

# The Influence of Parental Psychological Control on Life Satisfaction of Middle School Students: The Mediating Role of Parent-Child Relationship and the Regulatory Role of Sensation-Seeking

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**Abstract:** Based on self-determination theory and ecosystem theory, this study examines the mediating role of parent-child relationship between parental psychological control and middle school student life satisfaction, as well as the moderating effect of sensation seeking. The study uses a questionnaire survey method to predict the relationship between variables. The results indicate that: (1) Parental psychological control has a significant negative predictive effect on parent-child relationships and middle school student life satisfaction; (2) The parent-child relationship partially mediates the relationship between parental psychological control and middle school student life satisfaction; (3) The relationship between parental psychological control and life satisfaction in middle school students seeking trait regulation.

**Keywords:** Middle school students; Parental psychological control; Parent child relationship; Life satisfaction; Sensation Seeking

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## 1. Introduction

Life satisfaction is the subjective perception and cognitive evaluation of an individual's quality of life based on their own set standards<sup>[1]</sup>. It serves as a cognitive component of an individual's subjective well-being<sup>[2]</sup>. Ecosystem theory suggests that the family, as one of the microsystems, is an important place for adolescent life<sup>[3]</sup>. The life satisfaction of middle school students is largely influenced by their family environment. Compared to adolescents living in negative families, adolescents living in positive family environments tend to make higher evaluations of their quality of life<sup>[4]</sup>.

Parental psychological control refers to a parenting style in which parents try to control their children by encouraging them to rely on themselves<sup>[5]</sup>, inhibiting their individualized development<sup>[6]</sup> and causing a lack of self-awareness. It is a form of control that undermines children's autonomous development. During adolescence, middle school students experience a second awakening and gradual deepening of self-awareness and physical

maturity, leading them to believe that they have “grown up” and want to take responsibility for themselves, pursuing a state of autonomy and not being interfered with by others. Middle school students often see parental control as a form of restraint, believing it is no longer necessary to rely on their parents in life. When parents with a high desire for control have students who perform poorly and deviate from their developmental direction as parents, they stimulate teenagers by inducing feelings of guilt or reducing care, forcing middle school students to make changes <sup>[7]</sup>. The parent-child relationship is an important factor in measuring the harmony of family relationships and an important predictive indicator of life satisfaction for middle school students <sup>[8]</sup>. As a key factor in the family ecosystem, high-quality parent-child relationships significantly positively predict subjective well-being <sup>[9]</sup>, while negative parent-child relationships lead to decreased happiness and more negative emotional experiences <sup>[10]</sup>.

Personality is an important factor that affects life satisfaction <sup>[11]</sup>. As a personality trait, sensation seeking refers to the desire of individuals to obtain these experiences through diverse, novel, complex and legal river economy adventure behaviors <sup>[12]</sup>. The influence of parental parenting styles and behaviors, as well as other environmental factors, on middle school students may vary due to differences in their personality traits <sup>[13]</sup>. The more parents of middle school students protect and control their children, the higher their level of sensory seeking <sup>[14]</sup> and the more difficult it is to suppress their pursuit of new and exciting stimuli. Individuals who pursue diverse, novel, complex and strong feelings and experiences will obtain a sense of pleasure and experience satisfaction in life through diverse, away from parents and autonomous ways and behaviors <sup>[15]</sup>.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes that parental psychological control can enhance middle school student life satisfaction by improving parent-child relationships, which partially mediate the relationship between parental psychological control and life satisfaction. Sensation-seeking plays a moderating role between parental psychological control and middle school student life satisfaction.

## **2. Research methods**

### **2.1. Research subjects**

A convenient sampling method was adopted to randomly conduct a questionnaire survey on six grades in a certain high school. A total of 472 questionnaires were collected and subjects with missing detection in key demographic variables such as research variables and grade, gender and parental situation were deleted. Finally, 451 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective rate of 95.6%.

### **2.2. Research tools**

This study used the Parental Psychological Control Questionnaire, the Chinese version of the Parent-Child Relationship Scale 16 (CPRS), the Chinese Adolescent Life Satisfaction Scale 17 and the Sensation Seeking Scale 18 for primary and secondary school students, respectively.

## **3. Research results**

### **3.1. Common method bias testing**

The Harman univariate test was used to perform a common method bias test on the variables involved to avoid common method effects. There were 24 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the first factor's explanatory rate was 16.78%, which was less than the critical value of 40%. The results confirmed that there was no significant common method bias in this study.

### 3.2. Descriptive statistical analysis between variables

The mean, standard deviation, and correlation matrix of each variable are shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Mean, standard deviation and correlation matrix of each variable

Variable	M	SD	One	Two	Three
Parental psychological control	2.545	0.901			
Parent-child relationship	2.883	0.308	-0.175*		
Life satisfaction	5.182	0.841	-0.413*	0.430*	
Sensation seeking	1.620	0.384	0.077	0.075	-0.004

\*  $p < 0.001$ , †  $p < 0.01$

### 3.3. Testing the mediating effect of parent-child relationships

As shown in **Table 2**, parental psychological control has a significant negative predictive effect on the life satisfaction of middle school students ( $\beta = -0.413$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and a significant negative predictive effect on parent-child relationships ( $\beta = -0.175$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). After using the parent-child relationship as a mediator variable, the effects of parental psychological control ( $\beta = -0.349$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and the parent-child relationship ( $\beta = 0.369$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) on the life satisfaction of middle school students were both significant. The overall effect of parental psychological control on the life satisfaction of middle school students and the mediating effect of the parent-child relationship is not included in the 95% confidence interval, indicating that the parent-child relationship partially mediates the relationship between parental psychological control and life satisfaction of middle school students ( $\beta = -0.064$ ,  $SE = 0.209$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), with a 95% confidence interval of  $[-0.107, -0.025]$  (see **Table 3**).

**Table 2.** Regression analysis of the mediating effect of parent-child relationship

Project result variables	Regression equation	Overall fit index				Regression coefficient significance		
	Predictive variables	R	R2	F	$\beta$	BootLLCI	BootULCI	t
Life satisfaction	Parental psychological control	0.413	0.171	92.299*	-0.413	-0.497	-0.329	-9.607*
Parent-child relationship	Parental psychological control	0.175	0.031	14.119†	-0.175	-0.266	-0.083	-3.758†
Life satisfaction	Parental psychological control	0.549	0.302	97.101*	-0.349	-0.427	-0.269	-8.697*
	Parent-child relationship				0.369	0.290	0.448	9.203*

\*  $p < 0.001$ , †  $p < 0.01$

**Table 3.** Indirect and direct effects of parent-child relationship on life satisfaction of middle school students

	Effect value	Standard error	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Direct effects	-0.349	0.401	-0.427	-0.269
Mediating effect	-0.064	0.209	-0.107	-0.025
Total effect	-0.413	0.043	-0.497	-0.329

\*  $p < 0.001$ , †  $p < 0.01$

### 3.4. The moderating effect of sensation seeking on the relationship between parental psychological control and middle school student life satisfaction

Using the Process macro plugin to test the moderating effect of sensation seeking on the direct path of

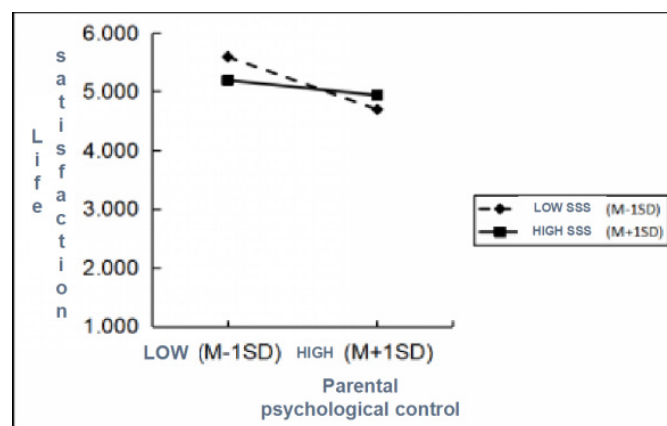
mediation models. The results showed that the interaction between sensory seeking and parental psychological control significantly moderated the life satisfaction of middle school students ( $\beta = 0.229, P < 0.05$ ), as shown in **Table 4**.

**Table 4.** The regulatory effect of sensation-seeking

Result variables	Predictive variables	$\beta$	SE	$t$	BootLLCI	BootULCI	R2	$F$
Life satisfaction	Parental psychological control	-0.352	0.402	8.783*	-0.431	-0.274		
	Sensation-seeking	-0.009	0.103	0.094	-0.212	0.193		
	Parental psychological control * sensation seeking	0.229	0.099	2.291 <sup>†</sup>	0.033	0.425	0.311	50.221*

\*  $p < 0.001$ , <sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.01$

To further understand the regulatory role of sensory seeking in middle school students, an interaction diagram was drawn with a value of  $\pm 1$  SD (**Figure 1**). When students have a higher level of sensory seeking, even if their parents have a higher level of psychological control, they can still have self-regulation and pursue their methods and ways. The impact on life satisfaction is not significant, but it still shows that the higher the level of parental psychological control, the lower life satisfaction will be ( $\beta = -0.265, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$ ). When middle school students feel that they are seeking less, they are significantly influenced by their parents' level of psychological control. It is shown that the higher the level of parental psychological control, the significantly lower the self-evaluation of life satisfaction among middle school students ( $\beta = -0.441, SE = 0.057, p < 0.001$ ).



**Figure 1.** The regulatory effect of sensation-seeking.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Analysis of the mediating role of the parent-child relationship

The higher the level of parental psychological control, the more conflicts between parents and children. However, parent-child conflicts do not necessarily mean the breakdown of the parent-child relationship. Parent-child conflicts can deepen the understanding between parents and children, establish effective communication channels and establish harmonious parent-child relationships. In this type of parent-child relationship, parents will try to understand the child's perspective and position, negotiate unacceptable events based on the perspectives of both parents and children and strive to find acceptable solutions to both parties. To a certain

extent, parent-child conflicts can also encourage parents to change their threat of withdrawal of care for their children or trigger negative parenting styles of guilt and parental authoritarian power. This can be achieved in secondary school. Establishing a relatively harmonious family relationship at this stage. If both parents want to control their child's parenting style without giving behavioral control, they want to focus on psychological control and always try to force the child to meet their parents' needs without respecting their normal psychological development process. This increases the parent-child dependency that should not be present in middle school and suppresses the personalized and adaptive development of middle school students, causing a psychological gap between middle school students and their peers, leading to a decrease in their self-life satisfaction.

#### **4.2. Analysis of the regulatory effect of sensation-seeking**

The research results of this study show that middle school students feel that seeking personality traits can regulate the predictive effect of parental psychological control on their life satisfaction, which is consistent with the research hypothesis of this study. In the group of middle school students who feel that their level of seeking is relatively low, parental psychological control can significantly negatively predict their life satisfaction. For the group of middle school students who feel that their level of seeking is high, the influence of parental psychological control on their life satisfaction is insignificant. This result aligns with the relevant views of the differential susceptibility theory, where individuals have varying sensitivities to environmental influences. Some susceptible individuals are not only susceptible to negative environments but are more sensitive to positive environments and can self-regulate. The reason is that parental psychological control may not necessarily cause children's aversion, but this parenting style can hinder children from developing into unique individuals outside of their parents. Combined with cultural reasons, perhaps it is because Chinese parents and children tend to view parental psychological control as a manifestation of parental care, and only a portion of children will see parental psychological control as interference with individual freedom. For individuals seeking high-level feelings, parental psychological control can affect their life satisfaction, but the impact is not significant. Based on this, the study explores individuals seeking low-level feelings. The higher the level of parental psychological control, the lower the individual's sense of self-satisfaction and identification with their parents, and the worse the overall family environment. Therefore, as parental psychological control increases, the child's life satisfaction decreases and becomes extremely significant. This is because individuals cannot obtain self-satisfaction through their means and are willing to see parental psychological control as care for themselves, leading them into conflicts.

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#### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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