

## The Mediating Role of Family Structure on Family Functioning and Social Competence: In Teenagers' Perspective on Psychology

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Families can be set up in a variety of ways, including biological two-parent households, divorced households, single-parent households, or blended households. Even though family structures are changing recently, it is crucial for teenagers' healthy development they establish strong family relationships and positive social skills.

**Objectives:** This study aimed to examine the mediating role of the family structure on teenagers' perception of their family functioning as well as their social competence.

**Methods:** An ex-post facto research design was chosen as the method for the investigation. The sample comprised 107 teenage school-going children. The schools were chosen using simple random sampling, whereas the respondents were chosen using convenient sampling. The personal information sheet, McMaster Family Assessment Device, and Children Self-Report Social Skills Scale were used for collecting data. The Analysis of Variance and regression analysis were used to analyze the data.

**Results:** Teenagers' perceptions of family functioning and their social competence do not differ significantly depending on the family structure. Family functioning significantly predicts teenagers' social competence more than family structure.

**Conclusions:** The study concludes that for teenagers to develop positive social skills, a foundation of family steadiness is more crucial than the family structure alone.

**Keywords:** Family Structure; Family Functioning; Social Competence; Teenagers

### 1. Introduction

Families can be set up in a variety of ways, including biological two-parent households, divorced households, single-parent households, or blended households. These families could even consist of single or divorced people in addition to the parents, who may be married or not (Lin et al., 2019). The positive functioning of families is presumably the most prominent and most probable to provide positive results regardless of the family's structure (Lin et al., 2019).

Children's academic failure, potentially hazardous behavior, and subpar long-term educational performance are all heavily impacted by family structure. Children from single-parent, divorced, or blended families accomplish less well than those from two-parent biological families. Similar negative effects on teenagers' behavioral outcomes can be observed in households with less than two biological parents. Styles of parenting, educational attainment of parents, maternal occupations, and psychological well-being are a few examples of variables that may interact with family structure. According to a Carlson study, children living in blended families could have been affected by their parents' abandoned relationships and challenging entry and exit from new relationships (Lin et al., 2019).

A two-year longitudinal research investigation noticed that mothers who continued to be single or walked into poor standard relationships encountered an overall decline in mental wellness contrasted to those who got into good-quality relationships. Single mothers, on the other hand, reported feeling more content. This implies that parents who decide to parent alone after a divorce or who prefer continuing to be single may give their kids consistent socialization environments, encouraging positive development (Lin et al., 2019).

Furthermore, family structure is not the only factor, the parents' connection with one another and their capacity to create a positive environment have a greater impact on children's adjustment than the parents' marital status (Lin et al., 2019). Previous studies have highlighted that, in terms of promoting positive child development, stability in family structure may be more significant than family structure type (Craigie, 2010).

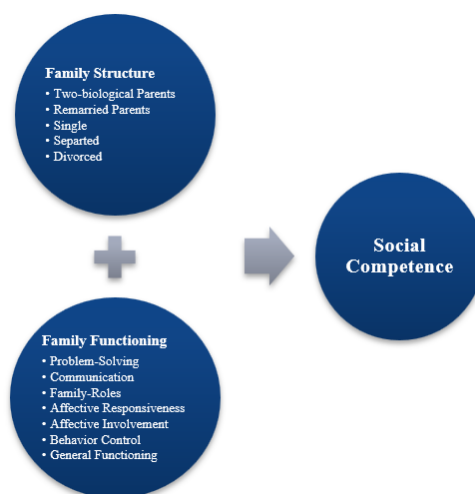
### 1.1 Cultural Context

In India, a nation with a variety of cultural and socioeconomic contexts, there is a lack of study on the impact of family dynamics on family functioning (Sondhi, 2017). Family functioning is still necessary, and social competency differs depending on family structure, even though the significance of family dynamics and family functioning throughout child growth and development is well documented.

Indian families strongly emphasize collectivist principles and the interdependence of family members on an emotional, social, and economic level. They also share many similarities with other Asian cultures (Arnett, 2012; Sondhi, 2017). Interestingly, Indian teenagers prefer spending their free time with relatives over friends. Such family customs and the strong bonds that exist among families imply that perhaps the home environment may have an even greater influence on teenagers in Indian culture. On the other hand, greater exposure to Western society and globalization may alter Indian family structure and process patterns (Hsieh et al., 2022).

### 1.2 Conceptual Framework

The association between a person's family relationships and social competence has been highlighted in studies from two different disciplines. Attachment studies emphasize the relationship between the intrafamily influence and the person's social competence by describing how the nature of caregiver-infant attachment affects the development of explorations and autonomy throughout infancy and early childhood (Ainsworth, 1972; Sroufe, 1979). According to life-span perspectives on attachment, attachment has the same purpose at all ages—supporting the human's mastery of a social realm (Kalish & Knudtson, 1976). Also, socialization studies point to a link between parental techniques and offspring's psychosocial competency. It has been demonstrated that parenting behaviors including parental control and tenderness are connected to traits of children's psychosocial competency (Baumrind, 1968, 1971). The conceptual framework that directs our empirical investigation is shown in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1** The mediating role of family structure on family functioning and social competence

## 2. Current Study

Previous research has shown that the functioning of the family and the structure of the family are both significant factors influencing the well-being of teenagers. In the proposed investigation, researchers aim to make the following contributions. This study focuses on three main research questions: (1) Do different family structures significantly affect how well family function? (2) Does family structure substantially impact how socially competent teenagers are? and (3) Is family functioning a more reliable predictor of teenagers' social competence than family structure?

The objective of this study is to specifically examine the mediating role of family structure [married once (two-biological parents), single, remarried, and separated] on teenagers' perception of family functioning and their social competence.

Seven aspects of family functioning as described by the McMaster Model of Family Functioning, are measured: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control, and general functioning. It defines the family group's structural and organizational characteristics as well as the patterns of family member interactions that have been discovered to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy families (Epstein et al., 1983). (i) *Problem-solving* – It defines resolving family conflicts as essential for preserving efficient functioning and dealing with problems that jeopardize the family's ability and integrity. Despite not endangering their ability to function, some unaddressed issues can nevertheless be problematic (Epstein, 1970; Epstein et al., 1978; Fogarty, 2009). (ii) *Communication* – It is described as the vocal sharing of knowledge among family members (Epstein et al., 1978; Fogarty, 2009). (iii) *Family Roles* – It denotes that, by completing particular tasks frequently, family members can accomplish their roles and maintain a healthy and functional system (Fogarty, 2009; Rado, 1961). (iv) *Affective Responsiveness* – This dimension emphasizes family members' potential to respond emotionally differently from the reality of their behaviors, emphasizing the type, quantity, and suitability of their emotional responses. A broader spectrum of emotions along with more appropriate reactions can be found in effective families (Epstein et al., 1978; Fogarty, 2009). (v) *Affective Involvement* – It refers to how much the family values and expresses involvement in a member's specific activities. The emphasis is on how much and how expressly one person is interested in the other (Epstein et al., 1978; Fogarty, 2009). (vi) *Behavior Control* – It outlines the expectations or guidelines the family sets as well as the degree of flexibility they accept. This aspect relates to both the rules and expectations that parents set for their kids' behavior as well as the norms and requirements that adults have for one another (Epstein et al., 1978; Fogarty, 2009). (vii) *General Functioning* - It measures the entire healthy and unhealthy functioning of the family (Epstein et al., 1978; Shylaja et al., 2022).

## 3. Methods & Materials

### 3.1 Participants

This study employs a non-probability sampling method for sample selection due to its nature. Schools were selected using simple random sampling and respondents were selected using convenient sampling.

The sample consisted of 107 school-age teenagers with an average age of 14.55 years, with 53 males (49%) along with 54 girls (51%) with ages that ranged from 13 to 15 years. Teenagers from all types of family structures were included, including those who had been married just once (N = 70, 65%), were single (N = 21, 20%), had remarried (N = 9, 8%), and had been divorced (N = 7, 7%). The study excluded children in children who had never attended school, school former students, and kids with impairments and developmental issues. Only those who expressed a desire to engage were chosen as respondents.

### 3.2 Procedure

The study adopts a questionnaire method to gather information from students between the ages of 13 and 15 at four schools in Tamil Nadu. Before participating, participants received information and gave their consent. Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale (CS<sup>4</sup>), Family Assessment Device, and personal data sheets were all used in the study.

### 3.3 Measures

#### 3.3.1 Personal Data Sheet

To examine the experiences and connections of a sample of teenagers, the researcher gathered personal information about them, including their age, gender, parental job position, parent's marriage history, and family structure.

#### 3.3.2 McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD)

FAD is built on the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF), a family model with a clinical focus (Needham et al., 1969). The structural and organizational elements of the family group are defined, in conjunction with the principles of family member engagement that have been found to distinguish between properly functioning and improperly functioning families. The scale measures family functioning in terms of seven dimensions: (i) Problem-Solving, (ii) Communication, (iii) Roles, (iv) Affective Responsiveness, (v) Affective Involvement, (vi) Behavior Control, and (vii) General functioning (Epstein et al., 1983).

The scale consisted of 60 items and the answers are coded as strongly agree "1", agree "2", disagree "3" and strongly disagree "4". A score less than 2 is considered healthy family functioning, whereas a score of 2 and above is considered as family functioning unhealthily.

The reliability test's alpha coefficient of 0.7 indicates that this questionnaire's reliability is at an adequate level. The FAD has been shown to: (a) have adequate test-retest reliability; (b) have modest correlations with social desirability; (c) have slightly elevated associations with other subjective indicators of family functioning, and (d) distinguish significantly between healthy and unhealthy families as determined by clinicians. Additionally, cut-off ratings that may distinguish between healthy and unhealthy households were created (Epstein et al., 1983).

#### 3.3.3 Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale (CS<sup>4</sup>)

The Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale (CS<sup>4</sup>), designed by Carla Kmett Danielson and Carolyn Roecker Phelps in 2003, measures children's social skills. Social rules, likeability, and social ingenuousness make up the 21-item instrument. Social rules characterize a child's civility and sticking to social norms. Likeability is a measure of a child's popularity among friends, whereas social ingenuousness shows a lack of knowledge of social interactions. The CS<sup>4</sup> possesses certain essential principles, but its execution is not elegant (Danielson & Phelps, 2003).

A 5-point Likert scale is used to test social skills on the CS<sup>4</sup> scale, with higher scores indicating better social abilities and lower scores indicating worse social skills. The range of potential scores is 21 to 105, and the internal consistency and test-retest reliability are, respectively, .74 and .96 (Danielson & Phelps, 2003).

### 3.4 Data Analyses

Descriptive analysis was used to evaluate sample characteristics of the research variables (See **Table 1**). The first research question, whether family functioning varies significantly among family structures, was analyzed using one-way ANOVA (See **Table 2**). The second one-way ANOVA assessed if there are significant differences in teenagers' social competencies as a result of family structure (See **Table 3**). Finally, after controlling for age and gender, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was employed to investigate whether family functioning predicts teenagers' social competency more reliably than family structure (See

**Table 4**).

## 4. Results

**Table 1** The frequency and percentage of sampling distribution about study variables.

Socio-demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Boys	53	49%
Girls	54	51%

Family Structure		
Married Once	70	65%
Single	21	20%
Remarried	9	8%
Separated	7	7%

According to descriptive analyses, 65% of the teenage participants (N = 107) living with two biological parents who had been married once, 20% (N = 21) lived in a single-parent household, 9% (N = 9) lived in a two-parent family in which one parent was a stepparent (parents who had remarried), and the remaining 7% (N = 7) living in a household where the parents were separated (See **Table 1**).

**Table 2 Inferential statistics of ANOVA showing teenagers' perception of family functioning in terms of different family structures**

Variables	Structure of Family	N (= 107)	Mean	SD	F-value
Problem-Solving	Married Once	70	2.01	.515	.703 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	2.10	.406	
	Remarried	9	2.03	.283	
	Separated	7	2.28	.427	
Communication	Married Once	70	2.14	.495	1.709 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	2.14	.394	
	Remarried	9	2.16	.446	
	Separated	7	2.60	.359	
Roles	Married Once	70	2.17	.447	.572 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	2.21	.389	
	Remarried	9	2.23	.360	
	Separated	7	2.38	.380	
Affective Responsiveness	Married Once	70	2.23	.550	.361 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	2.20	.570	
	Remarried	9	2.42	.537	
	Separated	7	2.26	.300	
Affective Involvement	Married Once	70	2.40	.450	.265 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	2.40	.209	
	Remarried	9	2.49	.448	
	Separated	7	2.53	.318	
Behavior Control	Married Once	70	2.48	.355	1.465 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	2.54	.346	
	Remarried	9	2.34	.177	
	Separated	7	2.26	.399	
General Functioning	Married Once	70	1.98	.493	1.649 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	1.99	.376	
	Remarried	9	2.09	.489	
	Separated	7	2.41	.302	

NS – Not Significant at .05 level

Results of one-way ANOVA in Table 2 revealed the teenagers' perception of family functioning on problem-solving ( $F = .703, p > .05$ ) communication ( $F = 1.709, p > .05$ ), roles ( $F = .572, p > .05$ ), affective responsiveness ( $F = .361, p > .05$ ), affective involvement ( $F = .265, p > .05$ ), behavior control ( $F = 1.465, p > .05$ ), and general functioning ( $F = 1.649, p > .05$ ) do not change significantly based on family structure (married once, single, remarried, and separated). Meanwhile, the mean score of above 2 indicates that most teenagers of all family structures (married once, single, remarried, and separated) reported their family functions in unhealthy ways in terms of problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control, and general functioning). It denotes that, regardless of family structure, teenagers generally perceive their families as functioning unhealthily. In **Table 2**, means and standard deviations are shown. The findings offer an answer to the initial research question (See **Table 2**).

**Table 3 Inferential statistics of ANOVA showing teenagers' social competence in terms of different family structures.**

Variables	Structure of Family	N (= 107)	Mean	SD	F-value
Social Rules	Married Once	70	37.25	7.807	1.325 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	35.75	7.162	
	Remarried	9	34.73	4.406	
	Separated	7	43.01	3.406	
Likeability	Married Once	70	18.52	3.135	1.275 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	18.71	3.585	
	Remarried	9	16.35	2.712	
	Separated	7	18.31	3.225	
Social Ingenuousness	Married Once	70	20.18	3.944	1.179 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	20.41	3.080	
	Remarried	9	22.39	3.292	
	Separated	7	23.60	2.950	
Overall Social Competence	Married Once	70	74.74	11.214	1.260 <sup>NS</sup>
	Single	21	73.15	9.773	
	Remarried	9	73.35	6.296	
	Separated	7	83.50	6.626	

NS – Not Significant at .05 level

The results of one-way ANOVA in Table 3 illustrate that teenagers' level of social competence ( $F = 1.260, p > .05$ ) in terms of social rules ( $F = 1.325, p > .05$ ), likeability ( $F = 1.275, p > .05$ ), and social ingenuousness ( $F = 1.179, p > .05$ ) do not differ significantly depending on the family structure. The greater mean score denotes that teenagers of all family structures perceive they are highly socially competent. It indicates that family structure does not affect social competence among teenagers. **Table 3** presents means and standard deviations. The results provide an answer to the second research question (See **Table 3**).

**Table 4 Multiple regression analysis of the family structure and family functioning predicting social competence**

Predictors	$\beta$	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. error of the Estimate
Family Structure	.049	.049	.002	.001	11.098
Family Functioning	-.464	.464	.215	.214	9.845

**Dependent variable:** Social Competence

To determine if family structure and family functioning are predictors of teenagers' social competency, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed. In the family structure, the model accounts for 0.2% of the variance in social competence, as indicated by the R<sup>2</sup> value of .002 ( $\beta = .049, p > .05$ ). Meanwhile, in family functioning, the model accounts for 21.5% of the variance in teenagers' social competence. It implies that the social competence of teenagers is predicted more by family functioning than family structure (See

**Table 4**). The findings respond to the second study question. The results cannot be generalized to the wider population because fewer teenage participants represent single-parent, remarried, and separated families.

## 5. Discussion

The present study findings reported that teenagers perceive their families are functioning unhealthily. And their perception of their family did not differ regarding the structure family they live in, i.e., married once, single, remarried, or separated. In short, the family structure does not alter the teenagers' perception of their family. The study's other finding is that the family structure does not affect teenagers' social competence. The fact that we assess the functioning of the family from the teenage participant's perspective may help explain this result. Teenagers may experience significant problems in families with either two parents, stepparents, or blended parents because they often go through moments of transition and modification (Kobak et al., 2017; Parra et al., 2015). More so than just structure, family harmony is essential for greater functioning.

According to a 2019 study by Yi-Ching Lin, cohesion, adaptability, and communication among families with varied household patterns differ, which affects the development of teenagers (Lin et al., 2019). According to research, family structure has less of an impact on how well family functions when considered alone than when taken into account alongside other elements including parental work, mental wellness, and parenting styles (Amato, 2001; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Friedel et al., 2010).

Transitions in family structure and youngsters' social skills were not shown to be negatively correlated, according to Eda Ruschena et al. (2005). They contend that younger children with a variety of social abilities may grow far more resilient in stressful familial and growth-oriented circumstances (Leme et al., 2015; Ruschena et al., 2005).

Earlier research studies have found that, due to the strong association between social maturity and family functioning (Zubrick et al., 2005), a study by Saleem and Gul (2016), reported that disruptive households can negatively impact teenagers' social skillfulness (Saleem & Gul, 2016). Teenagers from miserable households with poor parenting methods and little peer support suffer in social settings, leading to interaction issues and conflicts (Lee, 1983). Teenagers' ability to develop social skills depends on their family's overall health (Saleem & Gul, 2016). In an Iran study, researchers found that lower social skillfulness is predicted with high behavior control along with low affective involvement (Mousavi et al., 2015).

Furthermore, from a theoretical point of view, Social Cognitive Theory by Albert Bandura (1986), emphasized that a person's social behavior is primarily modeled after how their family is operating (Bandura & National Inst of Mental Health, 1986). According to research by Nancy J. Bell and colleagues, social skills and family functioning are positively correlated, with social contact in close connections with parents being more satisfying. For social competency, the complete atmosphere of familial relationships is more important (Bell et al., 1985). Families take part in programs to make sure kids develop wholesome, socially acceptable behavior. However, ongoing conflicts within families might impede children's social skill development, increasing stress levels and lowering performance in situations of socialization (Bornstein, 2002; Rashid, 2010; Saleem & Gul, 2016).

## **6. Conclusion**

The present study predicted that family structure has less impact on teenagers' perception of family functioning and their social competence. However, family functioning significantly contributes to teenagers' social competence, and a healthy family promotes social competence among teenagers more than in unhealthy families. And other mediating family variables that significantly affect the teenagers' social competence.

This study is one of the few that looks at how family functioning affects social competence during the teenage years. It proves that family functioning is a strong indicator of teenagers' social skill results than family structure. According to our research, having a single parent may not necessarily have a negative impact on teenagers' development more or less than having a two-parent family with a stepparent.

## **7. Limitations and Future Directions**

Firstly, the authors are unaware of studies that include both parent and teenager opinions on similar outcomes. Moreover, the majority of studies on the relationships between family structure and child outcomes only looked at outcomes reported by parents, teachers, or teenagers. Because parents' opinions of the family may be different from teenagers' perceptions, it may be useful to compare results from teenagers with those provided by their parents.

Secondly, although our sample of teenagers was drawn from a rural location, they were more likely to be from intact households with low and/or stable socioeconomic status. This further restricts the applicability of our findings and may have had a substantial impact on the nature of the research results.

Furthermore, teenagers' reported family functioning may compromise research objectivity since they are going through a difficult phase in their relationships, which could affect perceptions owing to instability or insecurity. To ensure both ecological reliability and universal applicability, future research should broaden its focus to cover a larger range of socioeconomic categories and analyze the opinions of numerous respondents.

## Declarations

### *Funding*

The authors state no funding is involved.

### *Conflicts of Interest*

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### *Ethics Approval*

The research related to human use has been compiled with all the relevant national regulations, Institutional policies, and by the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration, and has been approved by the author's institutional review board or equivalent committee.

### *Consent*

Informed consent has been obtained from all individuals included in this study.

### *Data Availability*

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy concerns but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### *Author Contributions*

The Ph.D. student, S. Pon Shylaja, has contributed to defining the overall problem and proposed the core scientific idea to solve it. The Ph.D. student wrote the entire draught version of the paper and revised it according to the comments of co-authors Dr. Neharshi Srivastava and Dr. M. Ramya Maheswari. The Ph.D. student, S. Pon Shylaja, derived the key methodology together with Dr. Neharshi Srivastava and Dr. M. Ramya Maheswari, and the student implemented all simulations. The student identified relevant performance metrics and interpreted the simulation and experimental results with comments from the co-authors.

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