



## Caught in the Crossfire: Examining the Mediating Effects of Negative Emotion on the Relationship Between Interparental Conflict and Behavior Problems

Saba Riaz<sup>1</sup>, Shehroz Babar<sup>2</sup>, Usama Khan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of Allied Health Sciences, Iqra University, Chak Shahzad Campus, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [sabariazqureshi@gmail.com](mailto:sabariazqureshi@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> BS Scholar, Department of Allied Health Sciences, Iqra University, Chak Shahzad Campus, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [shehrozbabar300@gmail.com](mailto:shehrozbabar300@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> BS Scholar, Department of Allied Health Sciences, Iqra University, Chak Shahzad Campus, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [usama323436@gmail.com](mailto:usama323436@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

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Behavioral problems are more prevalent in children belonging to conflictual families. Therefore, the aims of current study encompass to explore the potential links between interparental conflict and behavior problems and whether this relationship is mediated by negative emotions. A cross-sectional research design was implemented to recruit 200 participants within age range of 15-20 years, having a mean age of 18.75 years (SD = 1.15) conveniently. The main standardized assessment tools administered in this study were Child Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPICS), Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Short Form (PANAS-SF) and Behavior Problem Scale (BPS). Results revealed that interparental conflict was significantly linked with negative emotions and behavior problems respectively. Furthermore, interparental conflict and negative emotions were significantly predicting behavior problems in the recruited adolescents. Mediation analysis indicated that negative emotions were significantly mediating the association between interparental conflict and behavior problems. Results of the current study are discussed in the light of relevant literature.

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Corresponding Author's Email: [sabariazqureshi@gmail.com](mailto:sabariazqureshi@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

The marital quality of parents significantly affects the psychosocial health of their children (Wahyuningsih, Kusumaningrum, & Novitasari, 2020). Interparental conflict referred to tensions, disagreements and disputes arising within a family between parents in their interactions, roles and responsibilities, negatively influencing the well-beings of adolescents (Liu, 2025). Pakistan is ordered 5th amongst the utmost populated nations having consanguineous family structure with numerous age groups living together. Pakistan is a patriarchal society where people live in collectivist culture, in a nuclear and joint family systems in a single home. Such types of living in the same house increase the probability of disputes, tensions and conflicts between key members because of social and health inequities, restricted social and financial resources, crowded living, etc. The amalgamation of such stressors fuels the domestic violence, even exposing children to physical punishment and crying (Mushtaque et al., 2024). Literature suggests a relationship between PC and teenagers' mental health, but much remains unclear regarding the precise mechanisms and magnitude of this impact (Tang, 2025). Emotional security theory postulates that children often feel secure and comfort in their family life but due to their repeated exposure to conflicts between parents and negative behaviors such as violence, unresolved problems and hostility, they feel unsecure (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Such type of unsecure family environment endangered the psychosocial health of children. The propositions offered by EST might be stretched via spillover hypothesis (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). The spillover hypothesis recommends that increased negative parental affects due to interparental conflict propagate the unhealthy parent-child interactions characterized by arguing, criticizing, scolding and shouting, eventually resulting in adverse child outcomes (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

Therefore, it is speculated that interparental conflict in early years of life impair the healthy parent-child interaction making them insecure, resulting in negative emotions and behavior problems in adolescence period of life.

Interparental conflictual relationship is characterized by hitting, shouting, criticism, threatening, and aggression (Liu, 2025). Social learning theory posits that behaving, acting and thinking of a child result from modeling their parent's behaviors (Sears et al., 2016). Interparental conflict predicts aggressive behavior, decreased prosocial behavior, lack of self-control, lower collaboration and seclusion (Koçak et al., 2017). The behavior of parents determines both mental health and socially appropriate behavioral patterns of children (Dickerson, 2021). Frequent experience of and witnessing interpersonal conflicts cause adolescents to internalize negative emotions (Lucas-Thompson, Seiter, & Lunkenheimer, 2020). Children of such parents consider such challenging responses as typical and espouse those behavioral patterns in their personal relations (Xia, Li, & Liu, 2018). According to Tang (2025), negative emotions include worry, anger, fear, melancholy, jealousy, and other unpleasant feelings that a person may feel when confronted with challenges, frustration, stress, etc. These feelings may be short-term or long-term, show up physically and mentally, possibly resulting in social dysfunction and mental health problems (Tang, 2025). There is a lot of societal worry about how PC affects adolescents' negative emotion. Interparental conflict pronounces vocal or corporal disagreements between parents resulting from lifestyle differences or other conflicts. In addition to affecting family relationships, these disagreements negatively affecting middle school children' mental health, particularly with regard to their emotional development as they mature. Furthermore, some researches have suggested that medical practitioners should focus on prevalence of interparental conflict and their impact on psychological well-being of children (Khaleque et al., 2016).

There has always been a greater chance of behavioral issues during adolescence. WHO warns that screening at any time will lead to between 10 and 20 percent of adolescents globally experiencing behavioral issues (Kashala et al., 2005), with at least 30 percent of adolescents under the age of 16 experiencing behavioral issues (Weitzman, Wegner, & the SECTION ON DEVELOPMENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL PEDIATRICS, 2015). 3446 students between the ages of 10 and 18 were interrogated by Austria in 2018; 16.5% of them had behavioral issues (Philipp et al., 2018). A cross-sectional survey revealed that 10.7% of teenagers in school experience behavioral and emotional issues (Wang, Liu, & Wang, 2014). Adolescent mental and behavioral issues have been more prevalent in China and elsewhere in recent years. Additionally, longitudinal study found that behavior problems in childhood have long lasting consequences in the subsequent life stages supporting the notion that emotional and behavioral issues in early life stages have an influence on mental health in later life (Darney et al., 2013). Experiencing parental disputes in childhood suffer negatively almost 46% of children in their upcoming lives (Syed, Hussein, & Haidry, 2009). Verbal and physical violence between parents 49% and 23% of the population respectively. Females in rural regions of Pakistan are subjected to increased violence in their marriages (Mushtaque et al., 2024). While in urban areas, both partners have aggressive tendencies resulting in significant harm and amplifying the likelihood of resentments. The impact of such interparental conflicts on children population are categorized as poor academic performance (41%), exhibition of violence (53%), sadness and loneliness (33%) and suicidal attempts (7%) (Fortgang et al., 2021). Based on the aforementioned literature, this study assumes that; a) interparental conflict will be positively associated with negative emotions, (b) negative emotions will be positively associated with behavioral problems, and (c) negative emotions will mediate the association between interparental conflict and behavioral problems.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Participants and Procedures**

This cross-sectional research study was conducted between October 2024 to December 2024. The inclusion criteria include participants who are living with their biological parents, having an age range of 15-20 years, while the exclusion criteria include adapted child, participants whose parents are died, divorced or separated, having missing values on survey booklet regarding demographics and assessment tools. All participants were recruited through convenient sampling technique having a mean age of 18.75 years ( $SD = 1.15$ ). The study was conducted offline and all subjects were required to sign an informed consent prior to their participation. The survey booklet does not encompass any recognizable evidence such as name, location etc. to maintain the anonymity of participants. Each survey booklet was provided with a

4-digit code to maintain the privacy of the participating participants. Furthermore, they were provided with the right to pull out their participation at any stage and maintenance of their participation will not be encouraged through prize bonds, or any other source.

## **2.2. Measures**

### **2.2.1. Demographic Characteristics**

The sociodemographic includes participant's self-reported age, gender, level of education, birth order, socioeconomic status, type of residence and family system. Age was classified into three levels such as 15-16, 17-18, 19-20. Gender was grouped as male and female. Level of education was categorized as secondary, intermediate and undergraduate. The birth order was classified into 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> birth order respectively. Similarly, socioeconomic status of participants was grouped as; lower, middle and upper. Type of residence was categorized as rural and urban while family system was classified into neutral and joint respectively.

### **2.2.2. Psychological Measures**

Child Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPICS): This study administered CPICS to assess the intensity of perceived interparental conflict in adolescents (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). CPICS is a valid and reliable ( $\alpha=0.77$ ) tool to measure interparental conflict in Pakistani adolescents (Mushtaque et al., 2024). This scale is comprised of 48 items having a 3-point Likert response format. CPICS is a reliable tool having a reliability index of .72. After reverse scoring items 1, 2, 6, 9, 13, 17, 20, 23, 27, 28, 30, 36, 39, and 47 to create a total score. The CPICS Cronbach's alpha value in this study was 0.87.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule- Short Form (PANAS-SF): Negative emotions were assessed by utilizing the negative emotion items in PANAS-SF (Watson et al., 1988). PANAS-SF is a valid and reliable tool across cultures and can be used to measure positive and negative emotion in Pakistani context (Karim, Weisz, & Rehman, 2011). Items 2,4,6,7,8,11,13,15, 18 and 20 measures negative emotions using a 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1= very lightly or not at all, to 5=extremely. This scale is scored up by simply summing up all the responses. The reliability index of negative affect subscale of PANAS-SF in this current study was 0.79.

Behavior Problem Scale (BPS): Behavior problem scale was administered to measure behavior problem in adolescents (Ara, 2018). Behavior Problem scale is a standardized assessment tool that is used to assess behavior problems in Pakistani adolescents (Shaheen, Akhtar, & Khan, 2023). This scale comprised of 10 items having 5-points Likert response format ranging from 1=never to 5=most often. The reliability index of this study was 0.79. This scale is scored up by summing up all the responses on each item. Higher scores indicate greater behavior problem. The Cronbach's alpha value of BPS reported in this study was 0.76.

### **2.2.3. Common method bias**

This study utilized procedural method to control potential bias related to method of the study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Bias of dishonesty and artificial responses were eliminated by providing confidentiality of the participant's responses. To avoid the respondent's errors in establishing cause and effect relationship between the variables of interest, all the included variables were randomly introduced in the survey booklet.

## **2.3. Statistical Analysis**

SPSS version 26 and Hayes Macro Process version 4 were used to statistically analyze the data, with a two-tailed  $p$  values  $<0.05$  statistical significance. The main statistical tools in this study include descriptive statistics, Pearson product moment correlation, multiple linear regression analysis, and mediation analysis. Descriptive statistics were executed designed for the description of demographic characteristics. Pearson product moment correlation analysis was utilized to calculate bivariate correlations between variables of interest. Regression analysis was utilized to investigate the predictors of behavior problems in Pakistani adolescents. Since, mediation assumptions proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) were met, therefore this study utilizes mediation analysis model 4 in order to determine the potential mediating role of negative emotions between interparental conflict and behavior problems in Pakistani adolescents.

### 2.4. Control for Confounding Variables

Confounding variables such as age of participants, socioeconomic status and family systems were controlled in regression analysis. The regression analysis was run in two steps. The first step included variables such as age of participants, socioeconomic status and family systems while the second step contained interparental conflict and negative emotion as predictors of behavior problems. Variables enlisted in step 1 were not predicting behavior problems in Pakistani adolescents. Therefore, variables included in step 2 were only utilized in multiple linear regression analysis.

### 3. Results

**Descriptive Statistics:** Table 1 indicates the summary of recruited participant’s demographics in the current study. The mean age of participant was calculated as ( $M= 18.75$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ). Majority of participants falls in the age range of 19-20 years (51.5%), female (64.5%), and having an undergraduate level of education (76.5%). More than half of participants belongs to nuclear family system (66%), middle class (87%), having first birth order (30.5%) and living in urban areas (54%).

**Bivariate Analysis:** Table 2 indicates bivariate analysis to examine the association between interparental conflict, negative emotion and behavior problem in adolescents. Results revealed that interparental conflict was significantly positively linked to negative emotion ( $r=.23$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and behavior problem ( $r=.18$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Similarly, negative emotions were significantly positively correlated to behavior problem ( $r =.23$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

**Multiple Linear Regression Analysis:** Table 3 indicates multiple linear regression analysis of interparental conflict, negative emotion and behavior problem in adolescents. Results indicated that both interparental conflict ( $\beta= .14$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and negative emotion ( $\beta= .19$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) were significantly positively predicting behavior problem in adolescents.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics of participant’s demographic (N=120)**

Demographic Variables	F	%	M	SD
Age (Years)			18.75	1.15
Age Categories (Years)				
15-16	4	2		
17-18	93	46.5		
19-20	103	51.5		
Gender				
Male	71	35.5		
Female	129	64.5		
Education				
Secondary	18	9		
Intermediate	29	14.5		
Undergraduate	153	76.5		
Family System				
Nuclear	132	66		
Joint	68	34		
Socioeconomic Status				
Lower class	6	10		
Middle class	174	87		
Upper class	20	3		
Birth Order				
1 <sup>st</sup>	61	30.5		
2 <sup>nd</sup>	47	23.5		
3 <sup>rd</sup>	51	25.5		
4 <sup>th</sup>	24	12.0		
5 <sup>th</sup>	17	8.5		
Residence Type				
Rural	92	46		
Urban	108	54		

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Interparental Conflict, Negative Emotion and Behavior Problem in Adolescents (N=200)**

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Interparental Conflict	102.39	14.42	—		
2. Negative Emotion	30.27	7.94	.23**	—	
3. Behavior Problem	32.68	7.31	.18*	.23**	—

Note: M= mean, SD= Standard Deviation \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression analysis of Interparental Conflict, Negative Emotion and Behavior Problem in Adolescents (N=200)**

Variables	Behavior Problem				
	B	SE	B	T	P
Interparental Conflict	.07	.03	.14	2.00	.046
Negative Emotion	.18	.06	.19	2.77	.006
R <sup>2</sup>	.07				
F (df)	7.53(2,197)				
P	0.001				

**Table 4: Mediation analysis of Interparental Conflict, Negative Emotion and Behavior Problem in Adolescents (N=200)**

Antecedent	Consequent						
	Negative Emotion (M)				Behavior Problem (Y)		
	B	SE	P	B	SE	P	
Interparental Conflict (X)	<i>a</i> .12	.03	.001***	<i>c'</i> .07	.03	.04*	
Negative Emotion (M)				<i>B</i> .17	.06	.006**	
Constant	<i>i</i> 17.29	3.93	.000***	<i>I</i> 19.93	3.76	.000***	
R <sup>2</sup> = .05	R <sup>2</sup> = .07			F (2,197) = 7.53 $p = .000$ ***			
F (1,198) = 11.06, $p = .001$ ***							

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p > .05$

**Table 5: Indirect Effects of Interparental Conflict on Behavior Problem through Negative Emotion in Adolescents (N=200)**

Variables	B	SE	LL	UL
Negative Emotion	.02	.01	.00	.05

### 3.1. Mediation Analysis

Table 4 and 5 indicates a mediation analysis with 1000 bootstrapped samples. The direct effect of interparental conflict on behavior problem was significant (DE= .07,  $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 4). Similarly, findings indicate significant indirect effects of interparental conflicts on behavior problem through negative emotion ((LL=.00, UL= .05) (Table 5). Adolescents experiencing high interparental conflict were more likely to develop negative emotions and through negative emotions were more likely to have behavior problems.

## 4. Discussion

The collectivist nature of Pakistani culture strongly emphasizes the family honor which restricts parents to discuss their disputes in front of their children because of the resulting embarrassment. Consequently, such parents detach their children from themselves. The full-time absorption of negative activities leads children to do catharsis in the form of negative emotions either inward or outward (Zaman, Kausar, & Abid, 2020). Therefore, the determination of current study was to inspect the correlation between interparental conflict, negative emotion and behavior problems in Pakistani adolescents. This study found that interparental conflict was a significant positive correlate and predictor of behavior problem in adolescents, align with the previous research study (Rogers, 2018). Adolescents perceived non-problematic conflict between parents as less threatening (Grych & Fincham, 1993), and vice versa. Such adolescents are more fearful of minor disagreements because of their fear of escalation of conflict to violence (Grych, 1998). Such type of increased threat appraisals leads to maladjustment of adolescents (Fosco & Grych, 2007), which is linked with behavior problems (Rhoades, 2008). Interparental conflict was a significant positively correlated to negative emotion, align with the findings of the study conducted by Tang (2025). Children believe that parents are more inclined to scold, argue, and condemn their kids than to provide affection or lift their spirits when they are feeling down. Children's social well-being is subsequently linked to these shifts in parenting style, as seen by a decline in prosocial conduct and an increase in peer issues, aligning with propositions postulated

by emotional security theory and spillover hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1994). The findings of the current study demonstrated that negative emotion was significant positive correlate and predictor of behavior problems in adolescents. Literature reported that negative emotionality of children is a correlate and predictor of behavior problems (Belsky & Pluess, 2009). Adolescents who have a tendency of negative emotion are more likely to exhibit behavior problems in daily life such as fighting and arguing. Similarly, adolescents who exhibit fewer negative emotions have low risk of behavior problems even when their parents score high on negative emotionality (Slatcher & Trentacosta, 2012). The result of this study documented that negative emotion significantly mediated a connection amid conflict between parents and behavior problem in adolescents (Labella & Masten, 2018). There is a curvilinear effect of interparental conflict to the psychological adjustments of adolescents and their respond to different stressors in family environment (Koss & Gunnar, 2018). Furthermore, literature reported that adolescents having frequent exposure to conflict between parents have high risk of developing behavioral problems (Harold & Sellers, 2018). The mediation role of negative emotion is validated by the assumption that interparental conflict alter the emotional reactions of children and cortisol responses to family adversities increases their vulnerability to behavior problems (Repetti, Robles, & Reynolds, 2011).

#### **4.1. Limitations**

Besides providing novel findings regarding interparental conflicts and behavior problems, this study has some limitations. The primary limitation includes the quantitative nature of the current study where respondents have to provide their responses based on their honesty which might cause misperceptions of questions ultimately resulting in neutral responses. Another limitation was adoption of cross-sectional research design, which cannot provide in-depth analysis of the study variables. The generalizability of the study's findings is restricted in different social and cultural contexts such as individualist culture.

#### **4.2. Future Suggestions**

The same model could be replicated with a different sample such as adolescents living with a single parent, divorced parent, and adolescents living without parents to draw a comparative analysis of the study variables across different samples. Future studies may also replicate the current study by adding some other constructs such as coping strategies, social support etc. This study could be replicate and generalize by researchers in various contexts to increase the generalizability and validation of the current's study results. Researchers may use longitudinal study designs to determine the long-term effects, and comparative study designs to examine the various cultural influences.

#### **4.3. Implications**

Family and couple therapist must address the negative emotions in order to alleviate their psychosocial burdens. Addressing negative emotions will decrease their likelihood of poor mental health and subsequently will mitigate the potential risk of impair parent-child bonding. Furthermore, there is a need of school-based intervention such as school connectedness to make children feel secure in this new environment and buffer the stress resulting from interparental conflict. Social workers should propose parent-focused interventions including child rearing practices in order to decrease the problematic behavior of children.

### **5. Conclusion**

Despite the adverse impacts of interparental conflict on psychosocial health of adolescents, there is a scarcity of previous literature investigating the mechanisms relating interparental conflicts to behavior problems in Pakistani adolescents. Interparental conflict is vital to investigate because of its profound impacts on psychological development of a child and their behavior. To address this research gap, the current study intends to investigate the impact of interparental conflicts on behavior problems along with the mediating mechanism influencing this relationship. Based on the Emotional Security theory, this study hypothesized the positive link between interparental conflict and negative emotion. This study also hypothesized the positive relationship between negative emotion and behavior problems and mediating role of negative emotion in the relationship between interparental conflict and behavior problems. Findings of the current study confirmed that interparental conflict was significantly positively associated with negative emotion and behavior problems respectively. Furthermore, negative emotion was significantly mediating the association between interparental conflict and behavior problems. Since according to a researcher's knowledge, this is the first study in terms of investigating

interparental conflict, negative emotion, and behavior problems altogether, provide a sort of uniqueness to this research study. Additionally, its inimitability lies in examination of the sequential relationship between interparental conflict, negative emotion, and behavior problems. Since the existing literature was comprised of the studies directly linking interparental conflict to behavior problems, this study is novel because of its wide-ranging approach to investigate all variables, especially their mediational effects in Pakistani adolescents. This research study is important since it suggests a new viewpoint on how interparental conflict affects adolescent's emotion and behavior. Practically speaking, this study offers evidence-based recommendations for school intervention and family education, assisting in the development of more effective interventions to promote teenagers' emotional control and mental health. Additionally, it can increase public knowledge of adolescent mental health concerns, particularly the role that the home environment plays in adolescent's development.

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