence the psychological well-being of children in the family.

The findings of this study add to findings of previous research and highlight the need to further examine of the effects of these variables on children.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

An important issue that has not been adequately researched and addressed in South Africa is parenting approaches. There is a dearth of information regarding psychologically controlling parenting in South Africa. The relevance of the study has implications for psychologists and/or counsellors, as children would need to be assessed or counselled in a broader psychosocial context possibly meaning that parents could require counselling as well. This would mean that parent interventions should have a broad family-based perspective so as to show parents the implications of their choice of parenting on child well-being.

### References

- Barber, B.K. (1996). Parental psychological control: Revisiting a neglected construct. *Child Development*, 67, 3296-3319.
- Bean, R.A., Bush, K.R., McKenry, P.C., & Wilson, S.M. (2003). The impact of parental support, behavioral control, and psychological control on the academic achievement and self-esteem of African American and European American adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 18, 523-541.
- Chipman, S., Frost Olsen, S., Klein, S., Hart, C.H., & Robinson, C.C. (2000). Differences in retrospective perceptions of parenting of male and female inmates and non-inmates. *Journal of Family Relations*, 49, 5-11.
- Coopersmith, S. (2002). *Self-esteem inventories manual*. Redwood City, CA: Mind Garden, Inc.
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (2004). *Handbook of self-determination research*. New York: University of Rochester Press.
- DeGenova, M.K., & Rice, F.P. (2002). *Intimate relationships, marriages & families*. (5th ed.). New York: Mc Graw Hill.
- Diener, E., Emmons, R.A., Larsen, R.J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49, 71-75.
- Doyle, A.B., & Markiewicz, D. (2005). Parenting, marital conflict and adjustment from early-to mid-adolescence: Mediated by adolescent attachment style. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34, 97-111.
- El-Sheikh, M., & Buckhalt, J.A. (2003). Parental problem drinking and children's adjustment: Attachment and family functioning as moderators and mediators of risk. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17, 510-520.
- Grolnick, W. (2003). *The psychology of parental control: How well-meant parenting backfires*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grolnick, W.S., Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1997). Internalization within the family: The self-determination theory perspective. In J.E. Grusec & L. Kuczynski (Eds.), *Parenting and children's internalization of values: A handbook of contemporary theory* (pp. 135-161). New York: Wiley.
- Hill, N.E. (1995). The relationship between family environment and parenting style: A preliminary study of African American families. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 21, 408-423.
- Mandara, J., & Murray, C.B. (2002). Development of an empirical typology of African American family functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 16, 318-337.
- Moos, R.H., & Moos, B.S. (2002). *Family environment scale manual: Development, applications, research* (3rd ed.). California: Mind Garden.
- Prevatt, F.F. (2003). The contribution of parenting practices in a risk and resiliency model of children's adjustment. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 21, 469-480.
- Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-Determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.
- Schaefer, E.S. (1965). Children's reports of parental behavior: An inventory. *Child Development*, 36, 413-424.
- Soenens, B. (2006). *Psychologically controlling parenting and adolescent psychosocial adjustment*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Leuven. Leuven, Belgium.
- Soenens, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Luyten, P., Duriez, B., & Goossens, L. (2005). Maladaptive perfectionistic self-representations: The mediational link between psychological control and adjustment. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 38, 487-498.
- Vansteenkiste, M. (2005). *Intrinsic versus extrinsic goal promotion and autonomy support versus control*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium..
- Vansteenkiste, M., Zhou, M., Lens, W., & Soenens, B. (2005). Experiences of autonomy and control among Chinese learners: Vitalizing or immobilizing? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97, 468-483.
- Wissing, M.P., & Van Eeden, C. (2002). Empirical clarification of the nature of psychological well-being. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 32, 32-44.