

# Parent Child Relationship and Peer Relationship through Self-Esteem in Chinese Adolescents—A Mediation Analysis

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the mediation role of self-esteem in the relationship between parent-child dynamics and peer relationships among Chinese adolescents. Using a sample of 476 participants aged 11 to 18 from northern China, we examined how perceived parental closeness and conflict relate to peer acceptance and rejection, with self-esteem as a mediator. The Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS; Zhang, 2011) was employed to measure parent-child closeness and conflict, while peer relationships were assessed through sociometric nomination. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, created in 1965, provides an objective assessment of self-esteem. In the study, it is known that if the degree of closeness between parents and children is relatively high, there is usually strong peer acceptance, and self-esteem can play a mediating role in the development of this relationship. Peer rejection will lead to conflicts between parents and children, and self-esteem still plays a mediating role. The acquisition of this research result makes people deeply feel that under the cultural background of our country, the influence of family on teenagers is relatively heavy, and it is more prominent in peer groups. This means that in order to properly guide adolescents to interact with their peers, they need to be supported by the family environment.

**Keywords:** Self-esteem, Parent-child Relationship, Peer Relationship

## 1. Introduction

Parent-child relationship is a basic content in children's socialization development [1] (Lerner, 2013). If the quality of parent-child relationship is relatively high, children's performance in life will be positively affected, and peer relationship is even more critical. The spillover theory points out that the parent-child relationship in the family will have an impact on peer interaction, which is supported by diverse cultural backgrounds [2-4] (Kaufman et al., 2020). Liu et al. (2020) tried to analyze whether parent-child relationship affects the peer relationship of adolescents, but only studied the direct and indirect relationship of adolescents in China and enriched the theoretical results. In their study, they pointed out that the degree of peer acceptance and rejection is related to the relationship between adolescents and their parents. In the process of influence, academic performance and interpersonal characteristics become important mediating variables, indicating that this relationship is more complex in the Chinese cultural context.

At present, most scholars only analyze from the western background, and do not pay attention to the characteristics of parent-child relationship in the multicultural background, and do not analyze the impact of cultural dynamics. When analyzing how these relationships affect the socialization development of adolescents, there is a clear gap between the ideal and the ideal. In addition to relationship dynamics, parent-child interaction can also affect personal characteristics such as interpersonal style and academic performance, and indirectly affect peer relationships [4-5] (Ladd, 1992). Liu et al. (2020) deeply analyzed how personal characteristics can play a role between peer relationship and parent-child relationship. In the development of Chinese society, these characteristics are highly valued.

Considering these contents, this paper takes Chinese adolescents as the research object to analyze the relationship between peer and parent-child relationship, referring to the research conclusions drawn by Liu et al. (2020) [4]. Self-esteem is an important potential mediator in the interaction between the two relationships, because existing studies have shown that self-esteem is inevitably related to the quality of parent-child interaction, which will affect adolescents' peer relationships and social interaction.

## 2. Parent-child Relationship and Peer Relationship

In the development of children's socialization, parent-child relationship has a deep impact, and many scholars have written papers or books about it. Kaufman et al. (2020) [2] analyzed this problem under the guidance of the spillover theory, and believed that in the process of children's communication with their peers, the parenting style of parents in the family and the mode of communication with their children can have an important impact. Almeida et al. (1999) [3] also support this theory in their research, focusing on the analysis of spillover mechanism, believing that children's social ability often depends on early family education.

Based on this understanding, Liu et al. (2020) [4] carried out a detailed analysis in the context of Chinese culture, in-depth analysis of children's interpersonal characteristics will be affected by the degree of closeness between parents and children, which will also affect whether children can accept peers, enough to reflect that children's peer relationship is inevitably related to the quality of family interaction. Adolescents with better interpersonal characteristics have good parent-child and mother-child relationships in family life, which can promote peer acceptance, indicating that the social structure of adolescents is related to the quality of parent-child relationships, and the influence mechanism is more complex.

Liu et al. (2020) [4] pointed out in the study that children's performance in learning and the degree of peer rejection or acceptance are related to whether there is conflict between parents and children. This conclusion shows that if there are negative factors in parent-child relationship, including contradictions and frictions, children's peer relationship will be affected, and the intermediary factor of this impact is academic success, which is more prominent in Chinese cultural background and the existing education system.

Pallini et al. (2014) [6] also carried out the same analysis and contributed to the development of the theory. These scholars pointed out that family education is an effective way to cultivate good peer relationships, if it can ensure effective communication and bring emotional security to children, children's peer relationships will be better. In their research, they focus on the formation and maintenance of adolescent peer relationship, which is inevitably related to parental attachment. They have a wide range of research perspectives, and pay attention to the way parents communicate and the sense of security they bring to their children.

Combining the above research results, it is not difficult to see that parents have a greater impact on children's social development, and there are many factors to be considered, including understanding of children, emotional communication, communication style and so on. Academic achievement will be affected by interpersonal characteristics, parent-child closeness or rejection degree and other factors, thus forming a complex mechanism of influence, which will affect children's peer relationship and social development.

## 3. The Mediating Effect of Self Esteem

In recent years, more and more scholars have found that self-esteem is an important mediating variable in the process of parent-child relationship affecting peer relationship. Trong Dam et al. (2023) [7] pointed out that if parents and children can interact positively, children's self-esteem can be effectively cultivated, they can perform well in social interaction, and they can also have healthy psychology. Bishop-Inderbitzen (1995) [8] also got the same conclusion. The latter more clearly pointed out the relationship between peer relationship and self-esteem, and analyzed that in the process of improving children's peer acceptance ability or establishing deep friendship, family education had a greater impact, and then affected children's social development.

This conclusion can be introduced into different family environments. Thompson et al. (2016) [9] took adolescents in foster families as research objects to analyze the impact of self-esteem in depth. In the study, it is clearly pointed out that emotional support can play an important role in the process of cultivating adolescents' self-esteem, and parenting behavior is also crucial, which is the premise for the analysis of peer relationship and social behavior. These scholars believe that self-esteem will be affected by the family environment, and put forward suggestions on how to cultivate adolescents' self-esteem in foster families.

It has been pointed out that family interaction has a direct impact on adolescents' self-esteem, which is related to the emotional atmosphere and cultural background of family members. Therefore, it is

absolutely necessary to analyze the characteristics of different cultural backgrounds, explore the impact of self-esteem in the family environment, and analyze the role of peer relations in cultural norms.

Generally speaking, the existing researches emphasize the importance of the cultivation of adolescents' self-esteem, and the importance of making good use of cultural, family, personal and other factors, and emphasize that the relationship between adolescents' peer relationship and self-esteem should be analyzed by combining the characteristics of cultural background and family structure.

#### **4. Hypothesis**

Existing studies indicate that self-esteem can play an important mediating role in the process of interaction between peer relationship and parent-child relationship, and put forward hypotheses combined with other scholars' claims:

**H1:** There is a positive relationship between parent-child relationship and peer relationship in Chinese adolescents.

**H2:** Self-esteem mediates the relationship between the quality of the parent-child relationship and the quality of peer relationships among Chinese adolescents. Specifically, a positive parent-child relationship is associated with higher self-esteem, which in turn is associated with better peer relationships.

#### **5. Method**

##### **5.1. Participants**

A total of 476 Chinese adolescents, aged between 11 and 18 years, participated in this study. The sample consisted of 228 males and 245 females. Participants were recruited from three schools in northern China. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be currently enrolled in one of the participating schools and have lived with at least one biological parent for the past year. Participants with diagnosed psychological disorders or those undergoing psychological therapy were excluded to ensure the validity of the results. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and for those under the age of 16, parental consent was also secured.

##### **5.2. Procedure**

###### **5.2.1. Recruitment**

Schools were approached with a formal request to participate in the study. Once approval was obtained, students and their parents were informed about the study through a joint informational session held at the school. Interested participants were provided with electronic consent forms, accessible via a QR code, to be signed by both the student and their parent.

###### **5.2.2. Data Collection**

Participants completed a series of electronic questionnaires on their smartphones. An SMS link was sent to both parents and students, directing them to the survey platform. The session began with a brief introduction, explaining the purpose of the study and assuring participants of the confidentiality of their responses. Questionnaires were prepared for parents and children to analyze their views and perceptions of parent-child relationship. In addition, children need to fill out another questionnaire that can measure peer relationships and self-esteem.

###### **5.2.3. Data Analysis**

The data were coded and analyzed by SPSS-27. Descriptive statistics and speculative analysis are carried out in this link to judge whether the assumptions put forward in the previous period are reasonable. Using this software for data analysis can ensure efficiency and accuracy.

###### **5.2.4. Debriefing**

After filling in the questionnaire, all the people who fill in the questionnaire can get the thank information released by the platform, explain the significance of their behavior to this study, and express their heartfelt thanks. In this message, the contact information of counseling service personnel is provided, and once the questionnaire respondents encounter this problem in their lives, they can get help.

### 5.3. Measures

#### 5.3.1. Parent-Child Closeness and Conflict

In this study, in order to grasp the parent-child relationship, the CPRS questionnaire compiled by Pianta was directly used, which was compiled in 2011 [10] to objectively describe the conflict or closeness between parents and children. This scale uses a 5-point scoring method, and the more it does not conform to the situation described in the question, the lower the score. This scale has been used by many scholars to investigate Chinese research objects in the early stage, and its validity is guaranteed (Zhang, 2011) [10]. The relationship between parents and children is investigated through two questionnaires, one is the closeness questionnaire, the number of questions is 9, which can show parents' views on communicating with their children and maintaining close relationship (for example, "When I get along with my children, I try to form a warm relationship with each other"). The other is a conflict questionnaire, with 12 questions, which can show how parents feel about the conflict between themselves and their children (for example, "It seems that I have been struggling with my children"). High values of internal consistency were found for both scales, with Cronbach's alpha for the Closeness sub-scale being 0.74 for mothers and 0.76 for fathers, and for the Conflict sub-scale being 0.75 for mothers and 0.78 for fathers. The score of each item in both sub-scales are averaged to obtain the score of mother and father separately for each sub-scale. A higher score indicates higher closeness or conflict.

#### 5.3.2. Peer acceptance and peer rejection

Children's peer acceptance and peer rejection are measured through sociometric nomination based on Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982)'s procedure [11]. In each class, children were asked to nominate three peer whom they most liked to spend time with (positive nomination) and those who they least liked to spend time with (negative nomination). After collecting all nominations, both negative and positive nomination were totaled and standardized within each class. A higher score of positive nomination or negative nomination indicates higher acceptance or rejection for the child within the class.

#### 5.3.3. Self-esteem

Children's self-esteems are measured by using the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenburg, 1965)[12]. The RSE is a 10-item Guttman scale that measures self-esteem for adolescents. Sample questions include "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself," and "At times I think I am no good at all." Each item is scored in a 4-point format, ranging from 1 (i.e, strongly disagree) to 4 (i.e, strongly agree). Individual's score is added in total with the negatively worded items reverse coded. Total score ranges from 8 to 32, and a higher score indicates higher level of self-esteem.

## 6. Result

### 6.1. Preliminary Analysis

The preliminary analysis (Table 1-2) of the study scrutinized seven variables from the sample and revealed insightful trends across different demographic variables.

Table 1: Mean(M) and deviation(SD)-part 1

Means(M) and deviations(SD) of the study variables and subgroup differences							
		Age			Sibiling Status		
	Total: n = 476	Group 1	Group2		Singleton	Non-Singleton	
		M(SD)	M(SD)	t	M(SD)	M(SD)	t
<b>M-C Cloesness</b>	3.64(0.58)	3.66(0.66)	3.61(0.63)	0.8	3.71(0.61)	3.59(0.68)	2.082*
<b>F-C Cloesness</b>	3.47(0.68)	3.47(0.68)	3.46(0.68)	0.21	3.46(0.62)	3.47(0.73)	-0.15*
<b>M-C Conflict</b>	2.11(0.70)	2.06(0.70)	2.17(0.69)	-1.72	2.04(0.68)	2.17(0.71)	-1.952
<b>F-C Conflict</b>	2.04(0.67)	2.00(0.64)	2.09(0.70)	-1.55	2.00(0.65)	2.08(0.69)	-1.386
<b>Self esteem</b>	3.08(0.58)	3.14(0.56)	3.01(0.56)	2.43*	3.18(0.58)	2.99(0.56)	3.641***
<b>Peer acceptance</b>	-0.025(0.98)	-0.00070(0.93)	-0.048(1.03)	0.534	-0.0097(0.96)	-0.037(1.00)	0.301
<b>Peer rejection</b>	-0.034(0.91)	-0.050(0.85)	-0.018(0.97)	-0.391	-0.049(0.90)	-0.022(0.92)	-0.316
Note: M-C = mother-child; F-C = father-child; * p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.							

Table 2: Mean(M) and deviation(SD)-part 2

Means(M) and deviations(SD) of the study variables and subgroup differences							
	Area				Gender		
	Total: n = 476	Rural	Urban		Boy	Girl	
		M(SD)	M(SD)	t	M(SD)	M(SD)	t
<b>M-C Closeness</b>	3.64(0.58)	3.58(0.69)	3.67(0.62)	-1.42	3.56(0.64)	3.72(0.65)	-2.8*
<b>F-C Closeness</b>	3.47(0.68)	3.45(0.73)	3.48(0.66)	-0.51	3.33(0.68)	3.59(0.66)	-4.28***
<b>M-C Conflict</b>	2.11(0.70)	2.25(0.72)	2.04(0.68)	3.00**	2.19(0.71)	2.04(0.69)	2.48*
<b>F-C Conflict</b>	2.04(0.67)	2.11(0.70)	2.01(0.66)	1.53	2.12(0.69)	1.97(0.66)	2.41*
<b>Self esteem</b>	3.08(0.58)	2.97(0.52)	3.13(0.60)	-3.02**	3.14(0.54)	3.02(0.61)	2.24*
<b>Peer acceptance</b>	-0.025(0.98)	-0.00029(0.94)	-0.037(1.00)	0.39	-0.045(1.03)	0.0037(0.93)	-0.538
<b>Peer rejection</b>	-0.034(0.91)	-0.15(0.73)	0.027(1.00)	-2.07*	0.12(0.99)	-0.18(0.81)	3.594***
<b>Note: M-C = mother-child; F-C = father-child; * p &lt; .05. **p &lt; .01. ***p &lt; .001.</b>							

**Mother-Child (M-C) Closeness:** This variable averaged at 3.67 (SD = 0.58). In the comparison for sibling status, singleton family showed slightly higher closeness (M = 3.71, SD = 0.61) compared to non-singleton families (M = 3.59, SD = 0.68), with a T statistic of 2.082\*. This closeness was more pronounced in girls (M = 3.72, SD = 0.65) than in boys (M = 3.56, SD = 0.64) with a T statistic of -2.8\*. There was no significant difference between M-C Closeness across different area and age group.

**Father-Child (F-C) Closeness:** The overall mean was 3.47 (SD = 0.68). Similar to M-C Closeness, this variable was significantly (T = -4.28\*\*\*) higher for girls (M = 3.59, SD = 0.66) compared to boys (M = 3.33, SD = 0.68). However, singleton families had slightly lower closeness (M = 3.46, SD = 0.62) compared to non-singleton families (M = 3.47, SD = 0.73), with a T statistics of -0.15\*.

**Mother-Child (M-C) Conflict:** This variable had a mean of 2.11 (SD = 0.7). In the comparison for area, rural area had higher conflict (M = 2.25, SD = 0.72) than urban area (M = 2.04, SD = 0.68) with a T statistic of 3.0\*\*\*. Another significant difference (T = 2.48\*) was across gender, with boys showing higher conflict (M = 2.19, SD = 0.71) than girls (M = 2.04, SD = 0.69).

**Father-Child (F-C) Conflict:** F-C conflict had an overall mean of 2.04 (SD = 0.67). The only difference between different demographic subgroup was gender. Girls (M = 1.97, SD = 0.66) had significantly less conflict (T = 2.41\*) than boys (M = 2.12, SD = 0.69).

**Self-Esteem:** The overall mean for this variable was 3.08 (SD = 0.58). Differences across all demographic collected were significant. For instance, rural participants showed lower level of self-esteem (M = 2.97, SD = 0.52) compared to their urban counterparts (M = 3.31, SD = 0.60) with a T statistics of -3.02\*\*. Additionally, older participants had higher self-esteem score (M = 3.14, SD = 0.56) than younger ones (M = 3.01, SD = 0.56), with a T statistic of 2.43\*. The most significant difference in self-esteem was across different sibling status. Participants from singleton families have higher self-esteem (M = 3.18, SD = 0.58) than those from non-singleton families (M = 2.99, SD = 0.56), with a T statistic of 3.641\*\*\*.

**Peer Acceptance:** The overall mean for Peer Acceptance was -0.025 (SD = 0.98). Across all demographics, there was no significant differences.

**Peer Rejection:** The average Peer Rejection score was -0.034 (SD = 0.91). Participants from rural area had lower Peer Rejection (M = -0.15, SD = 0.73) than participants from Urban area (M = 0.027, SD = 1), with a T statistic of -2.07\*. Gender is another significant factor, with boys having higher Peer Rejection (M = 0.0007, SD = 0.93) than girls (M = -0.048, SD = 1.03), with a T statistic of 3.549\*\*\*.

## 6.2. Correlation Matrix

The correlation analysis (Table 3) of this study identified several interesting relationships between the variables. First, M-C Closeness was positively correlated with Self-Esteem ( $r = 0.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and negatively correlated with Peer Rejection ( $r = -0.127$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, F-C Closeness was also positively correlated with Self-Esteem ( $r = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Additionally, both M-C and F-C Conflict was found to positively correlate with Peer Rejection (M-C Conflict:  $r = -0.153$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; F-C Conflict:  $r = 0.107$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Only M-C conflict was negatively correlated with Self Esteem ( $r = -0.188$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Peer Acceptance was also positively correlated with Self-Esteem ( $r = 0.127$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Table 3: Correlation

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Parent-Child Relationship</b>						
1. M-C Closeness						
2. F-C Closeness	.424**					
3. M-C Conflict	-.251**	-.206**				
4. F-C Conflict	-.119**	-.120**	.451**			
<b>Peer Relationship</b>						
5. Peer Acceptance	0.061	0.029	-.143**	-.157**		
6. Peer Rejection	-.127**	-0.036	.153**	.107**	-.339**	
<b>Other</b>						
7. Self Esteem	.200**	.150**	-.188**	-0.074	.127**	-0.037

**Note:** M-C = mother-child; F-C = father-child; \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### 6.3. Mediation Analysis

In the mediation analysis (Table 4), several indirect effects were found to be statistically significant. Self-esteem mediated the relationship between M-C Closeness and Peer Acceptance ( $B = 0.036$ ,  $SE = 0.016$ , 95% CI [0.0075, 0.0071]). Similarly, the indirect effect of F-C Closeness on Peer Acceptance mediated by Self-Esteem was significant ( $B = 0.027$ ,  $SE = 0.013$ , 95% CI [0.0054, 0.057]). There is also a significant negative effect between M-C Conflict and Peer Acceptance through Self-Esteem ( $B = -0.027$ ,  $SE = 0.015$ , 95% CI [-0.6, -0.0028]).

Table 4: Mediation

Mediation Analysis				
	Indirect Effect	Std. Error	95.0% Confidence Interval	
<b>M-C Closeness - Self Esteem - Peer Acceptance</b>	0.036	0.016	0.0075	0.071
<b>M-C Closeness - Self Esteem - Peer Rejection</b>	-0.0032	0.016	-0.037	0.026
<b>F-C Closeness - Self Esteem - Peer Acceptance</b>	0.027	0.013	0.0054	0.057
<b>F-C Closeness - Self Esteem - Peer Rejection</b>	-0.0065	0.011	-0.032	0.0145
<b>M-C Conflict - Self Esteem - Peer Acceptance</b>	-0.027	0.015	-0.6	-0.0028
<b>M-C Conflict - Self Esteem - Peer Rejection</b>	0.002	0.013	-0.022	0.31
<b>F-C Conflict - Self Esteem - Peer Acceptance</b>	-0.012	0.0097	-0.034	0.0036
<b>F-C Conflict - Self Esteem - Peer Rejection</b>	0.003	0.0065	-0.0089	0.0178

## 7. Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of this research supported the proposed hypotheses regarding the influence of parent-child relationships on peer relationships among Chinese adolescents, and the mediating role of self-esteem. In alignment with Hypothesis 1 (H1), a positive association was evident between the quality of parent-child relationships and peer relationships. The mean scores of mother-child (M-C) and father-child (F-C) closeness provide empirical backing for this assertion, particularly noting the slight variance in closeness between singleton and non-singleton families. This variance could be indicative of the differential attention a child receives in varied family structures, possibly affecting their social development and subsequent peer interactions.

Through the study, we know that hypothesis 2 is true, that is, self-esteem can play a mediating effect between the two relationships. The discovery of mediating variables can reveal the statistical path, and it can be seen that the more harmonious the family relationship is, the more positive changes can occur in children's peer relationship and self-esteem. Previous scholars have come to the same conclusion in this regard, fully proving that self-esteem can play an important role in adolescents' social adaptation (Trong Dam et al., 2023 et al.) [7].

Analyzing whether there are obvious gender differences in the closeness between father and son or mother and son, and carefully observing the conflicts between parents and children, the conclusion is helpful for the in-depth analysis of gender differences in family and social relations. It can not be ignored that the closeness between parents and children is relatively high for girls, and the conflict is relatively

light, which is enough to show that parents will choose different ways of communication according to their children's gender in the context of Chinese culture.

By constructing the matrix, we can see the characteristics of parent-child relationship. Children's self-esteem will affect the closeness between parents and children, and there is a positive relationship between them; self-esteem will affect the degree of peer rejection, and there is a negative relationship between them. On the contrary, there is a positive relationship between peer rejection and parent-child conflict, but a negative relationship between self-esteem and mother-child conflict. Through careful observation and analysis of family interaction, it is found that self-esteem has an impact on peer relationship, which is related to cultural background and the nature of conflict.

It should be noted that there is no significant difference in peer acceptance among different populations, and this conclusion can play a key role in the next stage of measurement, which can analyze the general experience of adolescents. In contrast, peer rejection has obvious variability, and girls and rural children have a low degree of rejection, which requires an analysis of the impact of cultural background and environment.

This study focuses on the complex relationship among social environment, self-perception and family atmosphere. Although the conclusions put forward can bring support for the next stage of in-depth analysis of the growth background of adolescents, it also reflects that adolescents need to go through the transition period smoothly from family to society, and there are complex problems. In the next stage of research, we should analyze the complex relationship vertically, pay attention to the impact of socio-economic status, take the diverse cultural subgroups as the research object, and deeply understand this complex relationship.

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