

**Impact of Indian Parenting Methods on Parent-Teenager Relationships**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which methods of parenting affect the quality of parent-teen relationships, with a special focus on the development of stress-related mental health issues in Indian teens. The approach will be a qualitative one, involving the use of open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews to elicit subjective feedback. This approach was taken to encourage responses about parenting expectations as well as parenting realities. A close reading of their responses reveals that teens experience a lack of freedom and agency in their households that has a negative impact on their relationship with their parents. The paper explores both the causes of Indian parenting methods and the effects it has on teenagers. These include both negative impacts on their mental health as well as irregular or rebellious behavior. It concludes with a set of informed suggestions for parents to improve communication and to have a more open, gen-z centered approach to parenting.

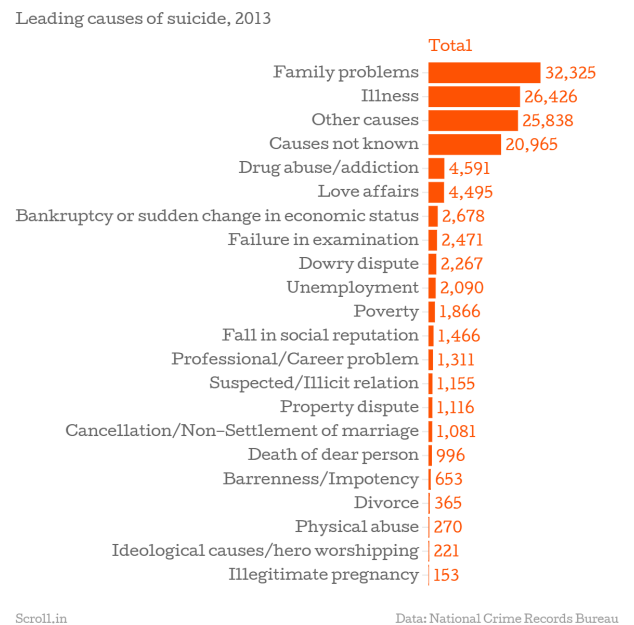
**Research Aim and Approach**

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This research helps us in understanding the role of parenting in teenage mental health. According to Vasudevan Mukunth, ‘A common cause for concern is the *pressure from parents* to do well in the national board examinations, especially for Class XII, before finishing school. As scores in these exams often determine college admissions and subsequent employment opportunities, *students aged 16-18* are often subjected to undue pressure at home to succeed. When they don't, *suicide becomes a way out*. In 2013 alone, *2,471 suicides* were attributed to "failure in the examination".’ (Mukunth, 2014)

Pressure to perform well in school is just one of the forms of family pressure. The mental health of teenagers is also affected by non-academic pressures exerted by families. It can stem from various factors such as generation gaps, differences in religious beliefs, socio-economic factors, and so on.

A chart containing data from National Crime Records Bureau shows the different reasons because of which teenagers committed suicide in 2013. This chart suggests that the leading reasons for teen suicides are associated with family problems. (Mukunth, 2014)



**Figure 1:** Data collected by National Crime Records Bureau 2013 on teen suicide

These reports indicate the mental harm which is caused to teenagers in India due to parenting methods. Hence, this study investigates the degree to which Indian parenting methods impact the mental health of teenagers, with the larger aim of identifying solutions.

## Data Collection

A questionnaire was developed, which contained the following scenario:

*‘Arjun is a 16-year-old high school teenager who is the sole child in the family. Students in his school often go out to party and hang out, but he is not invited. His parents are usually busy working the whole day. Arjun was close to his grandmother with whom he spoke a lot. However, she recently passed away. Arjun has not been coming out of his room much, except for meals. Even during meal times, he barely eats or speaks to his parents. His grades at school have also been slipping, but his teacher has not been able to get Arjun to speak to her about his studies.’*

This self-formulated scenario was developed through research on existing scenarios. (Department of Health, Australia, 1997) They were then creatively transformed to make them culturally relevant. In order to create relatable scenarios for my respondents/interviewees, I also tapped into my personal experiences as an individual brought up in Indian culture characterized by deep connections between grandparents and grandkids. The parents’ failure to observe Arjun’s distress is reflected in the existing literature on Indian parenting. (Kakkar, 2020)

Respondents, aged between 16-17, were asked to respond to the scenario by filling out the following open-ended questions. There were asked

five questions out of which three were specifically focused on the scenario given. The remaining two were general questions specific to the respondents themselves.

### Scenario specific questions:

- 1) If you were Arjun, how do you think you are feeling?
- 2) How would you like Arjun’s parents to respond to the situation?
- 3) How do you think most parents in India would respond to Arjun?

### General Questions:

- 4) How would you describe your parents’ parenting approach? (Please give specific examples)
- 5) What is the impact on you? (Please give a specific example)

The first question, ‘If you were Arjun, how do you think you are feeling?’ was a scenario-based question specifically aimed to help respondents identify with Arjun. The intent was to help the respondent fill the survey with a more personal approach, giving more details about themselves in the questions to follow.

The second and the third questions were also scenario-specific. By juxtaposing them, the questionnaire tried to draw out a comparison between the expectation that the respondents have about ‘good parenting’, and their perception of Indian parenting styles in general. Further, the

fourth question was set as a comparison to the second and third. By answering the question about their own parents, participants would either identify with Arjun's perceived parenting methods or contradict them.

The fifth and final question was posed to observe the consequences of the parenting method that respondents have experienced (expressed in question four). Altogether, this gave space to analyze the quality of relationships between parents and teens, and the consequences they have on the mental health status of teenagers. Ultimately, 13 responses were gathered.

Next, semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with six respondents. A purposive sampling<sup>1</sup> approach was adopted to select the interviewees, based on their responses to the survey. The focus was identifying expressive and articulate interviewees who were willing to open up about their relationships with their parents. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the likelihood that the interviewees might want to project an inaccurate impression of their relationship with their parents, general questions about day-to-day life were asked at first to help them feel comfortable in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique which focuses on sampling techniques where the units that are investigated are based on the judgement of the researcher

investigate in-depth later. Once a sense was indicated that they are at ease with sharing about their lives, the interview was driven towards the topic of their relationship with their parents. These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

#### 1) Reading data multiple times:

Firstly, a close reading of the respondents' survey was done multiple times. Every reading of the data had the potential to provide a new insight or a new perspective that could be observed and reflected upon. The truth can not be assumed, but can be arrived at through collating interpretations. Specifically, some phrases and words can suggest personal reflexivity, emotions, intuitive opinions, etc.

#### 2) Identifying relationships between them:

At this stage, specific attention was paid to the notes that were made for each of the responses. A common point was arrived at to develop the main themes. During this process, special attention was paid to whether the responses were more consistent or more contradictory? In case the respondent did not identify with Arjun, what were the major points of difference in the parenting style of their parents? Lastly, for the responses that were consistent, what

impact did they highlight? Based on my evaluations of the psychology of the respondents, the main argument was developed.

3) Group emerging thematic clusters to form large themes:

To synthesize the identified patterns, connections were drawn between emerging themes. These connections were then grouped together according to conceptual similarities, and each cluster was provided with a descriptive label. Discrepancies were accounted for through self-judgment. After accounting for potentially superficial responses, all the major themes and subthemes were noted. Short extracts have been provided as evidence for the shortlisted themes.

**Findings**

In this section, the perspectives of Indian parenting methods and their impact on the quality of parent-teen relationships, as revealed through the survey and unstructured one-on-one interviews, will be presented and analyzed.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Socioeconomic Background	No. of siblings
A	16	Female	Middle class	0

B	16	Female	Upper-lower class	0
C	16	Male	Middle class	1
D	16	Male	Upper-lower class	1
E	16	Female	Upper-lower class	1
F	16	Male	Upper-lower class	0

**Table 1:** *Descriptions of Interviewees*

Teenage life can be hard and may require special care. All the participants mentioned above face various kinds of problems/pressures and have different approaches to these problems. This pressure can be created by different factors like their socioeconomic background, social life, education systems, number of siblings, etc. For example, one of the interviewees was suffering from problems like loneliness due to lack of socialization and no siblings.

Based on the table above, it is evident that all the respondents are right in the midst of their puberty, at the age of 16 years old. This is a challenging period for most teenagers, as it is a phase of heightened hormonal changes that are accompanied by increased physiological, cognitive, and emotional changes. As a result, they will also have a conflicted perspective between wanting to be

more independent, yet needing guidance from their parents at the same time. (Staughton,2020) Peers will also start to play an increasingly important role, which can be positive or negative, depending on their social circles. (Raising Children Network)

At the same time, as they all come from middle-class and upper-middle-class families within the Indian society, they would also be coping with increased expectations to do well academically. As Mukunth argues, *“As scores in these exams often determine college admissions and subsequent employment opportunities, students aged 16-18 are often subjected to undue pressure at home to succeed.”* (Mukunth, 2014)

Depending on how these parents are, they may either face excessive pressure or get understanding and support from their parents. In such cases, the presence of a sibling, who could be a positive or negative source of support could also be important in influencing their overall well-being.

### **Theme 1: Negative Perceptions of Indian Parenting Styles**

A prominent point that emerged from the survey and interviews is that Indian parenting methods, in general, were largely perceived to be negative and detrimental to a child’s well-being. The criticisms stemmed from the fact that Indian parenting methods lay on two extreme ends of the parenting spectrum: they were considered to be either too intrusive or too distant.

In the case of B (female, 16), she complained that her parents invaded her privacy. They were constantly checking her phone to make sure that she was not secretly in a romantic relationship. She would not be allowed to use her phone after 10:30 pm so that she could sleep early. Furthermore, they kept a close eye on her social life and restricted it. Every time she would go out, they would grill her about the people she was with, the place she was at, and the time she would be back.

For B, her parents’ intrusion into her life felt annoying and irritating. It made her rebel against them by lying about the people that she was spending time with, or turning off her phone when she had missed her “curfew” so as to avoid interacting with her parents. Whenever she returned home later than her curfew, her parents would shout at her and threaten to forbid her from going out. For B, her parents’ invasiveness ruined her relationship with them. She will no longer feel comfortable sharing any difficulties she faces with them.

B wrote - *'I have learned not to share a lot. It took two to three years for me to openly cry in front of my close friends....I am harshly critical of myself, almost to a fault.'*

The tension between B and her parents reveals a clear generational gap between them. She differs from her parents on the issue of how individuals should be raised. Within the context of Indian culture, B's parents feel justified in adopting their traditional and conservative stance. From their standpoint, parents should play a dominant role in dictating what their daughters can or cannot do.. Hence, they do not want their children to make a wrong decision or have something bad happen to them. As a result, they tend to engage in authoritarian parenting. (Singh et al. 2017)

In contrast, B, who has grown up in modern India, has been changed by exposure to Western culture and the Internet (globalization) (Prakesh). B, like many of her peers, felt a lack of trust from her parents' end. Their mistrust led to them giving her very little freedom or control over her life. As a result, B came to believe that breaking the rules in any way would result in horrible consequences.

On the other hand, A (female, 16) lamented that her parents were cold and distant. This was noted both in her answers, as well as the follow-up telephonic interview. It was more elaborate, however, in the interview where she expressed

feeling lonely due to not getting enough attention and affection from her parents.

Another common perception of Indian parents is that they are detached and distant. As A mentioned in her interview -

*'It makes me sad that my parents are always busy... Even on weekends, my father is watching TV. My mum just wants me to study. There is no time to go out to play, and no one to play with at home.'*

As a consequence of their detached parenting, A feels like she is not valued. This not only saddens her but also prevents her from having a healthy social life. Due to the lack of candid interaction at home, A finds it difficult to make friends.

The tension between A and her parents reveals a clear gap between them. She differs from her parents on the issue of how individuals should be raised. As stated in B's case above, A's parents also feel justified in adopting their traditional and conservative stance. However, from their standpoint, parents shouldn't interfere in their daughter's life but only place some restrictions to make her avoid bad choices. They, too, do not want their children to make a wrong decision or have something bad happen to them. As a result, they tend to engage in neglectful parenting.

Parents in India at times forget to pay attention or give enough time to their wards. This



causes teenagers to feel lonely, sad, and not worthy of love. It is a primary cause of major issues like low self-esteem, depression, suicidal thoughts, and more (Stravynski and Boyer, 2001). In children, this creates anger towards the parents and toxifies the relationship between teenagers and parents. As a result, A doesn't find her parents open enough to express her own feelings. This creates a gap between them. The distance between A and her parents takes her to an isolated mental space.

In contrast to her parents, A, too, has grown up in a more modern, globalized India. Like many of her peers, she felt a lack of trust from her parents' end. Their mistrust led to them giving her very little freedom or control over her life. As a result, A came to believe that everyone in the world will act cold and distant from her.

Comparing the parenting experienced by A & B, we observe that the parenting methods are poles apart. One is *neglectful* parenting whereas the other is *authoritarian*. Yet, both face similar consequences of the parenting methods. They both felt that they weren't trusted and valued enough by their parents. This is an outcome of the fact that both sets of parents are *unwilling to accord freedom* to their children. One experience's a world where her parents only have *harsh interactions* and the other experiences a world where her parents *barely interact* with her. Both of the problems are quite different yet the outcome is similar. It leads to problems for both children in making healthy emotional connections with peers (Weaver et al.)

One took 3 years to openly talk to her "*close friends*" about the issues faced at home whereas others face issues *making friends at all*. While B becomes rebellious and develops issues related to anger and control, A develops self-esteem issues and faces loneliness. The fundamental thing absent from both relationships is positive, emotionally healthy interactions with parents, in which these children can feel loved and heard.

## **Theme 2: Reluctance of Respondents to Open Up About Relations With Parents**

In this theme, an analysis will be done, to investigate the difference in responses from the same respondents when the method of surveying was changed from a form to a telephonic interview. Filling out a survey form is a mechanical task which people often do half-heartedly, with a feeling of being burdened. They often don't take the surveys seriously since there isn't really a direct connection with the research associated. This was evident specifically in some discrepancies in the responses collected which were accounted for through self-judgment.

For instance, one-line non-descriptive answers were not accepted for face value but followed up in the interview. Apart from the above, respondents also have multiple other reasons for being dishonest during the survey, as they want to appear like their best self, be socially desirable, answering what they 'think' should be the answer instead of 'what is.' Most importantly, they find it

hard to criticize their parents without the assurance of privacy and emotional safety. These elements can be controlled to a great extent via telephonic interviews. (Infosurv, 2017)

Telephonic interviews are more reliable because they give researchers the ability to organically ask follow up questions, giving more in-depth knowledge about the respondent. Apart from this, an interview is a form of human interaction that gives the sense of an emotional connection, not a mechanical task. Respondents were able to vent out about things in an interview since the researcher interacted with them about things that are not spoken about otherwise. On the researcher's end, they can make more space to interpret tone, wording, mood, etc. which can be factored into the findings.

Interestingly, the teen interviews only disclosed their actual perceptions about their parents during one-on-one interviews. In stark contrast, for the surveys, when the subject was Arjun, they waxed lyrical about their own parents, while making generic critiques about Indian parents in general.

For example, F (Male, 16) gave two different versions of his parents on both interview mediums. In response to the survey's first general question, 'How would you describe your parent's parenting approach, he wrote:

*'I think my parents try their best, and from what I notice it's their first time in*

*everything so little mistakes here and there are pretty understandable. My parents parenting approach is like how one takes care of something they cherish as in this case one always wants them to be happy. They try to talk to me and ask about my day "how it went", "what I did" and etc, while they also talk about some plans that they want to see through with me or help me in something or even just give me something that will make me happy.*

In this response, F suggested that his parents had a very understanding & caring approach towards him which he appeared to "cherish." He seemed to enjoy the care and attention provided by his parents. The constant questioning of "how it went", "what I did" and etc" made him feel looked after. However, in the telephonic interview, F had a different interpretation of the same behavior by his parents. Consider the following fragment from his telephonic interview:

*'I love my parents, and they love me too. So they want me to spend as much time as I can with them. I understand where they're coming from since I am their only child, but this makes it very hard to do things by myself. They don't let me talk to my friends or be alone for a long time. It is becoming very annoying.'*

F proposed the same parenting approach but expressed it differently. He expressed irritation at

them for being too involved. The expectation of always being around them made him feel stuck. He felt that his parents weren't giving him his personal space because of which he was not able to have an individual life.

Adding another layer of complexity to this contradiction is that F, and many other kids, generally have a negative perception of Indian parenting. This is known because of their response to the question, 'How would you think most of the Parents in India would respond to Arjun?'. So, if they agree that Indian parenting methods are negative, and also confirm that during the telephonic interviews, why did they choose to hide that information in the survey?

This is due to the emotionally manipulative nature of Indian parenting, especially the kind F experiences. According to Psychology Today, one of the most prevalent ways in which parents manipulate their children is by invalidating their real feelings. Daniel Flint writes,

*'Feeling invalidation is an insidious relational manipulation tactic prevalent in all sorts of close relationships. Adolescents who have experienced feeling invalidation from their parents report that their parents finish their sentences, interrupt them, act like they know what their child is thinking or feeling, and try to change how they feel about things.'* (Flint, 2019)

F vented on the phone call because there is a lack of spaces in his life where he can convey his feeling of irritation and annoyance. It is commonly observed that Indian parents often invalidate their children's feelings by masking manipulation as parental love. This was well evident in the case of F. Moreover, respect and love are expected from children, even against their own wishes. Torn between the 'love' of their parents and the genuine emotions that they feel, children often lie about their feelings. It requires them a safe space to express the reality about their feelings, hence they lied in the survey. But when they find themselves in a safe space during a human interaction they attempt to vent, revealing the reality of the parent-teen relationship.

A sense of irritation is being developed in F's cognition whenever he is with his parents. This is ruining his mental health and his relationship with his parents. For F, it is more of a burden/duty to be with his parents the entire time rather than being a conscious choice. He will tend to seek opportunities to avoid them and stay away from them in the future, distancing his parents from him.

**Conclusion:**

In today’s world, teenagers are becoming increasingly alienated from their parents. They want their parents to adapt to the changing environments and consider better ways of parenting. On the other hand, parents prefer adopting their traditional and conservative stance. This manifests in teens as rebelliousness, lying, self-isolation, internalizing irritation, resentment towards authority figures. This results in the following:

Affect on Mental Health of teen	Quality of parent-teen relationship
The mental health of the teen is largely impacted in a negative way. This was explicitly evident in the case of A who felt <i>“lonely and depressed”</i> the entire time. In the case of B, her mental health was impacted at an insidious level as she became emotionally unstable (Weaver et al) and took <i>“3 years”</i> to be vulnerable with <i>“close friends.”</i> The mental health problem further leads to complications in their	This resulted in the creation of a gap between the teen and the parents. Teens no longer felt that parents really understood their emotions and life. This results in them avoiding sharing the truth about their lives and the events they experience, including the problems they face in their day-to-day life. It ruined the openness of their relationship. This can further lead to teens cutting off, completely removing their parents

social life and development as discussed previously.	from their life. (ReachOut Parents)
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**Table 2:** Two sides of conclusion

Because of a culture of expected ‘respect’ and ‘obedience’ for parents, (Chadda and Deb, 2013) often teens are unable to communicate their true feelings, for fear of offending their parents or breaking the unspoken rule of never criticizing them. They are forced to suppress their feelings, which then come out and manifest in many negative ways. This is a direct cause of the mental health epidemic in Indian teens. Due to the specific nature of Indian parenting as discussed above, it is also quite possible that children begin to keep dual lives - one in which they create a facade of happiness and the other where they develop a genuine resentment for their parents. Parent-teen relationships can be ruined even without the parents realizing that anything is wrong.

Based on these findings, key problem areas have been identified, which can be paid attention to by parents. Parents should attempt to understand their ward by giving them a sense of freedom and trust. The primary connecting thread in the responses of all interviews was how they felt like they did not have any agency in front of their parents. They feel misunderstood and unheard since they are treated as children without any individual personalities. This is a counter-productive approach to take, especially towards teenagers who need their parents’ support to explore the world and confidently navigate their

journey into adulthood. Parents should not unreasonably restrict them from doing the activities they do, talking to people they like, or invade their privacy in any way. Instead of ordering them, forbidding certain activities, they should adopt the path of monitoring, advising, and guiding them. Giving teens an open space to share their feelings, by accepting and recognizing them, will yield far more positive communication than opposing them or constantly threatening them with consequences. A good parent-teen relationship can be established on the thread of *trust and freedom*. Let F decide his own daily routine, let B hang out with friends however long she wants, and make A feel cared for. Let the relationship be child-driven, Gen-Z driven. A *permissive approach* to parenting.

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