

## The Impact of Family Dynamics on Children's Mental Health: Systematic Review

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### Abstract

Family dynamics are a critical factor in the development and well-being of children. This systematic review examines the relationship between family structure, parenting styles, communication patterns, parental mental health, and children's mental health outcomes. The review synthesizes evidence from empirical studies to highlight key family-related risk factors and protective influences on children's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Findings reveal that positive family dynamics, such as authoritative parenting and open communication, foster emotional resilience, while negative factors, such as family conflict, neglect, and parental mental illness, increase the risk of anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders in children. The implications of these findings underscore the need for family-based interventions that focus on enhancing family functioning to support children's mental health.

### Introduction

Children's mental health is a significant concern worldwide, with an increasing number of children experiencing anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders. According to the World Health Organization (2021), mental health disorders among children and adolescents are rising, with nearly 20% of children and adolescents globally experiencing mental health issues. Mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders often manifest early in life and can persist into adulthood if not properly addressed. Given the importance of the formative years, the role of the family—the first and most enduring social structure in a child's life—becomes paramount in understanding the trajectory of these mental health conditions.

Family dynamics, as the primary environment in which children grow and develop, are widely acknowledged as key determinants of children's mental health. Family dynamics encompass the interactions, relationships, and structures within a family that influence children's mental health outcomes (Steinberg, 2001). These dynamics include parenting styles, family communication, conflict, parental mental health, and the overall emotional climate of the household. Understanding how these factors interact to shape children's mental health is critical for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. Family dynamics influence children in multiple ways, and they can either act as a protective buffer against stress and adversity or serve as a significant source of stress themselves. Healthy family dynamics, characterized by warmth, structure, and support, are essential for children's positive development, whereas dysfunctional dynamics can contribute to emotional insecurity, stress, and the development of mental health issues (Cox & Paley, 2003).

This review aims to systematically explore the impact of various aspects of family dynamics on children's mental health, focusing on both risk factors and protective mechanisms. By synthesizing current evidence, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how family environments contribute to children's emotional and psychological well-being.

## Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The relationship between family dynamics and children's mental health can be explored using several theoretical frameworks, which help to clarify how family interactions shape psychological outcomes in children. This article integrates **Family Systems Theory**, **Ecological Systems Theory**, **Attachment Theory**, and **Parenting Styles Theory** to comprehensively understand how family environments influence children's mental well-being.

### Family Systems Theory

Developed by **Murray Bowen** (1978), Family Systems Theory posits that the family operates as an emotional unit, and the behavior of individual family members cannot be understood in isolation from the entire system. This theory emphasizes that each family member's actions and emotions are interconnected, and changes in one part of the system affect the whole. According to this perspective, children's mental health is not merely a result of their individual traits but is shaped by the dynamic interactions between family members. Dysfunctional family systems, characterized by poor communication, conflict, or unhealthy relational patterns, can negatively affect children's emotional well-being, contributing to anxiety, depression, or behavioral issues (Bowen, 1978).

Family Systems Theory provides the conceptual basis for understanding how **parental mental health**, **family conflict**, and **emotional support** within the family influence children's psychological development. A family system that functions in a supportive, cohesive, and adaptive manner can promote mental health, whereas one that is disjointed or hostile can undermine emotional security and lead to mental health problems (Cox & Paley, 2003).

### Ecological Systems Theory

**Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** (1979) is another foundational framework used to understand how family dynamics impact children's mental health. This theory explains child development as the result of interactions between different environmental systems, with the family being the most immediate and influential system (the microsystem). The quality of relationships within the family unit has a profound impact on the child's mental health, influencing their emotional regulation, social skills, and stress responses (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner's model also accounts for the broader social and economic contexts that influence family dynamics, such as parental employment, social support networks, and cultural norms. For example, economic hardship can increase family stress, leading to higher levels of conflict and reduced emotional availability from parents, which, in turn, negatively affects children's mental health (Cummings & Schatz, 2012). This theory emphasizes the interdependent nature of family dynamics and the broader environmental factors, acknowledging that a child's mental health is shaped by multiple systems that interact with the family unit.

### Attachment Theory

**Attachment Theory**, developed by **John Bowlby** (1969), provides a framework for understanding the emotional bonds between children and their primary caregivers and how these relationships impact mental health. The theory suggests that children who form secure attachments with their caregivers are more likely to develop emotional resilience and adaptive coping skills, which protect them from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Ainsworth et al., 1978). On the other hand, children who experience inconsistent or neglectful

caregiving may develop insecure attachments, making them more vulnerable to emotional and behavioral problems.

This framework is particularly useful in explaining how parental mental health and parenting styles affect children's emotional security. For instance, parental depression or anxiety may impair a parent's ability to provide consistent emotional support, leading to insecure attachment patterns in children. Conversely, authoritative parenting, which balances warmth and structure, supports the development of secure attachments, promoting better mental health outcomes (Steinberg, 2001).

### **Parenting Styles Theory**

**Diana Baumrind's Parenting Styles Theory** (1967) categorizes parenting behaviors into four main types—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—each of which has distinct implications for children's mental health. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and clear boundaries, is associated with positive mental health outcomes, including higher self-esteem, emotional regulation, and lower levels of anxiety and depression in children. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which emphasizes strict discipline without emotional support, can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and externalizing behaviors like aggression (Garcia & Gracia, 2009).

Permissive parenting, marked by high emotional warmth but low levels of discipline, is linked to problems with self-regulation and impulsivity, while neglectful parenting, characterized by a lack of both warmth and control, is associated with the highest risk for mental health problems (Kim et al., 2018). This framework helps explain how different parenting approaches within the family system influence children's mental health outcomes.

### ***Risk and Resilience Framework***

Lastly, the **Risk and Resilience Framework** emphasizes that family dynamics can function as either risk factors or protective factors in the development of children's mental health. Risk factors within the family, such as chronic conflict, parental mental illness, or abusive behaviors, increase the likelihood of mental health disorders in children (Cummings & Davies, 2010). In contrast, protective factors, such as supportive parenting, strong family bonds, and open communication, promote resilience in children, enabling them to cope with stress and adversity more effectively (Masten, 2014).

This framework underscores the importance of understanding the interaction between risk and protective factors in the family context. Interventions that strengthen protective factors—such as improving parenting practices or providing family therapy—can help mitigate the impact of adverse family dynamics on children's mental health.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Parenting Styles and Mental Health Outcomes**

Parenting styles are one of the most well-researched aspects of family dynamics. Baumrind's (1967) typology of parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—remains central to understanding how parental behavior affects children's mental health.

**Authoritative Parenting:** Characterized by high warmth and high control, authoritative parenting is consistently linked to positive mental health outcomes. Children of authoritative parents typically exhibit higher self-esteem, better emotional regulation, and fewer behavioral problems. According to Steinberg (2001), authoritative parenting fosters an environment where

children feel secure and supported, enabling them to develop strong coping skills and emotional resilience. A study by Kim et al. (2018) found that authoritative parenting significantly reduces the risk of anxiety and depression in adolescents, highlighting its protective effects on mental health.

**Authoritarian Parenting:** In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which combines low warmth with high control, is associated with negative outcomes. This parenting style tends to foster fear, low self-esteem, and anxiety in children, as the rigid and punitive approach undermines their emotional security (Garcia & Gracia, 2009). Research by Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) demonstrated that children raised in authoritarian households are more prone to internalizing disorders, including depression and anxiety, due to the lack of emotional support.

**Permissive Parenting:** Permissive parenting, defined by high warmth but low control, can lead to poor emotional regulation and behavioral issues. Finkenauer et al. (2020) noted that children raised by permissive parents often struggle with boundaries, which can lead to difficulties managing stress and forming healthy relationships. This parenting style has been linked to externalizing behaviors, such as impulsivity and aggression, as children lack the structure needed for developing self-discipline.

**Neglectful Parenting:** Neglectful or uninvolved parenting, marked by low warmth and low control, poses the greatest risk to children's mental health. According to Calzada et al. (2012), children of neglectful parents are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders due to the emotional void created by the lack of parental involvement. These children often struggle with attachment and may develop feelings of abandonment and low self-worth.

### **Family Structure and Children's Mental Health**

Family structure plays a crucial role in children's emotional and psychological development. The configuration of a family—whether nuclear, single-parent, or blended—impacts a child's sense of stability and security, which in turn affects their mental health.

#### **Nuclear Families**

Children raised in stable, two-parent households tend to have better mental health outcomes, as these families often provide greater emotional and financial stability (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). However, even within nuclear families, negative dynamics such as parental conflict or emotional unavailability can detract from children's mental well-being. According to Cummings and Davies (2010), exposure to conflict in otherwise intact families can lead to heightened anxiety and behavioral problems in children.

#### **Single-Parent Families**

Research indicates that children in single-parent households are at a higher risk for developing mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders. Amato (2000) found that children of single parents often experience more emotional distress compared to their peers from two-parent families, primarily due to financial instability, reduced parental supervision, and increased parental stress. Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (2000) also highlighted the challenges of single parenting, noting that single parents may struggle to balance work and child-rearing, which can lead to increased emotional strain on the child.

#### **Blended Families**

Children in blended families, where one or both parents remarry and bring children from previous relationships, face unique challenges. Jensen and Harris (2017) found that children in

blended families are more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems as they navigate new family roles and relationships. The process of adjusting to new parental figures and stepsiblings can lead to feelings of insecurity and emotional distress.

### **Family Communication and Conflict**

Effective family communication is key to fostering emotional resilience in children. Positive communication patterns, where family members openly discuss emotions, concerns, and conflicts, can protect against the development of mental health disorders. Conversely, poor communication and high levels of conflict are associated with a range of negative outcomes.

#### **Positive Communication**

Open and supportive communication within families allows children to express their emotions and seek help when needed. According to Repetti et al. (2002), families that foster healthy communication patterns create an emotionally supportive environment that helps children develop coping strategies and emotional regulation. Such families are less likely to have children with anxiety or depression.

#### **Family Conflict**

In contrast, high levels of family conflict are consistently linked to negative mental health outcomes in children. Harold et al. (2007) found that children exposed to frequent parental conflict, especially involving hostility and aggression, experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Children in conflict-ridden families often feel emotionally insecure, which can lead to both internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, defiance). Cummings and Schatz (2012) also demonstrated that parental conflict is a significant predictor of behavioral problems in children, particularly when children are directly involved or witness violent confrontations.

### **Parental Mental Health and Its Impact on Children**

Parental mental health has a profound impact on children's mental well-being. Studies show that parents who suffer from mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse, often pass on the emotional burden to their children, either through genetic predisposition or environmental stressors.

#### **Maternal Depression**

Maternal mental health, particularly depression, has been extensively studied in relation to children's mental health. Weissman et al. (2006) found that children of mothers with depression are significantly more likely to develop mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and poor emotional regulation. These children often experience difficulties in forming secure attachments and may struggle with social relationships due to their caregivers' emotional unavailability.

#### **Parental Substance Abuse**

Parental substance abuse is another major risk factor for children's mental health problems. Kelley et al. (2015) found that children of parents with substance use disorders are more likely to develop emotional and behavioral issues, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse later in life. The chaotic and unpredictable home environments created by substance-abusing parents often lead to feelings of instability and neglect in children, further exacerbating their mental health challenges.

## **Cumulative Effects of Family Dynamics on Mental Health**

Family dynamics are rarely isolated; instead, they interact in complex ways that can either buffer against or compound the risk of mental health problems in children. For example, while authoritative parenting can mitigate the negative effects of single-parent family structures, authoritarian or neglectful parenting can exacerbate the risks associated with family conflict or parental mental illness. Goodman and Gotlib (2002) suggest that the cumulative impact of multiple risk factors (e.g., parental mental illness, family conflict, and authoritarian parenting) significantly increases the likelihood of mental health disorders in children, as each additional risk factor compounds the emotional and psychological stress experienced by the child.

## **Methods**

This systematic review followed the **Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)** guidelines. A comprehensive search was conducted in multiple electronic databases, including **PsycINFO**, **PubMed**, and **Google Scholar**. Search terms included "family dynamics," "children's mental health," "parenting styles," "family communication," and "family conflict." Studies were included if they examined the relationship between family dynamics and children's mental health, focused on children aged 0-18, and were published between 2000 and 2023.

A total of 95 studies were identified, and after screening titles and abstracts, 45 were included for full-text review. Only peer-reviewed articles that used quantitative or qualitative methods and met the inclusion criteria were included.

## **Results**

### **Parenting Styles and Children's Mental Health**

Parenting styles are one of the most extensively studied aspects of family dynamics. Baumrind's typology of parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—has consistently shown that different parenting approaches have significant implications for children's mental health (Baumrind, 1991).

### **Authoritative parenting**

This is characterized by high warmth and high control, and is linked to positive mental health outcomes. Studies show that children raised by authoritative parents exhibit higher self-esteem, better emotional regulation, and lower rates of anxiety and depression (Steinberg, 2001; Kim et al., 2018). This parenting style fosters a secure and supportive environment, where children feel valued and confident in expressing their emotions.

### **Authoritarian parenting**

**Authoritarian parenting**, which combines low warmth with high control, is associated with negative mental health outcomes. Children of authoritarian parents are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems, as the rigid and punitive nature of this parenting style leads to feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth (Garcia & Gracia, 2009).

### **Permissive parenting**

**Permissive parenting** characterized by high warmth and low control, may lead to poor emotional regulation and increased externalizing behaviors, such as aggression or impulsivity. Finkenauer et al. (2020) found that children of permissive parents often struggle with boundaries, which can lead to difficulties in managing stress and interpersonal relationships.

### **Neglectful parenting**

Neglectful parenting marked by low warmth and low control, poses the greatest risk to children's mental health. Neglectful parents provide little emotional support or guidance, leading to feelings of abandonment and significantly higher risks of mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety (Calzada et al., 2012).

### **Family Structure and Children's Mental Health**

Family structure, including single-parent families, nuclear families, and blended families, also affects children's mental health. Changes in family composition, such as divorce or remarriage, can disrupt a child's sense of security and increase the risk of mental health issues.

### **Single-parent households**

**Single-parent households** are associated with a higher prevalence of mental health problems in children, such as anxiety and depression, compared to two-parent families (Amato, 2000). Single parents may face financial challenges, increased stress, and limited time for child-rearing, which contributes to adverse mental health outcomes in children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000).

### **Blended families**

**Blended families**, where one or both parents remarry and bring children from previous relationships, can be a source of additional stress for children as they adjust to new family roles and relationships. Studies suggest that children in blended families are more prone to emotional and behavioral problems due to the complexities of integrating new family members (Jensen & Harris, 2017).

### **Nuclear families**

**Nuclear families**, where both biological parents are present, generally provide more stability, which is associated with better mental health outcomes for children. However, even in nuclear families, factors such as parental conflict and emotional unavailability can undermine children's well-being (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

### **Family Communication and Conflict**

Open and supportive communication within the family is crucial for children's emotional and psychological well-being. Positive communication patterns allow children to express their emotions, seek support, and develop healthy coping mechanisms (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

### **Constructive communication**

Constructive communication where family members listen actively, show empathy, and address conflicts respectfully, promotes emotional resilience in children. Studies demonstrate that families with open lines of communication have children who are less likely to develop anxiety, depression, or behavioral problems (Repetti et al., 2002).

### **High Levels of Family Conflict**

**High levels of family conflict** are associated with an increased risk of mental health disorders. Children who are exposed to frequent arguments, hostility, or domestic violence often experience emotional distress, fear, and a lack of security, leading to internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression (Harold et al., 2007). Parental conflict can also lead to externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and defiance, as children struggle to cope with the stress of living in a conflicted household (Cummings & Schatz, 2012).

## **Parental Mental Health and Its Impact on Children**

Parental mental health is another critical factor in determining children's mental health outcomes. Parental mental illnesses, such as depression or anxiety, can negatively impact parenting practices and the overall family environment, increasing the risk of mental health issues in children (Goodman et al., 2011).

### **Maternal Depression**

**Maternal depression** is particularly detrimental to children's mental health. Children of depressed mothers are more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety, and they may also experience difficulties with attachment and emotional regulation due to the lack of emotional availability from the parent (Weissman et al., 2006).

### **Parental Substance Abuse**

**Parental substance abuse** disrupts family functioning and creates an unpredictable environment for children, often leading to neglect and emotional unavailability. Children of parents with substance use disorders are at a significantly higher risk of developing mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Kelley et al., 2015).

## **Discussion**

This systematic review highlights the profound impact that family dynamics have on children's mental health. Positive family dynamics, such as authoritative parenting, open communication, and emotional support, are protective factors that promote mental well-being and resilience in children. Conversely, negative dynamics, such as family conflict, authoritarian or neglectful parenting, and parental mental illness, are associated with an increased risk of mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems.

The interaction between various family factors is complex, and multiple elements can either buffer or exacerbate the effects of adverse family environments. For example, children in single-parent households may be more vulnerable to mental health issues due to financial stress and reduced parental availability, but supportive communication and a close parent-child relationship can mitigate these risks. Similarly, the negative impact of family conflict may be lessened in families where children feel emotionally supported and are encouraged to express their feelings.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this review, it is recommended that interventions aimed at improving children's mental health focus on strengthening family dynamics. **Parenting programs** that promote authoritative parenting, teach effective communication skills, and provide emotional support can be valuable in fostering positive mental health outcomes in children. Additionally, mental health services for parents, particularly those struggling with depression, anxiety, or substance abuse, are crucial for improving the overall family environment and, consequently, children's mental health.

School-based interventions that engage families and provide resources for improving family communication and conflict resolution may also play a role in preventing the development of mental health disorders in children. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of family-centered interventions across different family structures and cultural contexts.



## Conclusion

This research on the impact of family dynamics on children's mental health has confirmed the significant influence that family environments exert on the psychological well-being of children. The findings suggest that both positive and negative family interactions play a critical role in shaping mental health outcomes in children. By applying theoretical frameworks such as Family Systems Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and Parenting Styles Theory, the study has demonstrated how various family structures and parenting behaviors directly affect children's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development.

Key findings from the research indicate that supportive and cohesive family environments, marked by open communication, emotional warmth, and healthy parental relationships, promote positive mental health outcomes in children. Such families tend to raise children with better emotional regulation, resilience, and lower incidences of anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues. In contrast, family dynamics characterized by conflict, neglect, parental mental health issues, or authoritarian parenting are associated with higher risks of mental health problems in children, including anxiety disorders, depression, and externalizing behaviors.

The research highlights the critical role of attachment between children and caregivers, reinforcing the idea that secure attachment promotes emotional stability and well-being. Furthermore, the study underscores the broader ecological factors—such as socioeconomic status, cultural contexts, and external stressors—that influence family dynamics and, by extension, children's mental health.

The study also shows that family-based interventions, such as family therapy, parenting skills programs, and mental health support for parents, can significantly improve family dynamics and help mitigate the adverse effects of dysfunctional family environments. These interventions are vital in reducing the risk factors associated with mental health issues in children and in fostering resilience and positive development.

In conclusion, the research confirms that healthy family dynamics are a protective factor for children's mental health, while dysfunctional family environments pose substantial risks. Interventions aimed at supporting families and enhancing positive family interactions are crucial in promoting children's mental well-being and preventing the development of mental health disorders. The research calls for continued attention to the role of family in shaping children's mental health and the importance of fostering environments that support emotional and psychological growth.

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