

# Parental Psychological Control and Interpersonal Trust in Junior High School Students: Serial Mediating Roles of Shyness and Interpersonal Self-Support

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**Purpose:** Long-term parental psychological control tends to cause adolescents to become oversensitive in interpersonal relationships, and there is a gap in the mechanism of action between parental psychological control and the interpersonal trust of junior high school students. This study intends to analyze the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust in middle school students and explore the sequential mediation role of shyness and interpersonal self-support.

**Methods:** Based on self-determination theory and object-relations theory, this study administered questionnaires to 542 Chinese junior high school students using the Psychological Control Scale, Interpersonal Trust Scale, Shyness Scale, and Interpersonal Self-support Scale. Afterwards, structural equation modelling was used for testing.

**Results:** The findings revealed that (1) parental psychological control significantly and negatively predicted interpersonal trust and that (2) shyness and interpersonal self-support sequentially mediated the association between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that parental psychological control can not only directly influence the interpersonal trust of junior high school students but also indirectly act on interpersonal trust through shyness and interpersonal self-support. This study contributes to an in-depth understanding of the relationship between parental psychological control and the interpersonal trust of junior high school students, which is important for increasing the level of interpersonal trust of junior high school students.

**Keywords:** junior high school students, interpersonal trust, parental psychological control, shyness, interpersonal self-support

## Introduction

Junior high school students are in the adolescent stage, during which their social higher emotions develop rapidly and interpersonal relationships among friends are increasingly important. Blos mentions in his theory of relationships that adolescent individuals are in an important period of second individuation, in which they re-experience a trusting relationship.<sup>1</sup> Interpersonal trust is the foundation of adolescents' psychological growth and development,<sup>2</sup> and a lack of interpersonal trust is not conducive for establishing good interpersonal relationships, thus affecting psychological health.<sup>3</sup> For example, it affects individuals' subjective well-being,<sup>4</sup> happiness,<sup>5</sup> self-harmony,<sup>6</sup> and self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> It is negatively correlated with social anxiety,<sup>8</sup> social avoidance,<sup>9</sup> and interpersonal distress,<sup>10</sup> which affect people's basic psychological quality and mental health.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is essential to study interpersonal trust among adolescents. Interpersonal trust is affected by many factors, and the influence of family factors on interpersonal trust has received the attention of many scholars; current research mainly focuses on family factors such as family environment,<sup>11</sup> family intimacy and parenting style.<sup>12,13</sup> Ecological systems theory states that the family environment is at the innermost level

of individuals' ecosystems and has a long-term, direct impact on individuals.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the influence of family factors on the generation of interpersonal trust cannot be ignored.

Adolescence is a critical period of physical and mental growth in a person's life. Studying the psychology of adolescents helps to understand their inner world, identify and solve potential psychological problems in time, and provide a strong guarantee for their healthy growth. Junior high school students are at the stage of adolescence, and when they enter adolescence, on the one hand, there is a marked increase in parent-child conflicts and disagreements, and a decrease in the level of connection with their parents.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, their sense of adulthood and autonomy develops rapidly, their need for autonomy grows stronger and they want to be free from parental control.<sup>16</sup> At this stage, parental behavioral control gradually decreases, and psychological control begins to gradually increase.<sup>17</sup> Behavioral control depends on parental guidance, supervision and setting rules regarding children's behaviors, providing them with the guidance they need to develop not inhibiting their individualized development.<sup>18</sup> Parental behavioral control does not always involve pressuring children or dictating their behaviors and is considered necessary for the development of social competence and behavioral regulation in adolescents.<sup>19,20</sup> Parental mind control occurs when parents intervene and control their children in an intrusive manner, often through verbal or nonverbal means.<sup>21</sup> Parental behavioral control is often beneficial to children's development, while psychological control is often considered a risk factor affecting adolescent development.<sup>22</sup> Research has mainly demonstrated that parental psychological control triggers a series of internalising and externalising problems in children, with negative effects on their social functioning.<sup>23</sup> In addition, a follow-up study found that parental psychological control positively predicted internalising and externalising problems in adolescents two years later, and that this type of negative parenting can have long-term negative effects on children.<sup>24</sup> Parental denial and rejection affect children's interpersonal trust,<sup>25</sup> yet at this stage few scholars have focused on the impact of parental psychological control on adolescents' interpersonal trust and its mechanisms of action, hindering our understanding of negative family factors. In addition, in the context of the special collectivist culture of the East, Chinese parents exhibit higher levels of psychological control than those in Western countries.<sup>18,26</sup> Thus, whether parental psychological control impacts the development of interpersonal trust among junior high school students in the cultural context of China and the mechanism of the above relationship urgently need to be investigated.

Object-relations theory (OTR) suggests that the relationships between parents and children affect children's development and thus their later interpersonal relationships.<sup>27</sup> With excessive parental psychological control, when children's thoughts or behaviors do not meet their parents' demands, parents undermine their autonomy by withdrawing love and triggering guilt, causing children to give up their ideas to meet their parents' expectations.<sup>28</sup> The development of an individual's need for self-growth becomes based upon meeting the expectations or demands of others, increasing the risk of individual social maladjustment and even exacerbating shyness.<sup>29</sup> In addition, according to self-determination theory, individuals have a basic need for self-actualization, such as autonomy,<sup>30</sup> and prolonged high parental psychological control can hinder the formation and development of their interpersonal self-support.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of Chinese society and culture, which highly emphasize the maintenance of social harmony and interpersonal relationships, shyness should be taken more seriously.<sup>32</sup> Shy individuals have difficulty establishing trust with others in interpersonal interactions.<sup>33</sup> Shy individuals often experience negative emotions and have difficulty emerging from them.<sup>34</sup> Negative emotions are closely related to interpersonal self-support.<sup>35</sup> Individuals with high interpersonal self-support are often trustworthy, and their traits promote the formation of positive evaluations of others, which in turn promotes interpersonal trust.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the role of shyness and interpersonal self-support in the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust also deserves further exploration.

Therefore, to enrich the study of the relationship between parental psychological control and the interpersonal trust of junior high school students in the Chinese cultural context, this study explores the relationship between parental psychological control and the interpersonal trust of Chinese junior high school students and examines the sequential mediating effects of shyness and interpersonal self-support in this relationship to provide inspiration for junior high school students' family education and promote the level of interpersonal trust of junior high school students.

## Literature Review

### Parental Psychological Control and Interpersonal Trust

Psychological control is an intrusive parenting strategy that controls children's emotions and thoughts and limits their self-development and self-expression by triggering feelings of guilt or anxiety and withdrawal of love.<sup>37</sup> It is a parenting behavior that violates children's integrity and individuality,<sup>38</sup> and prolonged exposure to parental psychological control can be detrimental to children's development.<sup>39</sup>

The impact of parental control varies across cultures.<sup>40</sup> In Chinese culture, parents demand absolute obedience from their children, Chinese parents place more emphasis on harsh punishment of their children,<sup>41</sup> love withdrawals are used more frequently than in North American cultures,<sup>42</sup> and the degree of parental control is higher than that in other cultures. Nowadays, with the global cultural intermingling, Chinese parents are gradually giving more attention to the development of their children's autonomy, and behavioural control has been reduced, but the traditional filial piety culture still has an important influence on parents' parenting. The culture of filial piety has always been an important part of life education, and the traditional Chinese concept of filial piety, which emphasises parents' control over their children and children's obedience to their parents, influences to a certain extent the degree and manner of parents' psychological control over their children.<sup>43</sup> Compared to the West, despite the cultural orientation of obedience and respect for authority in traditional Chinese culture and Chinese Confucianism influencing participants' perceptions and acceptability of parental psychological control,<sup>44</sup> many studies based in China have demonstrated that parental psychological control has more negative effects on children. The higher the level of parental psychological control is, the poorer the mental health of adolescents.<sup>45</sup> It can trigger a series of problematic behaviors or adverse reactions in children,<sup>46–48</sup> such as academic anxiety,<sup>49</sup> frustration,<sup>50</sup> social anxiety,<sup>51</sup> and depression.<sup>52</sup> Thus, although there are some differences between Chinese and Western cultures, both parents' intrusive control of their children can cause their children to suffer and have a negative impact, although the extent of the negative impact varies with other factors.<sup>19</sup>

Interpersonal trust is a broad expectation that individuals or groups identify with or expect from others, including the extent to which words, promises, and verbal or written statements can be believed and relied upon.<sup>53</sup> Parents who give their children some autonomy facilitate the development of trust between these children as adolescents and their parents.<sup>54</sup> High parental psychological control is mostly intrusive and dominant, ignoring children's feelings and undermining the development of autonomy, which is not conducive to children's effective interpersonal problem solving<sup>55</sup> and hinders adolescents' natural trajectory of recognizing their lives, increasing the risk of social maladaptation.<sup>18,22</sup> Human relations in Chinese culture emphasize the order of status between the upper and lower levels of the hierarchy, and the way in which interpersonal trust is gained is generally embodied in traditional culture in the vertical relationship of "the order of the young and the old".<sup>56</sup> In Chinese family relationships, parents are the eldest and children are the youngest, so it is interesting to explore the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust both in the context of Chinese culture. Therefore, the impact of parental psychological control on adolescents' interpersonal relationships should not be ignored. In addition, a high intensity of parental psychological control can lead to a decrease in children's trust in their parents.<sup>41</sup> Excessive parental psychological control can make children feel that their parents do not understand their feelings and that they are not respected, which affects the intimate relationship between parents and children, which in turn affects children's development of self-esteem and trust in others.<sup>57</sup> In terms of parenting styles and interpersonal trust, previous research has found that parenting styles influence the development of individual interpersonal trust, with positive parenting styles increasing children's interpersonal trust and negative parenting styles decreasing children's interpersonal trust.<sup>58</sup> Among parenting styles, parental control is one of the most microscopic and fundamental factors.<sup>59</sup> Parental psychological control is often considered a negative parenting style<sup>37,60</sup> and is often associated with maladjustment in adolescents,<sup>61–63</sup> and we predict parental psychological control parenting styles to be detrimental to the development of interpersonal trust in children. If parents act in a coercive and controlling manner toward their children and do not provide timely remedies, children fall into isolation and mistrust.<sup>64</sup>

### Mediating Role of Shyness

Shyness is a tendency to feel judged by others in interpersonal contexts and to feel nervous, worried or embarrassed in the presence of others.<sup>65</sup> Although shyness is often associated with qualities such as modesty and caution, which tend to be valued and encouraged in traditional Chinese culture,<sup>66</sup> the adaptive value of shy behaviors is declining as China

develops.<sup>67</sup> Most Western scholars associate shyness with over parenting, which exacerbates children's shyness.<sup>68–70</sup> Overparenting involves parents excessively intervening and protecting their children.<sup>71</sup> Overparenting is similar to psychological control and involves intrusive interference with children.<sup>68</sup> However, there is little research on parental psychological control and shyness. Object-relations theory suggests that the relationship between parents and children affects children's later interpersonal relationships.<sup>28</sup> The pressure of parental psychological control may be a significant environmental factor influencing the development of shyness in children.<sup>72</sup> Shy behavior is associated with rejection and denial in parental psychological control.<sup>73</sup> Shy individuals are not only more sensitive to negative evaluations from others but also more inclined to believe that others will evaluate them negatively<sup>59</sup> and to subsequently avoid social interaction for fear of negative evaluations from others, which makes it difficult for shy individuals to build trust with others.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, shyness may significantly impact parental psychological control and interpersonal trust.

## Mediating Role of Interpersonal Self-Support

Self-support is a spiritual pursuit that has always been carried out in Chinese culture. Self-support is a positive personality quality valued in traditional Chinese culture,<sup>74</sup> and interpersonal self-support is an important aspect of self-supporting personality.<sup>75</sup> Interpersonal self-support is associated with the personality qualities of independence, initiative, responsibility, flexibility and openness with interpersonal overtones that individuals develop in solving the basic interpersonal problems they encounter on their own.<sup>76</sup> That is, it is the ability to engage in basic interpersonal activities on one's own, take the initiative to interact with others, be loyal and trustworthy to others, deal with problems in interpersonal relationships in a flexible manner, and accommodate others positively.<sup>77</sup> Self-determination theory suggests that the social environment facilitates individuals' social adjustment by supporting the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relationships.<sup>30</sup> The satisfaction and development of basic psychological needs depends on certain environmental factors. The environment provides support for the need for autonomy, and significant others around the individual are key to this source of support; these significant others include parents, whose unconditional care, support, and minimal control over their children help satisfy and develop their children's basic psychological needs.<sup>78,79</sup> In family environments with parental psychological control, when children sacrifice their need for autonomy to avoid punishment or in the hope of parental care or are pressured or coerced by a parent, it can conflict with the development of their sense of autonomy and undermine it.<sup>50</sup> The fulfillment of basic needs can be undermined by controlling environments,<sup>19</sup> and if parental psychological control is present throughout a child's development, the cumulative effect may hinder the formation and development of interpersonal independence.<sup>22,80</sup> Interpersonal self-support is significantly associated with interpersonal trust tendencies and cognitive and behavioral responses to interpersonal trust.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, a positive interpersonal schema is the basic unit of interpersonal self-support, and individuals high in interpersonal self-support can predict interpersonal trust through positive attitudes and evaluations of others.<sup>36</sup> Thus, interpersonal self-support may mediate the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust.

## Sequential Mediation of Shyness and Interpersonal Self-Support

Shy adolescents are less proactive in their interactions with peers, lack the social skills necessary for interaction, and tend to perform poorly in social interaction activities.<sup>82</sup> Shy individuals tend to have negative projections of interpersonal interactions, to be sensitive and suspicious, and to experience shame during interpersonal interactions, and these negative emotions and thought patterns can lead to difficulties in adaptively engaging in social interaction.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, negative emotions are closely related to low interpersonal self-support;<sup>35</sup> thus, excessive shyness may result in low interpersonal self-support. Self-awareness theory suggests that individuals become somewhat aware of their external environments and of themselves and that this awareness forms self-assessments that influence self-regulation.<sup>83</sup> Individuals who are shy have a certain awareness of others and themselves during interpersonal interactions and tend to think that others will have negative evaluations of them, accompanied by their own emotional uneasiness or inhibition,<sup>84</sup> fear of rejection, and thus interpersonal distress, which is an important factor leading to difficulty in dealing with strangers and taking the initiative in meeting new people.<sup>85</sup> Crick and Dodge proposed a reformulated social information-processing model of social adjustment in 1986,<sup>86</sup> in which children, when confronted with social situations, respond to social stimuli through a series of information-processing processes that involve encoding and interpreting the implementation of a response scheme to social information or cues. Shy individuals facing social situations process information more through a series of negative schemas and ultimately fear of being negatively assessed by others in social situations, which in

turn inhibits their social behaviors and social skills.<sup>87,88</sup> According to the above theoretical analyses, over time, shy individuals' interpersonal self-support is not well developed and negatively affects their interpersonal self-support. In summary, the present study predicts shyness and interpersonal self-support to mediate the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust.

Parental psychological control differs significantly by grade and gender,<sup>89</sup> and interpersonal trust differs significantly by gender.<sup>90</sup> There is a significant difference in shyness across grade levels.<sup>46</sup> Parental education is significantly associated with parental psychological control and interpersonal self-support,<sup>22</sup> so in this study, grade level, gender, and father's and mother's educational attainment were controlled for to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust and its mechanism of action.

## Present Study

In summary, this study constructed and tested a model of the serial mediating effect of shyness and interpersonal self-support on the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust based on ecological systems theory, object-relations theory and other theories using junior high school students as research subjects (Figure 1). The research hypotheses were as follows: (1) parental psychological control is negatively correlated with interpersonal trust in middle school students; (2) shyness partially mediates the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust; (3) interpersonal self-support partially mediates the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust; and (4) shyness and interpersonal self-support serially mediate the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust.

## Method

### Participants

A questionnaire was administered to 600 junior high school students in Henan Province, China, using the convenience sampling method. The participants were mostly from rural areas. Junior high school students in grades 7 to 9, aged between 12 and 15 years old, were selected. In order to reduce the error as much as possible, we organised a questionnaire for the subjects at the same time, which was divided into five parts: basic information, the parental psychological control scale, the shyness scale, the interpersonal self-support scale and the interpersonal trust scale. Questionnaires with meaningless random answers, straight-lining, nondifferentiation, meaningless regular choices of answers or specific response styles were excluded,<sup>91</sup> resulting in sixty-eight questionnaires being deleted, yielding 542 valid questionnaires, for an effective rate of 90.3%. Subjects in this study: 259 (47.8%) males and 283 (52.2%) females; 164 (30.3%, 73 males and 91 females) in the seventh grade, 123 (22.7%, 54 males and 69 females) in the eighth grade and 255 (47.0%, 132 males and 123 females) in the ninth grade. The participants in this study are shown in Table 1. There was no significant difference in the distribution of the participants' gender by grade,  $\chi^2(2) = 3.07$ .

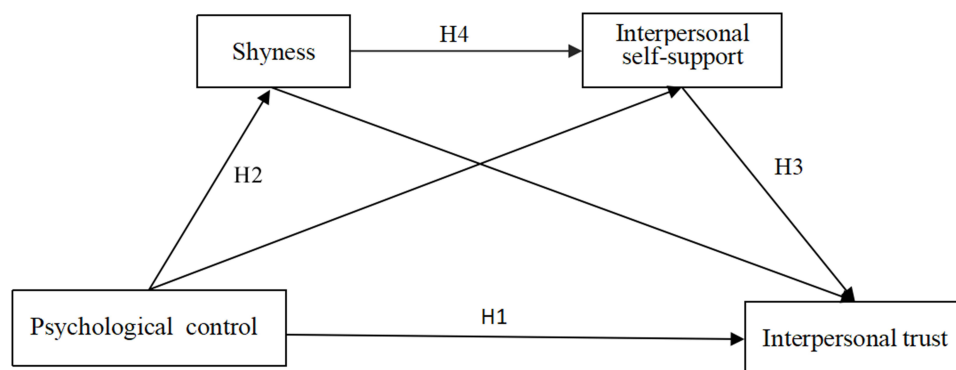


Figure 1 Research Model.



**Table I** Frequency Analysis of Demographic Variables

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	259	47.8%
	Female	283	52.2%
Grade	Seventh grade	164	30.3%
	Eighth grade	123	22.7%
	Ninth grade	255	47.0%
Father's education	Primary school education	32	5.9%
	Junior high school education	193	35.6%
	Secondary/high school education	212	39.1%
	Bachelor's degree or above	105	19.4%
Mother's education	Primary school education	41	7.6%
	Junior high school education	179	33.0%
	Secondary/high school education	212	39.1%
	Bachelor's degree or above	110	20.3%

## Materials

### Psychological Control Scale

This study used the Parental Psychological Control Scale developed by Wang, Pomerantz, and Chen to measure the degree of parental psychological control perceived by adolescents,<sup>18</sup> which was adapted to the Chinese context by studying the effects of parental psychological control on adolescent psychological functioning in various cultural contexts. The 18-question questionnaire includes guilt-triggering (10 questions, eg, My parents tell me that I should feel guilty when I do not meet their expectations; My parents tell me that I am not as good as other kids when I fall short of their expectations) withdrawal of love (5 questions, eg, My parents act cold and unfriendly if I do something they do not like; If I have hurt their feelings, my parents stop talking to me until I please them again) and assertion of authority (3 questions, eg, My parents tell me that what they want me to do is the best for me and I should not question it; My parents will not let me do things with them if I do something they do not like) The three dimensions ask participants to report the extent to which they experienced parental psychological control using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very inconsistent to 5 = very consistent), with higher scores indicating greater parental psychological control. The scale has been shown to have good reliability in Chinese studies,<sup>92</sup> and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the questionnaire in this study was 0.93, indicating good reliability.

### Shyness Scale

This study used the Shyness Scale developed by Cheek and Buss.<sup>65</sup> This questionnaire has 13 questions (eg, "I feel tense when I'm with people I don't know well; I am socially somewhat awkward; I often find it hard to start a conversation"). A 5-point Likert scale (1 = very inconsistent to 5 = very consistent) is used to report the subject's level of shyness. It includes four reverse-scored questions, with higher total scores after reverse scoring indicating higher levels of shyness. The scale has shown to have good reliability in Chinese studies,<sup>93</sup> and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the questionnaire in this study was 0.89, indicating good reliability.

### Interpersonal Self-Support Scale

This study used the Adolescent Interpersonal Self-Support Scale subscale,<sup>76</sup> which consists of 20 questions. It includes four items for each of the following: interpersonal independence (eg, "It's easy to panic when you're talking to strangers alone"), interpersonal responsibility (eg, "Trying to abandon their commitments when they get into trouble"), interpersonal initiative (eg, "When meeting people for the first time, I am usually the first to introduce myself"), interpersonal openness (eg, "I can't stand classmates who have many flaws") and interpersonal flexibility (eg, "I reconcile my opinions when I disagree with others. I can reconcile my views with others"). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very inconsistent to 5 = very consistent). These included thirteen reverse-scored questions, with higher total scores after reverse scoring indicating greater interpersonal

self-support. The scale has shown good reliability in Chinese studies,<sup>94</sup> and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the questionnaire in this study was 0.87, indicating good reliability.

### Interpersonal Trust Scale

The Interpersonal Trust Scale (ITS) was developed by Rotter (1967)<sup>53</sup> to measure the reliability of participants' behaviors, promises and statements to others. There are 25 questions on the scale (eg),

In dealing with strangers, one is better off to be cautious until they have provided evidence that they are trustworthy; Parents and teachers are likely to say what they believe themselves and not just what they think is good for the child to hear; Parents usually can be relied upon to keep their promises.

A 5-point Likert scale is used (1 = disagree completely to 5 = agree completely). It includes thirteen reverse-scored questions, where higher total scores after reverse scoring indicate higher levels of interpersonal trust. The scale has shown to have good reliability in Chinese studies,<sup>95</sup> and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for this questionnaire is 0.85, indicating good questionnaire reliability.

### Procedure

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Henan Normal University, and all participants and their parents signed an informed consent form. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, and the privacy of the participants and the anonymity of the questionnaire were guaranteed during the questionnaire process. The questionnaires were completed and returned on the spot during class time.

### Analyses

In this study, grade level (seventh grade, eighth grade or ninth grade), gender (male or female), and father's and mother's educational attainment (primary school, middle school, junior college/high school, or bachelor's degree and above) were controlled for to prevent their influence on the study.

SPSS 25.0 software was used to statistically analyze the data. We used the mean of all variables, ie, the total score divided by the number of entries, to make comparisons and conduct model tests at the same level. Reliability and validity analyses and common method bias tests were first conducted, followed by independent samples *t* tests and one-way ANOVAs, and then correlation analysis, regression analyses and mediating effects analysis. Mediated effects were analysed by Hayes using model 6 of plug-in version 3.3 during the SPSS macros,<sup>96</sup> and control variables such as grade and gender were added as covariates to the model in the PROCESS plug-in to test the chained mediation model. The mediation effect was tested through repetitive sampling 5000 times, primarily utilizing the bootstrapping method.

As grade, father's education level and mother's education level were categorical variables, this study transformed grade, gender and parent's education level into dummy variables, ie, We placed the fathers (or mothers) with a 9th-grade education a, female students, and those with a bachelor's degree and above in the control group.

### Results

#### Common Method Bias Test

Harman's one-way test<sup>97</sup> was used to test for common method bias. The four-variable scale with a total of 82 entries was assessed with an exploratory factor analysis, and the first common factor explained 15.77% of the variance, which did not reach 40%. Therefore, there is no serious common method bias effect between the variables.

#### Correlation Analysis Between Variables

Analysis of the correlation data shows (see Table 2) that parental psychological control was significantly positively correlated with shyness ( $r = 0.35$ ), significantly negatively correlated with interpersonal self-support ( $r = -0.45$ ) and negatively correlated with interpersonal trust ( $r = -0.44$ ). Shyness was negatively correlated with interpersonal trust ( $r = -0.51$ ) and significantly negatively correlated with interpersonal self-support ( $r = -0.69$ ). Interpersonal self-support was significantly and positively correlated with interpersonal trust ( $r = 0.58$ ).

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis (N=542)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Psychological control	2.27	0.81	1			
1. Shyness	2.82	0.83	0.35**	1		
1. Interpersonal self-support	3.50	0.67	-0.45**	-0.69**	1	
1. Interpersonal trust	3.05	0.58	-0.44**	-0.51**	0.58**	0.36**

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Abbreviation: SD, Standard Deviation.

## A Test of the Chain Mediation Model of Parental Psychological Control and Interpersonal Trust

The process macro program was used to estimate 95% confidence intervals for the mediating effects of shyness and interpersonal self-support in a randomly selected sample of 5000 from the study sample, controlling for grade level and parental education level, to estimate the amount and confidence intervals for the mediating effects of shyness and interpersonal self-support between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust. As shown in Table 2.

Analysis of the mediating effects (Table 3) showed that parental psychological control had a significant positive predictive effect on shyness ( $p < 0.001$ ), and shyness had a significant negative predictive effect on interpersonal trust ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that shyness mediated the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust. Parental psychological control had a significant negative predictive effect on interpersonal self-support ( $p < 0.001$ ), and interpersonal self-support was a significant positive predictor of interpersonal trust ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that interpersonal self-support mediated the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust. Shyness was significantly negatively related to interpersonal self-support ( $p < 0.001$ ), and parental psychological control mediated interpersonal trust through the sequence of shyness and interpersonal self-support. The mediating effect was a negative predictor of interpersonal trust.

The results of the analysis of the mediating effects of shyness and interpersonal self-support on the effect of parental psychological control on interpersonal trust (Table 4 and Figure 2) show that shyness and interpersonal self-support partially mediated the effect of parental psychological control on interpersonal trust, with a mediating effect

**Table 3** Results of the Mediation Model

Variables	Shyness			Interpersonal self-support			Interpersonal trust		
	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t
Gender 1	-0.01	0.01	-0.52	0.001	0.01	0.88	-0.01	0.01	-0.66
Grade 1	0.03	0.08	0.44	-0.05	0.05	-1.09	0.02	0.05	-0.53
Grade 2	-0.53	0.09	-1.98**	-0.04	0.04	-0.77	0.11	0.05	2.16*
FLE 1	0.35	0.17	2.02*	-0.20	0.20	-1.96	0.13	0.10	1.34
FLE 2	0.28	0.12	2.36*	-0.09	0.09	-1.35	0.07	0.07	0.99
FLE 3	0.17	0.10	1.71	-0.05	0.05	-0.83	0.03	0.06	0.48
MLE 1	0.40	0.16	2.56*	0.17	0.17	-0.21	-0.09	0.09	-2.23*
MLE 2	0.23	0.12	2.00*	0.03	0.03	0.43	-0.23	0.07	-3.43**
MLE 3	0.18	0.10	1.85	-0.08	0.08	-1.31	-0.08	0.06	-1.35
Psychological control	0.34	0.04	8.23***	-0.19	0.03	-7.24***	-0.15	0.03	-5.73***
Shyness				-0.49	0.03	-18.74***	-0.11	0.03	-3.38**
Interpersonal self-support							0.31	0.04	7.38***
$R^2$	0.18			0.55			0.42		
F	11.64***			58.06***			32.21***		

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Gender 1 = male, Grade 1 = Grade 7, Grade 2 = Grade 8, FLE(MLE) 1 = primary school, FLE(MLE) 2 = junior high school and FLE(MLE) 3 = secondary/high school.

Abbreviations: FLE, Father's Level of Education; MLE, Mother's Level of Education; SE, Standard Error.



**Table 4** Bootstrap Analyses of Mediating Effects

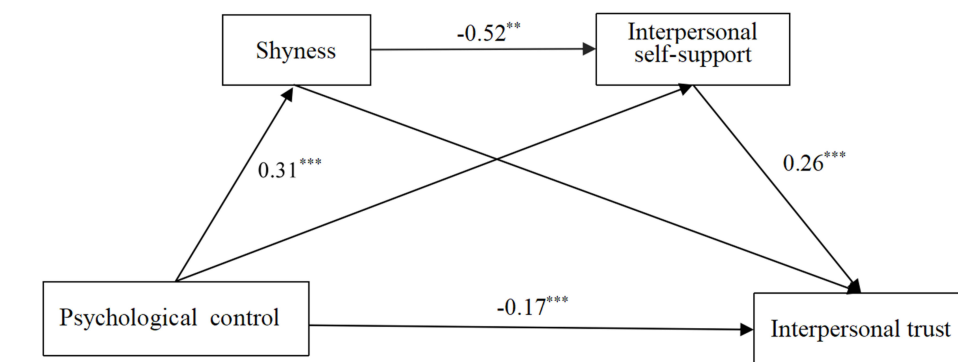
Pathway	Indire Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	The Ratio of Total Effects, %
Total indirect effect	-0.13	0.02	-0.19	-0.11	49.81%
Psychological control→Shyness→Interpersonal trust	-0.04	0.01	-0.07	-0.01	12.42%
Psychological control→Interpersonal self-support→Interpersonal trust	-0.06	0.01	-0.09	-0.04	19.93%
Psychological control→Shyness→Interpersonal self-support→Interpersonal trust	-0.05	0.01	-0.08	-0.03	16.61%

**Abbreviations:** SE, Bootstrap Standard Error; LLCI, lower level of confidence interval; ULCI, upper level of confidence interval.

value of  $-0.13$ , accounting for 41.93% of the total effect of parental psychological control on interpersonal trust ( $-0.31$ ). The mediating effect consisted of indirect effects arising from three pathways: indirect effect 1 ( $-0.04$ ) via parental psychological control → shyness → interpersonal trust pathway; indirect effect 2 ( $-0.06$ ) via parental psychological control → interpersonal self-support → interpersonal trust; and indirect effect 3 ( $-0.05$ ) via parental psychological control → shyness → interpersonal self-support → interpersonal trust. The indirect effects all reached significant levels.

## Discussion

The relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust, as a negative parenting style, has been little explored. This study explored effect of parental psychological control on interpersonal trust as a negative parenting style. The results of the study show that parental psychological control is significantly and negatively related to interpersonal trust. According to self-determination theory,<sup>79</sup> the innate tendency of individuals' psychological growth and development depends on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and if the need for autonomy can be satisfied, individuals can experience a sense of choice and autonomy over their own behaviors and have a high degree of self-determination in their activities,<sup>78</sup> which enables better development of interpersonal trust.<sup>31</sup> However, when parental psychological control is high, parents often intrusively restrict their children's self-development and self-expression, inhibiting their children's autonomy, and their children's self-growth needs are often not met.<sup>98</sup> In addition, excessive parental interference or refusal to deny their children may be a sign of parental mistrust of their children's abilities and a projection of their low interpersonal trust in their children, who acquire a sense of low interpersonal trust during such long-term interpersonal interactions with their parents,<sup>99</sup> thus affecting the development of interpersonal trust. This study provides some insight into parenting, draws attention to negative parenting styles and encourages decreasing the psychological control parents have over their children.



Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Figure 2** The Mediating Effects Mode.

Parental psychological control is significantly and negatively related to interpersonal trust, and shyness mediates the relationship between the two. The findings suggest that the greater the level of parental psychological control is, the higher the level of individual shyness for the following reasons. Children who are intrusively disciplined and have their guilt triggered are prone to negatively evaluate themselves, which leads to higher levels of shyness.<sup>100</sup> In addition, denial, criticism or rejection from parents, in the long run, may lead to a generalized fear of negative evaluation in children, which is an important component of shyness.<sup>73</sup> The results of this study also suggest that shyness has a negative predictive effect on interpersonal trust. Research has found that shy individuals have difficulty building trust with others.<sup>33</sup> This study further explored the relationship between shyness and interpersonal trust. Shyness is a common phenomenon in interpersonal activities, but the higher the psychological control of parents is, the more sensitive and suspicious their children are to social information, which in turn affects the individual's difficulty in establishing interpersonal trust with others.

Using junior high school students, this study found that interpersonal self-support mediates the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust, ie, parental psychological control reduces the level of interpersonal self-support, which in turn has a negative impact on interpersonal trust. An explanation of this is as follows: ecological systems theory<sup>14</sup> suggests that the family is at the innermost level of the ecosystem and has a direct and long-term impact on individuals' development; children with high interpersonal self-support experience more warm, caring parenting, where parents listen to and adopt children's perspectives in their parenting and encourage initiative in problem solving.<sup>101</sup> However, under the negative parenting style of parental psychological control, parents deny their children attention once they fail to meet their expectations, and in the long run, parental psychological control affects all periods of their children's development, with the cumulative effect negatively impacting the formation of interpersonal self-support.<sup>80</sup> This study found that interpersonal self-support is a positive predictor of interpersonal trust and that long-term parental psychological control tends to lead to negative developmental outcomes for individuals and makes them prone to many internalizing and externalizing problems (eg, social maladjustment),<sup>102</sup> particularly in the development of interpersonal self-support, which includes the ability to solve interpersonal problems in interpersonal interactions.<sup>22</sup> The lack of well-developed interpersonal self-support leaves them in a state of low interpersonal self-support, which in turn leads to a low level of interpersonal trust.

Shyness and interpersonal self-support play a sequential mediating role in the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust. Therefore, this study extends the research perspective on interpersonal trust. The reasons for this are as follows: object-relations theory emphasizes that early internal experiences influence later social adjustment and that the relationship between parents and children influences their later interpersonal relationships.<sup>103</sup> When parents have too much psychological control over their children, if the children fail to meet their parents' demands or expectations, the parents will withdraw their love, triggering their children's feelings of guilt, and making their children give up their own ideas. As a result, the individual's need for self-growth develops into meeting the expectations or demands of others, and the individual becomes frequently shy. Individuals with high levels of shyness tend to experience fearful and anxious psychological states during social interactions and avoid interpersonal interactions.<sup>104</sup> The lack of interpersonal interaction, the lack of practice and development of social skills, the inability to be flexible in interpersonal relationships, and the inability to know how to accept others are not conducive to increasing an individual's level of interpersonal self-support. According to social projection theory,<sup>105</sup> individuals with low levels of interpersonal self-support perceive others as untrustworthy.<sup>81</sup> This is one of the major reasons interpersonal trust is affected. Therefore, individuals with low interpersonal self-support have lower levels of interpersonal trust.

In contrast, Chinese parents' parenting style is more controlling than that of parents in the West.<sup>100</sup> Culturally, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes subtlety and introversion, and Chinese parents often do not express love directly. Coupled with the influence of collectivism and Confucianism, there is a greater emphasis on obedience in the lives of their children, and the degree of psychological control is often greater. On the economic front, with economic development and changes in educational philosophy, although the child-rearing and education system has become increasingly similar to the Western system in many parts of China, under the influence of collective culturalism, Chinese parents, especially in economically backward rural areas, still consider the process of child-rearing to be a matter of "love and a deep sense of responsibility" and show a high degree of psychological control.<sup>106,107</sup> In areas where economic development is relatively slow, further education has become important for rural students' future development, which undoubtedly aggravates the psychological control of parents.<sup>108</sup> Based on cultural specificities, this study explored the characteristics of the relationship between parental

psychological control and interpersonal trust among adolescents and its internal mechanisms of action in a Chinese cultural context. Although the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and the extent to which parental control affects children vary across cultures, cross-cultural studies have confirmed that parental control tends to be negatively correlated with adolescent physical and mental health,<sup>109</sup> and that children rejected by their parents are more likely to experience psychological maladjustment and behavioural problems.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, parents in different socio-cultural contexts should still focus on adopting positive parenting styles and reducing parental psychological control.

In addition, the growth and social adjustment processes of young people require they have a certain amount of interpersonal interaction with the individuals around them,<sup>111</sup> and interpersonal trust, as the basis for good interpersonal relationships, is an important factor in the psychological health of junior high school students<sup>9</sup> and an important component of adolescents' psychosocial functioning.<sup>112</sup> On the one hand, parental psychological control interferes with the natural developmental trajectory of adolescents and hinders the acquisition of a sense of autonomy, thus exacerbating the risk of social maladjustment.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, when adolescents display problems of social maladjustment, these manifestations may cause children to fall short of their parents' expectations, and parents may further intensify their discipline by adopting negative parenting styles, such as psychological control, thus creating a vicious circle.<sup>113</sup> This study used junior high school students as the research object to reveal the intrinsic mechanism of parental psychological control affecting the interpersonal trust of junior high school students. Based on the findings, when focusing on adolescents' levels of interpersonal trust, it is also important to consider the effects of parental psychological control, shyness and interpersonal self-support to promote the development of their psychological health.

## Practical Insights

Parental psychological control is not conducive to raising the level of interpersonal trust in junior high school students. Parents should try to adopt a positive parenting style, as opposed to neglecting their children and withdrawing parental love from them when they fail to meet expectations. Parents should try to show more love and care when parenting their junior high school students and reduce their psychological control over their children so that they can experience emotional warmth. For example, parents should focus on creating a positive family atmosphere, building strong emotional ties and trusting relationships with their children, listening to their children's thoughts and feelings, understanding their needs, and respecting their children's individuality and choices. Second, parents should give attention to the characteristics of junior high school students' adolescent development and avoid excessive psychological control. Adolescent junior high school students have a rapidly rising sense of self and oppose their parents' interference and control over them.<sup>16</sup> If parents still exert excessive psychological control over their children at this time, it is likely to trigger rebelliousness in their children and make parents more reluctant to engage in discipline. Therefore, parents should reduce their psychological control over their children, adopt a positive parenting style, and give more care and support to their children. Third, we should give attention to the developmental needs of our children. According to self-determination theory, individuals have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relationships. If parents exert long-term psychological control over their children, it will stifle the development of their children's autonomy and is not conducive to their healthy development.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, in educating their children, parents should often reflect on whether they have psychologically controlling behaviours, reduce unnecessary intervention and guidance, and give their children more space for their own growth, and then give them appropriate guidance when necessary. At the same time, educators should also focus on providing guidance to parents, organising parent training courses or providing counselling services to help parents master positive parenting methods, so as to reduce the negative impact of parental psychological control on children. This study can provide some insight into how parents can parent their children by avoiding negative parenting styles and minimizing the parental psychological control they exert over their children.

Excessive parental psychological control can increase children's level of shyness, and excessive levels of shyness can negatively affect interpersonal trust and be detrimental to building harmonious relationships. It is therefore important for students to acquire the ability to be self-aware. When they become aware that their level of shyness is too high, they should adapt themselves and learn ways to overcome their shyness, such as using positive mental cues, deep breathing and relaxation and avoiding excessive self-focus to keep their shyness at normal levels. In addition, systematic intervention or counseling can help students decrease their shyness.<sup>114</sup> Schools or educators can help shy individuals correct irrational beliefs, adopt positive coping styles and attitudes, acquire or improve social skills, alleviate negative

emotions in social situations, and decrease their shyness through several psychological interventions, such as cognitive restructuring, behavioral therapy, relaxation training, and family counseling.<sup>115,116</sup> In addition, parents should adopt positive parenting styles, minimize psychological control tactics, avoid excessive psychological control,<sup>31</sup> and encourage their children to participate in social interaction activities, exercise their social interaction skills and overcome their shyness.

Excessive parental psychological control can have a negative impact on the level of interpersonal self-support, which in turn affects the level of interpersonal trust. Therefore, we must pay attention to the impact of parental psychological control on adolescents' interpersonal self-support. Improving the level of interpersonal self-support helps establish harmonious interpersonal relationships with others and has a facilitating effect on the socialization of individuals.<sup>76</sup> Schools should focus on developing students' interpersonal self-support. First, schools can conduct regular psychological surveys of students to determine the current status of their interpersonal self-support. In the design of the mental health interpersonal communication curriculum, emphasis should be placed on the development of students' interpersonal self-support to improve their personality development and mental health. Second, students with significant interpersonal problems can be aided in improving their interpersonal self-support through group or individual counseling, using psychological theories and methods to help them improve their interpersonal initiative, flexibility, openness, etc. In addition, schools should focus on quality education for students and on the development of interpersonal self-support qualities in the organization of curricula and activities. In addition, parents have long-term and direct influences on their children. Parents should first have a scientific outlook, encourage their children, increase their children's initiative, guide their children to use scientific and reasonable methods in interpersonal interactions, improve their children's flexibility and ability to solve interpersonal problems independently, and guide their children to be tolerant and able to actively accommodate others.

In terms of institutional support, in 2022, China issued the Five-Year Plan on Guidance for Promoting Family Education (2021–2025), with the overall goal of increasing the number of various types of family education guidance service positions, basically establishing stable, standardized, and professional guidance service teams, perfecting a fair and high-quality family education guidance service system that covers both urban and rural areas and is developed in a balanced manner to improve the mechanism for coordinated parenting in schools, families, and society. It also promotes the high-quality development of family education through the development of family education guidance in schools, the strengthening of family education guidance in communities, and the coordinated use of public service venues for family education guidance. The system is in place to improve the development of positive parenting styles.

In the 1930s, a form of group-based student counselling emerged in the United States. Group counselling is universal, experiential and exploratory in nature.<sup>117</sup> Schools can carry out a variety of group counselling activities for students with a low level of interpersonal trust, taking the improvement of interpersonal trust as the goal of group counselling. During group counselling, through the relaxed and warm atmosphere of the team, individuals with a low level of interpersonal trust can feel a sense of security, reduce their excessive sense of defence and fear in interpersonal interactions, and develop their social skills to improve their level of interpersonal trust. For example, activities such as "Trust Fall" and "Trust Journey" can be created to make participants feel the importance of trust in interpersonal interactions, and the sense of security and positive emotional experience brought by interpersonal trust.<sup>3</sup>

## Limitations and Outlook

There are also several shortcomings in this study. First, all questionnaire measures were self-reported, and there may be some bias effects in the study results. Future research could collect data in a variety of ways, such as observational methods of behavioural observation or behavioural measurements of subjects, and interviews with subjects' parents or teachers, to minimise bias from self-reporting. Second, this study had a cross-sectional design and focused only on junior high school students in early adolescence. The lack of longitudinal studies prevents us from recognising how parental psychological control will affect the development of interpersonal trust in adolescents over time, or from inferring causality. Therefore, future research should adopt longitudinal designs and extend the length of the study to explore the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust throughout adolescence and its influencing factors. The present study found that parental psychological control affects interpersonal trust through shyness and interpersonal self-support, but no

further interventions were conducted; based on the current intervention research on shyness<sup>115</sup> and the call for interventions on interpersonal self-support,<sup>94,118</sup> new intervention protocols to enhance junior high school students' interpersonal trust should be developed in the future. Third, this study explored only parental psychological control, shyness, and the effect of interpersonal self-support on interpersonal trust. Compared to the West, the influence of parental psychological control among Chinese junior high school students may be moderated by other factors. The culture of filial piety is an important component of Chinese ethics and morality, and the Chinese identify filial piety as the norm for the treatment of parents. Filial perceptions not only influence the degree of parental psychological control, but also influence children's perceptions of negative parenting styles.<sup>119</sup> Future research could consider further exploring the influence that filial perceptions play between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust in the context of Chinese culture. Attachment theory provides a framework for the emergence and development of trust,<sup>120</sup> and existing research has found that attachment style type has a significant impact on interpersonal trust,<sup>121</sup> thus, future research should examine attachment type as a boundary condition. Currently, the main self-report scales for measuring adolescent attachment are the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)<sup>122</sup> and the Adolescent Friendship Attachment Scale (AFAS). The influence of attachment type has also been explored through secure attachment initiation experiments.<sup>123,124</sup> Fourth, prolonged parental psychological control affects children's development of positive selves and can increase the risk of low self-esteem.<sup>99</sup> Self-esteem should be considered in future research when studying the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust.

To further deepen the understanding of the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust, future research could explore other mediating mechanisms besides shyness and interpersonal self-support. Peer relationships and school environment, as important influences on adolescents "socialisation, affect individuals" perceptions of interpersonal relationships and levels of trust.<sup>125,126</sup> Future research could explore how peer relationship characteristics such as peer acceptance, friendship quality, and factors in the school environment act as moderating variables to influence the path of parental psychological control on interpersonal trust.

## Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust and explored its underlying mechanisms of action by constructing a sequential mediated effects model using a questionnaire with junior high school students. After controlling for grade level and parental education, the results showed that parental psychological control negatively predicted the level of interpersonal trust among junior high school students. The higher the degree of parental psychological control is, the lower the level of interpersonal trust among junior high school students. Parental psychological control not only directly influenced junior high school students' levels of interpersonal trust but also influenced their levels of interpersonal trust through the sequential mediating effects of shyness and interpersonal self-support.

Although this paper provides additional insights into the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust, it still has some limitations. For example, the cross-sectional design does not allow for good inference of causal relationships between variables; the data collection method is rather homogeneous, relying on self-reported data, etc. Future studies can adopt multiple methods of data collection, design longitudinal follow-up as well as intervention experiments, and explore other potential mediators or moderators to further explain the relationship between parental psychological control and interpersonal trust.

## Data Sharing Statement

The datasets supporting the conclusions of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Ethical Approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Henan Normal University (Approval Code: 2022CJY052; Approval Date: 20220915). Written informed consent was provided by all participants. We also obtained written informed consent from the parents of participants under the age of 18 in this study.



## Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants and their parents included in the study.

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## Disclosure

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest. First author: Hui Zhao.

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