



Interparental Conflict And Personality Traits In Early Adolescence

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Abstract: The present study examined differences in personality traits, with a specific focus on agreeableness and conscientiousness among adolescents exposed to high versus low interparental conflict (IPC). The sample comprised 300 adolescents aged 10–14 years, categorized into high IPC ($n = 150$) and low IPC ($n = 150$) groups including both male and female based on their perceptions of parental conflict. Interparental conflict was assessed using the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Questionnaire (Grych & Fincham, 1992), and personality traits were measured using the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). Independent samples t -tests were conducted to examine group differences. Results indicated that adolescents from low IPC households scored significantly higher on both agreeableness ($M = 35.26$, $SD = 4.60$) and conscientiousness ($M = 37.05$, $SD = 4.84$) than those from high IPC households (agreeableness: $M = 31.33$, $SD = 4.76$; conscientiousness: $M = 32.67$, $SD = 5.35$), with large effect sizes (Cohen's $d > 0.80$). These findings underscore the importance of a low-conflict family environment in supporting adaptive personality development during early adolescence.

Index Terms - interparental conflict, agreeableness, conscientiousness, adolescents, personality development

Introduction

Children do not learn how to relate to others in isolation; their earliest understanding of trust, cooperation, and emotional regulation develops within the family. Everyday interactions between parents whether calm and supportive or tense and conflictual create the emotional backdrop against which children form expectations about relationships, self-control, and emotional safety. During early adolescence, a developmental period marked by rapid emotional, cognitive, and social change, these family experiences become especially influential. At this stage, repeated exposure to unresolved or hostile interparental conflict may shape not only how adolescents feel in the moment, but also more enduring aspects of who they become.

Interparental conflict (IPC) has been consistently linked to a wide range of emotional and behavioral difficulties in children and adolescents, including anxiety, depression, aggression, and problems in peer relationships (Harold & Sellers, 2018). Recent research indicates that interparental conflict is associated not only with emotional and behavioral adjustment problems but also with adolescents' internal security and mental health outcomes. Beyond immediate psychological symptoms, IPC has also been associated with long-term difficulties in emotion regulation, interpersonal functioning, and relationship quality across the lifespan (Kumar & Mattanah, 2018). Despite this robust body of evidence, most research has focused on symptom-based outcomes, leaving comparatively less attention to how interparental conflict may influence the development of core personality traits during adolescence.

Personality traits provide a broad framework through which individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to their social environments. Within the Five-Factor Model, agreeableness and conscientiousness are particularly relevant during adolescence, as they underpin empathy, cooperation, responsibility, persistence, and self-regulation—capacities essential for academic engagement, peer relationships, and adaptive functioning (McCrae & Costa, 2008).

Agreeableness reflects tendencies toward kindness, empathy, cooperation, and prosocial behavior, whereas conscientiousness encompasses organization, impulse control, responsibility, and goal-directed behavior (John et al., 2008). Research indicates that higher levels of agreeableness are associated with positive interpersonal relations and effective coping mechanisms during conflicts, particularly in children and adolescents (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2003; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001). During adolescence, these traits are associated with social competence, academic engagement, and adaptive functioning and continue to show sensitivity to environmental contexts (Soto & Tackett, 2015).

The importance of environmental influences on personality development is particularly pronounced during adolescence, a developmental period characterized by heightened sensitivity to family dynamics, peer influence, and broader social contexts (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). While adolescence has traditionally been conceptualized as a time of emotional turbulence and personality instability, growing empirical evidence suggests a more nuanced picture. Personality structure remains largely stable during adolescence, with only modest and often temporary changes observed in traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness (Ibáñez et al., 2016). These findings indicate that adolescence represents a sensitive period in which environmental stressors may influence the expression and consolidation of personality traits without fundamentally altering their underlying structure.

Theoretical frameworks such as emotional security theory and family systems theory provide valuable lenses for understanding how interparental conflict may shape adolescent personality development. Emotional security theory posits that exposure to destructive parental conflict threatens children's sense of safety within the family, leading to emotional dysregulation and maladaptive coping strategies that may, over time, influence interpersonal orientations and self-regulatory capacities (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Family systems theory further emphasizes that conflict within the interparental subsystem can spill over into parent-child relationships, disrupting consistency, warmth, and structure—environmental conditions that are critical for children's emotional regulation and social development, and that are theorized to support the development of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

The present study focuses specifically on agreeableness and conscientiousness because these traits are closely linked to social functioning and self-regulation—domains that are particularly sensitive to family environmental influences during early adolescence. By examining differences in agreeableness and conscientiousness among adolescents exposed to high versus low levels of interparental conflict, the current study seeks to extend existing research beyond symptom-focused outcomes and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of personality development within the context of family relationships.

Gap identification

Although interparental conflict has been extensively linked to children's emotional and behavioral problems, comparatively little research has examined how such conflict relates to the development of core personality traits during early adolescence. Moreover, theoretical frameworks such as emotional security theory and family systems theory suggest that parental conflict may influence adolescents' interpersonal orientations and self-regulatory capacities, yet these propositions have rarely been tested using personality traits as developmental indicators.

Objective

To examine differences in agreeableness and conscientiousness among adolescents (10–14 years) exposed to high and low interparental conflict.

Hypotheses

H1: Adolescents exposed to high interparental conflict will score significantly lower on agreeableness than those exposed to low interparental conflict.

H2: Adolescents exposed to high interparental conflict will score significantly lower on conscientiousness than those exposed to low interparental conflict.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The present study employed a quantitative, non-experimental, between-groups comparative research design to examine differences in agreeableness and conscientiousness among adolescents exposed to varying levels of interparental conflict (IPC). The independent variable was the level of interparental conflict. Participants were classified into high IPC and low IPC groups based on their scores on the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Questionnaire. The dependent variables were the personality traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness, measured using Big 5 inventory.

Sample and technique

Purposive sampling was used to choose the study sample. The sample was gathered from 6 different schools from Jaipur. The total sample consisted of 300 early adolescents including both males and females.

Sample selection Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

Adolescents aged 10–14 years were included in the study.

Both male and female adolescents were included.

Adolescents whose biological parents were living together at the time of the study were included.

Adolescents living in nuclear family setup were included.

Exclusion Criteria

Adolescents who were currently receiving psychological therapy, psychiatric treatment, or medication for clinical purposes were excluded.

Adolescents with diagnosed physical or developmental disabilities that could interfere with questionnaire comprehension or response were excluded.

Measures

Demographics Form

The demographic form was used to assess the background information of adolescents. This includes age, gender, grade, family setup etc.

Child Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych & Fincham, 1992)

Interparental conflict was assessed using the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict questionnaire (CPIC) developed by Grych and Fincham (1992). It is a 48 item, 3 point likert scale to assess the perception of interparental conflict among children. Considering their inter-parental conflict behavior, the respondents

selected "true," "Sort of true" and "false" from the available options. Each item got a score of 0,1 or 2 based on whether it was a positive item or a negative one.

For the purpose of this study, 3 subscales were used i.e. Frequency (6 Items), Intensity (7 items), Resolution (6 items). participants were categorized into high IPC and low IPC according to their score. The alpha coefficients of the subscales demonstrated good internal consistency with all the values greater than .70. Test retest correlations of over two weeks period were derived for each subscale and it ranged between .70 and .76 with evidence suggesting good validity coefficients.

Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999)

Personality traits were assessed using the Big Five Inventory (BFI-44) developed by John and Srivastava (1999). The BFI is a widely used self-report measure designed to assess the five major dimensions of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. For the purpose of the present study, only the agreeableness (9 items) and conscientiousness (9 items) dimensions were considered. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scores for each subscale were calculated by summing the respective item responses, with higher scores representing higher levels of the trait. It has shown good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas typically ranging from around 0.70 to 0.90. Test-retest reliability over periods of weeks to months has also been demonstrated. It has shown convergent validity with related constructs.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Internal consistency of the study instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumptions for parametric analyses were examined, including normality of distributions and homogeneity of variances. Normality was assessed through visual inspection of histograms and Q-Q plots, and homogeneity of variance was examined using Levene's test. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed for agreeableness and conscientiousness scores across high and low interparental conflict (IPC) groups. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine group differences in agreeableness and conscientiousness. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to estimate the magnitude of observed differences.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary assumption checks indicated that agreeableness and conscientiousness scores were approximately normally distributed across IPC groups. Levene's test showed no significant violations of homogeneity of variance for either agreeableness or conscientiousness ($p > .05$). These findings supported the use of independent samples t-tests for subsequent analyses.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for agreeableness and conscientiousness across high and low interparental conflict (IPC) groups are presented in Table 1. Adolescents from low IPC households demonstrated higher mean scores on both agreeableness and conscientiousness compared to adolescents from high IPC households.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics for Agreeableness and Conscientiousness by Interparental Conflict Group*

Variable	IPC Group	N	M	SD
Agreeableness	High IPC	150	31.33	4.76
	Low IPC	150	35.26	4.60
Conscientiousness	High IPC	150	32.67	5.35
	Low IPC	150	37.05	4.84

Group Differences in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness

Independent samples t tests were conducted to examine differences in agreeableness and conscientiousness between adolescents exposed to high versus low levels of interparental conflict (see Table 2).

Results indicated a significant difference in agreeableness scores between groups, $t(298) = -7.28, p < .001$, with adolescents from low IPC households scoring higher than those from high IPC households. The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = 0.84$).

Similarly, a significant group difference was observed for conscientiousness, $t(298) = -7.43, p < .001$. Adolescents in the low IPC group reported higher conscientiousness compared to those in the high IPC group, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.86$).

Table 2*Independent Samples t-Test Results for Agreeableness and Conscientiousness*

Variable	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Agreeableness	-7.28	298	< .001	0.84
Conscientiousness	-7.43	298	< .001	0.86

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between exposure to interparental conflict and the personality traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness during early adolescence. Consistent with the study hypotheses, the findings demonstrated that adolescents who reported high levels of interparental conflict exhibited significantly lower levels of both agreeableness and conscientiousness compared to adolescents from low-conflict households. These results extend existing literature by showing that interparental conflict is not only associated with emotional and behavioral maladjustment (Harold & Sellers, 2018) but is also linked to differences in core personality traits that shape social functioning and adaptive behavior across developmental stages.

The large effect size observed for agreeableness suggests that exposure to interparental conflict plays a substantial role in shaping adolescents' prosocial orientation, empathic capacity, and cooperative tendencies. This finding is consistent with emotional security theory, which posits that destructive interparental conflict threatens children's sense of safety and emotional stability within the family system (Davies & Cummings, 1994). The chronic emotional insecurity created by ongoing parental discord may

limit adolescents' capacity for adaptive social functioning, as emotional resources are diverted toward managing distress and perceived threat rather than engaging empathically with others (Cummings et al., 2012). In line with this interpretation, prior research has shown that interparental conflict predicts interpersonal difficulties during adolescence (Kumar & Mattanah, 2018). The present findings extend this work by suggesting that such interpersonal challenges may be reflected in more enduring personality characteristics, particularly agreeableness, shaped by early family experiences.

Similarly, the large effect observed for conscientiousness indicates that interparental conflict is significantly associated with lower levels of self-regulation, organization, and goal-directed behavior during adolescence. This finding is particularly noteworthy given meta-analytic evidence indicating that conscientiousness is among the strongest personality predictors of academic performance, often exceeding the predictive power of intelligence (Poropat, 2009). Several mechanisms may explain the association between high interparental conflict and lower conscientiousness. The emotional volatility and unpredictability characteristic of high-conflict homes may interfere with the establishment of consistent routines, structure, and expectations that are critical for the development of conscientious behavior patterns. Additionally, chronic stress associated with parental conflict may deplete adolescents' self-regulatory resources, making it more difficult to develop persistence, impulse control, and sustained goal-directed behavior.

The present findings suggest that the influence of interparental conflict on these personality traits may have broader developmental implications, potentially affecting adolescents' capacity for self-regulation, academic engagement, and adaptive functioning across multiple life domains. Taken together, the results highlight the importance of family emotional climate in shaping not only adolescents' immediate adjustment but also foundational personality traits that contribute to long-term developmental outcomes.

Limitations

The present study has certain limitations. First, its cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretations of the relationship between interparental conflict and personality traits. Second, the sample was limited to urban adolescents aged 10–14 years with parents living together, which may reduce the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the study focused only on agreeableness and conscientiousness; future research may examine other personality traits to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings highlight the importance of addressing interparental conflict as a family-level risk factor for adolescents' personality development. Interventions aimed at improving parental conflict resolution and emotional climate within the family may support the development of adaptive traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness. School counselors and mental health professionals should consider family dynamics when working with adolescents exposed to chronic conflict. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and multi-informant assessments to better understand developmental pathways linking interparental conflict and personality traits.

Conclusion

This study provides robust empirical evidence that childhood exposure to interparental conflict has significant and lasting associations with core personality dimensions in adolescence. Adolescents from high-conflict family backgrounds exhibited substantially lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness compared to those from low-conflict backgrounds, with large effect sizes indicating meaningful real-world differences. The results underscore the critical importance of the family environment in personality development and highlight interparental relationship quality as a key factor influencing children's developmental trajectories. From both theoretical and practical perspectives, these findings emphasize the need for prevention and intervention efforts targeting interparental conflict. By helping parents manage disagreements constructively and maintain supportive family climates, we may foster healthier personality development in children, with cascading benefits for their relationships, achievements, and well-being across the lifespan.

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