Systematic Literature Review

The Emotional Proximity Paradox: Why Children Are More Open to Others Than Their Parents

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ABSTRACT

The paradox of emotional proximity in modern family dynamics occurs when children are more open to external parties than their own parents. This research aims to synthesize the factors underlying this phenomenon and its implications for family communication in the digital era. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA protocol, systematic searches were conducted on Scopus, SINTA, and Google Scholar databases (2000–2025). From 537 identified records, 7 primary studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic synthesis. Results show that child openness is primarily determined by perceived relational safety rather than interaction frequency. Authoritarian parenting and emotional suppression were found as main inhibiting factors, while peers and digital platforms provide a more democratic space for identity negotiation. The synthesis reveals that children manage privacy boundaries selectively, where boundaries toward parents become stricter as a form of self-protection. This research suggests a parenting transition towards emotion coaching, prioritizing empathy and validation over mere technical problem-solving to overcome the paradox.

Keywords: *Communication Psychology; Emotional Closeness; Family Communication; Parenting Patterns*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between parents and children is widely regarded as the foundation of emotional security. Attachment theory emphasizes the role of caregivers as the primary source of emotional support for children (Bowlby, 1988).[1] However, contemporary research shows a strengthening paradoxical trend: children and adolescents are actually more frequently disclosing their emotional experiences to peers, teachers, or through digital platforms compared to their own parents.[2,3] This phenomenon, conceptually referred to as the paradox of emotional proximity, is defined as a condition where children have structural physical proximity to parents, yet functionally there are psychological barriers that redirect emotional openness to external parties. This is exacerbated by advancements in digital technology that allow adolescents broad access to information and communities that support their self-expression more openly than interactions with parents. Access to digital technology worsens this paradox by providing virtual communities that offer instant validation without the risk of social judgment often felt within the household. Although previous literature has discussed emotional openness, most research remains fragmentary and fails to integrate how digital mediation changes the threshold of emotional risk in children's dynamics.

For instance, a longitudinal study in 2023 found that adolescents perceive peers more as

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individuals who better understand their emotional struggles, whereas parents are more frequently seen as problem-solvers who tend to dismiss or overreact to the child's feelings (Wei et al., 2023).[4] The implication of these findings is a gap between the child's need to share emotional experiences and the parents' expectations in providing support. Consequently, many children choose to rely on external sources of support such as social media, teachers, or even AI-based technologies that are perceived as more neutral and non-judgmental (Uhls et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2022).[5,6]

Changes in patterns of children's openness to parents can be understood through several communication theory frameworks. One relevant theory is Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), which states that the depth and breadth of a person's openness to others is influenced by the trust and social risk perceived within a relationship. However, this theory is still based on traditional communication models that do not fully consider the impact of digital technology in shaping the dynamics of trust between children and parents. Therefore, Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002) is more appropriate for understanding how children manage their private information in relationships with parents and external parties. Additionally, Relational Dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) can also be used to understand how children balance the need for openness with the desire to maintain their autonomy from parental control.[7,8,9]

Although many studies have discussed emotional openness in parent-child relationships, there are still several gaps in the literature that need further investigation. Most research only measures emotional openness based on communication frequency without considering children's subjective interpretation of the emotional risk associated with sharing private information with parents (Rudi & Dworkin, 2021).[10] Dominant cultural narratives still tend to view children's openness to parties outside the family as a form of deficit, without considering that such actions could be a child's adaptation strategy in facing power imbalances within family relationships (Rogers et al., 2023).[11]

Given the increasingly rapid social and technological changes affecting family relationship dynamics, it is important to understand how today's children and adolescents manage their emotional openness. This research will not only provide insights for academics but also for practitioners such as family therapists, educators, and policymakers in developing strategies to enhance more effective intergenerational communication. For example, intervention programs based on emotion coaching (Hajal et al., 2023) can be better tailored to children's needs if the factors hindering their openness to parents can be understood in more depth. Furthermore, this research is also relevant regarding ethics and child protection, given that an increasing number of children choose to share their private information with AI-based technologies or social media platforms that carry high risks to data security and privacy.[12]

Further, a debate has emerged regarding the role of modern parenting approaches such as gentle parenting. Gentle parenting is defined as a parenting style based on empathy, respect, and the setting of healthy boundaries without elements of coercion. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding whether this approach is effective in overcoming barriers to openness in the digital era or instead creates new emotional expectations that prompt children to continue hiding their vulnerable sides. Dominant cultural narratives still consider children's openness to outside parties as a form of family "deficit," without considering that it could be a child's adaptation strategy in dealing with power imbalances within family relationships (Rogers et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aims to explore how children weigh emotional risks in sharing information, and to provide a new theoretical synthesis regarding the dynamics of trust between children and parents amidst rapid technological changes.[11]

METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses) protocol. The use of SLR was chosen to ensure that the evidence evaluation process is conducted critically, systematically, and transparently to provide a deep understanding of the quality of the available literature (Pati & Lorusso, 2017).[13] The literature search was conducted on three main databases: Scopus, SINTA, and Google Scholar, with a publication period ranging from 2000 to 2025. The keywords used in the search strategy were combinations of 'child openness', 'family disclosure', and 'parent-child communication' using Boolean operators (AND/OR).

The article selection process was carried out through four main stages: identification of duplicate articles, screening of titles and abstracts, full-text assessment, and determination of the final articles based on inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria included: (a) articles from primary sources; (b)

focus on parent-child relationships; (c) discussion of aspects of openness or parenting (gentle parenting); and (d) publication in reputable scientific journals. From a total of 537 articles captured in the initial stage, a manual elimination was performed on irrelevant and inaccessible articles, resulting in 7 selected studies which were then analyzed thematically to produce an integrative qualitative synthesis.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

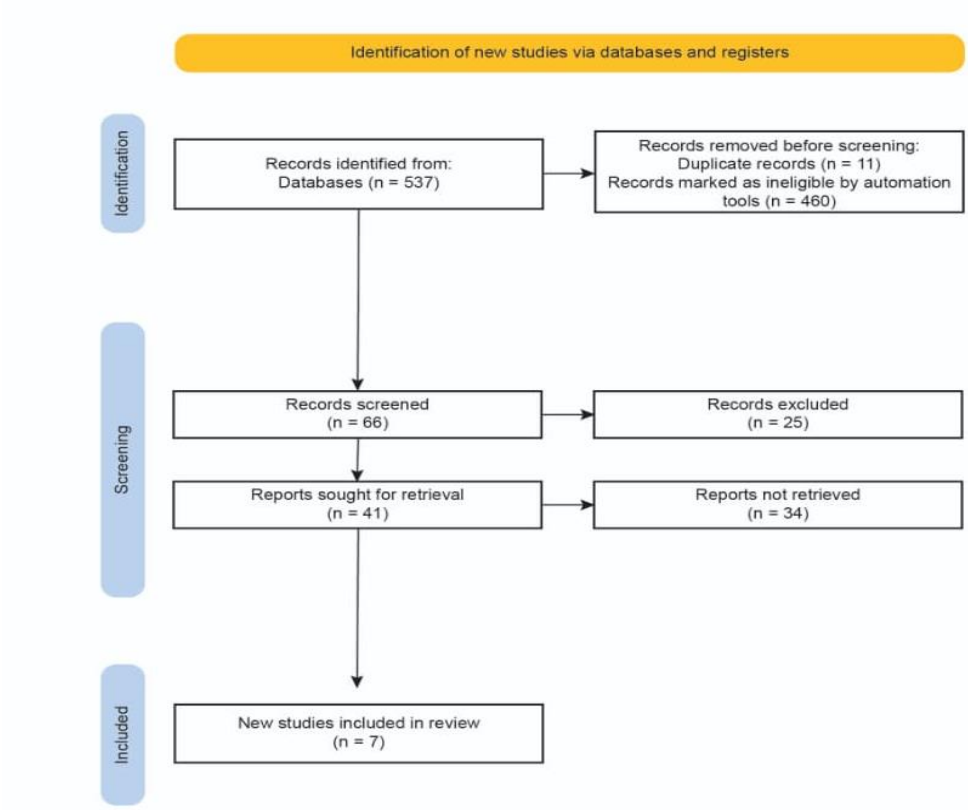

Figure 1. Systematic Review Flow

To obtain suitable articles, the researcher used specific keywords across various database sources. The selection of keywords aimed for the study to obtain information on parent-child relationships, especially regarding child openness toward parents. In relation to this, the researcher established specific keywords as a search strategy to obtain data sources related to the research topic. The researcher set

variations of keywords (‘CHILD OPENNESS’ OR ‘FAMILY DISCLOSURE’ AND ‘PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION’) to reach all research related to the researcher's topic. Furthermore, the researcher applied these keywords to the Scopus, SINTA, and Publish or Perish research databases. From the search process of these three database sources, the researcher obtained a total of 537 studies related to the topic being researched.

Article Selection and Elimination Criteria

Article selection and elimination criteria represent one of the stages in performing a scoping review process. This research selection or filtering process was conducted so that the researcher could filter and set aside research that was less relevant to the research topic. The process began with an initial selection stage, namely sorting research based on article titles and research abstracts. The selection process refers to the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021).[14] In the PRISMA selection process, several steps were taken: (1) the first step is identification, namely selecting based on duplicate research; (2) the second step is reviewing research titles and abstracts or title and abstract screening, where research that has no correlation or has a different focus from the search keywords is not included and not continued as a research database; (3) the

third step is the process of retrieval of all selected articles or journals (obtaining the full text); (4) finally, research that does not meet the inclusion criteria will be selected to obtain the number of research results that truly align with the research objectives.

In the initial stage of screening through the established keywords, a total of 537 articles were captured. The researcher then used an identification process, namely reviewing the entirety of the research to mark whether there were duplicate studies or not. The identification process found 11 duplicate studies. The next step was the screening process with tools. From 526 studies, 460 studies were eliminated. The third step, selecting from 66 studies, involved a manual re-selection where 25 articles were found to be unsuitable, leaving 41 articles. This elimination process set aside 34 articles that turned out to be inaccessible for free in full PDF format. From this exclusion process, the researcher obtained a total of 7 studies that matched the research topic. The selection process diagram is displayed in Table 1.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Tabel 1. Research Results on Openness and/or Interpersonal Relationships between Child and Parent

NO	TITLE	AUTHOR	YEAR	METHODS	RESULTS
1	Children's reasoning with peers and parents about moral dilemmas	Mammen, M., Köymen, B., & Tomasello, M.[15]	2019	Experimental	The results suggest that with mothers moral judgments are experienced mostly as *non-negotiable* dictums, but with co-equal peers they are experienced more as personal beliefs that can be actively negotiated.
2	Clear Self, Better Relationships Adolescents Self Concept Clarity and Relationship Quality With Parents and Peers Across 5 Years	Becht, A. I., Nelemans, S. A., Dijk, M. P. A., Branje, S. J. T., Van Lier, P. A. C., Denissen, J. J. A., & Meeus, W. H. J. [16]	2017	Observational Cohort	In all, 497 adolescents (57% boys) reported on their SCC and all informants (i.e., adolescents, both parents, and *adolescents'* best friends) reported on support and negative interaction. Within-person cross lagged analysis provided systematic evidence for both parent effects and child effects, with the direction of effects being strongly dependent on the relational context. For example, higher maternal support predicted higher adolescent SCC, supporting a parent effects perspective, whereas higher SCC predicted lower paternal negative interaction, supporting a child effects perspective. Peer effects on adolescent SCC were not consistently found across adolescent and best friend reports.
3	Not in Front of the Kids Effects of Parental Suppression on Socialization	Karnilowicz HR, Waters SF, Mendes WB.[17]	2019	Experimental	We found that suppression decreased parents' observed positive mood, responsiveness, warmth, and

NO	TITLE	AUTHOR	YEAR	METHODS	RESULTS
	Behaviors During Cooperative Parent Child Interactions				guidance, as well as children's observed positive mood, responsiveness, and warmth, and decreased the overall dyadic interaction quality. However, parent sex played a significant role in moderating these effects. Fathers in the suppression condition were less responsive and warm than control fathers, though children interacting with their fathers did not exhibit decrements in responsiveness or warmth. In contrast, children of suppressing mothers appeared less warm than children of mothers in the control condition, though suppressing mothers did not exhibit decrements in their observed warmth or responsiveness relative to control mothers. Taken together, these findings suggest that the desire to hide one's feelings from one's children may have unwanted negative consequences but may differ for fathers versus mothers.
4	The value of self-disclosure to parents and peers during adolescence	Nowell C, Pfeifer JH, Enticott P, Silk T, Vijayakumar N.[18]	2023	Qualitative-StudyCase	Children are more open to others, especially peers, than to their own parents because of less effective communication, unsupportive parenting, psychological need to be accepted, and fear of being judged by parents. To increase children's openness, parents need to build open, trusting communication and be good listeners without judgment.
5	Interpersonal Communication Between Working Fathers and Daughters in Increasing Children's Self-Openness	Kalimau, Isabela & Rina, Nofha.[19]	2023	Qualitative	The findings of this study indicate that interpersonal communication between working fathers and their adult daughters, aged 21-25 years old, possesses positive characteristics in terms of empathy, support, and positivity. However, there are

NO	TITLE	AUTHOR	YEAR	METHODS	RESULTS
					still shortcomings in terms of openness and equality between them. To enhance the daughter's openness towards her father, improvements are still needed in terms of the dimension of time and the depth of conversation topics. Thus, it is necessary to enhance interpersonal communication so that the child can broaden their self-expression towards their working father. These conclusions are supported by data obtained through observation methods and in-depth interviews with key informants, resulting in detailed research findings. Expert informants also provided scientifically-based opinions to support the responses of the key informants and offered constructive suggestions regarding interpersonal communication between working fathers and their daughters to enhance the child's openness.
6	The Relationship Between Authoritative Parenting and the Intensity of Parent-Child Distance Communication With the Self-Openness of Migrant Students to Their Families	Alisha Mumtaz, F., Noor Rakhmad, w., & Naryoso, A.[20]	2024	Quantitative-Correlational	The findings of this study highlight the importance of communication that consistent and meaningful between parents and children in maintaining emotional closeness even though The two are separated by physical distance. This research provides an understanding of how the pattern Authoritative parenting and high-intensity communication can increase self-openness of migrant students to their families who can ultimately help with the maintenance of family relationships especially in the context of distance.
7	Self-Openness in Parent-Child Communication in	Ramadhana MR.[21]	2018	Mix-Methods	The results of processing the reliability of the measuring instrument questionnaire

NO	TITLE	AUTHOR	YEAR	METHODS	RESULTS
	Adolescents Authoritarian Parenting				reliability were .745 (alpha cronbach's) with strong inter-dimensional relationship analysis. The results of this study illustrate that adolescents with authoritarian parenting show self-disclosure in the medium category with the frequency dimension of interaction that is not intensive, there are positive and negative responses in conversation, candor has not appeared, self-disclosure that is not directed at the goal and the existence of a less intimate attitude in the relationship parent-child communication.

Based on the analysis of selected studies, it was found that the phenomenon of child openness reflects a complex psychological evaluation rather than merely the frequency of interaction.

Relational Safety vs. Structural Closeness

These findings indicate that emotional disclosure is more influenced by perceived relational safety than by physical or structural proximity. This directly challenges the classic assumption of attachment theory, which posits that physical proximity automatically creates openness. Children tend to view parents as authority figures with "absolute commands," causing every moral or private discussion to be perceived as a risk of conflict. In contrast, peers offer co-equal relationships where personal beliefs can be actively negotiated without fear of disciplinary sanctions (Mammen et al., 2019).[15]

Gender Dynamics and Emotional Suppression

Data synthesis shows significant differences based on the parent's gender in managing emotions. Parents who use suppression strategies (repressing negative emotions) tend to lower the quality of responsiveness and warmth in interactions. Fathers who practice emotional suppression have a greater negative impact on a daughter's openness compared to mothers. However, consistent maternal support proves to be a strong predictor of a child's self-concept clarity, which in turn improves relationship quality and reduces negative interactions (Becht et al., 2017; Karnilowicz et al., 2019).[16,17]

Parenting Styles and Social Exchange Calculation

The concepts of gentle parenting and authoritative parenting styles act as moderators in increasing child self-disclosure. Children tend to maintain relationships that provide greater emotional rewards than costs. If sharing information with parents is considered emotionally "expensive" (e.g., due to the risk of being judged or belittled), the child will redirect that openness to digital platforms or peers who provide instant validation. This proves that child openness is an adaptive process to maintain self-autonomy from excessive parental control. These findings integrate Communication Privacy Management Theory by showing that in the digital era, child privacy boundaries become more fluid toward external parties but stricter toward parents as a form of self-protection.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

This research confirms the existence of the Paradox of Emotional Proximity as a dominant communication dynamic in modern families. The main findings indicate that physical and structural proximity between parents and children does not automatically guarantee functional proximity or emotional openness. This paradox is triggered by the discrepancy between the child's psychological need for unconditional validation and the reality of parenting patterns that tend to be solutive, hierarchical, and judgmental. An individual performs a social exchange calculation where external parties, such as peers and digital communities, are perceived to offer lower

"emotional costs" and higher validation rewards compared to domestic interactions that risk triggering conflict or excessive surveillance.

Theoretically, this research provides an important contribution to the development of family communication science and developmental psychology through three main aspects:

Modification of Attachment Theory

This research expands the concept of a "secure base" by showing that in the digital era, a secure base is no longer limited to the physical presence of the caregiver, but rather to the quality of emotional responsiveness capable of competing with external support sources.

Integration of Communication Privacy Management (CPM)

The results of this review strengthen CPM theory by explaining how children manage "privacy boundaries" selectively. In the technological era, privacy boundaries toward parents become increasingly rigid as an effort to maintain autonomy, while boundaries toward external parties become more permeable.

Redefinition of the Proximity Paradox

This research provides a sharper operational definition for the term Emotional Proximity Paradox, which combines traditional relational dimensions with a new variable, namely technological mediation.

Practical Implications

Parents should transition from being "problem solvers" to "emotion coaches" who validate feelings before providing direction. Implementation of gentle parenting which emphasizes respect and healthy boundaries can lower the child's perception of emotional risk.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has limitations in the number of literature samples synthesized through the SLR method, which may not yet represent all cultural variations outside the context of the selected studies. Additionally, the reliance on secondary data limits the ability of this research to capture deeper emotional nuances from the child's perspective directly.

Future researchers are suggested to:

1. Conduct primary empirical studies with qualitative phenomenological methods to deepen the subjective interpretation of children regarding "emotional risk" within the family.
2. Explore the impact of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology as digital confidants and its influence on the shift of parental roles in the future.
3. Conduct longitudinal studies to measure the long-term effectiveness of implementing gentle parenting on the level of child openness as they enter early adulthood.

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