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Relationship between Family Involvement and Delinquent Behaviors among High School Students: Empathy as Mediator

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Abstract

In the rapidly changing social environment, the prevalence of adolescent delinquent behaviors (DB), like rule-breaking, dishonesty, aggression, and internet misuse, have increased steadily in recent years, causing large concerns for educators and policymakers. Family involvement (FI) is a crucial factor in shaping adolescent delinquent behaviors, while empathy (EM) essential in this process. However, the mediating role of EM in the relationship between family involvement and delinquent behaviors among high school students has been less explored. This study was conducted among 500 high school students in Xinzhou City, China, using structured questionnaires and the data was analyzed through partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Results indicate that there is a significant negative relationship between FI and DB ($\beta = -.602$, $n=500$, $p < .001$) and between EM and DB ($\beta = -.494$, $n=500$, $p < .001$), as well as a significant positive relationship between FI and EM ($\beta = .443$, $n=500$, $p < .001$). Additionally, EM partially mediates the relationship between FI and DB. These findings emphasize the importance of family-based interventions and EM development in reducing adolescent delinquency. Future research should explore these dynamics through longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to further validate and generalize the findings.

Keywords: Adolescents, Delinquent Behaviors, Empathy, Family Involvement, High School Students, Mediation.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

Adolescents shape the future of society, with their well-being impacting both personal and national development. In China, high school students (aged 13–18) face social changes, academic pressure, and identity challenges, increasing their risk of DB,

including cheating, internet misuse, bullying, and rule-breaking (Cui & Li 2023). Despite government policies like the Education Modernization 2035 Plan and the Law on the Protection of Minors, delinquency remains prevalent, especially in regions like Xinzhou

City. The family plays a key role in shaping adolescent behavior, with FI, emotional support, and communication influencing moral development (Pérez-Fuentes et al. 2019). However, Chinese families often prioritize academics over emotional engagement, whereas international studies emphasize the protective effects of active FI (Lippold et al. 2018). EM, a crucial personal value, helps reduce delinquency by fostering emotional understanding and prosocial behavior, yet its development may be constrained in Chinese cultures that emphasize conformity over emotional expression. This study examines how FI and EM interact to influence high school students' behavior.

1.2 Research Problem

Adolescent delinquent behaviors, such as rule-breaking, dishonesty, aggression, and internet misuse, remains a growing concern in China's evolving social and educational landscape. Family involvement plays a vital role in shaping behavior, yet research often focuses on general family functioning rather than FI's direct impact on reducing delinquency. While empathy is known to protect against antisocial behaviors, its mediating role between family involvement and delinquent behaviors is understudied, particularly in China. Cultural factors like high academic pressure and authoritarian parenting may uniquely shape these relationships, differing from Western patterns (Gao & Peng, 2024). Existing research relies heavily on Western frameworks, overlooking China's distinct sociocultural context. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the relationship between FI and DB among Chinese high school students, with EM as a mediating factor, aiming to inform culturally relevant family-based interventions and policies.

1.3 Research Questions

The following are the research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between family involvement and delinquent behavior?

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between family involvement and empathy?

RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between empathy and delinquent behavior?

RQ4: Does empathy mediate the relationship between family involvement and delinquent behavior?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a critical stage of rapid physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral changes that shape identity and future development (Csikszentmihalyi 2024). These transformations influence decision-making, relationships, and social behaviors (Best & Ban 2021). Physically, hormonal changes and growth spurts affect self-image and confidence, impacting social interactions and emotional well-being (Nurhaliza et al. 2024). Emotionally, increased sensitivity and mood swings shape stress management and relationships, with poor regulation leading to frustration and aggression (Demkowicz et al. 2023). Cognitively, adolescents develop reasoning skills but struggle with impulse control, increasing risk-taking behaviors (Gauvain & Richert 2016; El Damaty et al. 2022). Socially, peer influence strengthens while family remains a key support system (Mitic et al. 2021). Positive peer relationships enhance resilience, but negative influences may lead to delinquency (Kretschmer 2022). Some adolescents develop self-discipline, while others engage in

delinquency as a response to stress, peer rejection, or academic pressure (Ruiz & Yabut 2024).

2.2 High School Students' Delinquent Behaviors

High school students (aged 13–18) exhibit various delinquent behaviors (DB) influenced by academic stress, peer dynamics, and identity formation (Smyth & Darmody 2021). These behaviors, often persistent, impact academic performance and social interactions. Key forms include rule-breaking, dishonesty, aggression, and internet misuse, shaped by psychological, social, and environmental factors (Cui et al. 2021). Rule-breaking, such as truancy, vandalism, and defiance, often reflects adolescents' desire for autonomy (Remondi et al. 2023). Academic dishonesty, including cheating and plagiarism, arises from high parental and institutional expectations (Cipriano et al. 2023). Aggression, including bullying and verbal abuse, is linked to school climate, family relationships, and peer influence, with lasting effects on both victims and perpetrators. Internet misuse, including excessive gaming, cyberbullying, and social media addiction, negatively affects mental health, impulse control, and academic performance (Shi & Cheung 2024). Digital delinquency increases social isolation and further disrupts adolescent development (Martínez-Hernández & Lloret-Irles 2023).

2.3 Family Involvement and High School Students' Delinquent Behavior

Family involvement is crucial in shaping adolescents' emotional well-being, social interactions, and moral development. As the primary socializing agent, the family provides essential life skills and coping mechanisms. Research shows that parental support, communication, and supervision reduce risky behaviors such as aggression, dishonesty, and substance use, while neglect or inconsistent discipline increases delinquency (Huang et al. 2022; Jia et al. 2021; Luo et al. 2020). High school students (ages 13–18) face academic pressure, peer influence, and identity challenges, making FI even more critical (Jiang et al. 2021). Greater autonomy at this stage can lead to delinquent behaviors (DB) like rule-breaking and internet misuse, especially when parental guidance is lacking (Cui & Li 2023). In China, FI is often focused on academic success, with strict control but limited emotional support, which may lead students to cope through cheating, rule-breaking, or excessive internet use (Xing et al. 2021; Zou et al. 2022). This study examines how FI influences DB in the high-pressure context of Chinese high schools.

2.4 Underpinned Theories

This study is based on four key theories explaining the connections between FI, EM, and DB. Social Control Theory (Hirschi 1969) suggests that strong family bonds, through attachment, commitment, and involvement, reduce delinquency by reinforcing societal norms. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991) explains how FI shapes adolescents' attitudes, perceived social norms, and behavioral control, discouraging delinquent actions. Family Systems Theory (Bowen 1978) highlights the role of family stability and communication in fostering emotional regulation and EM, which are crucial for prosocial decision-making. The Theory of Basic Human Values (Schwartz et al. 2012) positions EM as a core value mediating the effects of FI on DB, motivating adolescents to align with moral and social expectations. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework, showing how FI directly reduces DB and fosters EM as a protective factor against delinquency.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research methodology to investigate the relationships between FI, EM, and DB among high school students in China (Creswell 2023). A cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect data at a single point in time, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and associations among the study variables. The data collected through structured questionnaires were analyzed using Smart PLS 4.0, with descriptive statistics summarizing the data and structural equation modeling (SEM) employed to test the hypothesized relationships among the variables.

3.2 Research Sampling

The sample consisted of 500 students selected from 4032 students in three high schools located in urban, suburban, and rural areas of Xinzhou City. The sample size was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's table, ensuring statistical power and representativeness, with proportional distribution across the three schools: 179 students from School A (urban), 166 students from School B (suburban), and 155 students from School C (rural).

3.3 Research Instruments

The study employed three instruments, all using a five-point Likert Scale. FI was measured with a 7-item scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=.937$) adapted from the McMaster Family Assessment Device, EM was assessed with an 8-item scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=.944$) adapted from the Empathy Assessment Scale, and DB was evaluated with a 17-item scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=.846$) adapted from the Youth Self-Report (YSR), the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), Questionnaire on School Bullying, and the Problematic Internet Use Scale (PIUS-a). All scales demonstrated strong internal consistency, indicating high reliability for assessing the respective constructs.

3.4 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through an online survey administered via Wenjuanxing, a widely used online platform in China. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from relevant educational authorities and institutional review boards. Informed consent was secured from both high school students (aged 13–18) and their legal guardians, with participants informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The survey was distributed through official school communication channels, and students completed the questionnaires in supervised settings to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the responses.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Smart PLS 4 to examine the relationships between FI, EM, and DB. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to assess both direct and indirect effects, providing a comprehensive understanding of how FI influences DB, both independently and through the mediating role of EM.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Relationship between Family Involvement and Delinquent Behavior

Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate the structural equation modeling (SEM) results, revealing a significant negative relationship ($\beta=-.602$, $n=500$, $p<.01$), between FI and DB among high school students. The finding indicates that higher levels of FI are

associated with lower levels of DB. Specifically, for every one-unit increase in FI, there is a corresponding decrease of .602 in DB.

Table 1

The Path Coefficient Value between FI and DB

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	95% Confidence intervals
FI \rightarrow DB	-.602	-.602	.027	22.218	.000	[-.654, -.547]

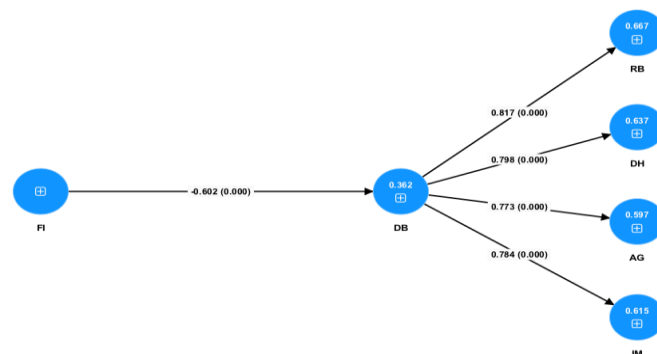


Figure 1 Path Coefficient of the Structural Model between FI and DB

4.2 Relationship between Family Involvement and Empathy

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the structural equation modeling (SEM) results, indicating a significant positive relationship ($\beta=.443$, $n=500$, $p<.01$), between FI and EM among high school students. The finding suggests that higher levels of FI are associated with increased levels of EM. Specifically, a one-unit increase in FI corresponds to a .443 increase in EM.

Table 2

The Path Coefficient Value between FI and EM

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	95% Confidence intervals
FI \rightarrow EM	.443	.447	.035	12.487	.000	[.377, .516]

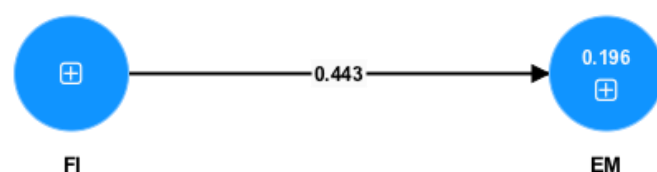


Figure 2 Path Coefficient of the Structural Model between FI and EM

4.3 Relationship between Empathy and Delinquent Behavior

In Table 3, the path coefficient of the relationship between EM and DB was -.494. Figure 3 showed a significant negative relationship ($\beta=-.494$, $n=500$, $p<.01$) between EM and DB. Based on the regression equation calculation, an increase of one in the covariance of EM resulted in a .494 decrease in the slope of the covariance of DB.

Table 3

The Path Coefficient Value between EM and DB

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	95% Confidence intervals
FI -> EM	.443	.447	.035	12.487	.000	[.377, .516]

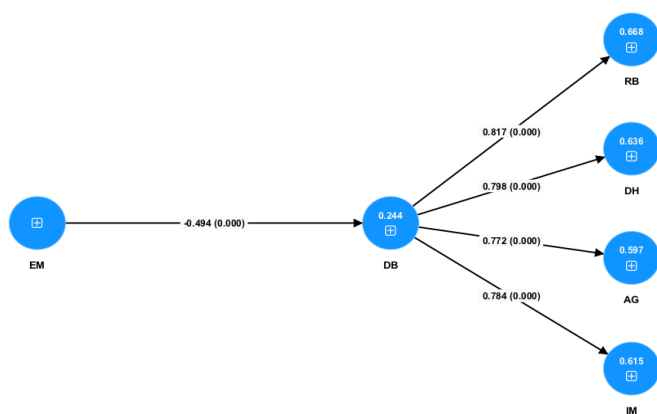


Figure 3 Path Coefficient of the Structural Model between EM and DB

4.4 Empathy Partially Mediate the Relationship between Family Involvement and Delinquent Behavior

Table 4 and Figure 4 revealed that the direct effect of FI on DB was significant ($\beta = -.479$, $t = 13.086$, $p < .01$), the indirect effect of FI on DB through EM was found significant ($\beta = -.126$, $t = 5.984$, $p < .01$). Consequently, this meant that EM partially mediated the influence of FI on DB.

Table 4 Mediating Effects of EM on the Relationship Between FI and DB

Direct effect (FI -> DB)			Indirect effects of FI on DB				
Coefficient	T-value	p-value	Indirect paths	Indirect effects	Point estimate	T-value	p-value
-.479	13.086	.000	FI -> EM -> DB	a*b	-.126	5.984	.000
							BC [2.5%;97.5%]
							[-.168, -.088]

Note: FI=Family Involvement, EM=Empathy, DB=Delinquent Behaviors.

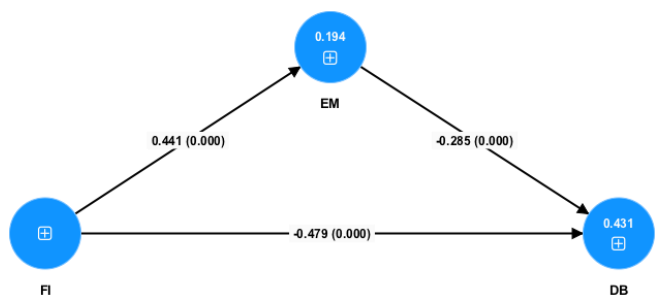


Figure 4 Mediation of Relationship between Family Involvement and Delinquent Behaviors

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Relationship between Family Involvement and Delinquent Behavior

This study found a significant negative relationship between FI and DB among high school students in China. Higher FI, including emotional support, communication, and supervision, was linked to lower rates of rule-breaking, dishonesty, aggression, and internet misuse. These findings align with research showing that active parental involvement reduces delinquency, while limited involvement increases risk (Shek et al. 2022; Wan et al. 2022; Fonseca et al. 2023). The results highlight FI as a key protective

factor. Engaged parents help adolescents develop responsibility, emotional regulation, and moral judgment, reducing their need to seek validation through risky behaviors. Additionally, effective supervision and communication help adolescents navigate peer pressure and make better choices. These findings emphasize the need for family-based interventions to strengthen parental involvement and prevent delinquency.

5.2 Relationship between Family Involvement and Empathy

This study identified a significant positive relationship between family involvement and empathy showed that strong parental involvement enhances adolescents' empathy. These findings support research suggesting that emotionally supportive families promote empathy, prosocial behavior, and emotional regulation (Barragán Martín et al. 2021; Pérez-Fuentes et al. 2019). FI fosters EM by providing a supportive environment where adolescents learn to understand others' emotions. Open communication, emotional warmth, and parental role modeling of empathy encourage adolescents to adopt similar behaviors. These results highlight the importance of FI in fostering emotional and moral development, contributing to ethical decision-making and positive relationships.

5.3 Relationship between Empathy and Delinquent Behaviors

A significant negative relationship was found between EM and DB indicating that higher EM is linked to lower delinquency. This supports prior research showing that empathetic adolescents better understand the consequences of their actions and adhere to social norms (O'Neill 2020; Goering & Mrug 2021). EM development is shaped by family, school, and peer environments. Families that model empathy through emotional support and guidance foster its growth, while schools that promote social-emotional learning further enhance it. Peer influence also plays a role, as adolescents with empathetic friends are more likely to develop prosocial behaviors. Strong EM helps adolescents regulate emotions, resolve conflicts, and resist peer pressure, reducing delinquency. These findings emphasize the role of EM in promoting positive social interactions and preventing antisocial behaviors.

5.4 Mediation Effect of Empathy between Family Involvement and Delinquent Behaviors

This study confirmed that EM partially mediates the relationship between FI and DB. These findings align with research showing that FI reduces delinquency both directly and by fostering EM, which further discourages DB (Peng et al. 2024). Greater parental engagement enhances EM, which then acts as a protective factor against delinquency. The partial mediation suggests that EM continues to develop through family, school, and peer interactions, strengthening its influence over time. However, as EM is still evolving in adolescence, it does not fully mediate the relationship between FI and DB. Differences in parental involvement and the multidimensional nature of EM may also affect its mediating role. These findings highlight the importance of integrating family-based interventions with empathy training programs to effectively reduce delinquency and support adolescent development.

6.0 Conclusion

This study mainly focuses on the critical role of family involvement and empathy in mitigating the delinquent behaviors among high school students. It also emphasizes the urgent need for family-based and school-related interventions. Parental

involvement is strengthened through education, counseling, and school-family collaboration, creating a supportive family environment that helps prevent delinquency. Integrating empathy-building programs, like social-emotional learning (SEL) and peer mentoring, into school curricula can further encourage prosocial behavior. Because peer relationships and digital media play a significant role, a collaborative approach involving families, schools, and communities is essential. Schools and communities should equip parents with practical strategies to foster empathy and encourage positive behavior in adolescents. Future research could investigate other potential mediators, examine long-term outcomes, and explore cultural variations to improve intervention approaches and better support the well-being of young people.

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