Original Article

Helicopter parenting, perceived parental distress, and academic self-efficacy among high school adolescents

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Received: 16 Aug 2026 **Accepted:** 17 Oct 2026 **Published:** 04 Nov 2026

Abstract

Background: Academic self-efficacy (ASE) is a fundamental driver of student success; however, it remains highly susceptible to intrusive family dynamics, including helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress. The present study investigated how overparenting (helicopter parenting) and subjective parental distress relate to ASE among Iranian secondary school students.

Method: Utilizing a descriptive-correlational framework, the target group comprised all enrolled adolescents in Mahshahr during the 2025–2026 academic year. A multi-stage cluster strategy yielded a final cohort of 309 participants. Information was gathered via validated instruments assessing academic self-efficacy, helicopter parenting, and adolescent-reported parental stress. Analyses were performed using Pearson correlation and simultaneous multiple regression in SPSS.

Results: Descriptive statistics indicated mean scores of 28.59 (SD=11.56) for ASE, 40.17 (SD=7.46) for helicopter parenting, and 108.18 (SD=19.31) for perceived parental distress (as indexed by the Parenting Stress Index). Bivariate calculations demonstrated inverse relationships between ASE and both helicopter parenting ($r=-0.48$, $P<0.01$) and perceived parental stress ($r=-0.42$, $P<0.01$). Furthermore, simultaneous multiple regression yielded a robust model ($F=64.05$, $P<0.01$), explaining 29.5% of the variance in ASE ($R^2=0.295$). Both helicopter parenting ($\beta=-0.38$, $P<0.01$) and perceived parental distress ($\beta=-0.27$, $P<0.01$) proved to be meaningful negative predictors of student self-efficacy.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that lower levels of perceived parental over-involvement and perceived parental distress are associated with higher adolescent ASE. Family-centered educational interventions that promote healthy, autonomy-supportive parenting practices may enhance students' academic well-being and warrant further investigation.

Keywords: Adolescent, Parenting, Psychological Distress, Self-efficacy.

Cite this article as: Parnian F, Johari Fard R, Heidarei A. Helicopter parenting, perceived parental distress, and academic self-efficacy among high school adolescents. *Soc Determinants Health*. 2026;12(1):1-9. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.22037/SDH.v12i1.53208

Introduction

Adolescence, particularly the senior high school years, represents a highly sensitive and defining developmental stage marked by profound cognitive, emotional, and social transitions. It is a critical period during which academic identity, future career trajectories, and the foundational elements of lifelong success or difficulty are substantially shaped (1). In these formative years, adolescents confront intense academic pressure, elevated societal expectations, and the challenging task of

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securing admission to higher education. These multifaceted demands frequently generate considerable stress, emotional vulnerability, and a persistent need to demonstrate competence (2). Successfully navigating the high school environment requires robust psychological resilience and adaptive learning strategies (3). In the absence of adequate psychological resources, adolescents become highly susceptible to academic burnout, reduced motivation, and elevated anxiety (4). Moreover, the contemporary educational landscape, combined with intense familial expectations, places a substantial burden on adolescents and heightens their vulnerability to the adverse effects of maladaptive family dynamics (5). Consequently, elucidating the core psychological mechanisms that enable students to overcome academic obstacles, manage stress, and thrive in competitive educational settings has become a central priority for developmental and educational psychologists committed to fostering positive youth development.

Academic self-efficacy (ASE) serves as a core psychological pillar enabling adolescents to navigate secondary education demands. Conceptualized as a student's confidence in executing behaviors required to reach specific educational milestones, ASE heavily influences academic drive, persistence, and effort (6). High-ASE youths typically demonstrate elevated resilience against setbacks, utilize sophisticated cognitive strategies, and earn higher grades (7). In contrast, those with deficient self-efficacy often shy away from academic challenges, capitulate easily under stress, and suffer from reduced scholastic outcomes (8). Given its pervasive influence on academic functioning and psychological well-being, identifying familial factors that may support or undermine this belief system is essential for informing educational and family-based interventions.

Among the range of familial influences, parenting styles exert a profound impact on the development of adolescents' ASE (9). In recent years, helicopter parenting has received increasing attention within the developmental psychology literature. It is characterized by hyper-involvement, excessive control, over-monitoring, and a persistent tendency to resolve problems on the child's behalf (10). While typically driven by protective, supportive intentions, hyper-involved parenting often compromises students' academic and psychological independence. Restricting chances for autonomous decision-making, independent problem-solving, and resilience-building via failure can inadvertently signal to teenagers that they are incapable (11). This lack of trust in the adolescent's capabilities has been linked to greater dependence, a diminished sense of mastery, and lower belief in one's own academic abilities (12). Consistent evidence indicates that adolescents exposed to such over-parenting tend to display lower intrinsic motivation, heightened anxiety, and lower ASE (13). It should be noted, however, that the effects of helicopter parenting may vary according to developmental stage, cultural context, and specific parenting behaviours.

In addition to over-parenting, perceived parental distress has received growing attention as a family-level factor associated with adolescents' ASE (14). In the present study, perceived parental distress is conceptualized as chronic worry, self-doubt concerning one's parenting competence, and intense fear of the child's academic and social failure, and is operationalized through adolescents' reports on the Parenting Stress Index, which indexes perceived parenting-related distress rather than a clinical anxiety diagnosis. Parents experiencing high levels of distress often project their distress onto their children, responding to academic challenges with disproportionate criticism, blame, or unhealthy social comparisons (15). Such emotionally charged environments may

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deprive the family context of the supportive climate necessary for cultivating self-confidence. Continuous exposure to parental distress not only strains the parent–child relationship but also has been linked to the internalization of a sense of inadequacy in the adolescent (16). Research further suggests that perceived parental distress is associated with lower adolescents' self-efficacy and may co-occur with more intrusive parenting behaviors (17). Evaluating the concurrent associations of both helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress is therefore essential for a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent academic development.

Grounded in Bandura's social cognitive framework, self-efficacy develops fundamentally through mastery experiences, where individuals conquer hurdles via prolonged personal endeavor. Both helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress may undermine these mastery experiences: the former by restricting opportunities for independent problem-solving and learning from failure, and the latter by saturating the family environment with emotional tension that interferes with the adolescent's engagement in challenging academic tasks. Together, these processes are proposed to be associated with lower ASE.

Despite the recognized importance of family dynamics in shaping educational outcomes, research examining the simultaneous associations of helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress with adolescent ASE remains limited. Internationally, a growing body of work has documented negative links between over-parenting and self-efficacy, as well as between parental educational anxiety and adolescent academic outcomes. In the Iranian context, studies have examined parenting styles and stress, yet few have jointly investigated helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress as concurrent predictors of ASE among high school students. The specific gap addressed by the present study is therefore the concurrent examination of these two family-level factors in relation to ASE within the socio-economic context of Mahshahr, an industrial city characterized by intense economic pressures and demanding parental work schedules. Investigating these variables in this localized setting yields insights capable of informing targeted, culturally sensitive psychological interventions. Addressing these issues is of particular importance because lower ASE has been associated in prior research with adverse academic and psychological outcomes; however, the present study does not directly examine those outcomes.

Consequently, this investigation analyzed how parental overinvolvement and perceived distress relate to ASE among senior high schoolers in Mahshahr. In light of the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence detailed previously, the following hypotheses were posited: H1: Helicopter parenting will be negatively associated with adolescents' academic self-efficacy. H2: Perceived parental distress (as indexed by the Parenting Stress Index) will be negatively associated with adolescents' academic self-efficacy. H3: Helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress will each uniquely contribute to the prediction of adolescents' academic self-efficacy when entered simultaneously in a multiple regression model.

Methods

Research Design and Participants

This investigation adopted a quantitative, descriptive-correlational methodology targeting all boys and girls attending senior high school in Mahshahr, Iran, across the 2025–2026 academic year. A multi-stage cluster sampling method secured representativeness. First, four high schools (two for female students and two for male students) were randomly selected from the city's educational districts (representing approximately one-third of the eligible

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public high schools in the city). Next, three intact classes were randomly chosen from each selected school (yielding a total of 12 classes). The design effect associated with this cluster sampling was estimated at approximately 1.4, based on the average cluster size and an assumed moderate intra-class correlation; this value was incorporated into the a-priori sample-size calculation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be officially registered as senior high school students in Mahshahr and to provide informed consent indicating willingness to participate. Exclusion criteria included incomplete questionnaires or explicit withdrawal from the assessment. Out of 320 total distributed surveys, 11 incomplete sets were omitted during data screening, yielding a final analyzed cohort of 309 valid participants.

Measures

Helicopter Parenting Instrument (HPI): Adolescent perceptions of intrusive parenting were gauged via the 10-item short-form HPI created by Pistella et al. (18). Rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), overall values span from 10 to 70, with higher tallies denoting greater overparenting. Fooladi et al. (19) verified its psychometric integrity within the Iranian demographic, documenting a 0.85 internal consistency alongside stable test-retest reliability. Cronbach's alpha in the current project reached 0.86.

Parenting Stress Index (PSI):

Perceived parental stress was evaluated using Abidin's (20) Parenting Stress Index–Short Form (PSI-SF). This 36-item tool assesses stress across parental distress, parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and difficult child dimensions through a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Cumulative scores range from 36 to 180, where higher scores signify elevated distress. Although the instrument primarily indexes parenting stress rather than a clinical diagnosis of parental anxiety, it was selected because elevated scores on the parental distress domain closely reflect the chronic worry, self-doubt, and fear of child failure that constitute the conceptual definition of perceived parental distress used in this study. All items were completed by the adolescent participants themselves, thereby capturing their perceptions of parental distress rather than parents' self-reported anxiety. The Persian adaptation, validated by Babakri et al. (21) on a normative sample, demonstrated excellent temporal stability (test–retest reliability) and high internal consistency (α=0.89). In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha was 0.84.

Academic Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (ASEQ)*:* Student confidence in scholastic abilities was measured using the 9-item ASEQ developed by Hemade et al. (22). Items utilize a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with peak scores reflecting superior ASE. Internal consistency for the current sample was exceptionally high at 0.95.

Procedure

Data gathering commenced following formal ethical approval and permission from local educational authorities in Mahshahr. Because respondents were under legal age, written parental/guardian consent alongside adolescent assent was acquired. The lead investigator briefed participants in classrooms regarding study goals, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and completion guidelines. Complete anonymity was guaranteed, and students retained the right to exit the study at any point without penalty. Surveys were administered in quiet classroom environments to optimize focus, with the entire battery—including the stress index—completed solely by the student participants.

Data Analysis

Statistical evaluations utilized SPSS version 29. Initial descriptive metrics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) were computed. Inferential

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procedures involved Pearson correlation coefficients and simultaneous multiple regression to explore predictive dynamics. Prior to regression modeling, residual checks (normality, homoscedasticity, and linearity) and multicollinearity diagnostics (tolerance and variance inflation factors, VIF) confirmed that all analytical assumptions were met. Given the multi-stage cluster sampling design, the potential non-independence of observations within schools and classes was acknowledged; however, standard ordinary-least-squares regression was retained because the primary analytic focus was on individual-level associations, the design effect had already been incorporated into the sample-size planning, and the intra-class correlation was expected to be modest. Multilevel modeling was considered but not adopted, as the number of higher-level units (schools and classes) was limited and the research questions centered on person-level relationships rather than contextual effects. Potential confounders such as age, sex, academic track, and socioeconomic or family characteristics were not included as covariates in the primary models; this limitation is acknowledged and is further discussed in the Limitations section.

Results

The final cohort of 309 high schoolers comprised 159 females (51.5%) and 150 males (48.5%), aged 16 to 18 years (94 aged 16 [30.4%], 120 aged 17 [38.8%], and 95 aged 18 [30.8%]). Regarding academic orientation, 129 students (41.7%) specialized in Experimental Sciences, 84 (27.2%) in Mathematics and Physics, and 96 (31.1%) in Humanities.

Table 1 outlines the descriptive metrics for all core variables, detailing means, standard deviations, and corresponding normality indices. The mean score for ASE was 28.59 (SD=11.56). Given that the possible range on the 9-item 7-point ASEQ is 9–63, this mean falls in the lower portion of the scale and may reflect floor effects or response bias; this issue is further considered in the Discussion. Adolescents reported mean scores of 40.17 (SD=7.46) for helicopter parenting and 108.18 (SD=19.31) for perceived parental distress (Parenting Stress Index completed by adolescents). In accordance with conventional criteria in the behavioral sciences, skewness and kurtosis values between −2 and +2 are regarded as acceptable indicators of univariate normality. As shown in Table 1, all skewness and kurtosis values fell within these limits, confirming that the normality assumption was satisfied for subsequent parametric tests.

Following screening for missing values and outliers, bivariate Pearson correlations revealed significant patterns. Helicopter parenting correlated negatively with ASE ($r=-0.48$, $P<0.01$), as did perceived parental distress ($r=-0.42$, $P<0.01$). The inter-predictor correlation between helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress was $r=0.41$ ($P<0.01$).

A simultaneous multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the contribution of the family-level variables to adolescents' ASE. No interaction term between the predictors was tested, and hierarchical entry was not employed; both predictors were entered simultaneously. Preliminary checks of residual plots and formal tests indicated no substantial violations of linearity, normality, or homoscedasticity assumptions. Multicollinearity diagnostics yielded variance inflation factors (VIFs) of 1.20 for helicopter parenting and 1.20 for perceived parental distress, with corresponding tolerance values of 0.83 for both predictors, indicating no problematic multicollinearity. Given the multi-stage cluster sampling design, the potential non-independence of observations within schools and classes is acknowledged; standard ordinary-least-squares regression was retained as the primary analytic approach.

As detailed in Table 3, the overall multiple regression model reached statistical significance ($F=64.05$, $P<0.001$).

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and normality indices for the study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Academic self-efficacy (ASE)	28.59	11.56	0.715	0.384
Helicopter parenting	40.17	7.46	0.068	0.216
Perceived parental distress (PSI)	108.18	19.31	0.094	−0.08

Table 2. Pearson correlation matrix for the study variables

Variables	Academic self-efficacy (ASE)	Helicopter parenting	Perceived parental distress (PSI)
Academic self-efficacy (ASE)	1		
Helicopter parenting	−0.48**	1	
Perceived parental distress (PSI)	−0.42**	0.41**	1

Note. **P<0.01.

Table 3. Simultaneous multiple regression analysis predicting academic self-efficacy

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	P	95% CI for B
Helicopter parenting	−0.58	0.08	−0.38	−7.25	0.001	−0.74, −0.42
Perceived parental distress (PSI)	−0.16	0.03	−0.27	−5.24	0.001	−0.22, −0.10

Note. Model summary: R=0.54, R^2=0.295, Adjusted R^2=0.290, F=64.05, P<0.001. No interaction term was included.

The analysis yielded a multiple correlation coefficient of R=0.54, a coefficient of determination of R^2=0.295, and an adjusted R^2=0.290. These metrics indicate that when entered simultaneously, helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress jointly account for 29.5% of the variance in academic self-efficacy. Examination of the standardized coefficients showed that both predictors were significant and negative. Helicopter parenting exerted the stronger effect (β=−0.38, t=−7.25, P<0.001, 95% CI for B: −0.74 to −0.42), followed by perceived parental distress (β=−0.27, t=−5.24, P<0.001, 95% CI for B: −0.22 to −0.10).

Discussion

This investigation explored the connections between helicopter parenting, perceived parental stress, and academic self-efficacy among high school adolescents. The primary finding demonstrated by the data was a significant negative association between helicopter parenting and adolescents' ASE. This result is consistent with previous studies reporting that over-parenting is linked to lower academic well-being (9, 19). From a theoretical perspective grounded in Bandura's social cognitive framework, self-efficacy is predominantly forged through mastery experiences—overcoming obstacles through sustained personal effort. Helicopter parenting, characterized by hyper-vigilance and a tendency to resolve children's academic challenges, may restrict adolescents' opportunities for independent problem-solving and learning from failure. The present cross-sectional design, however, cannot establish that such deprivation actually occurs; the observed association is compatible with, but does not prove, this theoretical pathway.

Beyond the restriction of autonomy, prior literature suggests that helicopter parenting may also convey implicit messages of reduced competence when parents continuously monitor assignments and dictate academic choices (8). Adolescents may internalize such extrinsic micromanagement as evidence of personal inadequacy. These interpretations are drawn from existing theory and prior research rather than from direct tests within the current dataset. As adolescents transition into the demanding environment of senior high school, lower ASE associated with higher perceived over-parenting may manifest as greater academic dependence and elevated fear of failure (5). These possible downstream consequences require longitudinal investigation.

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Equally noteworthy was the finding that higher scores on the Parenting Stress Index (completed by adolescents) were significantly and negatively associated with ASE. This result is consistent with studies linking parental educational anxiety or distress to adolescent academic burnout and reduced self-confidence (14, 15). It is important to emphasize that the Parenting Stress Index in the present study captured adolescents' perceptions of parental distress rather than parents' self-reported anxiety levels. Consequently, the scores reflect the adolescent's subjective experience of the family emotional climate and cannot be interpreted as direct measures of parental anxiety. Causal language regarding parental anxiety must therefore be limited.

The underlying mechanisms proposed in the literature—emotional contagion and family systems processes—remain theoretically plausible but were not tested in this study. Parents who experience chronic worry about their child's academic future may project distress onto the adolescent, framing academic achievement as a high-stakes domain (23). Such interpretations are consistent with prior theory yet constitute possible mechanisms that require future investigation rather than findings demonstrated by the present data. Continuous exposure to a perceived anxious or critical family climate has been linked in previous research to eroded academic mastery and heightened susceptibility to test anxiety (24, 25). Again, these pathways were not examined mediationally in the current analyses.

Taken together, the findings indicate that helicopter parenting and perceived parental distress show concurrent negative associations with adolescent ASE. The claim of "synergistic barriers" is not warranted, because no interaction term was tested; the two variables appear to function as complementary or concurrent correlates rather than statistically synergistic ones. The central theoretical issue remains the potential disruption of the individuation process, whereby excessive behavioral control and emotional tension may keep the adolescent tethered to the parent and impede the development of an autonomous, self-efficacious learner. These interpretations are offered as theoretically informed possibilities rather than as demonstrated causal processes.

Despite these notable findings, several methodological limitations deserve consideration. The cross-sectional design restricts causal deductions regarding how family practices influence ASE. Furthermore, reliance on self-report instruments introduces potential common-method variance. The multi-stage cluster sampling design raises the potential for non-independence of observations within schools and classes, which was acknowledged but not fully modeled through multilevel analysis. In addition, the Parenting Stress Index reflects adolescent perceptions of parental distress rather than parents' actual anxiety levels, limiting the precision of conclusions about parental anxiety. Unmeasured confounders—such as socioeconomic status, family composition, parental educational levels, and adolescent psychological symptoms—were not controlled and could affect the reported associations. Finally, confining the participant pool to Mahshahr high schools restricts the generalizability of results to broader cultural or socioeconomic settings. The relatively low mean ASE score (28.59 on a possible range of 9–63) also warrants caution and may reflect floor effects or response bias that merit further examination in future work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present findings demonstrate significant negative associations between helicopter parenting and adolescents' ASE, and between adolescents' perceptions of parental distress and ASE. While these results are consistent with the possibility that intrusive and distress-related family dynamics may

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constitute vulnerability factors for lower ASE, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes causal conclusions. Reducing parental over-involvement and addressing parental distress therefore represent potential intervention targets whose efficacy in fostering students' academic confidence remains to be tested in future longitudinal and experimental research. Supporting parents in regulating their own anxieties and adopting more autonomy-supportive practices may ultimately contribute to the development of resilient, self-directed, and academically confident adolescents, but such outcomes cannot be claimed on the basis of the present evidence alone.

Authors' contribution

Fatemeh Parnian: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing – original draft. Reza Johari Fard: Supervision, methodology, validation, writing – review & editing, corresponding author. Alireza Heidarei: Supervision, resources, writing – review & editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. For participants under 18 years of age, written informed consent was also obtained from a parent or legal guardian. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their data.

Ethical Approval

This project received institutional review board approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch, Iran (Ethics Code: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1405.274).

Funding/financial support

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sector

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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