



# Antecedents and Child Quality-of-Life Outcomes of Parental Psychological Control: Observations, Unresolved Issues, and Future Research Directions

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## Abstract

Parental psychological control (PPC) refers to parental attempts to control the child's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through manipulative tactics such as invalidation, shaming, guilt induction, and love withdrawal. Scientific research in this field generally indicates that PPC negatively affects quality-of-life (QOL) outcomes among children and adolescents. To promote individual and family well-being, it is essential to advance our understanding not only of PPC's impact on child QOL outcomes and the underlying pathways, but also of its antecedents. This review aims to summarize research in these two areas, highlighting key observations, conceptual and methodological gaps, inconsistencies in findings, and future research directions.

**Keywords** Parental Psychological Control · Well-Being · Children and Adolescents · Self-Determination Theory · Intergenerational Transmission

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## Introduction

Parental psychological control (PPC) was first defined by Schaefer (1965) as “covert, psychological methods of controlling the child’s activities and behaviors that would not permit the child to develop as an individual apart from the parent” (p. 555). In his conceptualization, “PPC versus autonomy” was one of three dimensions of parental behavior (the other two are “acceptance versus rejection” and “firm versus lax behavioral control”). Schaefer’s seminal work distinguished between PPC (i.e., intrusive and possessive control, and pressuring the child’s autonomous self-development) and parental behavioral control (i.e., parental monitoring and regulation of the child’s actions and behaviors by setting rules, guidelines, and regulations) as two components of parental control. Based on Schaefer’s early conceptualizations, other scholars have further refined the concept of PPC by highlighting its behavioral characteristics and manifestations in terms of intrusive and manipulative parental attempts to dominate a child’s internal psychological world, encompassing their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sense of self (Barber, 1996; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

PPC behavior is characterized by psychological intrusion (i.e., violating the child’s emotional and cognitive boundaries), use of manipulative strategies, and suppression of the child’s psychological autonomy, which are typically manifested in tactics like guilt induction, shaming, love withdrawal, personal attacks or ridicule, invalidation of feelings, and constraining verbal expression. Barber et al. (2012) further refined this conceptualization of PPC by including parental intrusion into children’s and adolescents’ personal domains and disrespect for their individuality through unfavorable comparisons, excessive expectations, and public embarrassment. The primary goals of PPC are to enforce compliance, maintain parental authority, and induce emotional dependence by explicitly or implicitly conveying that the child’s authentic internal experiences or sense of self are unacceptable (Scharf & Goldner, 2018; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

A wide range of theoretical frameworks have been used to explain why parents engage in PPC and how it shapes child development. Among these, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) has become increasingly cited as a meta-theory to understand parent–child dynamics, including both antecedents and consequences of PPC (Costa et al., 2019, 2020; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). SDT posits that all humans have three inherent psychological needs: autonomy (i.e., to make decisions and take action in volitional, self-sufficient ways), competence (i.e., to feel capable of completing tasks, dealing with challenges, and achieving goals), and relatedness (i.e., to feel connected with important others). Satisfaction of these needs is essential for intrinsic motivation, self-worth, social integration, and healthy bonding, which enable individuals to achieve healthy growth and well-being. Conversely, dissatisfaction or frustration with the basic psychological needs impedes individuals’ volitional functioning and leads to feelings of pressure, resistance, inner conflict, inferiority, and alienation, making individuals more vulnerable to dysfunctional behaviors, maladjustment, and psychopathologies (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Based on this theoretical proposition, PPC can be regarded as a parenting style leading to needs frustration in children (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). In fact, many research studies have revealed that PPC interferes with related psychologi-

cal processes essential to healthy child and adolescent development, leading to maladjustment and a decline in quality-of-life (QOL) outcomes across domains, such as physical, social, emotional, and academic domains (see Bradshaw et al. 2025; Chyung et al. 2022; Huang et al. 2026; Li et al. 2026; Pinquart 2017a, b; Salaam and Kyere 2025; Yan et al. 2020 for meta-analyses). Nevertheless, Costa et al. (2020) noted that “less attention has been dedicated to understanding why parents behave in a controlling manner with their children ... parental psychological control researches have [abundantly] focused on the consequences of this practice, neglecting the deepening of the antecedents” (p. 31). Fortunately, they also remarked that “recently there has been a growing interest [in] this aspect that led to the realization of a series of studies on this topic” (p. 31).

## Antecedents of PPC: Theoretical Mechanisms Shaping PPC

According to SDT, parents tend to engage in PPC to pour all their frustration onto children when their needs for autonomy (e.g., a lack of control in their lives), competence (e.g., insufficient parenting efficacy), and/or relatedness (e.g., insecure attachment or bonding with children) are unmet. PPC is considered a way to compensate for parents’ needs rather than attend to children’s needs by transmitting parents’ feelings of pressure and tension to children (Costa et al., 2020). Within this theoretical framework, antecedents of PPC can be further divided into internal factors (e.g., parents’ personal characteristics, such as parents’ developmental history and emotional functioning) and external factors, including child characteristics (e.g., children’s emotional regulation and behaviors) and relational and contextual factors (e.g., marital relationship, economic stress, and social support; Costa et al., 2020; Scharf & Goldner, 2018).

### Internal Factors Shaping PPC

In line with SDT’s proposition that PPC primarily stems from parents’ unmet psychological needs, empirical findings have shown that dissatisfaction or frustration of parents’ psychological needs was positively associated with their PPC (Costa et al., 2019, 2025; Mabbe et al., 2018; van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019). In a similar vein, other factors reflecting parental vulnerabilities or pressure in meeting their basic psychological needs are also major predictors of PPC.

First, internal pressures that drive parents toward PPC can stem from self-imposed stress to succeed within the parental context. Child-based self-worth (i.e., the belief that one’s worth depends on children’s achievements), which serves as an efficient way to maintain self-esteem by getting children to achieve desired outcomes (Kyeong et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2014), is positively associated with PPC. Such contingent self-worth may lead parents to place great emphasis on interpersonal comparisons and external approval, both of which are risk factors for PPC (Mageau et al., 2016). Similarly, parents’ unfavorable upward social comparison with other parents and children may lead to parents’ feelings of envy and, in turn, to intrusive or controlling parenting behaviors (Zong & Hawk, 2021).

Second, parenting skill deficits predispose parents to rely more on PPC. Parents with poorer emotion regulation, lower empathic concern, or lower sensitivity are more prone to use PPC, as they may be less attuned to their children's needs (Costa et al., 2020, 2025). Maladaptive perfectionism also drives parents to project their own unmet aspirations onto their children, leading them to use more PPC (e.g., Dieleman et al., 2020). Parents who perceive themselves as powerless and incompetent may feel pressured and lack personal adaptation in their interactions with their children, and are also more likely to interpret and respond to their children's behaviors negatively, leading to increased reliance on PPC (Scharf & Goldner, 2018; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2015). Research findings have shown that parents with low self-esteem, low parenting self-efficacy, or high levels of negative responses to children tend to use more PPC (Laukkanen et al., 2014; Trecca et al., 2022).

Third, poor parental mental health also reduces parents' effectiveness in attending to their children's needs and changes. It may also limit their parenting skills, leading to their greater reliance on dysfunctional parenting styles, such as PPC (Trang & Yates, 2022). Depressed parents perceived children's performance negatively and felt emotionally overwhelmed in dealing with this challenge (Scharf & Goldner, 2018). Thus, they employed hostile, intrusive, and manipulative behaviors to manage children's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors while also reducing their own stress (Pérez et al., 2021; Soenens et al., 2010; Trang & Yates, 2022). Besides, parents' separation anxiety was positively associated with their PPC (Pérez et al., 2021; Soenens et al., 2006, 2010).

### External Factors Shaping PCC

First, parents may resort to psychological control when traditional discipline strategies are perceived as ineffective, resulting in a cyclical pattern: children's externalizing or internalizing behaviors elicit stricter control, which in turn can exacerbate maladjustment (Kerr & Stattin, 2003; Zhu & Shek, 2020). Besides, parents of children displaying externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression and delinquency) may interpret these behaviors as threats to social acceptance and respond with psychologically controlling behaviors to enforce compliance (Dieleman et al., 2018, 2019). Children's internalizing problems (e.g., social withdrawal) may also elicit PPC, as parents attempt to "correct" perceived social or emotional difficulties of their children (Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2022). Some studies have demonstrated that higher initial levels of internalizing problems and relational aggression in children were associated with later increases in perceived PPC (Lin et al., 2020; Zhu & Shek, 2020).

Second, with rapid social development and increased competition, children's inadequate competence or academic underperformance may prompt parents' worry and concern over their children's development, making them feel compelled to push their children to achieve success, thus intensifying controlling behaviors (Luebbe et al., 2018; Robichaud et al., 2019). Studies have revealed that parents' perceptions of future threats to their children (e.g., scarce resources and unstable economies) increased their engagement in controlling behaviors to protect their children against these threats (Robichaud et al., 2020).

Third, poor mental health in one parent can predict both their own and their partner's ineffective parenting (Sutton et al., 2017). Mothers' needs frustration predicted both maternal and paternal psychological control (Costa et al., 2019); marital hostility, low-quality marital relationships, and interparental conflicts also spilled over into parent-child relationships, heightening parental distress and PPC toward children (Koçak et al., 2017; Pérez et al., 2021). In many families, mothers are the primary caregivers and often place a high value on meeting social expectations of "good parenting" and therefore perform greater parental control than fathers (Leung et al., 2023), and they might also encourage their spouses to adopt similar parenting standards. Meanwhile, fathers may emphasize the importance of raising well-behaved children to enhance family reputation and thus expect their spouses to support these goals (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Despite these potential dynamics within the family, research on dyadic effects between fathers and mothers in the development of PPC remains limited, and findings are inconclusive (Jiang et al., 2020; Leung & Shek, 2016; Leung et al., 2023).

Fourth, other environmental pressures may deplete parents' cognitive, emotional, and social resources, increasing their tendency toward coercive or controlling behaviors (Wuyts et al., 2015, 2017). These include high perceived general stress (e.g., work, personal life, and family), parenting stress (Wang et al., 2023), single motherhood (Laird, 2011), and economic disadvantage (Barber, 1996; Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2022). However, the literature is inconsistent (Shek & Lee, 2007), and it has been noted that a "practically unexplored area is the relation between SES [socioeconomic status] and parenting across cultures" (Hoff & Laursen, 2019, p. 426).

### Study Limitations and Future Directions

The above studies under review suggest that PPC can be viewed as a consequence of pressure and tension in parenting. Parents may use PPC as a rapid socialization strategy when they lack psychological resources and energy, with evidence for two broad types of antecedents (i.e., internal and external pressures). However, several limitations in the existing literature, along with corresponding future research directions, are noted.

First, studies have predominantly focused on proximal predictors, particularly individual characteristics of parents, while failing to consider and integrate distal ones, particularly parental developmental history (Barber et al., 2002; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). This is not desirable because there are some isolated studies showing that parents' adverse childhood experiences and negative parenting behaviors experienced in the family of origin were closely linked to their own parenting strategies (Hughes & Cossar, 2016; Morelli et al., 2021; Weistra et al., 2025). For example, mothers with a history of emotional abuse were rated lower in acceptance and higher in parenting tactics involving psychological control by their children (Zalewski et al., 2013). Sun et al. (2023) also reported that Chinese parents who experienced higher levels of PPC when they were children exerted more PPC over their adolescent children.

Theoretically, parents with histories of psychologically controlling parenting or other adversities (e.g., emotional abuse and neglect) may internalize such experi-

ences through vicarious learning (Dellor et al., 2025; Rothenberg, 2019). They often struggle to develop clear psychological boundaries with their parents, and subsequently with their children (Costa et al., 2019), to possess sufficient parenting competence and self-efficacy (Caldwell et al., 2011; Stige et al., 2025), and to attend to children's needs and form secure and empathic bonds with children (Weistra et al., 2025). In addition, research suggests that PPC can be situational, as parents use PPC more intensively on days when they experience greater distress or frustration (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019). Scholars argued that individuals with unresolved frustrations (e.g., difficult or traumatic childhood experiences) may exhibit trait-like PPC that is stable, whereas others without such vulnerabilities may exert state-like PPC only when facing situational stress above a certain threshold (Scharf & Goldner, 2018). In particular, some parents who are "adult children" may continue to experience PPC from their aging parents, which may serve as a proximal external pressure that likely interacts with childhood experiences. This may be especially the case in Asian contexts (e.g., China), where intergenerational co-parenting is common (Chen et al. 2025a). However, although theoretically insightful, these possibilities have not been systematically investigated.

Second, not all parents who have had difficult or traumatic childhood experiences display high PPC, and only a mild to moderate proportion of parenting characteristics are passed from one generation to the next (Belsky et al., 2009). Resilience theories suggest that individuals can learn and grow from frustrations and adversities (Hays-Grudo & Morris, 2020), which may enable parents to reflect on the long-term negative impact of dysfunctional parenting, hence disrupting the vicious cycle of PPC (Herbell & Bloom, 2020). Unfortunately, resilience factors and processes that may break the chain of intergenerational transmission of PPC remain largely unknown.

Third, most studies have involved only mothers or only mothers and children, leaving the paternal perspective and the dyadic effects between fathers and mothers insufficiently examined. This may be due to the traditional expectation that mothers are the primary caregivers of their children and engage in more parent-child interaction than fathers. However, growing evidence shows that fathers also play a crucial role in children's development (Roopnarine, 2015). As studies have shown interdependence between husbands and wives within the marital and parent-child subsystems using the actor-partner interdependence model (Basili et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2023), future studies will undoubtedly benefit from considering the entire family unit and integrating both parents' roles and perspectives.

Fourth, the majority of studies examined individual characteristics, child characteristics, as well as family, social, and contextual factors as predictors of PPC in a fragmented manner. Very few studies have applied a comprehensive, developmental perspective to evaluate and compare different types of predictors over the long term (Costa et al., 2020). Even fewer PPC studies have considered three-generational dynamics (i.e., grandparents, parents, and adolescent children), which have been increasingly recognized as an emerging social phenomenon around the world (He et al., 2025). As noted by Rothenberg (2019), reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social environments across various life stages jointly inform the continuous development of parenting strategies. Fortunately, recent studies have begun to consider individual, child, and environmental characteristics simultaneously (Pérez

et al., 2021; Trang & Yates, 2022). Hence, it is argued that future studies should adopt a systemic view, a developmental perspective involving grandparents, parents, and children, and advanced analytic methods, such as machine learning approaches (Wang et al., 2024), to evaluate how various antecedents interactively influence the development and change in PPC.

## Impact of PPC on Child and Adolescent QOL

### Consequences of PPC and Mediating Pathways

The scientific literature suggests several consequences of PPC for child and adolescent QOL outcomes. First, suppressing children's independence and forcing them to comply with rigid or excessive parental expectations are likely to foster feelings of inauthenticity, erode self-esteem, and trigger chronic stress among children, as they learn to prioritize parental approval over their own intrinsic motivation. Studies have shown that PPC frustrates adolescents' need for autonomy, triggering reactance and leading to subsequent externalizing and internalizing problems (Geng et al., 2022; Van Petegem et al., 2015). PPC may also make children feel externally pressured rather than self-motivated, resulting in academic disengagement and poorer performance (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005).

Second, children's sense of competence is similarly eroded by persistent criticisms and negative feedback associated with PPC, as they may internalize doubts about their self-worth and, as a result, lack confidence. Studies have demonstrated an association between high PPC and low self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, which in turn are linked to mental health issues and behavioral problems (e.g., Cao et al. 2025a; Li et al. 2023). Furthermore, feelings of inadequacy may lead to fear of failure and avoidance of challenges, limiting opportunities to build confidence or develop new skills (Deneault et al. 2020; Soenens et al. 2008b), instilling a pessimistic worldview and negative self-perceptions, resulting in hopeless attributions that subsequently lead to anxiety symptoms (Schleider et al., 2014).

Third, PPC constitutes conditional regard and parental negativity (e.g., love withdrawal and personal attack), which often involve potential parental rejection and hostility that can damage children's feelings of relatedness and emotional bonds with their parents. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 2008), the disruption of children's emotional safety and secure attachment often results in emotional dysregulation and difficulties in social functioning (Costa et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2024). Children may react by modeling their parents' emotional dysregulation, or with other dysfunctional strategies, such as over-reactivity, inhibition, and escape, fostering anxiety, depression, aggression, and problematic Internet use (e.g., Costa et al., 2025; Deng et al., 2024). Empirically, emotional dysregulation and related factors (e.g., negative attributional style and negative emotional response) have been identified as key pathways linking PPC to adverse developmental outcomes (e.g., Deng et al., 2024; Fu et al., 2025; Schleider et al., 2014).

The above-mentioned negative effects of PPC can also be understood through the lens of family systems theory, which posits that families function as intercon-

nected systems in which individual behaviors and relationships are interdependent (Cox & Paley, 2003). PPC often blurs the line between parent and child roles, creating enmeshment, which makes children struggle with identity formation issues, relational dysfunction, and emotional regulation difficulties (Barber, 2002). In PPC-driven families, control becomes the default mechanism for maintaining authority and relationships, which not only affects children but also distorts the entire family ecosystem, creating self-reinforcing patterns of control, guilt, and emotional insecurity among all family members (Barber, 2002; Hauser Kunz & Grych, 2013). Inherently aligned with this theoretical notion, emerging studies have highlighted bidirectional dynamics between PPC and child behavior (Chen et al. 2025b; Deng et al. 2024; Peng et al. 2024; Tang et al. 2024). Nevertheless, the bidirectional relationships between PPC and child outcomes have not yet been adequately addressed.

To sum up, SDT, attachment theory, and the family systems perspective assert that PPC suppresses and frustrates children's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which further creates maladjustment in social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains (e.g., Costa et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). These perspectives have generated a wealth of research revealing different pathways through which higher PPC is associated with poorer QOL outcomes. Table S1 in the supplementary material provides a brief summary of empirical studies on the possible mediators.

## Moderators

It is noteworthy that the strength of the association between PPC and children's QOL outcomes varies across studies, with some studies even reporting statistically nonsignificant results for specific outcome indicators (Bean et al., 2006; Gao et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024). These observations strongly suggest the need to specify which conditions (i.e., moderators) would strengthen or weaken the effect of PPC on child QOL outcomes. Here, we present a brief overview of the potential moderators in the predictive relationships between PPC and child QOL outcomes (see Table S2 in the supplementary material for a summary).

## Child Age

Many studies have shown that adolescents are susceptible to PPC due to their increasing needs for autonomy and independence. High PPC during adolescence implies parents' failure in attending to children's changing needs, making it especially harmful for adolescents (Scharf & Goldner, 2018). Meta-analyses showed that the associations between PPC and developmental maladjustment (e.g., externalizing and internalizing symptoms) were stronger in adolescents than in children (Li et al. 2026; Pinquart 2017a, b; Salaam and Kyere 2025; Yan et al. 2020). Chyung et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis further revealed a more substantial effect of PPC on anxiety in middle adolescence than in early adolescence. Nevertheless, other studies identified opposite or nonsignificant moderation effects of child age on the association between PPC and child QOL outcomes (Bradshaw et al. 2025; Soenens et al. 2008a). There are two possible explanations for such inconsistent findings. First, the inconsisten-

cies may be due to an imbalance in sample sizes across age groups. For example, Li et al.'s (2026) meta-analysis reviewed 6 studies based on university students and 28 based on adolescents, with no significant difference between the two groups regarding the link between PPC and relational aggression. Moreover, most existing studies are cross-sectional, and findings on long-term effects are less extensive (Bradshaw et al., 2025; Chyung et al., 2022), hence making it difficult to properly assess the effect of developmental change.

## Parent and Child Gender

Most studies on the effects of PPC have focused on mothers or parents in general, with a growing number of studies now differentiating between paternal and maternal effects. Nevertheless, the empirical findings are not conclusive (Bradshaw et al. 2025; Huang et al. 2026; Li et al. 2026; Pinquart 2017a, b; Salaam and Kyere 2025). While some studies showed that mothers' (but not fathers') psychological control significantly predicted child maladjustment (Costa et al., 2019; Shek et al., 2019), others found that paternal psychological control was an equivalent or even a stronger predictor than maternal psychological control (Wang et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2021).

Regarding child gender, mixed findings have also been reported. While some studies suggested that PPC is more harmful for boys than for girls (Jo and Zhang 2014; Soenens et al. 2008b; Sun et al. 2017), others revealed stronger effects among girls (Bradshaw et al., 2025; Schleider et al., 2014). There are also studies indicating minimal adolescent gender differences in the effect of PPC on child outcomes (Chyung et al. 2022; Huang et al. 2026; Li et al. 2026; Peng et al. 2024; Pinquart 2017a; Salaam and Kyere 2025; Yan et al. 2020; Zhu et al. 2026b).

A relatively small number of studies considering both child and parent gender have shown even more complex findings regarding dyadic gender effects. Some studies identified stronger effects in same-gender parent–child dyads (Leung & Shek, 2020; Shek, 2005) and advocated a more vital role for same-gender parent–child dynamics in child development. However, other studies showed that fathers' psychological control had a stronger effect on daughters' adjustment than on sons' (Rogers et al., 2003) or that there are no parental differences (Basili et al. 2021; Zhu et al. 2026b).

The inconclusive results may be attributable to different factors. One possibility is the employment of different outcome measures across studies. For example, Sun et al. (2017) found greater effects of PPC on girls' peer pressure and on boys' peer victimization. In Chyung et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis, mothers' PPC was found to be more influential than fathers' PPC on children's depression, whereas their effects on children's anxiety were almost identical. Second, PPC from fathers and mothers may be interpreted differently by children (Basili et al., 2021). Third, most studies have adopted a global measure of PPC without considering its specific components (e.g., guilt induction and love withdrawal), which may fail to capture nuanced gender differences across different aspects of PPC and their unique implications for child development (Zhu et al. 2026b). Thus, future studies need to differentiate parent–child gender dyads and consider specific dimensions of PPC.

## Child Characteristics

A wide range of child characteristics may also moderate the effects of PPC on child QOL outcomes. Primarily, variations in children's beliefs and interpretations of PPC (e.g., perceptions of parental intention or attribution of meaning) may determine how they respond to PPC, thereby affecting the association between PPC and QOL indicators (Smetana et al., 2021; Soenens et al., 2015). Children displaying more positive attributions toward PPC would experience fewer negative feelings and frustrations, and ultimately be less harmed by PPC (e.g., Cheah et al., 2019; Romm & DiLissio, 2025). Children's positive appraisal of PPC may be related to family- or relationship-oriented values, which make them more willing to comply with parental authority and view parents' behaviors in a more positive light (Dizon & Alampay, 2024). Conversely, adolescents who strongly endorse reciprocal filial piety have been found to be more adversely affected by parents' social comparison shaming as a major form of PPC (Cao et al. 2025b). Moreover, children's psychological characteristics also moderate the effects of PPC. Generally, temperamentally sensitive children are more vulnerable to the negative impact of PPC, whereas resilience factors, such as positive attributes and psychological resources, buffer against its adverse effects (e.g., Geng et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2022).

## Parent-Child Relationship and Contextual Factors

Studies have shown that positive parent-child relationships, characterized by bonding and satisfaction, create a trusting and secure environment that fosters effective socialization, promotes children's emotional security, and enables them to appraise their parents' behaviors more positively (e.g., Acar et al. 2019; Zhu et al. 2023a). Likewise, parental warmth and affection have been identified to reduce the adverse effects of controlling parenting by fostering emotional security (e.g., Romm et al., 2019). Positive parenting (e.g., behavioral control or the absence of the other parent's PPC) and school connectedness have also been found to mitigate PPC's negative effects on adolescents (Gao et al., 2020; Leung & Shek, 2020; Tian et al., 2019).

Contextual factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES), may also moderate the effects of PPC. Low-SES families face more chronic stress and greater social inequality, making parents exhibit heightened PPC while also intensifying its effects on children, as low SES may exacerbate children's vulnerability and feelings of inferiority and exclusion (Fu et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, insignificant or unexpected moderating effects of SES have also been reported (e.g., Bean et al., 2006; Henry et al., 2018). In addition, contextual factors may have interactive effects on children's QOL outcomes. For example, teacher support showed a stronger buffering effect on negative parental factors against externalizing behaviors among adolescents from divorced families (Pan et al., 2025). Taken together, favorable family, school, and community environments are likely to protect children against the adverse effects of PPC, but these factors and their interactions have not been thoroughly investigated.

## Cultural Factors

There is evidence suggesting that the impact of PPC varies across cultures, depending on its alignment with cultural values and social norms (Salaam & Kyere, 2025). Parents in collectivistic societies (e.g., China) tend to be more involved in controlling and managing their children's lives, where PPC tactics may be perceived as normative or well-intentioned, reflecting parental concern rather than hostility, and thus less detrimental (Fang et al., 2022; Rudy et al., 2014). While relationship-oriented parental guilt induction fostering family ties was positively associated with children's self-esteem in Indian families, this type of PPC hindered children's self-esteem in US families (Rudy et al., 2014). In individualistic cultures that prioritize autonomy, these PPC strategies are perceived as intrusive and manipulative, thereby amplifying their adverse effects (Ng & Wang, 2019; Scharf & Goldner, 2018).

Nevertheless, there are also findings supporting the universalist perspective that the negative effects of PPC are similar across cultural contexts (Bradshaw et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2026; Li et al., 2026; Yan et al., 2020). In their meta-analysis, Chung et al. (2022) even identified stronger effects of maternal PPC on children's depression and anxiety in collectivist than in individualist cultures. This finding contrasts with the culturally bound expectation that children from collectivistic societies may view PPC more positively and thus be less affected by it.

However, it should be noted that some of these meta-analyses primarily included Western studies (Bradshaw et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2020), while others included mostly Asian samples (Huang et al., 2026), resulting in unequal representation of studies from different cultural contexts. In addition, most studies have adopted a global measure of PPC, such as the Psychological Control Scale–Youth Self-Report (PCS-YSR), which includes eight items assessing constraints on verbal expression, invalidation of feelings, love withdrawal, and personal attacks (Barber, 1996). Such a measure may capture only a narrow aspect of PPC that is universally hostile and harmful, while overlooking other culturally bound forms (e.g., relational induction) that may be less hostile or non-hostile, thus less harmful in a particular cultural context. As such, cultural differences in the effects of PPC require more nuanced approaches that distinguish between PPC subtypes.

## Study Limitations and Future Directions

Despite extensive empirical evidence supporting theoretical propositions about the negative effects of PPC on children's QOL outcomes, several limitations in existing studies warrant attention.

First, PPC has been long operationalized in a unidimensional manner, typically using a global score derived from a limited number of items (usually no more than 10), such as the most widely cited PCS-YSR (Barber, 1996) and its translated and adapted versions in survey studies (Leung & Shek, 2020; Zhu & Shek, 2020), or coding items in observational or experimental studies (Selçuk et al., 2022; Wentholt et al., 2025). These short scales reflect only selected segments of PPC, overlooking its culturally salient forms (e.g., shaming and guilt induction) that may be central

to collectivistic societies (Zhu et al. 2023b). Progress has been made in advocating PPC's multidimensionality (Barber et al. 2012; Fung and Lau 2012; Wang et al. 2007; Zhu et al. 2026a). Despite these efforts, most existing empirical studies offered unidimensional interpretations of broad PPC, even though some of them used a multidimensional measure (i.e., aggregating different dimensions into a higher-order PPC factor). This pattern is clearly reflected in meta-analyses, in which the effects of broad PPC have been analyzed (Bradshaw et al. 2025; Chyung et al. 2022; Pinquart 2017a; Yan et al. 2020). Recent meta-analyses have begun to test the type of PPC as a potential moderator, with one reporting a significant moderating effect (Huang et al., 2026) and another failing to do so (Li et al., 2026). Therefore, there is a need to better define and operationalize PPC in a multidimensional manner that covers both culturally similar and dissimilar manifestations and to investigate the more nuanced developmental consequences of specific forms of PPC (Cao et al. 2025b; Fang et al. 2022; Zhu et al. 2023b).

Second, most empirical insights primarily concern the manipulative, coercive, and intrusive aspects of PPC (e.g., those measured by the PCS-YSR) without considering the extended PPC domain of parental disrespect (Barber et al., 2012). A unique manifestation of parental disrespect in PPC is parental social comparison shaming, which involves parents unfavorably comparing their children to others (e.g., peers and siblings). A handful of recent studies have supported the view that parental social comparison shaming is a distinct and highly prevalent form of PPC among Chinese parents and has unique implications for child development (Cao et al. 2025b; Fang et al. 2022; Zhu et al. 2023b, 2026b). In particular, its prevalence in China has its roots in traditional Chinese cultural values that have historically endorsed self-improvement, academic success, and conformity, which may be reinforced in today's increasingly competitive social environment. Researchers are encouraged to pay closer attention to the unique impact of parental social comparison shaming and its underlying mechanisms across developmental stages, contexts, and cultures, as well as its developmental implications relative to other forms of PPC.

Third, Xu et al. (2024) highlighted the evolving nature of parenting behaviors in response to sociocultural changes. Specifically, while PPC was correlated with improved child emotion regulation and reduced externalizing problems in the 2013 cohort of Chinese families, the opposite associations were observed in the 2021 cohort, suggesting a possible shift toward more negative impacts of PPC on Chinese adolescents in recent years. In Huang et al.'s (2026) meta-analysis, the effect of PPC on adolescents' problematic Internet use has become increasingly stronger in more recent years. The authors argued that the rapid development of information technologies and their deep integration into daily life have made it easier for adolescents to meet psychological needs and manage emotions via online activities. However, publication year did not show a significant moderating effect on the relationship between PPC and relational aggression, suggesting that PPC plays a robust role in shaping children's social and emotional adjustment over time (Li et al., 2026). These cross-cohort or cross-year comparisons with inconclusive findings cannot disentangle developmental trajectories from temporal societal shifts, leaving open the question of whether PPC's effects change or remain stable beyond broader societal evolution. This underscores the necessity of rigorous longitudinal designs to isolate

how PPC's impact evolves amid dynamic sociocultural contexts. Besides, it is meaningful to extend PPC studies to emerging QOL outcomes, such as digital literacy, AI dependence, technostress, and emotional and cognitive overload.

Fourth, parent–child dynamics are logically bidirectional, and the relationship between PPC and child development is no exception. Meta-analytic studies have shown that existing research is dominated by cross-sectional designs involving adolescents, and there are insufficient longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term reciprocal processes between PPC and child development across domains (Bradshaw et al., 2025; Chyung et al., 2022; Li et al., 2026; Pinquart, 2016; Salaam & Kyere, 2025; Yan et al., 2020). In addition, some scholars have suggested that PPC not only undermines short-term healthy development but also jeopardizes long-term adjustment and persists into adulthood (Bradshaw et al., 2025). Hence, rigorous longitudinal and experimental studies are necessary to elucidate causal effects, underlying mechanisms, and long-term dynamics across developmental stages (Deng et al., 2024). Furthermore, in addition to traditional methodological approaches (e.g., cross-lagged panel models and latent growth curve models), other advanced analytical techniques (e.g., latent change score models and random intercept cross-lagged panel models) can be applied for a better understanding of the bidirectional dynamics between PPC and child development (Chen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

Fifth, despite the adoption of observational or experimental designs in some studies (Selçuk et al., 2022; Wentholt et al., 2025), the overreliance on adolescent reports of PPC (i.e., a single-informant design) remains an issue warranting greater attention. Research has generally shown that the agreement between parents' and children's perceptions of PPC is in the low-to-moderate range (Hou et al., 2020). Adolescents consistently report higher levels of PPC than parents do (Hou et al. 2020; Pinquart 2017b), suggesting that parents may underestimate or rationalize their own controlling behaviors, or children may overemphasize PPC. Meta-analyses have yielded inconsistent findings regarding the moderating effect of reporters of PPC, with some showing significant results (Li et al. 2026; Pinquart 2017a, b; Salaam and Kyere 2025), while others did not (Bradshaw et al., 2025; Pinquart, 2016). These findings underscore the risks of relying on single-informant designs, as exclusive use of children's or parents' reports may inflate or mask the true associations between PPC and child QOL outcomes.

Furthermore, the aforementioned parent–child discrepancies in perceptions of PPC are not merely measurement noise but meaningful phenomena warranting exploration. According to the family systems perspective, such discrepancies may reflect relational tensions, in which parents view control as protective, whereas adolescents perceive it as intrusive. They may also signal a mismatch between the goals and needs of parents and children, where parents prioritize compliance or achievement, while children prioritize autonomy (Hou et al., 2020). Emerging studies have found significant associations between the discrepancies and adolescent maladjustments (e.g., Zheng & Chen, 2025). Nevertheless, nonsignificant findings have also been reported (e.g., Vrolijk et al., 2023), which align with normative developmental perspectives, holding that such discrepancies are a natural developmental phenomenon reflecting adolescents' striving for independence. The related processes (i.e., maladaptive vs. normative) associated with the respective theoretical accounts (family systems vs.

developmental perspectives) are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Instead, they may interact, with the significance of their roles depending on conditions such as the time course (Hou et al., 2020). Nevertheless, longitudinal investigations of parent–child discrepancies in reporting PPC and their associations with children’s QOL outcomes over time and across conditions (e.g., cultures) are rare.

## Conclusion

This review outlines the observations, study limitations, and future research directions for studies examining the antecedents of PPC and its effects on child QOL outcomes. It calls for a conceptual framework that integrates distal and proximal processes grounded in self-determination and family systems theories to understand the antecedents of PPC. The review also elucidates the multifaceted impact of PPC on children’s QOL, synthesizing decades of research to underscore its universal harms, such as eroded autonomy, emotional dysregulation, and strained family dynamics, while highlighting individual and contextual intervening factors and methodological issues. By integrating multiple theories, the review advances our understanding of how PPC disrupts core psychological needs and relational boundaries, while also revealing cultural contingencies, including the possible adaptive reinterpretation of specific forms (e.g., relational induction) in collectivist societies.

The current review suggests a need to consider both cultural similarities and differences in PPC studies, advocates a multidimensional conceptualization of PPC, and emphasizes the bidirectional interplay between parental strategies and child QOL outcomes. Future research may prioritize longitudinal designs to disentangle the bidirectional associations, validate culturally sensitive tools across diverse subgroups, and employ multi-informant methodologies to address reporting biases and emerging issues of parent–child discrepancies. The review calls for a re-conceptualization of “healthy” parental control in modern parenting science, particularly in contexts that value interdependence, and urges policies and programs to mitigate the harms of PPC while honoring cultural diversity, ultimately fostering favorable QOL outcomes among children and family well-being across global contexts.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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