

Parental Expectations and Adolescent Psychological Outcomes in Changing Family Contexts: A Review of International and Indian Evidence

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ABSTRACT

Parental expectations represent an important psychosocial factor determining adolescents' cognitive development and behavioral patterns, as both academic pressures and processes of identity formation tend to intensify during high school. During the last few decades, family structures have continued to change, marked by reduced family size, single-child families, and a movement away from joint to nuclear family systems, which again adjusts the context within which parental expectations are conceptualized and perceived. The aim of this review is to synthesize international and Indian empirical literature on the relationships among parental expectations, self-esteem, and adolescents' behavioral patterns, with particular emphasis on family composition and structure. The underlying methodology of this synthesis is that of a narrative review, which draws upon peer-reviewed studies indexed in major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. An attempt is also made to clarify concepts, articulate theoretical perspectives, and present empirical findings while focusing on convergences and divergences across diverse cultural contexts. Synthesis indicates that parental expectations are predictably associated with adolescents' self-esteem, emotional adjustment, and behavioral functioning; however, the magnitude of these associations is substantially moderated by parenting practices, family environment, and socio-cultural context. International studies increasingly integrate analytical approaches and address variables such as family size and parenting styles, whereas Indian research has focused largely on academic pressure and family structure with little comparative interest in single-child families. Common methodological limitations include cross-sectional designs and suboptimal measurement practices, which further limit the available evidence. This review points to several critical research gaps, including a lack of integrated models that investigate parental expectations, self-esteem, and behavioral patterns across diverse family ecology in India. These findings highlight the urgent need for methodologically rigorous and culturally grounded research to inform parenting practices, school-based interventions, and adolescent mental health policy in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Parental expectations, Adolescents, Self-esteem, Behavioural pattern, structure

1. Introduction:

Family environments play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' psychological and behavioural development. Over the past few decades, major demographic and social changes have altered family structures across the world, including India. Declining fertility rates, increasing urbanization, economic pressures and greater participation of

women in the workforce have contributed to the rise of smaller families and nuclear households. Joint family systems, traditionally common in India, are gradually giving way to nuclear family arrangements, particularly in urban areas. These transformations have significant implications for parenting practices and parental expectations.

Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by rapid biological growth, cognitive development and social transitions. During this period, individuals begin to explore their identity, develop self-evaluative beliefs and establish patterns of behaviour that often persist into adulthood. Secondary school years are particularly significant because adolescents face increasing academic demands, peer influence and expectations from parents and teachers.

Within this developmental context, parental expectations emerge as an important socialization mechanism influencing adolescents' motivation, self-concept and behaviour. Expectations regarding academic achievement, career aspirations and behavioural conduct shape adolescents' perceptions of competence and success. When expectations are supportive and realistic, they may encourage confidence, persistence and positive behaviour. However, excessively high or inflexible expectations may create psychological pressure and negatively affect adolescents' emotional wellbeing.

Although a growing body of research examines parenting and adolescent development, studies remain fragmented in terms of family composition and cultural context. International studies have increasingly examined factors such as parenting styles and family size, whereas Indian research has largely focused on academic pressure or family structure in isolation. Comparative reviews integrating parental expectations with adolescents' self-esteem and behavioural outcomes in changing family contexts remain limited.

Therefore, the present review aims to:

- i. Examine conceptual and theoretical perspectives on parental expectations and adolescent development;
- ii. Synthesize international and Indian empirical evidence;
- iii. Identify similarities and differences across cultural contexts; and
- iv. Highlight research gaps and directions for future research.

2. Methodology of the Review:

This review uses a narrative methodology underpinned by systematic search procedures to synthesize the existing empirical and theoretical literature on parental expectations and adolescent psychological outcomes within evolving family contexts. The narrative approach is justified given that the current review aims to synthesize conceptual, theoretical, and empirical evidence from different methodological traditions and cultural contexts, rather than statistical aggregation of effect sizes.

2.1 Sources of Literature:

Relevant literature was identified through major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO and Google Scholar. Keywords such as parental expectations, adolescents, self-esteem, behavioural patterns, academic stress, family structure and parenting styles were used in different combinations to retrieve relevant studies. Reference lists of key articles were also examined to identify additional sources.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included:

- focused on adolescents or secondary school students
- examined parental expectations, parenting practices or related family variables.
- investigated psychological or behavioural outcomes
- were empirical studies, theoretical papers or systematic reviews published in peer reviewed journals.

Only studies that focused exclusively on either early childhood or adulthood, that dealt with clinical populations without relevance for general development during adolescence, or did not have sufficient methodological clarity were excluded. Opinion pieces, unpublished dissertations, and non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded, except where institutional reports were required for contextual relevance.

Studies focusing exclusively on early childhood or clinical populations unrelated to general adolescent development were excluded.

2.3 Time Frame

The review covers studies published between 2000 and 2024, reflecting contemporary changes in family structures and adolescent development. Foundational theoretical works published prior to this period were included when necessary to provide conceptual and theoretical bases.

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Information regarding study objectives, sample characteristics, measurement tools and key findings was extracted from each study. The literature was then organized into conceptual, theoretical and empirical categories, and patterns across international and Indian studies were identified.

3. Conceptual Clarification of Key Constructs

3.1 Parental Expectations

Parental expectations refer to parents' beliefs and aspirations regarding their children's academic performance, behaviour and future achievements. In developmental psychology, these expectations are considered important socialization cues that influence children's motivation and self-concept. Parental expectations typically include academic expectations, behavioural expectations and social expectations. Academic expectations involve aspirations related to grades, educational attainment and career success. Behavioural expectations relate to discipline, self-control and adherence to family norms. Social expectations involve interpersonal behaviour and social competence.

Cultural context plays an important role in shaping parental expectations. In collectivistic societies such as India, parental expectations are often linked with family reputation, social mobility and economic security. While such expectations may motivate adolescents to succeed, excessively high expectations may also increase academic stress and psychological pressure. Changing family structures, including nuclear families and single-child households, may further intensify parental expectations because parents invest greater attention and resources in fewer children.

3.2 Self-Esteem in Adolescence:

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their self-worth and competence. It reflects how positively or negatively individuals perceive themselves. Adolescence is a crucial stage for the development of self-esteem because young individuals become more capable of self-reflection and social comparison. Feedback from significant others, particularly parents and teachers, plays a vital role in shaping adolescents' self-evaluations.

High self-esteem is associated with emotional resilience, academic engagement and healthy social relationships. In contrast, low self-esteem is often linked with anxiety, depression and behavioural difficulties. Family relationships strongly influence self-esteem development. Parental warmth, encouragement and realistic expectations tend to promote positive self-regard, whereas excessive criticism or unrealistic expectations may undermine adolescents' confidence and sense of competence.

3.3 Behavioural Patterns of Adolescents:

Adolescent behavioural patterns refer to consistent ways in which young individuals express emotions, interact socially and respond to environmental demands. Research commonly distinguishes between internalizing and externalizing behaviours. Internalizing behaviours include emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression and social withdrawal. Externalizing behaviours involve outward actions such as aggression, impulsivity and rule-breaking. In addition to problem behaviours, positive behaviours such as cooperation, empathy and helping others are also important indicators of adolescent adjustment. These prosocial behaviours contribute to healthy relationships and psychological well-being. Family environment plays a central role in shaping behavioural patterns. Parenting practices, emotional climate and parental expectations influence how adolescents regulate their behaviour and cope with stress.

4. Theoretical Perspectives Guiding the Review:

Several developmental and parenting theories provide a framework for understanding how parental expectations influence adolescent outcomes. Erikson's psychosocial theory identifies adolescence as the stage of identity versus role confusion, during which individuals explore personal values and future aspirations. Parental expectations may guide adolescents' identity formation by influencing their perceptions of competence and success. Parenting theories, particularly Baumrind's parenting style model, highlight how different parenting approaches shape children's development. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and appropriate expectations, is generally associated with positive psychological outcomes. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, involving strict control and rigid expectations, may contribute to stress and behavioural difficulties. These theoretical perspectives emphasize that parental expectations influence adolescents not only through direct pressure but also through broader family relationships and parenting practices.

5. Review of Empirical Evidence:

5.1 International Studies:

International research consistently demonstrates that parental expectations significantly influence adolescents' academic achievement, motivation and psychological adjustment. Studies based on expectancy-value theory indicate that parents' beliefs about their children's abilities shape adolescents' educational aspirations and performance. Research has also examined family size and only-child status. Contrary to earlier stereotypes, studies suggest that only children often perform well academically and receive greater parental investment. However, concentrated parental attention may sometimes increase performance pressure and stress.

International evidence also shows that supportive parental expectations are associated with higher self-esteem and better emotional regulation, whereas controlling or unrealistic expectations may contribute to anxiety and behavioural problems.

Cultural values play an important moderating role in determining how adolescents interpret parental expectations.

5.2 Indian Studies:

Indian research has largely focused on academic pressure and psychological stress among adolescents. Studies report that many secondary school students experience high levels of academic stress due to parental expectations regarding examination performance and career success.

Research comparing nuclear and joint families suggests that joint families may provide broader emotional support, while nuclear families often involve closer parental monitoring and higher academic expectations. However, findings vary across regions and socio-economic contexts. Studies examining self-esteem and behavioural problems among Indian adolescents indicate that excessive parental pressure is associated with lower self-esteem and increased emotional difficulties. Despite these findings, research specifically addressing single-child families in India remains limited.

6. Comparative Synthesis and Discussion:

Comparative analysis reveals both similarities and differences between international and Indian studies. Across cultures, parental expectations strongly influence adolescents' motivation, self-concept and behaviour. Supportive expectations promote positive development, while excessive expectations may increase stress and emotional difficulties.

However, cultural context shapes how adolescents interpret parental expectations. In collectivistic societies like India, expectations are often viewed as expressions of care and responsibility. Nevertheless, increasing academic competition may intensify pressure on adolescents. International research also pays greater attention to family size and parenting styles, whereas Indian research has focused more on family structure. This difference highlights the need for more comprehensive studies examining family composition and parental expectations simultaneously.

7. Methodological Trends and Limitations:

Most studies in this field rely on cross-sectional survey designs, which limit the ability to establish causal relationships. Longitudinal research examining developmental changes over time remains relatively limited, particularly in India. Sampling methods also vary considerably. International studies often use large national samples, while many Indian studies rely on smaller regional samples, limiting generalizability.

Measurement issues represent another challenge. Although standardized instruments such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale are widely used, cultural differences may influence how adolescents interpret survey items. Greater attention to cultural adaptation and validation of measurement tools is therefore required.

8. Research Gaps and Future Directions:

Several important research gaps remain. First, there is limited research on single-child families in India, despite increasing demographic trends toward smaller families. Second, many studies examine parental expectations, self-esteem and behavioural outcomes separately rather than using integrated analytical models.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs and incorporate diverse samples representing different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Mixed-method approaches combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews may also provide deeper insights into adolescents' experiences.

9. Implications for Practice and Policy:

The synthesis of international and Indian evidence reviewed in this article has several important implications for practice and policy aimed at promoting adolescents' psychological well-being within changing family contexts. Given the central role of parental expectations in shaping adolescents' self-esteem and behavioural adjustment, coordinated efforts involving parents, schools, mental health professionals and policymakers are essential.

9.1 Implications for Parents:

Findings across studies highlight the importance of balanced and developmentally appropriate parental expectations. Parents should be encouraged to communicate expectations that are realistic, flexible and aligned with adolescents' individual abilities and interests, rather than solely with academic or societal benchmarks. Parental awareness programmes can play a crucial role in helping parents recognize how excessive or rigid expectations may contribute to stress, diminished self-worth and behavioural difficulties during adolescence. In the Indian context, where educational achievement is strongly emphasized, parent education initiatives should promote the integration of emotional support and open communication with performance-related expectations, particularly in single-child and nuclear family settings where parental focus may be intensified.

9.2 School-Level Interventions:

Schools represent a critical setting for addressing the psychological impact of parental expectations. School-based interventions should incorporate life skills education, stress management strategies and programmes aimed at enhancing self-esteem and emotional regulation among adolescents. Teachers and school administrators can be trained to identify early signs of academic stress and behavioural difficulties and to engage constructively with parents regarding students' holistic development. Additionally, schools can serve as platforms for parent-teacher collaboration, facilitating dialogue on realistic academic goals and the importance of psychosocial well-being alongside scholastic achievement. Schools should provide programmes promoting life skills, stress management and emotional well-being. Collaboration between parents and teachers can help create balanced academic expectations.

9.3 Counselling and Mental Health Programmes:

The reviewed evidence underscores the need for accessible and culturally responsive counselling services for adolescents. School counselling programmes and community-based mental health services should address family-related stressors,

including parental expectations and family dynamics, as part of routine assessment and intervention. Counsellors can assist adolescents in developing coping strategies, assertive communication skills and resilience in the face of performance pressures. Family-based counselling approaches may be particularly effective in addressing expectation-related conflicts and fostering supportive parent–adolescent relationships

9.4 Policy Implications:

At the policy level, the findings of this review have relevance for educational and adolescent mental health policies in India. Policy initiatives should recognize the psychosocial dimensions of academic achievement and incorporate mental health promotion within school curricula and teacher training programmes. National and state-level education policies can support the integration of guidance and counselling services in secondary schools and encourage partnerships between educational institutions and mental health agencies. Furthermore, policies addressing adolescent well-being should consider evolving family structures, including the increasing prevalence of nuclear and single-child families, to ensure that interventions are responsive to contemporary social realities.

Overall, translating research insights into practice and policy requires a coordinated, multi-level approach that acknowledges the complex interplay between parental expectations, family context and adolescent development. Such efforts are essential for fostering supportive environments that promote both academic success and psychological well-being among adolescents.

Conclusion:

The present review synthesized conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature to examine the role of parental expectations in shaping adolescents' self-esteem and behavioural patterns within changing family contexts, with particular attention to international and Indian evidence. Across diverse cultural settings, parental expectations emerged as a significant psychosocial influence during

adolescence, a developmental stage marked by heightened sensitivity to evaluation, identity formation and behavioural regulation. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that parental expectations can function as both protective and risk factors, depending on their intensity, communication style and the emotional climate in which they are embedded.

The comparative analysis revealed substantial convergence between international and Indian studies in recognizing the importance of parental expectations for adolescents' psychological well-being and behavioural adjustment. At the same time, meaningful divergences were observed in how expectations are experienced and interpreted across cultural contexts. In India, parental expectations are often embedded within collectivistic values, family obligations and achievement-oriented educational systems, which can alter their psychological meaning and impact. These contextual nuances underscore the limitations of universal interpretations and highlight the need for culturally sensitive frameworks in adolescent and family research.

A key contribution of this review lies in foregrounding the relative neglect of family composition, particularly single-child families, in Indian research. While international studies provide systematic evidence on only-child outcomes, Indian literature remains largely silent on how concentrated parental expectations in single-child contexts may influence adolescents' self-esteem and behavioural patterns. Additionally, the review identified gaps related to the lack of integrated analytical models, limited use of longitudinal and mixed-method designs, and ongoing challenges related to measurement and cultural applicability of assessment tools.

Overall, this review underscores the necessity of moving beyond fragmented approaches toward integrative, contextually grounded research that simultaneously examines parental expectations, family characteristics and adolescent psychological outcomes. By consolidating existing evidence and identifying clear directions for future inquiry, the review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of

adolescent development in contemporary family settings. Such knowledge is essential for informing research, practice and policy initiatives aimed at supporting adolescents' psychological well-being in the face of evolving familial and educational pressures.

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