Perceived Inter-Parental Conflict, Psychological Distress and Aggression among Adolescents

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

In today's evolving family structures and rising academic demands, adolescents are increasingly exposed to emotional stressors rooted in their home environments. This study explored the association between perceived inter-parental conflict, psychological distress, and aggression among adolescents aged 13 to 17 years. A sample of 200 school-going adolescents was recruited through purposive sampling from various schools in Lahore, Pakistan. Participants completed the Children's Perception of Inter-Parental Conflict Scale, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, and the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 27. Pearson correlation assessed relationships among variables, while the Independent Samples t-test examined gender differences. Mediation analysis evaluated the role of psychological distress as a mediator. Results indicated a significant positive relationship between perceived conflict, psychological distress, and aggression. Males reported higher physical aggression, while females experienced greater psychological distress. The findings highlight the need for culturally informed, school-based interventions to support adolescents affected by family conflict.

Introduction

Adolescence represents one of the most emotionally charged and psychologically vulnerable stages of human development (Jami & Kamal, 2017). As young individuals navigate a period filled with identity exploration, academic responsibilities, and peer interactions, the environment within the home becomes a central influence on their well-being (Steinberg, 2014). This study explores the complex relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict, psychological distress, and aggression in adolescents, specifically within the cultural context of Pakistan. According to Cummings and Davies (2010), adolescence is also a time when sensitivity to family dynamics becomes more pronounced, making it critical to examine how inter-parental conflict affects psychological outcomes. Adolescence is marked by emotional, social, and mental changes. Teenagers begin to form their identities while managing schoolwork, friendships, and the growing need for independence. When they are exposed to frequent parental arguments, tension, or emotional distance, the psychological impact can be intense. Perceived inter-parental conflict refers to how adolescents interpret and respond to their parent's disagreements, whether through yelling, avoidance, or physical altercations. Each adolescent views these situations differently, based on their personal experiences, temperament, and cultural background, making this perception an important focus in psychological research. In cultures like Pakistan's, where family harmony and reputation are highly valued, adolescents are often discouraged from openly expressing concerns about family matters. This expectation to remain silent can

cause internal emotional conflict. Many adolescents internalize feelings of fear, guilt, or confusion, which may later appear as psychological distress or aggressive behavior (Haque et al., 2021; Archer & Coyne, 2005). This mismatch between how they feel and how they are expected to behave can contribute to emotional imbalance.

Psychological distress among adolescents can present as anxiety, sadness, fatigue, or emotional numbness. Kessler et al. (2002) noted that such symptoms often go unnoticed until they begin to interfere with academic performance or social relationships. In Pakistan, academic success is considered a source of family pride and future security. Rehman et al. (2015) observed that adolescents in urban settings often struggle to meet academic expectations while dealing with emotional tension at home. Misra et al. (2000) highlighted that this dual pressure can lead to emotional exhaustion, school disengagement, or mental breakdowns. Aggression may become an outlet for emotional stress in adolescents who lack the tools to cope effectively. It can show up as shouting, fighting, or emotional withdrawal. Buss and Perry (1992) define aggression as behavior intended to harm, often resulting from poor emotional regulation. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory suggests that children adopt behaviors they observe in others. Thus, adolescents who witness unresolved conflict at home may learn to express frustration through aggression in other settings, including school and peer interactions. Adolescents raised in conflict-ridden households often miss out on emotional security, which is essential for healthy development. Emotional safety is the feeling of being supported and understood helps adolescents cope with challenges. Amato and Keith (1991) found that long-term exposure to parental hostility can lead to fear, trust issues, and mood instability. Fincham and Cui (2010) emphasized that such experiences often correlate with declining academic achievement and strained social relationships. McKean and Misra (2000) linked emotional burnout in adolescents to the combined stress of academic pressure and family discord. In many cases, aggression should be viewed not as misbehavior but as a symptom of internal distress. Cultural beliefs play a strong role in shaping how adolescents deal with family conflict. In collectivist cultures such as Pakistan, discussing personal or family issues with outsiders is often discouraged. Shin et al. (2019) found that emotional expression is seen as inappropriate or shameful in many South Asian families, especially for adolescents. Haque et al. (2021) pointed out that stigma around mental health in Pakistani communities prevents many teens from seeking help. Without safe outlets for emotional expression, adolescents may either act out or withdraw socially.

Gender roles further affect how distress is processed. According to Ozdemir and Şagkal (2019), boys are more likely to express distress outwardly through aggression, while girls tend to internalize their feelings, leading to anxiety or sadness. In many Pakistani families, boys are allowed to show anger, while girls are expected to remain composed. Akram (2017) emphasized that these differing expectations shape how adolescents handle stress, often resulting in more visible behavioral issues among boys and silent suffering among girls. The impact of inter-parental conflict does not stop at emotional reactions; it also shapes long-term beliefs about relationships and trust. Cummings and Davies (2010) reported that adolescents raised in high-conflict homes often develop negative views of relationships and may struggle with attachment. Some begin to blame themselves for their parents' issues, leading to low self-esteem or shame. McKean and Misra (2000) found that these emotional responses may appear as academic withdrawal or defiance, often misinterpreted as behavioral problems. Schools are often the first place where signs of distress become visible. Adolescents exposed to frequent family conflict may act out, appear inattentive, or withdraw from school activities. Kitzmann et al. (2003) found a strong connection between family conflict and poor academic or social adjustment. However, in many Pakistani schools, the lack of psychological support leads teachers to use punishment rather than emotional assistance. Fincham and Cui (2010) argued that schools can play a critical role in early intervention if proper mental health resources are available.

To help adolescents facing these challenges, it is essential to develop culturally relevant support systems that involve both families and schools. Western counseling models may not fully apply in South Asian settings. Cummings and Schatz (2012) highlighted that involving both adolescents and their parents in emotional and conflict resolution strategies is more effective. Schools can support this process by offering peer support programs, emotional wellbeing workshops, and counselor-led sessions tailored to local cultural values. Strengthening collaboration between families and educational institutions can create a network of support to address the emotional and behavioral needs of adolescents. Despite increased global interest in adolescent mental health, there is still limited research in Pakistan on how inter-parental conflict, psychological distress, and aggression interact. Many existing findings are based on Western data that may not fully reflect Pakistani adolescents' lived experiences. Shin et al. (2019) stressed the importance of context-specific studies to better understand how conflict, stress, and aggression relate in South Asian cultures. Expanding research in this area can help inform more effective prevention, intervention, and mental health strategies for adolescents across Pakistan.

Hypotheses

- There is likely to be a significant positive relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict and aggression among adolescents.
- There is a significant positive relationship between psychological distress and aggression among adolescents.
- Psychological distress will mediate the relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict and aggression among adolescents.
- Males and females will differ significantly in their scores of inter-parental conflict, psychological distress and aggression.
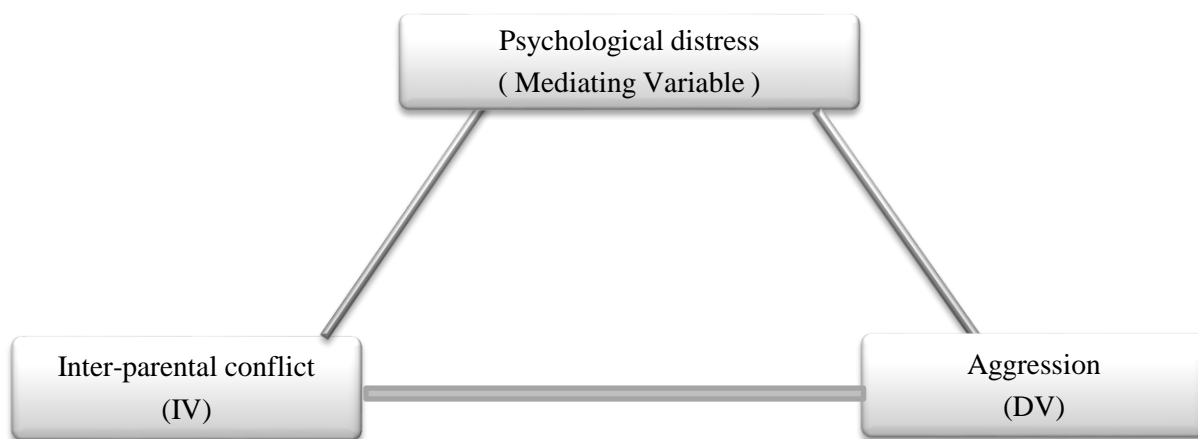
Hypothesized study model

Figure 1

Hypothesized model of inter-parental conflict, psychological distress, and aggression. Lines represent path between factors.

Methodology

The correlational research design was used to study the association between perceived inter-parental conflict, psychological distress, and aggression among adolescents. This method was appropriate to measure the strength and direction of naturally occurring relationships between the variables without involving any manipulation. The sample was 200 school-going adolescents (100 male and 100 female) selected from schools in Lahore using purposive sampling.

Inclusion Criteria

- Between the ages of 13 and 17 years.
- Enrolled in school of Lahore.
- Capable of understanding and responding in Urdu or English.
- Had experienced or witnessed inter-parental conflict.
- Given informed assent and obtained parental or guardian permission.

Exclusion Criteria

- Outside the target age range.
- Diagnosed with serious psychological or developmental disorders.
- Currently undergoing therapy for psychological distress or aggression.
- Inability to understand Urdu or English.

A self-made demographic form was filled by all participants before the study. It included age, gender, family type, health issues, and living situation, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency and Percentages of Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 200)

Variables	f	%
Gender		
Male	100	0.0
Female	100	0.0
Type of Family		
Nuclear	134	7.0
Extended	61	0.5
Single Parent	5	.5
Living Situation		
Both Parents	189	4.5
One Parent with Stepparent	1	.5
Just Mother or Father	2	.0
Another Relative	8	.0

Note. % = percentage, *f* = frequency. *N* = 200

The Children's Perception of Inter-parental Conflict Scale (CPIC) was used to assess how often and how intensely adolescents experience parental conflict, how threatened they feel, and whether they blame themselves. It has 48 items rated on a Likert scale, with higher scores showing more negative perceptions. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) measured emotional distress such as anxiety and depression. It includes 10 items rated from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). Higher scores indicate greater distress. The Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ) assessed aggression through 29 items across four types: physical, verbal, anger, and hostility. Items are rated on a five-point scale, with higher scores showing more aggression. A demographic form collected background details like age, gender, family type, health issues, and living situation to support analysis.

Procedure

Permission was obtained from the Research Committee of Kinnaird College, the original authors of the scales, and relevant school authorities. The English versions of all scales were used. A pilot study confirmed the clarity and suitability of the questionnaires. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on inclusion criteria. After informed consent, they completed the Demographic Form, the Children's Perception of Inter-Parental Conflict Scale, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, and the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire. Each session took about 15–20 minutes. Data was analyzed using SPSS-27.

Ethical Considerations

All the assessment tools used in the study were utilized after obtaining formal permission from their original authors. Prior to data collection, individual consent was taken from each participant, and no one was compelled to take part in the research. Informed consent forms were signed by all participants before the study began. The researcher addressed any questions or concerns raised by participants and ensured they fully understood the purpose and process of the research. Each participant was informed about the study's aims and was given the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality of all participant data were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Statistical Analyses

Data was analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages. Reliability analysis was conducted to assess internal consistency. Pearson correlation was used to examine relationships between variables, and an independent samples t-test was applied to assess gender differences. Mediation analysis was performed to test the mediating role of psychological distress between perceived inter-parental conflict and aggression.

Results

This section presents the statistical analyses used to test the hypotheses. Reliability of the scales was first assessed, followed by descriptive statistics. Pearson's correlation and independent samples t-tests were

conducted to examine relationships and gender differences. Mediation analysis was performed to test the role of psychological distress as a mediator.

Table 2

Psychometric Properties of Study Variables (N = 200)

Variables	k	M	SD	Range	α
1. Conflict Properties	19	37.91	11.05	19-57	.96
2. Threat	12	26.36	24.76	12-36	.86
3. Self-Blame	9	14.65	4.09	9-27	.90
4. CPIC	48	95.81	18.44	48-144	.95
5. K10	10	31.35	5.53	10-50	.72
6. Physical Aggression	9	27.55	6.82	9-45	.85
7. Verbal Aggression	5	16.58	4.08	5-25	.71
8. Anger	7	24.39	5.36	7-35	.69
9. Hostility	8	23.92	6.74	8-40	.77
10. BPAQ	29	92.44	19.85	29-145	.92

Note. CPIC = perceived inter-parental conflict scale; k10 = Kessler psychological distress scale; BPAQ = Buss and Perry aggression questionnaire.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the main study variables, including means, standard deviations, score ranges, reliability (Cronbach's alpha), skewness, and kurtosis. All scales demonstrated acceptable to excellent reliability. The Conflict Properties subscale showed strong reliability and a nearly normal distribution. The Threat and Self-Blame subscales were also reliable, with slightly skewed distributions, suggesting higher perceptions of threat and self-blame among participants. The overall Inter-Parental Conflict score indicated moderate to high conflict exposure with a balanced distribution. The Psychological Distress Scale (K10) showed high distress levels with a left-skewed, peaked distribution. Physical Aggression was more commonly reported at higher levels. Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility were also elevated, with slightly skewed and peaked patterns. The total Aggression score (BPAQ) showed a moderate negative skew, suggesting generally high aggression but fewer extreme scores. Most skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable limits (± 1.96), indicating that the data was approximately normally distributed.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients among Gender, Living Situation, Inter-Parental Conflict, Psychological Distress, and Aggression in Adolescents

Variables	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	200	1.450	0.50		.10	-.06	.0	.20**
2. Living Situation	200	1.153	0.63		—	-.05	.1	.04
3. CPIC	200	98.8144	18.44			.48**	.4	.12
4. K10	200	31.340	5.60				—	.21**
5. BPAQ	200	92.4485	19.85					—

*Note: *p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001; CPIC: inter-parental conflict scale; k10 = Kessler psychological distress scale; BPAQ = Buss and Perry aggression questionnaire.*

Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to assess the relationships among gender, living

situation, inter-parental conflict (CPIC), psychological distress (K10), and aggression (BPAQ). A significant positive correlation was observed between inter-parental conflict and psychological distress ($r = .48$, $p < .01$), and between psychological distress and aggression ($r = .21$, $p < .01$), indicating that adolescents perceiving more parental conflict experience greater psychological distress, which is in turn associated with higher aggression. Additionally, gender showed a significant positive correlation with aggression ($r = .20$, $p < .01$), suggesting differences in aggression across genders. No significant relationships were found involving living situation.

Table 4

Independent Sample t-test showing Gender Differences in Inter-parental Conflict, Psychological Distress and Aggression among Adolescents

Variable	Males		Females				95% CI		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t(df)*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*	Cohen's *d*
1. Sum of Cpic scale	98.89	19.61	98.73	17.30	0.06(198)	0.95	-4.99	5.32	0.02
2. Sum of Psychological distress scale	31.89	5.51	30.79	5.67	1.39(198)	0.17	-0.46	2.66	0.20
3. Sum of Aggression scale	96.43	19.64	88.44	19.34	2.90(198)	0.00 ***	2.55	13.43	0.44

Note: CPIC; inter-parental conflict scale; Males = 100; Females = 100; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Results in Table 4 indicate that gender differences are significant in terms of aggression, with males scoring significantly higher on the aggression scale compared to females. This suggests that males tend to exhibit more aggressive behavior than females. However, gender differences are not significant in terms of psychological distress or the CPIC scale, as the mean differences between males and females on these measures were not statistically significant. These findings suggest that males and females have similar levels of psychological distress and CPIC scale scores.

Table 5

Direct and Indirect Effects of Inter-Parental Conflict on Aggression via Psychological Distress

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable			95% CI	
		β	*P*	*LL*	*UL*
Direct Effects					
Aggression	Inter-parental Conflict	.03	.713	-.14	.20
Psychological Distress	Inter-Parental Conflict	.15***	<.001	.11	.18
Aggression	Psychological Distress	.69*	.016	.13	1.24
Indirect Effect					
Aggression	Inter-Parental Conflict through Psychological Distress	.10	---	.03	.20

Note. N = 200; β = standardized regression coefficient; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

A mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) was conducted to assess whether psychological distress mediates the relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict and aggression

among adolescents (N = 200). Results indicated that inter-parental conflict significantly predicted psychological distress (β = .15, *p* < .001, 95% CI [.11, .18]). However, its direct effect on aggression was not significant (β = .03, *p* = .713, 95% CI [–.14, .20]). Psychological distress significantly predicted aggression (β = .69, *p* = .016, 95% CI [.13, 1.24]). The indirect effect of inter-parental conflict on aggression through psychological distress was significant (β = .10, 95% CI [.03, .20]), indicating that psychological distress mediates this relationship. These findings suggest that inter-parental conflict contributes to aggression indirectly via increased psychological distress.

Figure 2

Emerging mediation model showing Psychological Distress as a mediator between Inter-Parental Conflict and Aggression
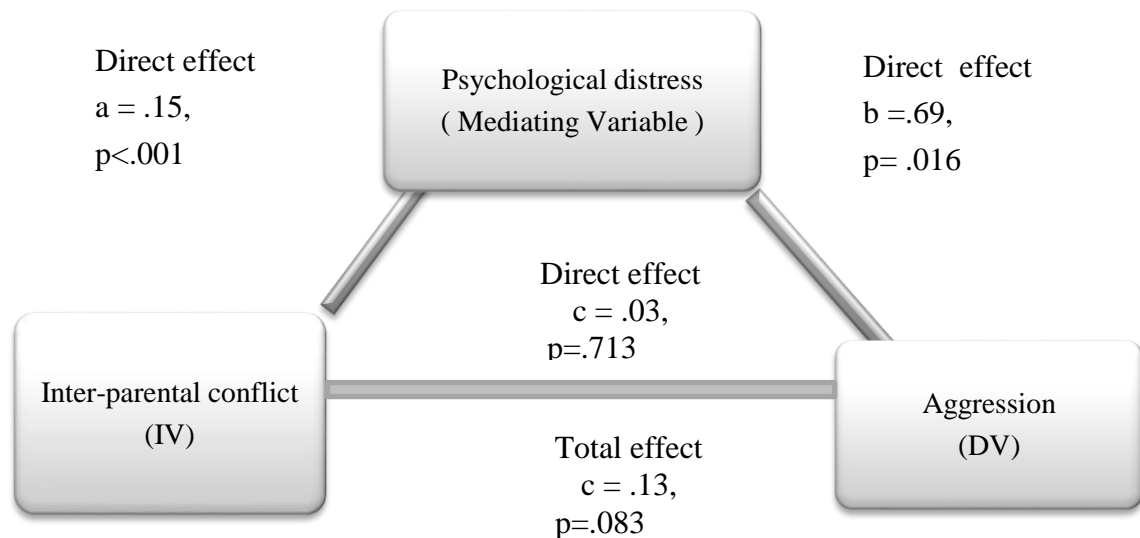
Inter-parental conflict did not directly predict aggression (β = 0.03, p = 0.713, LL = -0.14, UL = 0.20). However, it significantly predicted psychological distress (β = 0.15, p < .001, LL = 0.11, UL = 0.18), which in turn significantly predicted aggression (β = 0.69, p = 0.016, LL = 0.13, UL = 1.24). The indirect effect of inter-parental conflict on aggression through psychological distress was significant (β = 0.10, LL = 0.03, UL = 0.20), indicating mediation.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict, psychological distress, and aggression among adolescents. While the direct association between perceived inter-parental conflict and aggression was not statistically significant, an important indirect relationship was found through psychological distress. This suggests that adolescents who witness frequent or intense parental conflict may not immediately respond with aggressive behavior. However, the emotional strain resulting from such conflict can increase psychological distress, which then contributes to aggressive tendencies. These results are consistent with earlier research by Olatunji and Idemudia (2021), who found that the frequency and intensity of parental conflict were positively associated with aggression in Nigerian adolescents. They concluded that psychological distress served as a key mechanism in this relationship. In a similar context, Chaudhry and Shabbir (2018) reported that Pakistani adolescents who perceived high levels of parental conflict demonstrated elevated aggression, particularly among those with lower levels of optimism. These findings indicate that emotional vulnerability plays an important role in determining how adolescents respond to conflict within the home.

Emotional instability has long been recognized as a factor influencing aggressive behavior in adolescents. Zaman et al. (2017) emphasized that exposure to family conflict disrupts emotional regulation, making adolescents more likely to experience mood swings and behavioral outbursts. Their study linked family discord to increased emotional sensitivity, which was further associated with verbal and physical forms of aggression. Similarly, Javed et al. (2018) found that adolescents exposed to inter-parental conflict frequently engaged in relational aggression, such as gossiping and social exclusion. These behaviors may reflect an indirect way of coping with emotional turmoil when direct expression of distress is socially discouraged. The accumulation of emotional strain without adequate emotional outlets or support systems can lead adolescents to express their distress in unhealthy and socially harmful ways.

In addition to the indirect link, a strong positive relationship was found between psychological distress and various forms of aggression. Among these, verbal aggression showed the most significant association. This finding supports the idea that adolescents experiencing high levels of emotional distress may struggle to regulate their feelings and are more prone to reacting with hostility or confrontational behavior. Ali et al. (2018) explained that emotional distress resulting from unresolved family issues and lack of support often manifests in external behaviors such as aggression. They noted that adolescents who live in emotionally unstable home environments are at greater risk of developing aggressive tendencies, especially when mental health support is lacking. This observation was also supported by Iqbal and Jami (2022), who found a direct and statistically significant link between psychological distress and aggression in school-going adolescents in Lahore. Their research revealed that adolescents without effective coping mechanisms were more likely to express their inner distress through physical and verbal aggression, especially in social settings.

Mediation analysis further demonstrated that psychological distress played a significant role in explaining how perceived inter-parental conflict contributes to aggression. Although there was no significant direct association between inter-parental conflict and aggression, conflict exposure did significantly predict psychological distress, which in turn was strongly related to aggression. These results suggest that the emotional impact of conflict is more influential than the conflict itself in determining adolescent behavior. Rehman and Iqbal (2015) provided similar findings in their study of Pakistani adolescents, reporting that exposure to ongoing parental conflict increased emotional distress, which was strongly correlated with physical and verbal aggression. This highlights the need to focus on the emotional experiences of adolescents in conflict-affected families, as unresolved emotional responses may develop into long-term behavioral problems if left unaddressed.

The emotional toll of family conflict becomes more concerning in contexts where adolescents lack coping strategies or mental health support. Javed and Bhatti (2019) found that adolescents who faced high levels of family stress were more likely to become aggressive, especially when they lacked the resources to manage their emotions effectively. This emphasizes the importance of equipping adolescents with emotional regulation skills to buffer against the psychological effects of family tension. Shafiq and Khan (2020) similarly explored how psychological distress influenced adolescent behavior in Lahore. They observed that adolescents experiencing heightened emotional strain were more likely to display anger and engage in aggressive acts, particularly in their interactions with peers. Their findings confirm that emotional dysregulation, when intensified by family conflict, significantly raises the risk of aggressive behavior.

In the Pakistani cultural context, emotional expression is often restricted, particularly among adolescents. This restriction can result in unprocessed emotional distress, which may ultimately manifest as aggression. Cultural norms frequently dictate that adolescents, especially males, express distress through external behaviors like aggression, while females are more likely to internalize their emotional struggles. Despite these patterns, Rehman and Iqbal (2015) and Iqbal and Jami (2022) emphasized that both genders experience similar levels of emotional distress in response to family conflict, although the form of expression may differ. These findings underline the importance of developing culturally sensitive interventions that help adolescents recognize and regulate their emotions in constructive ways. Mental health programs in schools and communities should prioritize stress management, emotional awareness, and conflict resolution to support adolescents navigating emotionally challenging home environments. Overall, the study highlights psychological distress as a core mechanism linking perceived inter-parental conflict to aggression. Addressing the emotional consequences of family conflict, particularly in adolescence, may prevent the development of aggressive tendencies and support healthier emotional development. Strengthening emotional regulation skills and providing access to support systems can empower adolescents to manage distress and reduce the long-term behavioral consequences of inter-parental conflict.

Conclusion

This study contributes valuable knowledge about the psychological pathways through which perceived inter-parental conflict influences aggression in adolescents. While the direct relationship between conflict and aggression was not significant, psychological distress emerged as a key mediating variable. These findings are consistent with previous research and underscore the importance of addressing emotional distress in adolescents exposed to family conflict. The gender differences identified in the expression of aggression suggest the need for gender-responsive mental health strategies. Overall, the results support the implementation of school-based and family-centered interventions that focus on emotional development and conflict resolution. Promoting mental well-being among adolescents in culturally sensitive ways can reduce the harmful effects of inter-parental conflict and support healthier behavioral outcomes.

Limitations

The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for targeted research, limits the generalizability of the findings due to potential selection bias. Self-reported data may have been affected by social desirability or inaccurate recall. Since data were collected only from schools in Lahore, the results may not reflect the experiences of adolescents from other cities or rural areas in Pakistan. The study also did not account for external variables such as peer influence, academic stress, or socioeconomic factors that could impact aggression and psychological distress. Additionally, the focus on adolescents aged 13 to 17 years excludes younger and older individuals who may also be affected by inter-parental conflict in different ways.

Future Implications

➢ Future research should use longitudinal designs to examine how inter-parental conflict, psychological distress, and aggression interact over time to better understand cause-and-effect relationships.

➢ Including adolescents from diverse regions and socio-economic backgrounds across Pakistan will enhance the generalizability and cultural relevance of future findings.

➢ Culturally appropriate intervention programs should be developed to strengthen emotional resilience and coping skills among adolescents affected by family conflict.

➢ School-based mental health initiatives focusing on emotional regulation, stress management, and conflict resolution are essential to prevent aggression linked to psychological distress.

➢ Educating parents about the emotional impact of their conflicts on children can promote healthier family communication and reduce distress in adolescents.

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