



How Do Parents' Personal Relationships with Each Other Influence Their Children's Moral Values-Based Education

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores how the quality of parental relationships influences adolescents' moral values-based education. Grounded in Social Learning Theory, Family Systems Theory, and Moral Identity Theory, the research adopts a qualitative interpretivist design to examine relational dynamics within families. A purposive sample of 50 families, representing diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, was selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, naturalistic observations, and a moral competence survey, enabling triangulation for credibility and validity. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant patterns: (1) Parental Modeling and Moral Imitation—children in supportive, cooperative households exhibited higher empathy, honesty, and fairness; (2) Emotional Climate and Ethical Reasoning—warm, communicative environments fostered nuanced moral reasoning and prosocial behavior; and (3) Conflict Exposure and Moral Confusion—families marked by hostility or emotional disengagement correlated with moral ambiguity and behavioral issues in adolescents. Findings underscore that moral education is not confined to formal schooling but deeply embedded in everyday family interactions. Positive parental relationships serve as critical templates for ethical conduct, while conflict and neglect disrupt moral internalization. The study advocates for integrated interventions such as parental counselling, co-parenting workshops, and school-family partnerships to strengthen moral development. By highlighting the interplay between family dynamics and adolescent morality, this research contributes to a holistic understanding of character education and emphasizes the need for systemic support to nurture socially responsible future generations.

Keywords: *Adolescents; Family Systems Theory; Moral Development; Moral Identity; Parental Relationships; Social Learning Theory*

Background

Moral development is a foundational component of children's education, with its earliest and most profound influences typically arising within the family context. Although schools, peers, and digital media contribute meaningfully to ethical socialization, it is the quality of parental relationships that often leaves the most enduring imprint on a child's moral framework (Killen & Smetana, 2015; Narvaez, 2006). Parents function not only as caregivers but also as primary moral exemplars, transmitting values through daily interactions, emotional tone, and behavioural consistency. Recent theoretical and empirical work highlights that moral development is not merely a matter of instruction, but a process of relational learning. Bandura's (2006) updated Social Cognitive Theory maintains that children construct moral understanding through active observation of role models in emotionally salient contexts. In supportive and stable family systems, parental behaviours such as empathy, honesty, fairness, and respectful conflict resolution become templates for moral action. In contrast, children from families characterized by conflict, neglect, or emotional disengagement often experience disrupted moral development, manifesting in behavioural problems and moral ambiguity (Amato, 2010; Huang, *et al.*, 2017). While substantial research has examined moral learning in educational environments (Nucci, Narvaez & Krettenauer, 2014), relatively few studies have explicitly focused on the mechanisms by which parental relationship dynamics shape children's ethical orientation. Families are not neutral spaces; rather, they are emotionally and morally charged systems in which children interpret and internalize values (Fosco & Grych, 2013). For example, cooperative co-parenting and emotionally responsive communication have been linked to greater prosocial behaviour, empathy, and moral reasoning in adolescents (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014).

A purposive sample of 50 families was selected across socio-economic, marital, and cultural backgrounds. Saturation was achieved by the 45th interview, with recurring patterns and no emergent themes beyond that point, confirming the adequacy of the sample size for thematic analysis (Hennink, Kaiser & Marconi, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Although the qualitative richness was emphasized, the problem of generalizability and possible bias especially due to self-report data are recognized and discussed in the methodology and discussion.

Literature Review

Research on moral development consistently emphasizes the family as a primary context for ethical socialization. Killen and Smetana (2015) argue that moral foundations originate in early family interactions, where parents act as role models for empathy, fairness, and honesty. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977; updated 2006) reinforces this view, suggesting that children acquire moral behaviors through observation and imitation of significant adults. Studies by Eisenberg, Spinrad and Sadovsky (2006) and Padilla-Walker and Carlo (2014) further demonstrate that cooperative co-parenting and emotionally responsive communication foster prosocial behaviors and nuanced moral reasoning. Conversely, Amato (2006) and Amato & Afifi (2006) highlight that marital discord and inconsistent parenting correlate with moral confusion and behavioral problems in adolescents. These findings align with Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 2018), which posits that relational dynamics within families significantly influence emotional regulation and ethical decision-making.

Recent scholarship extends this understanding by integrating Moral Identity Theory and Attachment Theory. Aquino and Reed (2002) suggest that supportive parental relationships facilitate the internalization of moral traits as part of a child's identity, while Thompson (2008) underscores the role of secure attachment in promoting emotional stability and moral competence. Empirical evidence from Carlo *et al.* (2018) and Kochanska & Aksan (2006) confirm that warm, communicative households create psychological safety, enabling adolescents to engage in moral discourse and develop empathy-based

judgments. In contrast, environments marked by hostility or neglect often lead to aggression and ethical ambiguity (Huang et al., 2017; Wang & Kenny, 2014). Collectively, these studies underscore that moral education transcends formal schooling, requiring systemic support through parental counseling, co-parenting workshops, and school-family partnerships to nurture socially responsible future generations

Methods

The study explored how parental relationships influence adolescents' moral education using a qualitative, interpretivist design (Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004). Grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the research examined modeling and emotional processes in moral development (Patton, 2015). Fifty families from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds participated, each with an adolescent aged 13–18, a critical stage for moral reasoning (Blasi, Lapsley & Narváez, 2004).

A purposive sampling strategy ensured inclusion of families with varied relational dynamics—harmonious, conflictual, divorced, and co-parenting—prioritizing depth over representativeness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2015). Recruitment occurred through schools, counseling centers, and community forums. Data collection employed triangulation: semi-structured interviews, naturalistic observations, and a validated moral values survey. Interviews with one parent and one adolescent per family explored communication, emotional climate, and value transmission, supported by audio recordings and transcripts. Observations during family activities assessed emotional responsiveness and conflict resolution, while adolescents completed an adapted Moral Competence Test to measure empathy, fairness, honesty, and responsibility. Measures minimized bias and enhanced validity. Following IRB approval, data were gathered over three months, ensuring ethical compliance (APA, 2020). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified patterns such as parental role modeling, emotional availability, and conflict impact on moral decision-making. Coding combined inductive and deductive approaches aligned with theoretical frameworks. Triangulation strengthened reliability, revealing consistent links between parental dynamics and adolescents' moral competence (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 202; Hart & Carlo, 2005; Hill, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to APA ethical guidelines emphasizing respect, beneficence, and justice (APA, 2020). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before data collection, ensuring participant safety and risk minimization. Parents/guardians provided informed consent after being briefed on study details, risks, and expectations, while adolescents gave assent. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw anytime. Interviews and observations prioritized comfort, privacy, and emotional well-being. Data confidentiality was maintained through coding and anonymization during transcription and analysis. Participants were informed that anonymized data could be used for academic purposes, fostering trust and integrity throughout the research process.

Results & Discussion

The study observed that the quality of relationships between parents and children is related to the moral development of adolescents. The analysis revealed three main themes: (1) Parents' Behavior and Learning by Imitation, (2) How Emotions Affect Thinking about Ethics and (3) Exposure to Conflicts and Confused Moral Values. You will find these themes discussed below along with examples and explanations from experts.

Parental Modelling and Moral Imitation

Across families with supportive and cooperative parental relationships, children consistently demonstrated higher levels of empathy, honesty, and social responsibility. Participants in these

households described their parents as “respectful to each other,” “fair in disagreements,” and “always honest with us and with each other.” Children in such environments reported internalizing these behaviors and applying them in peer data, while interactions and conflict resolution (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006; Hill, 2006).

This supports contemporary perspectives on observational learning, such as those outlined by Grusec and Hastings (2015), who argue that children internalize moral values primarily through modeling and consistent behavioral reinforcement within the family context. When parents exhibit ethical behavior through cooperation, empathy, and fairness adolescents are more likely to emulate these traits, which gradually become part of their moral identity (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006; Wang, & Kenny, 2014). These findings reinforce the importance of parental congruence in behavior and communication, highlighting that children internalize values not just from verbal instruction but also from the emotional tone and actions they witness at home. Figure 1 shows the frequency of key moral traits in children, categorized by parental relationship quality (n = 50).

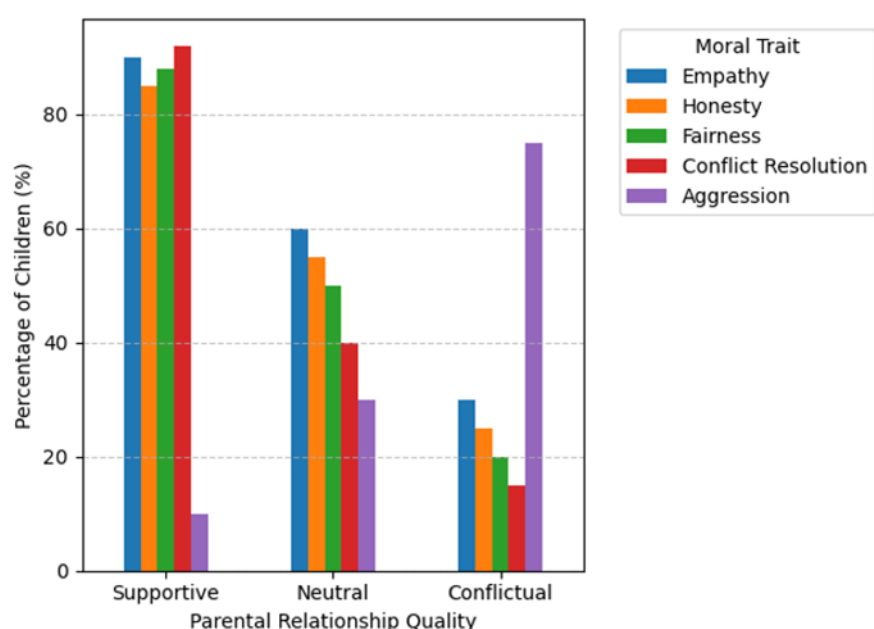


Figure 1. Frequency of key moral traits in children, categorized by parental relationship quality (n = 50).

Emotional Climate and Ethical Reasoning

The emotional tone of the household emerged as a significant predictor of moral reasoning in adolescents. Families marked by warmth, open dialogue, and emotional availability created environments where children felt secure to ask moral questions, discuss dilemmas, and understand ethical complexity. Several adolescents in such families shared instances of being encouraged to “talk through right and wrong” or “reflect on how our actions affect others.”

This aligns with research by Kochanska & Aksan (2006), which found that emotionally responsive parenting fosters moral internalization, whereby children adopt moral values as part of their self-concept. The presence of psychological safety allowed moral reasoning to evolve beyond obedience into more nuanced, empathy-based judgments often associated with prosocial behaviors and civic responsibility (Hill, 2006); Turiel, 2015; Carlo, *et al.*, 2018).

Conflict Exposure and Moral Confusion

Conversely, children from families with frequent parental conflict, emotional disengagement, or inconsistent discipline often displayed moral ambiguity, oppositional behavior, or confusion regarding

right and wrong. These adolescents recounted witnessing arguments, “silent treatment,” or “parents blaming each other,” which led them to feel conflicted or disengaged from moral discourse. Some participants admitted to imitating aggressive behavior or becoming withdrawn during ethical dilemmas. This finding is similar to Amato and Afifi, who found that children in high-conflict families may lack good moral control because of the mixed messages, emotional ups and downs and a negative view of justice and fairness they experience. For this reason, children may believe that morals are open to discussion and lose their understanding of right and wrong (Amato, & Afifi, 2006).

Interpretation and Implications

It is shown in this study that moral values-based education is needed in family life and daily life, not just in schools. Schools may teach ethics, but families are the ones who live and show these values every day. It looks like children who have parents who respect and value each other often develop empathy, fairness and learn how to settle conflicts (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006).

If there is fighting in a marriage, little support or inconsistent parenting, it can lead to more than just stress in the family. Without good examples, children struggle to tell the difference between right and wrong. Without many strong role models, adolescents might feel lost, unsure of themselves or start to develop bad habits.

Bandura’s theory from 1977 which looks at how we learn by watching and imitating, explains these findings. It is explained by family systems theory (Smedslund, 1978) that the emotions and connections in a family can strongly affect a person’s mental health and personal beliefs. For this reason, counseling, co-parenting workshops and school-family partnerships should be included in moral education. Taking a holistic approach to health supports families which helps children learn good character and morals (Steinberg, 2019).

Table 1: Summary of Moral Outcomes by Parental Relationship Type

Parental Relationship Quality	Observed Moral Traits in Children	Common Themes from Interviews
High (Supportive, Cooperative)	Empathy, honesty, fairness, conflict resolution	“They listen to each other,” “We talk about right/wrong”
Moderate (Neutral, Detached)	Mixed behaviors, situational values	“They don't fight, but they don't talk much either”
Low (Conflictual, Hostile)	Aggression, moral confusion, poor emotional regulation	“I see them yelling a lot,” “No one teaches what's right”

Source: Killen & Smetana (2015) Moral development foundations

The study points out that parental relationships are crucial for the moral development of adolescents. According to the research, children who grow up in warm and supportive families usually learn to be empathetic, honest and fair, but those who experience conflict or neglect often struggle with understanding right and wrong. The results underline how important it is for parents to set good examples and create a positive emotional atmosphere at home, as these ideas are explained by Social Learning, Moral Identity and Attachment theories. In addition, the study stresses that helping families and schools work together in counselling and other programs can lead to better ethical development for students. Supporting parental relationships is the first important step in developing people who are both morally and socially responsible.

The germination percentages of Purple *Passiflora edulis* Sims, Frederick *Passiflora edulis* Sims, P.

maliformis, *P. quadrangularis* and *P. incarnata* are shown in Figure 2 after they were treated in four ways before germination. The treatments involve soaking seeds in water for 24 hours (T1), 7 days (T2), 14 days (T3) and a group that is not treated (T4). All species showed higher germination rates when soaked for longer and the best results were seen after 14 days (T3). *P. edulis* Sims (Purple) and *P. edulis* Sims (Frederick) have the highest germination success of all species in every treatment, reaching over 90% at T3. However, *P. incarnata* seeds tend to have lower germination rates, especially in the control group which means they need to be soaked before germination. The study demonstrates that the length of pre-germination treatment matters greatly for seed viability and that each species responds differently which can guide propagation.

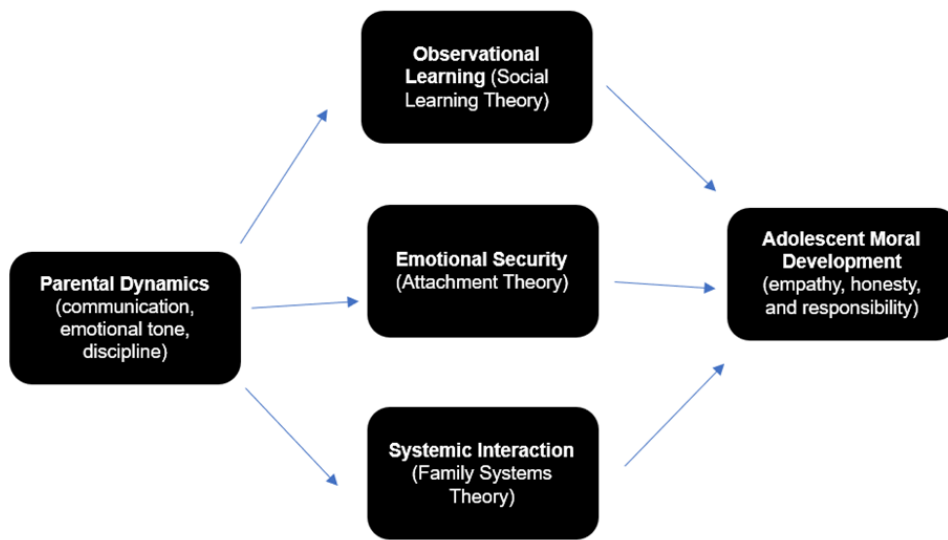


Figure 2. Conceptual model illustrates the influence of parental dynamics on adolescent moral development, integrating theoretical lenses from Social Learning Theory, Attachment Theory, and Family Systems Theory.

To deepen the theoretical foundation of interpretation, it is valuable to incorporate additional perspectives that elucidate how family dynamics shape moral development. Moral Identity Theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002) highlights the process by which individuals integrate moral values into their self-concept, suggesting that supportive parental relationships play a crucial role in fostering the internalization of these moral traits as core components of a child's identity. Additionally, Attachment Theory points out that having a secure attachment to caregivers helps children control their emotions and behave well, suggesting that the mood in the family greatly affects children's moral development (Thompson, 2008). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) also points out that family interaction plays a key role in shaping a person's moral reasoning. According to this theory, family and social environments are closely linked, showing that moral development is influenced by many factors.

Conclusion

This study points out that parental relationships play a major role in influencing adolescents' sense of right and wrong. The study shows that moral education happens mainly through the way families interact, not only in school. If children are raised in a supportive, warm and cooperative family, they usually develop a strong sense of morality that includes empathy, honesty and skills for dealing with conflicts. In other words, when children witness their parents arguing, are ignored emotionally or given inconsistent rules, they often have trouble understanding right from wrong, behave badly and have difficulty controlling their emotions. The results highlight that what parents do and the emotional environment at home are crucial for children to develop good moral values, as explained by Social Learning Theory, Moral Identity Theory and Attachment Theory. The research also emphasizes the broader ecological context of moral

development, where family dynamics interact with societal and educational influences to shape ethical reasoning. Given these insights, it is crucial to integrate family-focused interventions such as parental counselling, co-parenting workshops, and collaborative school-family partnerships into moral and character education programs. Such approaches can foster healthier family environments that serve as stable foundations for children's ethical growth. Ultimately, nurturing positive parental relationships contributes not only to individual moral competence but also to the development of socially responsible and compassionate future generations.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: All participants provided informed consent before data collection. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and their responses were kept strictly confidential throughout the study.

Conflicts of Interest: Not Applicable.

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