

Exploring the Effects of Family Communication on Adolescent Emotional Development

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the effects of family communication on the emotional development of adolescents in greater depth through group counseling with nine high school students from a secondary school in Gombak district, Selangor. The objectives of the study are to 1) understand the importance of family communication on the emotional development of adolescents and, 2) to identify the impact of family communication on the emotional management of adolescents. The Family Communication Pattern Theory (FCPT) by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) guides the exploration of two main categories: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Under the theme of conversation orientation, there are four sub-themes: 1) open communication, 2) threatening communication, 3) emotional support, and 4) paying attention during communication. For conformity orientation, there are two sub-themes: 1) complying with parental instructions and, 2) role as a child. Without strong family communication, conflicts between parents and adolescent children are likely to arise.

Keywords: Family Communication, Emotional Development, Conversation Orientation, Conformity Orientation, Adolescents

Introduction

Effective family communication can build a harmonious family and have a positive impact on the mental and emotional well-being of teenagers. However, many teenagers in Malaysia face challenges in communicating with family members effectively. Therefore, this study aims to explore the effect of family communication on the emotional development of teenagers. A family communication theory termed *Family Communication Pattern Theory* (FCPT) was pioneered by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006), who described family communication into two main categories: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. According to Fitzpatrick (2004), conversation orientation is about open and honest communication where family members can share feelings and emotions and interact highly with family members. A high level of conversation orientation means that the parents have succeeded in fostering two-way communication and can guide the children to communicate openly. The second

category, conformity orientation, looks at the extent to which a family encourages its members to conform to a set of values and beliefs. Family members who have high conformity orientation will expect their children to have similar thoughts and behaviors. Based on FCPT theory, the two main themes have been identified which are conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Under the conversation orientation theme, four sub-themes arise, namely 1) open communication, 2) threatening communication, 3) emotional support, and, 4) paying attention during interaction while for conformity orientation, two sub-themes arise which are 1) complying with parental instructions and, 2) role as a child.

The transition to adulthood is a journey full of challenges where teenagers go through various mental, emotional, and physical changes that impact emotional development. In Malaysia, there are many teenagers that identify confusion is one of the main factors to cause communication barriers among parents (Pauzi et al. 2024). This states that, without clear communication, the relationship between teenagers and parents will be disrupted due to rising conflicts. Communication skills with family members should be cultivated among teenagers to create a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere at home.

Furthermore, without strong family communication, teenagers have the potential to face emotional stress. For example, without open communication or a clear two-way communication, teenagers will feel deprived and unheard. Next, suppose a teenager grows up in a family environment that does not encourage its members to express their needs. In that case, trust will be lost and teenagers will become less involved in any family activities. Without effective communication, teenagers are at risk of facing various problems such as depression, engaging in unhealthy social interactions, and behavioral problems stemming from poor emotional management. Family communication is important so that teenagers learn to express their feelings when faced with a challenge, without family support, feelings of loneliness and inferiority arise.

Therefore, this study is important to educate teenagers and parents about the importance of family communication. This study is expected to help teenagers form a deep understanding of the implications of family communication on emotional development. Effective family communication can help teenagers share emotions and feelings that can strengthen the relationship with parents and siblings. In addition, this study is also expected to educate parents about the advantages of communication and the importance of providing the emotional support and love that teenagers need. Thus, a sense of trust and respect can be built between family members and can be used as a foundation for constructive family communication.

This study aims to explore the impact of family communication on the emotional development of teenagers in depth through group counseling intervention towards nine high school students from a secondary school in Gombak district, Selangor. This study aims to 1) understand the importance of family communication on the emotional development of adolescents and, 2) identify the impact of family communication on the emotional management of adolescents.

Literature Review**Family Communication**

Several past studies use FCPT theory as a guide in their studies. For example, a study by Nasir and Tahrir (2023) used FCPT to explore family communication and adolescent self-concept where open family communication is found to play a significant role in building a progressive self-concept among teenagers residing in rural areas. In addition, a study by Abdul Rahman and Alavi (2023) used the Revise Family Communication Pattern instrument by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) to study interpersonal family communication patterns. The study found that B40 teenagers scored highly in conversation orientation and conformity orientation, this directly supports Koerner's (2018) finding that conversation orientation acts as a pathway for family members to communicate with each other and encourage joint conflict resolution, while families from a low conversation orientation interact less with each other and steer away from family discussion upon decision making (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Next, a study by Zhou et al. (2022) reported that conversation orientation is a protective factor in preventing depression among adolescents at an early stage. This further strengthens the findings that family communication is an important factor that needs to be taken into account to maintain the mental and emotional well-being of teenagers. Therefore, parents should take care of their relationship with their teenage children by practicing communication skills that have elements of open communication, mutual respect, and showing empathy towards their children so that the emotional development of teenagers can be developed positively.

Conformity orientation refers to the extent to which family members conform to the values and beliefs set by parents (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Teenagers with strict parents often come from family structures that have high levels of conformity orientation. Teenagers as children must conform to the values and beliefs set by their parents. On the other hand, Koerner et al. (2018) explained that teenagers from families with low levels of conformity orientation can focus on self-autonomy and have a warm and loving relationship with their parents.

Emotional Development

Erik Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory explains adolescents' emotional development at the identity versus confusion level. According to Erikson (1968), at this stage, teenagers try to get a sense of ego identity, where teenagers try to recognize themselves and learn to adapt in society. At this level too, teenagers try to avoid identity confusion. Furthermore, teenagers learn to form their identity, explore more self-concept, and understand the perception of the world as a teenager at the identity versus confusion level. Therefore, when teenagers are faced with communication problems with their parents, the conflict that arises prevents teenagers from seeing parents as their idols which makes it harder for them to deal with identity confusion (Costantini, 2022).

According to Granic et al. (2020), teenagers prefer to search for their identity among their peers, especially in today's digital age where one can easily be influenced by what one sees and thus can easily shape their personality. Teenagers also tend to behave negatively when socializing freely without parental supervision. Erikson (1968) asserted that if teenagers go through the stage of identity versus confusion well, teenagers can form a solid self-concept on top of learning to manage their emotions healthily. Therefore, parents need to communicate positively with their teenage children so that the emotional development and mental well-being of teenagers can be well. Parents should strive to be role models so that

teenagers can understand their roles and functions in society as well as forming an exemplary identity.

Methodology

This study was conducted qualitatively through an interview session (semi-structured) with nine teenagers from a secondary school in Gombak district, Selangor who attended group counseling sessions. The nine students were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of three students aged 15 while the second group consisted of six students aged 14. A non-probability sampling method was used in this study. According to Merriam (1998), the research sample is filtered to help the researcher in obtaining accurate information to serve the intended objectives. The criteria for study participants are i) high school students aged 16 and below, ii) marked yes to the "family" category as the main topic to be discussed during sessions and iii) attended three group counseling sessions. The teenagers attended three sessions consisting of an introduction session, an intervention session, and a termination session. The researcher obtained informed consent from the respondents to record all three interview sessions through a smartphone video recording. Through interview techniques, students' perceptions related to family communication on the adolescents' emotional development can be further explored.

In the introduction session, the counselor gave an informed consent form and a client information form to be completed by the client before explaining the counseling procedure. In this session, respondents shared about how family communication has an impact on their emotional development as teenagers. The second session involved an art therapy intervention where group members were asked to draw about their dream family with the objective of understanding the teenagers' family communication patterns. Each respondent was given a sheet of A4 paper, drawing pencils, and colored pencils. The third session is the termination session where group members exchange opinions with each other on what they learned about family communication and emotional development from attending the counselling sessions. Each session lasts for an hour to an hour and a half. To analyse the transcripts, the researcher used a thematic technique approach and had written down notes and made conclusions related to family communication and adolescents' emotional development right after each session ends. This thematic technique is subject to open coding to find and match themes related to the respondents' lived experiences. Next, the interview data was transcribed into text for further analysis. The interview process was repeated until the data was saturated and no new themes emerged.

Findings

This study used FCPT as a guideline in which two themes have been identified: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. For conversation orientation, four sub-themes emerged; 1) open communication, 2) threatening communication, 3) emotional support and, 4) paying attention during communication for conformity orientation, two sub-themes emerged; 1) complying with parental instructions and, 2) role as a child.

Theme	Sub Theme	Participants	Interview Statement
Conversation Orientation	Open communication	Informant 1	<i>"umm talk about umm something that has to do with mechanics. Uhh at that time I was outside, I was doing my work and then I was washing the car but then I forgot what it was about but it was related to mechanical."</i>

- Informant 2 *"I always talk to Dad about sports. He told me to build my body and eat constantly and always uhh always jog like that."*
- Informant 3 *"uhh mostly about school and academics, sometimes about fighting, mixed martial arts (MMA), and stuff. I don't know much about MMA, but I think it's pretty cool."*
- Informant 5 *"My father is here, but currently he is not here, he is with his second family. One day I would like to hang out with my family where I can talk about any topic."*
- Threatening communication Informant 4 *"My mom called me, so I came down, then my mom threw the burnt toast at me and said, "What are you doing? You can't watch over your siblings, you're useless, you're a grown-up, can't you take care of your siblings? like can I do , I'm in the middle of an online class, it's impossible to watch over them every single time but I know I should have looked at where they were up to before my online class."*
- Informant 9 *"My mom always pushes me and threatens to change schools or go to a boarding school. My parents know that I don't like changing schools because I did it once where I couldn't go to school for months, weeks. My parents are always angry with me, I don't want that to happen again, I don't want to quit school but my parents always pressure me, they say that I'm not as smart as I used to be and that I don't try as much as I used to."*
- Emotional support Informant 2 *"uhh about having anxiety and stuff like that, so she doesn't like to hear it. My mom doesn't like negative things, so I hide it from her. Sometimes I have anxiety and she will respond like "It's just evil spirits" So yeah, parents are like that."*
- Informant 3 *"Something happened at school, so I feel sad and all and my mom would respond "what?" just like that so we don't communicate properly."*
- Informant 8 *"Okay this is me when I'm crying and this is when my sister is crying, so when my sister is crying, my mother and her future husband will always uhh comfort my sister, but when I cry, they don't comfort me, they just look at me and start getting angry. "*
- Attention Informant 4 *"This is an image that my mom and dad focus on us because sometimes they don't even care what we do, they sit in the room playing with their phones. I don't know what they do with their phone, sometimes work, sometimes something else. This means that we have a family hangout,*

			<i>we go out together, we talk to each other, we communicate."</i>
		Informant 6	<i>"This is my father, my mother, my sister, my brother, my other sister, and I, this is a family picture. When we were little, we all always went out together, now that my father is unwell though he can still move, my brother is working, my sister is at the university, sometimes when I want to go back to our village, I want to hang out but none of my family members are available. They are only free during holidays or the weekends. We cook and talk like that."</i>
		Informant 7	<i>"I want my mother to say that she is proud of me like that, but this is because my parents are getting divorced. Hmm, I want my mom to pay attention to me."</i>
Conformity Orientation	Comply with parental instructions	Informant 5	<i>"Sometimes I think what my parents said is right, so I just accept it."</i>
	Role as a child	Informant 1	<i>"uhh, I only look after my sister at night because there is no one around the house. Usually, I just let her be because she's small and she's good at being independent, like bathing all by herself, so I don't worry too much, the thing I worry about is eating but my mom has already prepared all the food so it's okay, but I have to make sure that she has eaten, that's all."</i>
		Informant 2	<i>"For example, mom doesn't tell us to wash the dishes, but we want to wash the dishes without our mom knowing like that. We like to do things quietly rather than letting our mom know."</i>
		Informant 3	<i>"That's nice, sometimes I do that, but it's like uhh more towards looking after my siblings for my mom, it's not doing chores cause I have a maid so yeah."</i>

Theme 1: Conversation Orientation

There are four sub themes under the conversational orientation that is 1) open communication, 2) threatening communication, 3) emotional support and, 4) paying attention during communication.

Sub-Theme 1: Open Communication

There were four informants sharing examples of daily communication topics with parents.

"umm talk about umm something that has to do with mechanics. Uhh at that time I was outside, I was doing my work and then I was washing the car but then I forgot what it was about but it was related to mechanical." (Informant 1)

"I always talk to Dad about sports. He told me to build my body and eat constantly and always uhh always jog like that." (Informant 2)

"uhh mostly about school and academics, sometimes about fighting, mixed martial arts (MMA) and stuff. I don't know much about it, but I think it's pretty cool." (Informant 3)

"My father is here, but currently he is not here, he is with his second family. One day I would like to hang out with my family where I can talk about any topic." (Informant 5)

Sub Theme 2: Threatening communication

There are teenage informants who utter sentences mixed with threats by parents and express emotional and mental distress.

"My mom called me, so I came down, then my mom threw the burnt toast at me and said, "What are you doing? You can't watch over your siblings, you're useless, you're a grown-up, can't you take care of your siblings? like can I do , I'm in the middle of an online class, it's impossible to watch over them every single time but I know I should have looked at where they were up to before my online class." (Informant 4)

"My mom always pushes me and threatens to change schools or go to a boarding school. My parents know that I don't like changing schools because I did it once where I couldn't go to school for months, weeks. My parents are always angry with me, I don't want that to happen again, I don't want to quit school but my parents always pressure me, they say that I'm not as smart as I used to be and that I don't try as much as I used to." (Informant 9)

Sub Theme 3: Emotional support

Three informants shared that their parents did not provide emotional support when all three informants tried to express their feelings to their parents.

"uhh about having anxiety and stuff like that, so she doesn't like to hear it. My mom doesn't like negative things, so I hide it from her. Sometimes I have anxiety and she will respond like "It's just evil spirits" so yeah, parents are like that." (Informant 2)

"Something happened at school, so I feel sad and all and my mom would respond "what?" just like that so we don't communicate properly." (Informant 3)

"Okay this is me when I'm crying and this is when my sister is crying, so when my sister is crying, my mother and her future husband will always uhh comfort my sister, but when I cry, they don't comfort me, they just look at me and start getting angry." (Informant 8)

Sub Theme 4: Attention

A sub-theme of attention also emerged where the informant as a teenager hoped that parents would pay attention to interactions at home.

"This is an image that my mom and dad focus on us because sometimes they don't even care what we do, they sit in the room playing with their phones. I don't know what they do with their phones , sometimes work, sometimes something else. This means that

we have a family hangout, we go out together, we talk to each other, we communicate." (Informant 4)

"This is my father, my mother, my sister, my brother, my other sister and I, this is a family picture. When we were little, we all always went out together, now that my father is unwell though he can still move, my brother is working, my sister is at the university, sometimes when I want to go back to our village, I want to hangout but none of my family members are available. They are only free during holidays or the weekends. We cook and talk like that." (Informant 6)

"I want my mother to say that she is proud of me like that, but this is because my parents are getting divorced. Hmm, I want my mom to pay attention to me." (Informant 7)

Theme 2: Conformity Orientation

Two sub-themes arise under the orientation of conformity, namely 1) complying with parental instructions and, 2) the role of a child.

Sub Theme 1: Comply with parental instructions

There was one informant who agreed with the values and instructions set by the parents.

"Sometimes I think what my parents said is right, so I just accept it." (Informant 5)

Sub Theme 2: Role as a child

Three informants understand the role of being a child at home and helping parents manage chores at home.

"uhh, I only look after my sister at night because there is no one around the house. Usually, I just let her be because she's small and she's good at being independent, like bathing all by herself, so I don't worry too much, the thing I worry about is eating but my mom has already prepared all the food so it's okay, but I have to make sure that she has eaten, that's all."(Informant 1)

"For example, mom doesn't tell us to wash the dishes, but we want to wash the dishes without our mom knowing like that. We like to do things quietly rather than letting our mom know." (Informant 2)

"That's nice, sometimes I do that, but it's like uhh more towards looking after my siblings for my mom, it's not doing chores cause I have a maid so yeah." (Informant 3)

Discussion

Conversation Orientation

Under the conversation orientation theme, four sub-themes arise, namely 1) open communication, 2) threatening communication, 3) emotional support and, 4) paying attention during communication. These four sub-themes explain the importance of healthy communication and the benefits of two-way communication. According to Bi and Wang (2023), ideal open communication involves an honest exchange of information and active involvement between family members when communicating.

This study is in line with the findings of Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2004) who explained that family members with a high conversation orientation live harmoniously as family members practice open communication on top of sharing their feelings and problems comfortably without feeling afraid or awkward. Open communication is important in improving family relationships as it promotes closeness between family members. In this study, four informants shared the topic of communication at home with parents and emphasized that open communication is important to strengthen the relationship between family members. On the other hand, threatening communication hurts the relationship between parents and children where this study found that there are informants who expressed feeling depressed when parents use threatening words that negatively affect the mental and emotional well-being of teenagers.

A study by Claretta et al. (2022), explained that the misuse of words in communication causes emotional stress, and self-esteem conflicts and impairs relationships with family members. Next, Balayar and Langlais (2022) found that having parents' support and motivation helps in developing positive emotions and boosts teenagers' self-esteem in their academic achievements. Emotional support can be applied by giving words of affirmation, showing empathy, and being alert to any mood changes that the family members go through. This will help teenagers to overcome life's obstacles more effectively, and increase resilience and overall mental health wellbeing when they feel the emotional support provided by family members. Finally, the fourth sub-theme, which is paying attention during communication, it can be explained when there are informants who think that parents do not concentrate when interacting with their children and are busy with their phones.

Lippold et al. (2021) explained the concept of mindful parenting which explains the importance of parenting with full awareness were paying attention during family communication is one of the core dimensions of mindful parenting. When parents focus on conversations with family members, it creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and provides opportunities for children to be close to their parents. Furthermore, from these four sub-themes, it can be concluded that conversation orientation plays an important role in forming quality dynamics and relationships among family members. Open communication and emotional support are key factors in promoting family harmony. On the other hand, threatening communication and lack of attention during interactions have high potential to trigger conflicts and fights between family members. Therefore, it is important to create a peaceful atmosphere that can be achieved through open communication, providing emotional support, and paying full attention in daily interactions with family members.

Conformity Orientation

For conformity orientation, two sub-themes arise, namely 1) complying with parental instructions and, 2) role as a child. For the first sub-theme, some informants think that it is important to comply with parents' instructions and accept the parents' instructions positively whereas one of the informants expressed that parents know best for their children. According to Fitzpatrick (2004), families with high conformity orientation have a conventional family structure where children must obey instructions, values, and beliefs set by parents without questioning their decisions. Nevertheless, a study by Kapetanovic and Skoog (2020) found that the rules and behavioral expectations set by parents hurt adolescents' development if the family environment is an emotional climate negative.

On the other hand, if teenagers grow up in a positive emotional environment, the rules and expectations of such behavior can be beneficial to the development of teenagers. Therefore, teenagers need to grow up in a harmonious family environment to allow teenagers to be their own individuals while maintaining a healthy and loving relationship with their parents. In addition, the second sub-theme which is the role of a child, this study found that three informants understand the responsibility and importance of fulfilling the expectations and instructions of parents. Adolescents who fulfill the role of a child emphasise the value of compliance and responsibility which is in line with the definition of conformity orientation by Fitzpatrick (2004). However, it is important for teenagers not to burden themselves until they feel suffocated when there is no room for self-autonomy and freedom.

Emotional Development

Conversation orientation and conformity orientation under the FCPT theory are closely related to adolescents' emotional development. Open communication and emotional support from parents are important factors in helping teenagers feel heard so that they can form positive self-identity. Parents who are actively involved in their children's daily communication can inspire teenagers to improve their social skills at school and to work on their self-confidence. However, threatening communication and lack of attention when interacting with children may cause misunderstandings and create tension at home. This in turn may potentially cause identity confusion as explained under Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory in which teenagers who fail to overcome the identity versus confusion level will endure various life challenges with great difficulty. For families that emphasise the concept of conformity orientation, parents need to find the balance between educating their children with expected values and beliefs while giving the needed space for teenagers to grow into their person. Thus, it is significant for parents to apply elements of open communication, providing good emotional support and paying full attention to their daily interactions so that teenagers can form a strong self-concept while learning to manage their emotions healthily.

Overall, FCPT is an accurate theory in understanding the importance of family communication through two important concepts introduced by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006), namely conversation orientation and conformity orientation. These two concepts provide a clear understanding of family communication compared to other studies. For example, a study by Ismail et al. (2020) stated that family communication refers to the interaction between parents and children by emphasizing the different roles that each family member brings. However, the study does not explain the concept or any family communication structure in depth and only gives a general definition. In addition, FCPT also touches on family communication comprehensively by explaining the importance of identity formation, the development of family members, and providing solutions to problems in the event of family conflict resulting from poor family communication. Moreover, FCPT theory can be applied to families from different backgrounds. Nasir and Tahrir (2023) conducted a study on teenagers from rural areas and found that effective family communication has a big impact on the formation of teenagers' self-concepts. FCPT theory is very useful in explaining family communication with great precision.

Implication

The study of family communication on adolescents' emotional development is important to ensure that teenagers can form a strong and clear self-identity. Parents who educate children

with conformity orientation should find a balance in educating children with good values and beliefs without hurting the adolescents' emotional development. Next, open communication and comprehensive emotional support from parents can reduce the risk of identity confusion as teenagers feel heard, valued, and validated. Parents should also avoid threatening communication and try to pay attention when interacting with children to establish a loving relationship. Therefore, parents need to educate themselves on effective family communication methods so that the family institution can be built firmly. Parents are also encouraged to get involved in guidance and counseling programs that emphasize the importance of family communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, parents who can understand the importance of family communication and successfully apply the elements of open communication and provide emotional support to their teenage children allows teenagers to grow up in a healthy environment that promotes individual growth while maintaining harmony with their loving family.

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