

# Parent Adolescent Communication as a Mediator Between Academic Pressure and Psychosocial Competence in Indian Adolescents

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## Abstract

The educational environment in India can be described as hyper-competitive with academic success most often being equated to social mobility and family honor. In this high-stakes setting, parental pressure regarding their academic accomplishments is a stress that is omnipresent. The present research examines how this pressure affects adolescent psychosocial competence, in particular, self-efficacy, resilience, and social functioning. Whereas the connections between pressure and distress have been found to be highly effective, less has been conducted regarding the mechanisms that occur between people that help bring about the effects of pressure and distress. We suggest a mediation model according to which high academic pressure worsens the quality of parent-adolescent interaction (lowers openness to communication and increases conflict), which further lowers the psychosocial competence of the adolescent. The study will employ a sample of 450 high school students that are about to take competitive board tests in urban India to point out the much-publicized conversation about grades that has been replacing the conversation about self, hence eroding the developmental resources needed to gain healthy adulthood.

**Keywords:** Parental Academic Achievement Pressure, Psychosocial Competence, Communication Quality, High-Stakes Testing, Indian Adolescents, Mediation Analysis.

## 1. Introduction

In modern India, especially in cities, the concept of adolescence is closely connected with the process of academic excellence. As a demographic dividend is driving so much pressure on fewer seats in top institutions (e.g., the IITs, AIIMS), the Board exam and the Entrance exam have become a communal nightmare and not a personal achievement (Deb, Strodl, and Sun, 2015). Parents in this type of environment tend to become an academic manager, where they have a strong demand to make sure that the child will be safe in the future. This Parental Academic Achievement Pressure (PAAP) has been found to be a major risk factor that has caused mental problems among teenagers, although with good intentions (Verma, Sharma, and Larson, 2002).

However, the existing sources tend to discuss the direct linear correlation between the pressure and the pathology (e.g.: depression, anxiety). The research into the area of psychosocial competence, which is the positive adapting capacities including emotional stability, interpersonal skills, and self-respect, and its degradation as per the influence of family factors is relatively scarce. Moreover, the erosion process is not studied well. One can think that the damage does not only reside in the fact that high grades are expected but in the way these expectations influence the interactions of the relationship between parents and children. In particular, as academic performance turns into the only medium of exchange, communication quality might be compromised, and the house might turn into the place of performance review.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The focal issue in this paper is parent-adolescent communication in Indian families that has been narrowed down. With a heightened academic interest and value placed on it, there is a enormous possibility that the talk might be more about marks, coaching lessons, and hierarchy, and little to do with the supportive communication of the inner world of the adolescent. The research paper assumes that Parent-Adolescent Communication Quality (PACQ) is a mediator with a critical role. Provided that pressure kills the openness of communication, the adolescent becomes deprived of an important asset to build competence. This is a crucial pathway because it is the basis of interventions that do not require that parents should give up on their dreams about their children.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In this research, the researcher employs the Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) and the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) to develop the conceptual model. The Family Systems Theory is an emotional unit of the family in which stress on one aspect (academic anxiety) transfers to related patterns. In cases where the parents have anxiety about the future of their child, it may be projected onto the child with the help of inflexible communication styles whereby a child can act as a mediator between emotional stability and instability on the part of a parent.

In addition to this, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) holds that competence and well-being thrive within an atmosphere that promotes Relatedness. High academic pressure usually plays the role of conditional regard in which love is conditional on performance (Assor, Roth, and Deci, 2004). Such contingency endangers relatedness, which results to defensive communication (closing off) and not open communication. The study hypothesis is that when the relatedness is thwarted by the lack of communication, the proximity is reduced psychosocial competence.

Figure 1: The Conceptual Mediation Model

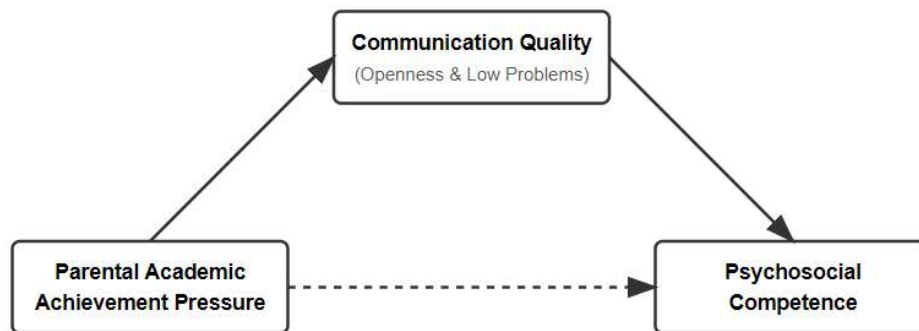


Figure 1. Conceptual path diagram. The model proposes that Parental Academic Achievement Pressure (IV) negatively impacts Psychosocial Competence (DV) both directly and indirectly through the degradation of Communication Quality (Mediator).

Figure 1 description: This is a path diagram presenting the proposed mediation. The Parental Academic Achievement Pressure is the Independent Variable. The Mediator includes the Communication Quality (divided into Openness and Problems). The Dependent Variable is Psychosocial Competence. The straight line between Pressure and Competence is represented negatively and the other line between Pressure and Communication has been pointed out.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1 The "Pressure Cooker": Academic Stress in India

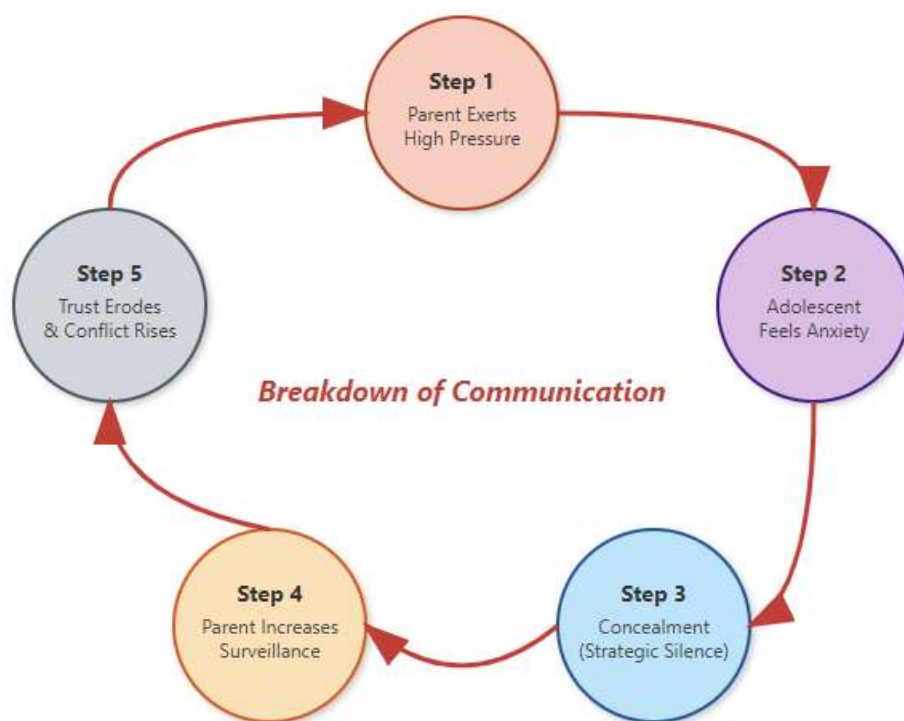
India has a special situation in terms of academic pressure because of its culture. Education is not simply considered as learning, but a kind of tapasya (sacrifices of discipline) which is needed to uplift the family. Luthar and Barkin (2012), as well as region-specific studies by Rao (2010), could have provided findings, in which Indian adolescents are said to be experiencing much more academic stress than their Western counterparts. This pressure is commonly represented in the form of a comparing with the peers and the reiteration of the failure consequences all the time. As much as expecting of a child is an indicator of parental involvement, pressure is one that involves criticism, overdependence and overemphasis on results rather than effort.

#### 3.2 Communication Quality as a Casualty of Pressure

The quality of communication has been typically understood in two dimensions: Openness (free-flowing exchange of information and emotions) and Problems (hesitancy, avoiding and conflict) (Barnes & Olson, 1985). Academic setups that are high-stakes are likely to imbalance this. In cases

where the parents focus more on academic observation, the volume of interaction can go up yet the quality goes down. Communication is transactional. Qualitative research in the cities of India has indicated that teenagers tend to leave their problems in their parents because of fear of being chastised because they were wasting their time, or of being branded distracted (Kapadia, 2017). This is a pressure resistance mechanism through a mechanism known as strategic silence, which worsens parent-child relationship.

**Figure 2: The Cycle of Strategic Silence**



*Figure 2 description: This cycle of three activities is illustrated in a vicious cycle. Step 1: Parent exerts pressure. Step 2: Teenager experiences anxiety. Step 3: Adolescent suppresses low marks/fears (Less Openness). Step 4: Parent intensifies surveillance because of the unavailability of information (Communication Problems). Step 5: The mistrust develops, and it becomes subject to more pressure.*

### 3.3 Psychosocial Competence: Beyond Mental Illness

The concept of psychosocial competence is used to refer to the ability of an individual to address matters and issues of daily life. It involves self esteem, decision making, empathy and resilience. Adolescence is a developmental stage that these competencies should be gained. Nevertheless, studies indicate that too much control and pressure may infantilize the adolescents by making them reliant on other people to rate them (grades) in order to boost their self-esteem (Soenens et al., 2005). Lack of the ability to share his or her fears with parents denies an adolescent the scaffold without which he lacks the capability to develop resilience. As such, they can be high on academic competence and low on psychosocial competence- a situation that is becoming a frequent occurrence amongst high-achieving and poor emotional stability in young people.

### 3.4 The Mediation Hypothesis

By uniting these strands, there is a literature that explains a mediation pathway. The pressure itself is not the only one that harms competence because the pressure dictates that communication style is critical instead of supportive. Provided that a parent is able to keep high expectations and, at the same time, develop open and non-judgmental communication channels, the adverse consequence on competence may be alleviated. But the current tendency in the Indian culture of the coaching class has been maintained that the pressure has a tendency of pushing communication into one dimension of metrics, which destroys the lifeline of social support required in psychosocial development.

## 4. Study Objectives

The following research intends to empirically examine such a mediation process based on the gaps in the literature found. The objectives are to:

1. Measuring the association between Parental Academic Achievement Pressure (PAAP) and Adolescent Psychosocial Competence (APC).
2. Interview the effect of PAAP on Parent-Adolescent Communication Quality (PACQ).
3. Test the hypothesis whether PACQ modulates the correlation existing between APC and PAAP.

It is assumed that the academic pressure will anticipate the lower communication openness, as well as the high-level communication issues. More so, it can be assumed that once the quality of communication is considered, the direct negative impact of pressure on competence will significantly decrease, which means full or partial mediation. This would emphasize the idea that message delivery (communication) is as important as the message (expectations).

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 450 adolescents (55 percent males, 45 percent females) that were recruited in six high schools in New Delhi and Bangalore that were privately operated and used English as the medium of instruction. These cities have been chosen because they present the areas where high competition and a culture of coaching are experienced. Students who were in their 10th and 12th grades, which are the two decisive years of the Indian education system examination of the board, were the participants. The median of the sample was 16.4 (SD = 0.9). The inclusion criteria included that subjects had to be living with both parents so as to obtain a constant account on the family communicational patterns. The sample comprised socioeconomic background that was largely upper-middle which is a demographic group with a high aspiration of education and investment in shadow education (private tutoring).

### 5.2 Procedure

The period of data collection was in the midst of the school day and in the full academic year, before the final pre-board examinations were taken, in order to record the highest levels of stress. The review board of the university and school management gave ethical clearance. Participation required active parental approval and adolescent consent. In order to reduce the bias of response and fear of parental penalty, the students were promised of the absolute confidentiality and cautioned not to put their names on the questionnaires. The survey packet required about 40 minutes to fill.

### 5.3 Measures

Parental Academic Achievement Pressure (PAAP) To test the level of pressure, Parental Expectations and Pressure Scale (PEPS) was modified to the Indian context (Verma and Gupta, 1990). The scale will be comprised of 10 questions that will measure the rate of parental demands in terms of grades as well as comparison with other children (e.g., "My parents are not satisfied with my marks unless I rank the first in the class). The answers were noted on the Likert scale of 5 points as 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). An increase in the scores means that there is an increase in perceived pressure. This study had high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

Parent-Adolescent Communication Quality (PACQ) Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS; Barnes & Olson, 1985) was used to measure the mediator. This instrument used 20 items and has two subscales:

1. Openness: The ease of exchange of information, satisfaction with communication (e.g., I find it easy to talk to my parents about the problem).



2. Problems: Measures hesitancy, selectivity, and negative styles of interaction (e.g., I am careful about what I say to my parents). To enable the mediation analysis, they obtained a composite score of Communication Quality, which was the sum of the openness score and the reciprocal of the problems score in which greater scores indicate high communication quality. The composite score in cronbach alpha was.89.

Adolescent Psychosocial Competence (APC) The Psychosocial Competence Scale (PCS) that was created by Dindigal and Amin (2018) was used with Indians adolescents in particular. This is a 25-item scale, which measures five dimensions including effective decision-making, problem-solving, empathy, critical thinking, and coping with emotions. Questions including "I can manage some unforeseen scenarios in a positive way were measured using a 5-point scale. There was a total competence score, as the higher the score, the more psychosocial maturity ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Preliminary Analyses

Analysis of data was done using SPSS 26.0. Listwise deletion was used to address missing data leading to a final analysis sample of 442 participants. Checks on skewness and kurtosis ensured that the data follow normality.

Descriptive statistics revealed that academic pressure at the baseline was very high ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.76$  on a 5-point scale) which confirmed that the sample setting was of a high-stake nature. The independent samples t-tests revealed significant gender difference as females had higher Communication Quality ( $M = 72.4$ ,  $SD = 10.1$ ) than males ( $M = 65.8$ ,  $SD = 11.2$ ),  $t(440) = 6.12$ ,  $p = .001$ . Notwithstanding, there were no considerable gender disparities in the matter of perceived Academic Pressure.

#### *Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Study Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Academic Pressure	3.82	0.76	—		
2. Communication Quality	68.77	10.85	-.52***	—	
3. Psychosocial Competence	92.40	12.50	-.41***	.58***	—

*Note.*  $N = 442$ .  $M$  = Mean;  $SD$  = Standard Deviation. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*Table 1 description: Correlation table that presents strong negative association between Academic Pressure and Communication Quality ( $r = -.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ), between Academic Pressure*



and Psychosocial Competence ( $r = -.41, p < .001$ ). Psychosocial Competence has a positive relationship with Communication Quality ( $r = .58, p < .001$ ).

## 6.2 Mediation Analysis

A simple mediation test was done with a PROCESS macro (Model 4) of SPSS to test the hypothesis according to which Parental Academic Achievement Pressure should be proposed to be linked to Adolescent Psychosocial Competence through Parent-Adolescent Communication Quality. Hayes (2018) used Process macro to perform the test.

**Step 1: The Direct Effect (Path c)** Firstly, a total impact of Academic Pressure on Psychosocial Competence was analyzed without taking into consideration the intermediary. Academic Pressure significantly and negatively predicted Psychosocial Competence, with a 17% explained variance, thus ( $-.41 = -.038, SE = .04, t = -9.23, p = .001$ ). This supports the fact that the greater the pressure, the lesser the competence.

**Step 2: Effect on Mediator (Path a)** The test of the effect of Academic Pressure on the mediator, Communication Quality was carried out next. Findings indicated that there was a highly negative relationship between the two ( $= -.52, SD = .05, t = -12.45, p = .001$ ). This argues the theoretical assumption that the environments of the family talk low pressure destroy the openness of family talk.

**Step 3: Influence of the Mediator on the Outcome (Path b)** In the case of the controlling variable Academic Pressure, the predicting variable Communication Quality had a significant and positive influence on Psychosocial competence ( $\beta = .46, SE = .04, t = 10.15, p = .001$ ). This shows that open communication is a source of competence development.

**The Indirect Effect (Path c 7)** The direct influence of Academic Pressure on Psychosocial Competence was once again investigated and the Communication Quality was added to the model. The Academic Pressure coefficient greatly decreased and was no longer statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) no longer  $-.41$ .

**Mediation validation:** The importance of the indirect effect was determined on 5,000 bootstrap samples. Academic Pressure had an indirect significant effect on Psychosocial Competence through Communication Quality (Effect =  $-.24, SE = .03$ ) since the 95% Confidence Interval did not include the zero mark [CI:  $-.30$  to  $-.18$ ].

**The indirect effect on the cumulative effect is also calculated to be .58 meaning that half of the negative effect of academic pressure on adolescent competence is mediated by the impairment of parent child communication.**



Figure 3: Statistical Mediation Results

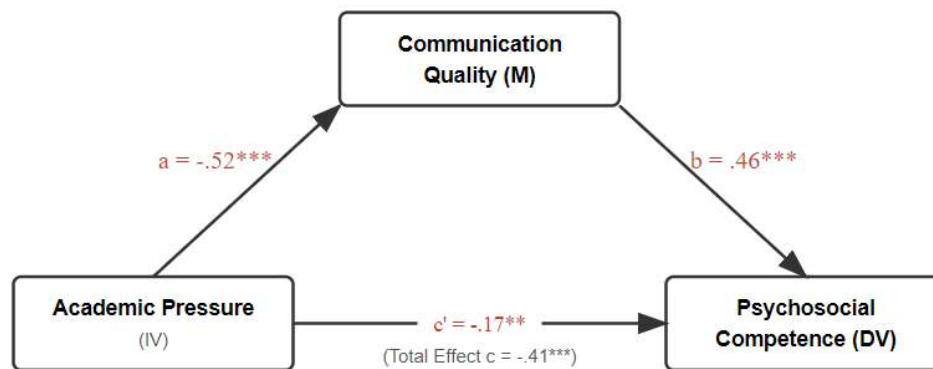


Figure 3. Statistical diagram of the simple mediation model (PROCESS Model 4). Values represent standardized beta coefficients. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . The reduction in the direct effect ( $c$  to  $c'$ ) confirms partial mediation.

Figure 3 description: A statistical figure with the coefficients. Path  $a$  ( $-.52$ ) between Pressure and Communication. The path  $b$  ( $.46$ ) takes Communication and Competence. The direct path  $c$  is trimmed down to  $c'$  ( $-.17$ ) describing mediation partially.

## 7. Discussion

The current research was aimed at clarifying interpersonal processes by which the pressure of parental academic achievement could affect the adolescent psychosocial competence within the high-stakes environment of urban India. Through the study of the mediating effect of quality parent-adolescence communication, this study provides a more delicate description of the process of functioning of family dynamics during the pressure of competitive examinations. The results are very solid empirical support of the proposed mediation model suggesting that the detrimental impacts of the pressure on adolescent competence to be mostly mediated by the undermining of open and supportive communication.

### 7.1 The Cost of Pressure: Eroding Competence

The directly negative correlation that exists between academic pressure and psychosocial competence is consistent with the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000). By too much pressure, the parents make the adolescents feel that their value is based on the external performance. Such external locus of causality sabotages the growth of internal resources of decision-making and emotional regulation. In the Indian scenario, in which the "board exam" is

widely considered as a singular glue in life path, this pressure is not only a matter of short-term stress, but, it seems to prevent the development of larger-scale life skills demanded in adulthood.

## 7.2 The Silent Mediator: Communication Quality

The greatest addition to the current body of knowledge is that parent-adolescent communication is one of the major intermediaries. The outcomes show that the quality of communication declines with an increasing pressure. This helps in the case of the hypothesis of content narrowing: there is a likelihood that a conversation in a high pressure household is dominated by the academic logistics: the test scores, rank, and timetables of the study, leaving no possibility of the discussion of the fears, hopes, and emotional battles.

The mediation analysis demonstrated the breakdown in communication as an outlet of almost 60 percent of the adverse influence of pressure. This implies that the pressure could be handled in case the communication channels were not closed. The data however suggests that in actual studies, pressure is an obstacle to relatedness. Teenagers are using strategic silence to prevent the possibility of conflict or disappointment denying themselves the parental scaffolding that would help them overcome the challenges. They will therefore record good marks but end up with low psychosocial competence, unprepared to meet the intricate interpersonal and emotional challenges of the actual world.

## 8. Implications

### 8.1 Theoretical Implications

This research paper will be an extension of the Family Systems Theory, by illustrating the reorganization of the internal communication structure within the family by an outside stressor (in this case academic competition). It dispels the usefulness of the so-called Tiger Parenting model traditionally held as part of the Asian cultures, demonstrating that a high level of strictness may, indeed, lead to success in academics (but in the context of this study, grades were not a measurable variable), however, it actively undermines the psychosocial capital of the teenager.

### 8.2 Practical Implications

To Parents: The results indicate the existence of a critical intervention point. There is the belief of not having the ability of reducing pressure by the parents because the education system is competitive in nature. Yet, this paper shows that they have an opportunity to reduce the damage through compartmentalization. The parents are to be urged to have the areas of pressure free conversation, during which the discussion about the academic side should be strictly prohibited, and it is time to pay attention to what interests and emotions the adolescent feels.

Schools and Counselors: India School counseling programs in India tend to be study skills-based or stress-management based. This information indicates that the family level interventions are necessary. Workshops named as Talking Beyond Marks would guide the parents to learn to be good listeners so that they can appreciate the emotional experience of the adolescent regardless of his or her academic success.

## 9. Limitations and Future Directions

There are a few limitations that should be considered. To start with, despite the fact that the study was cross-sectional, it can not be used to draw causal conclusions on the behaviour of the parents themselves; maybe less competent adolescents provoke more controlling behaviour? There is a need to have longitudinal designs that can follow the families through the pass through of grade 9-12. Second, the research was based on self-reports of adolescents. Although the validity of this is applicable in determining subjective experience, further studies should include parent accounts as well as observational outcomes of the family interaction to focus on the dyadic concept of communication. Third, the sample was also confined to urban schools with English medium which made it difficult to generalize to rural or vernacular medium populations where family dynamics may differentiate.

The research in the future will also need to look into possible moderators. In the case of Adam (17), is the actual performance of the adolescent in neutral of the negative effect of pressure? It is also possible that the high achievers might see pressure in a different way as compared to low achievers.

## 10. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper has underscored that the quest to achieve academic excellence in India is usually at an undetected developmental price. The parental stressful academic environment (pressure) is used to block the normal communication between parents and adolescents and ultimately, the psychosocial competence of the adolescent is compromised. The conversation about grades seems to be replacing the conversation about self. In order to make teenagers not only academically but also psychosocially fit adults, families should do their best to dissociate demonstrating love and interest with the report card and the home should also be a nurturing asylum and not the continuation of the exam hall.

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