




## Original Article

# The Associations between Parenting Styles, Family Power Structure, and Students' Emotional Autonomy with the Mediating Role of Parent-Adolescent Relationship

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## Abstract

**Background:** During adolescence, achieving emotional autonomy is crucial for successful identity formation, individuation, and the transition to adulthood. The current investigation examines the associations between parenting styles, family power structures, and emotional autonomy in students, with a particular focus on the mediating role of parent-adolescent relationships.

**Methods:** : This study utilized a descriptive correlational design and structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the hypothesized relationships. A cluster sample of 363 high school students in Isfahan was selected. Data were collected using four standardized instruments: the Emotional Autonomy Scale, the Parenting Style Questionnaire, the Power Structure of the Family Questionnaire, and the Parent-Child Relationship Survey. Pearson correlation coefficients were initially computed to assess bivariate associations, followed by SEM to test the hypothesized mediation model.

**Results:** The findings indicate that both permissive and authoritarian parenting styles were significantly associated with a family power structure characterized by parental dominance ( $P < 0.001$ ). Additionally, a positive correlation was found between the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and students' emotional autonomy ( $P < 0.001$ ). Importantly, the analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of the authoritarian parenting style on students' emotional autonomy, mediated by the parent-adolescent relationship ( $P < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** This study highlights the crucial role of parenting styles and family power structures in shaping students' emotional autonomy. The findings suggest that while both permissive and authoritarian styles are associated with the family power structure, only the authoritarian style seems to exert its influence indirectly through the parent-adolescent relationship.

**Keywords:** Adolescent; Emotions; Family; Parenting .

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## Introduction

Adolescence is characterized by a cascade of profound transformations, encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, and social

domains. This developmental period is frequently marked by a rise in negative emotions among teenagers, including anxiety, sadness, and irritability (1). It is a

transitional phase that can be confusing for them (2). Engaging in childish behavior may invite criticism while attempting to behave like adults can lead to serious problems due to lack of experience. Thus, adolescents enter a realm of cognitive argument and abstraction, contemplating their identity and the nature of the world around them (3). During this time, individuals must embrace roles related to their sexual identity, attain financial independence, build social networks, establish their own values, and manage emotional dependence on their parents (4). Adolescence signifies freedom from childish dependence on parents and adults, and in various aspects, it marks the achievement of autonomy and self-sufficiency (5).

Emotional autonomy involves individuals distancing themselves from parental dependence and developing a more mature, nuanced, and realistic understanding of their parents and their roles (6). Unlike emotional dependence, emotional autonomy is crucial for healthy relationships with others. Individuals with high emotional autonomy exhibit a diminished dependence on others for emotional well-being, including achieving life goals and fostering fulfilling relationships. They demonstrate a capacity for self-directed emotional regulation and possess a heightened sense of self-awareness. This leads to feeling satisfied with their lives, unconsciously attracting others, and performing well in their work and self-management (7). Emotional autonomy is a major developmental task of adolescence, closely linked to the formation of identity and uniqueness in adolescents, and plays a crucial role in the transition to adulthood and accepting adult roles (8). The formation of a mature identity that provides the groundwork for intimacy with others is believed to depend on the adolescent achieving emotional autonomy (9). The family's position in relation to the adolescent is crucial in terms of upbringing, as adolescence is characterized by rapid

physical changes and emotional and psychological developments (10). Prior research suggests that the implications of adolescent emotional autonomy are contingent upon the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship (11).

Child rearing, if carried out in the right way, will not only encourage the child's autonomy in the right direction but also maintain their close relationship with the parents. Parenting styles can have a significant impact on children's emotional autonomy (12). Each family employs specific methods in the upbringing of their children, which are influenced by various cultural, social, political, and economic factors (13). Parenting styles are classified into four distinct classifications: authoritarian (characterized by high control and low warmth), permissive (low control with high warmth), authoritative (combining high control with high warmth), and rejecting/neglecting (low control and low warmth) (14). Authoritative parenting, distinguished by its warmth, relational stability, and emphasis on psychological autonomy, is theorized to play a pivotal role in adolescent identity formation and autonomy development (15). Consequently, research suggests that authoritative parenting offers superior benefits for adolescent psychological outcomes compared to authoritarian and permissive styles (16).

Family power structure, as with parenting styles, can be a significant factor that can influence one's personality. The notion of power structure in the family focuses on the ability to influence the behaviors and decisions of others (17). An individual's conception of power influences their perception of the power dynamics within their family, and over time, the structure of the family adjusts to the prevailing social and physical circumstances (18). By the same token, social changes brought about by industrialization and modernity have produced a significant effect on the structure of the family and the position of

its members. For example, social developments, changes in lifestyle, peer modeling in urban societies, and women's involvement in society have transformed people's attitudes toward the division of roles and, in turn, the family power structure (19). Hence, in the process of socialization, family members are more inclined to participate when the family structure exhibits less authoritarianism and instead promotes cooperation and power distribution (20).

Adolescence is marked by a developmental shift in social orientation, with teenagers progressively dedicating less time to parental interactions and gravitating towards peer relationships. This transition can pose challenges for families, who must navigate the evolving dynamics of adolescent peer interaction and connection (21). According to Mastrotheodoros et al. (22), parent-adolescent conflict has been shown to increase during adolescence. This increase is often attributed to adolescents' perceptions of parental power imbalances. They argue that when parents exert control in a domineering way, dismiss their opinions, prejudice them, or have unreasonable expectations, it fosters conflict within the parent-adolescent relationship (22). Research suggests that adolescents experiencing conflict or strain in their relationships with parents may struggle with aspects of identity formation (23). Building upon prior research, Branje (24) emphasizes the critical role of the parent-adolescent relationship in shaping the nature of emotional autonomy, potentially influencing its adaptive or maladaptive qualities. Adolescents with emotionally distant or unsupportive parents may develop a form of emotional autonomy characterized by detachment, potentially hindering their capacity to assume adult responsibilities. Conversely, secure parent-adolescent attachment has been linked to positive outcomes such as reduced engagement in risky behaviors, lower rates of mental health problems, and enhanced social skills and coping mechanisms (25).

Given the significant role of the family in shaping adolescents' personality, understanding the complex interplay between parenting styles, family power structures, and emotional autonomy is crucial. This knowledge can inform interventions and support systems aimed at fostering healthy adolescent development. While prior research underscores the significance of the parent-adolescent relationship in adolescent development, the precise mechanisms by which parenting styles and family structures exert their influence on emotional autonomy remain underexplored. The current investigation seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by examining these associations and exploring the potential mediating role of parent-adolescent relationships.

## **Methods**

### ***Design and participants***

This study employed a descriptive correlational design utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the hypothesized relationships. The target population consisted of 6,700 high school students (grades 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>) enrolled in public schools across Isfahan. A multistage sampling approach yielded a final sample of 3,709 females and 2,991 males. Inclusion criteria comprised being a high school student, age between 16 and 18 years, parents both alive, residence with both parents, and provision of informed consent. The exclusion criterion was the presence of invalid or improperly completed questionnaires. The sample size of 350 individuals was determined by considering the research variables. To account for potential participant attrition, a total of 385 questionnaires were distributed to students. Following data collection, questionnaires with missing data were excluded, resulting in a final analyzed sample of 363 students.

### ***Procedure***

A multistage cluster sampling approach was employed for participant recruitment.

In the first stage, a random sample of seven schools (out of 17 total girls' and boys' public schools) was selected from District 2 of the Isfahan Education Department during the 2022-2023 academic year. From each school, at least three classes from different grades were selected at random to complete the questionnaires. To ensure participant privacy, this study adhered to strict ethical guidelines regarding data confidentiality. All data were anonymized during collection and analysis, meaning no personally identifiable information was linked to participant responses. Only authorized researchers directly involved in the study had access to the data. Participants' informed consent was obtained through a comprehensive informed consent form. This form outlined the data collection and storage procedures, and assured participants of the strict confidentiality measures in place to protect their privacy throughout the entire research process.

### ***Instruments***

*Emotional Autonomy Scale:* Emotional Autonomy Scale was developed to measure adolescents' emotional autonomy. It consists of two affective and emotional components ("nondependency" and "individuation") and two cognitive components of autonomy ("parental deidealization" and "perceives parents as people"). The instrument employed a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree) to assess these components (26). Cronbach's alpha was utilized to evaluate the instrument's reliability, yielding a coefficient of 0.88, indicative of good internal consistency.

*Parenting Style Questionnaire:* Parenting styles were assessed using a modified version of the Parenting Style Questionnaire (27). This 30-item instrument measures permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parenting styles on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha =

0.79), with subscale reliabilities ranging from 0.78 (authoritative) to 0.86 (authoritarian) (27).

*Power Structure of the Family Questionnaire:* The questionnaire was created by Mahdavi and Sabouri Khosrowshahi (28) to measure the power structure of the family. It consists of three subscales: 1) establishment of power relations 2) areas and domains of power, and parenting styles, and 3) exertion of power. This questionnaire consists of 36 items, with 12 pertaining to the establishment of power relations and 10 to the exertion of power. The items are answered based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1= exclusively my father" to "5= exclusively my mother". The scores of this questionnaire range from 36 to 180. An above-average score is indicative of the power being exerted by the father in the family. In this study, Cronbach's alpha determined the instrument's reliability to be 0.87.

*Parent-Child Relationship Survey:* The Parent-Child Relationship Survey developed by Fine et al. (29) was employed to assess the quality of parent-adolescent relationships. This 48-item instrument utilizes a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "almost none," 7 = "a great deal") to measure positive affect, communication, and specific aspects of parental involvement (father version: father involvement; mother version: resentment/role confusion, identification). Cronbach's alpha indicated good internal consistency for the scale ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

### ***Data analyses***

Data analysis employed a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics included means and standard deviations to summarize central tendency and dispersion, while skewness and kurtosis assessed normality assumptions. Pearson's correlation coefficients were utilized to examine bivariate relationships between variables.

SEM was conducted using SPSS v.26 for data preparation and AMOS v.24 for model estimation to test the hypothesized relationships.

## Results

The study sample comprised 363 high school students aged 16 to 18 years. Descriptive statistics for the key study variables (family power structure, parenting styles - permissive, authoritarian, authoritative, parent-adolescent relationship, and emotional autonomy) are presented in Table 1. These statistics include means, standard deviations (SD), skewness, and kurtosis. The skewness and kurtosis values fell within the acceptable range for normality assumptions ( $\pm 1$  for skewness,  $\pm 3$  for kurtosis), supporting the application of parametric statistical tests. A visual representation of the hypothesized relationships between these variables is depicted in Figure 1.

Table 2 details the Pearson correlation coefficients for the research variables. The results indicated that the parent-adolescent relationship exhibited a significant correlation with emotional autonomy ( $r = -0.58$ ), family power structure ( $r = -0.37$ ), permissive parenting style ( $r = 0.12$ ), and authoritarian parenting style ( $r = -0.24$ ). Moreover, students' emotional autonomy

correlated significantly with family power structure ( $r = 0.42$ ), permissive parenting style ( $r = -0.18$ ), and authoritarian parenting style ( $r = 0.27$ ). The hypothesized relationships between authoritative parenting style, parent-adolescent relationship, and emotional autonomy were not statistically significant. Consequently, the authoritative parenting style construct was removed from the subsequent analyses to ensure model parsimony and improve overall fit.

Path coefficient estimations revealed that adolescents' emotional autonomy had a positive and significant direct relationship with both permissive ( $p < 0.001$ ) and authoritarian ( $p < 0.001$ ) parenting styles. Similarly, family power structure displayed a positive and significant direct association with adolescents' emotional autonomy ( $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, an interesting finding emerged: authoritarian parenting style had a negative and significant direct relationship with parent-adolescent relationship ( $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, the direct relationship between parent-adolescent relationship and adolescents' emotional autonomy was positive and significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Notably, no significant association was found between permissive parenting style and parent-adolescent relationship (Table 3).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Variables	M	SD	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Family power structure	102.81	14.74	69	152	0.36	0.01
Permissive parenting style	18.96	5.97	4	35	0.16	-0.30
Authoritarian parenting style	29.04	5.35	13	40	-0.32	-0.07
Authoritative parenting style	6.69	4.15	0	22	0.74	0.63
Parent-adolescent relationship	247.50	39.54	104	324	-0.60	0.40
Emotional autonomy	33.55	6.01	17	49	-0.22	0.02

Table 2. Bivariate correlations among study variables

Variables	Family power structure	Permissive parenting style	Authoritarian parenting style	Authoritative parenting style	Emotional autonomy
Parent-adolescent relationship	-0.37**	0.12*	-0.24**	0.02	-0.58**
Emotional autonomy	0.42**	-0.18*	0.27**	-0.03	1

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

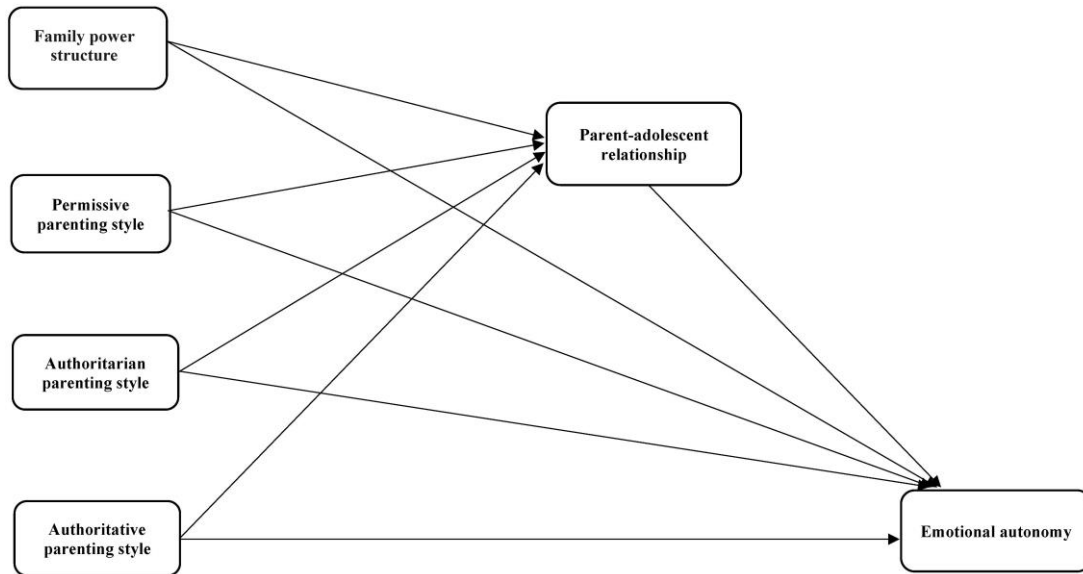


Figure 1. The conceptual model of the research

The analysis of indirect effects revealed a significant association ( $p < 0.001$ ) between authoritarian parenting style and adolescent emotional autonomy, mediated by parent-adolescent relationship. Similarly, family power structure demonstrated a significant indirect effect on adolescent emotional

autonomy ( $p < 0.001$ ), also mediated by parent-adolescent relationships. In contrast, no significant indirect effect of permissive parenting style on adolescent emotional autonomy was found ( $p = 0.109$ ), with parent-adolescent relationship as the mediator (Table 3).

Table 3. Standardized path coefficients for direct and indirect effects

Path	$\beta$	P
Permissive parenting style → Emotional autonomy	-0.11	0.001
Authoritarian parenting style → Emotional autonomy	0.16	0.001
Family power structure → Emotional autonomy	0.25	0.001
Permissive parenting style → Parent-adolescent relationship	0.09	0.081
Authoritarian parenting style → Parent-adolescent relationship	-0.23	0.001
Parent-adolescent relationship → Emotional autonomy	-0.44	0.001
Family power structure → Parent-adolescent relationship	-0.36	0.001
Authoritarian parenting style → Parent-adolescent relationship through parent-adolescent relationship	0.11	0.001
Family power structure → Emotional autonomy through parent-adolescent relationship	0.16	0.001
Permissive parenting style → Parent-adolescent relationship through parent-adolescent relationship	-0.04	0.109

Table 4. Fit indicators in the modified models

$\chi^2$	df		$(\chi^2/df)$	CFI	IFI	RFI	NFI	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA
1.93	3		0.64	0.99	0.99	0.97	0.99	0.99	0.98	0.001

The fit indices for the research model are presented in Table 4. As the calculated values fall within an acceptable range, the model is considered to have adequate fit. A depiction of the modified research model can be found in Figure 2.

## Discussion

This study investigated the associations between parenting styles (permissive, authoritarian), family power structure, and student emotional autonomy, with parent-adolescent relationships as a potential mediator. The results revealed unexpected associations between parenting styles and emotional autonomy. This finding aligns with the work of Peng et al. (10). Contrary to expectations, permissive parenting exhibited a significant negative relationship with adolescent emotional autonomy, while authoritarian parenting demonstrated a significant positive relationship (10). In families with permissive parenting, adolescents showed lower emotional autonomy. Children of authoritarian parents, due to forced obedience and receiving less love, have low self-esteem and are usually anxious, with restricted freedom and self-directed behavior. This may lead adolescents to seek emotional autonomy and be more attracted to peer

groups (14). Research has also shown that rejection of parental love in early adolescence increases emotional autonomy (30). Bi et al. (31) reported that although emotional autonomy scores are high in authoritarian parenting, resistance to peers, social adaptation, and self-confidence are low. This study confirms the positive and significant relationship between authoritarian parenting and emotional autonomy in early adolescence.

The analysis revealed a significant positive association between power distribution and adolescents' emotional autonomy. Higher scores on the power distribution measure likely indicate a more patriarchal family structure, where fathers hold greater decision-making authority. These findings resonate with Iranian cultural norms that emphasize the male role as the head of the household. Our results partially align with Zarei Toopkhaneh et al. (32), who explored the link between a male-dominant family power structure and family functioning (self-satisfaction, socialization, independence, personality growth, marital satisfaction). However, their study focused on family functioning rather than adolescent emotional autonomy specifically.

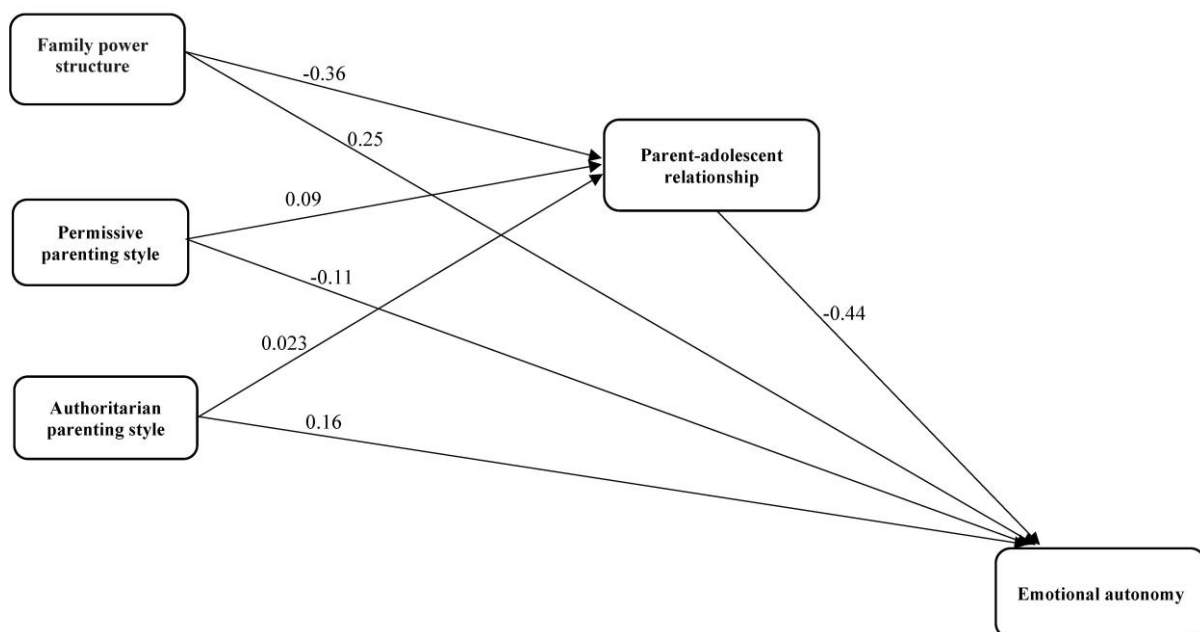


Figure 2. The modified model of the research

The hypothesized association between permissive parenting style and parent-adolescent relationship was not statistically significant in the current study. Conversely, authoritarian parenting style exhibited a significant negative prediction of this relationship. In other words, adolescents with more authoritarian parents reported weaker parent-adolescent relationships. These findings align with Saladino et al. (33), who suggest that adolescents may distance themselves from families with harsh parenting practices. Consistent with the null association observed between permissive parenting and parent-adolescent relationships, the analysis revealed a non-significant indirect effect of permissive parenting style on emotional autonomy mediated by parent-adolescent relationships.

The study revealed a surprising finding: authoritarian parenting style was positively associated with emotional autonomy in adolescents, but this association was mediated by the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship. These results appear to contradict the definition of emotional autonomy proposed by Ratliff et al. (24), who emphasize the negative influence of unsupportive parenting. One potential explanation lies in the specific dimensions of authoritarian parenting assessed in this study. Authoritarian parents may exert strict control and high expectations, but they also often provide clear rules and boundaries. This structure, combined with a positive parent-adolescent relationship, might foster a sense of responsibility and independence in adolescents, ultimately contributing to their emotional autonomy. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential negative consequences of authoritarian parenting highlighted by Ratliff et al. (24). Excessive strictness, violence, or controlling behaviors can lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and a weakened parent-adolescent bond. This, in turn, could push adolescents towards seeking emotional autonomy through social connections with peers,

potentially leading to maladjustment and defiance.

The analysis also revealed a significant indirect effect of family power distribution on emotional autonomy, mediated by the parent-adolescent relationship. These findings partially align with Zarei Toopkhaneh et al. (32), who identified a positive association between a male-dominant power structure and family functioning. However, it is important to distinguish between family functioning and adolescent emotional autonomy, which is the specific focus of the current study. Family power distribution refers to the way decision-making authority is shared within the family unit. This includes areas such as inheritance, finances, and everyday matters. The current study suggests that power structures where parents (not necessarily fathers) have a stronger voice, combined with a positive parent-adolescent relationship, may foster emotional autonomy in adolescents.

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the use of cluster sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings to the entire population of high school students in Isfahan. A random sampling approach would provide a more representative sample. Second, the correlational design can only identify associations between variables, not cause-and-effect relationships. Future research could employ longitudinal studies or interventions to explore causal links. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data from adolescents introduces potential bias due to social desirability or memory limitations. Future studies could incorporate additional data sources such as parental reports or observations of parent-child interactions.

To address these limitations and gain a deeper understanding of how parenting styles, family dynamics, and parent-child relationships influence emotional autonomy, several avenues for future research exist. A similar study with a

nationally representative sample would enhance generalizability. A longitudinal design could examine how these factors influence emotional autonomy over time. Additionally, exploring the potential mediating mechanisms between these variables would be informative. For instance, how do parenting practices or family communication styles influence the development of emotional autonomy in adolescents? Finally, investigating cultural variations in these relationships would provide a broader perspective.

### **Conclusion**

The current study revealed that parenting styles (authoritarian and permissive) directly predicted adolescents' emotional autonomy. Furthermore, the authoritarian parenting style exhibited an indirect effect on emotional autonomy mediated by parent-adolescent relationships. However, the hypothesized indirect effect of a permissive parenting style was not supported. These results highlight the importance of focusing on authoritarian parenting styles. Furthermore, power distribution within the family directly and indirectly predicts adolescents' emotional autonomy. The analysis revealed both direct and indirect effects: power distribution and parenting styles (particularly authoritarian and permissive) directly impacted emotional autonomy, while power distribution and authoritarian parenting style also indirectly influenced emotional autonomy through the mediation of the parent-adolescent relationship. The current study underscores the interplay between parenting styles (authoritarian and permissive), family power structure, and the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship in shaping adolescent emotional autonomy. This knowledge can inform interventions aimed at improving parenting practices, family dynamics, and ultimately, adolescent well-being. Moreover, the direct influence of power distribution and authoritarian parenting style on the parent-adolescent relationship

suggests that interventions focused on improving these factors may serve to strengthen parent-adolescent bonds.

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### **Authors' contribution**

Study conception and design: Shokoufeh Mousavi; data collection: Zeinab Sadat Mirian; analysis and interpretation of results: Mahmoud Reza Shahsavari; draft manuscript preparation: Shokoufeh Mousavi. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study protocol received ethical approval (cod: IR.PNU.REC.1402.091) from the Ethics Committee of Payame Noor University.

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### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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