

Relationship between Family Communication Patterns and Conflict Management Styles of Adolescents in Udenu Local Government Area, Enugu State

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Abstract

This study determined the association between family communication patterns and conflict management styles of adolescents in Udenu Local Government Area, Enugu state. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed. The population comprised 5,238 students in the 16 secondary schools in the study area. A multi-stage sampling procedure was applied to select 360 pupils that served as samples for the study. Three objectives guided the study. The instruments for data collection were two standardized questionnaires and a structured questionnaire that was validated by three lecturers from the Department of Home Science and Management. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square. Findings showed that 93.3% of the respondents communicated in a consensual pattern and had high conformity orientation and high conversation orientation within their family. A greater proportion (35.6%) of the respondents expressed a collaborative conflict management style. The respondents agreed that people's beliefs and values with a mean of 3.04, a person's ability or inability to communicate effectively (2.97), and an individual's personality type (2.91), were some factors associated with the conflict management style of adolescents. Factors associated with family communication patterns as identified by the respondents included the religion of family members with a mean of 2.86, parent-child and sibling relationships (2.82), and communication skills of family members (2.78). Family communication pattern was significantly associated with conflict management styles of adolescents at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. The study recommended that a proper family communication pattern should be emphasized as it influences adolescents' conflict management style.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Family Communication, Adolescents, Conversation Orientation, Conformity Orientation

Introduction

Communication is a very important and useful aspect of society and those who are part of said society. Without

communication, there would be little advancement in many areas, such as the arts or culture. Communication according to Dyess (2017) simply

means to express and relay information, but how communication can be used to do this differs and takes many forms. From actual verbal communication to sign language, this allows individuals and communities to come together and share ideas, emotions, and sentiments. Communication according to Thakkar and Sheth (2014) refers to the process used by people to create and manage relationships. Communication is one of the processes by which family members work out and share their meanings. Through this interaction, the members define their own identities and their relationships with each other and the rest of the world. Communication shapes and alters the structure of the family system thus, play a crucial role in people's lives (Clark, 2015).

Family is viewed as the simplest unit in life, but the concept of family is complex with different scholars proffering diverging definitions based on structure, roles, responsibilities, relationships, functions etc. According to Anyakoha and Eluwa (2010), the family comprises groups of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption and characterized by common residence and economic cooperation. Every human being is a member of a family, at least in the sense of a biological membership. The family is the most important group which permits parents to provide children with different types of

stimulating interactions that equip them for their future responsibilities. Extensive and intensive relationships exist among family members (Anyakoha & Eluwa, 2010). This is because family living includes the sharing of work, play, feeding, rest, joy, cries, worries, and so on through various forms of communication.

Family communication refers to the way verbal and non-verbal information is exchanged between family members. Family communication is much more than just the exchange of words between family members. It has to do with facial expressions, gestures, posture and vocal tones. Family members communicate to exchange ideas, gain knowledge, and increase their understanding of others (Thakkar & Sheth, 2014). Evans (2004) suggests that parents should aim to develop a strong and healthy family communication pattern with their adolescents because it plays a significant role in helping families achieve more flexibility and adapt to changes. According to a 1972 publication by McLeod and Chaffee, family communication happens along two different continuums: concept orientation and socio-orientation. Concept orientation is the pattern of family communication where freedom of expression is encouraged, communication is frequent, and family life is pleasurable. Conversely, socio-orientation is the pattern of family communication where similarity is

valued over individuality and self-expression, and harmony is preferred overexpression of personal opinion (Wrench et al., 2023). Concept orientation and socio-orientation were re-conceptualized as conversation orientation and conformity orientation by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick in 1994. Conversation orientation (concept orientation) refers to how much family members are encouraged to engage in unrestricted conversation; whereas conformity orientation (socio-orientation) refers to how much families believe communication should emphasize similarities in attitudes, beliefs, and values (Smith et al., 2004).

To further explain the concepts of socio and concept orientations, McLeod and Chaffee broke the combinations into four specific categories of communication patterns namely; laissez-faire, protective, pluralistic and consensual (Wrench et al., 2023). Laissez-fair is a style of family communication in which there is no dialogue or uniformity, and families are emotionally estranged from one another. In most cases, children are left to make their own decisions without the involvement of their parents or caretakers. The protective pattern does not include dialogue but does involve conformity, in which parents or caregivers expect their children to follow the rules and do not trust them to make their own judgments. Pluralistic pattern includes discourse but not conformity. When the family

unit makes a decision collectively, everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute. Consensual is a family communication pattern characterized by dialogue and conformity, in which family members can openly communicate their opinions and feelings while also appreciating the conformity of the family unit (Cultivate Communication, 2020). Smith et al., (2004) stressed for pluralistic communication pattern since social harmony is maintained when children do not argue with adults or express opinions that are different from those of the family members. *All these play significant roles in the development of adolescents.*

According to the World Health Organisation (2017), adolescents are defined as children between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Adolescence is that phase of life when strong parent-child attachment is essential for the normal development of adolescents, biologically, and psychologically, but it can also be a period that is disruptive to family socialization (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). Adolescence is a vital period that will determine how a person will view and interact with the world as an adult (Ginny, 2016). Behaviourally, adolescence is associated with volatile emotions and boundary-testing behaviour as individuals explore and assert personal identity, learn to navigate peer relationships, and transition to independence (American Psychological

Association, 2017). Adolescence is also a significant period in regards to developing one's communication style, as parent-child communication during this period is believed to influence how an individual resolves conflicts and forms relationships with others in later life (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005).

Despite the relevance of communication between parents and adolescents globally, there are still myriads of challenges. Observations reveal that parents and adolescents belong to two different generations; parents are often unable to keep pace with changing social and technological developments, so they are unable to understand their adolescent children. At the same time, adolescents cannot understand the mindset of their parents who they feel have a very traditional mindset and are regarded as "Old School" (Effiong & Usoroh, 2020). This is the period when most parents blame their adolescent children for not listening to parental advice. Interactions with adolescents reveal that they accuse their parents of not taking time to understand them; there is thus an inability of both generations to communicate and understand each other. The incidence of insubordination of adolescents to family norms and leadership as well as parents' lack of control of their wards is alarming (Effiong & Usoroh, 2020). This inability to communicate effectively has been attributed to the escalation of conflict in the family.

Every relationship, even relationships with family members, will eventually have moments of conflict. Although all humans need personal relationships, a person's relationships can have problems and might not go well (Lertsuwan & Hale, 2018). According to Collins and Laursen (2004), conflict frequency and conflict intensity change during adolescence. For example, a meta-analysis showed that conflicts are most frequent during early adolescence and decline gradually thereafter (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020). Another study showed that the combination of more frequent conflict during early adolescence, more intense conflicts during middle adolescence, and the gradual change into more symmetrical parent-adolescent relationships might be reflected by changes in the way adolescents and their parents handle conflicts with each other during this period (De Goede et al., 2009). To maintain good relationships, conflicts need to be properly managed. However, adolescents might not always react appropriately when faced with a conflict.

Conflict refers to a clash of interests. The basis of conflict may vary but it is always a part of society. The basis of conflict may be personal, racial, political, international or family-related. Since the family is dynamic in nature, conflict in the family can take a wide variety of forms, including verbal, physical, sexual, financial, or

psychological. Since conflict is inevitable, importance is now placed on the management of conflict (Afzalur, 2011). Conflict management refers to the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. It refers to the process by which disputes are resolved, where negative results are minimized and positive results are prioritized (Alper al., 2000). Everyone, including adolescents, has different styles of handling, addressing, resolving and dealing with conflict. According to Thomas and Kilmann's MODE instrument, there are five modes of dealing with conflict along two dimensions of behaviour (assertiveness and cooperativeness). The five modes are: competing (assertive and uncooperative), collaborating (assertive and cooperative), compromising (moderately assertive and cooperative), avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative), and accommodating (unassertive and cooperative) (Howell, 2014). In avoiding style, some adolescents will postpone a deadline or refuse to decide or avoid confrontation and conflict, thereby giving both parties time to modify their attitudes and viewpoints, and the issue may dissolve on its own. The competitive style of conflict management takes a direct approach to dispute resolution, to resolve the disagreement as rapidly as possible. The accommodating approach is the polar opposite of the

competitive method, in which the disagreement is resolved by giving in to the other party. In a compromising style, both parties are encouraged to make substantial compromises, this by definition, means that neither party receives everything they seek. The collaborating style aims to discover a solution that meets the needs of all parties concerned (Amaresan, 2022). With properly managed conflict, adolescents together with their family and friends will be able to minimize interpersonal issues and improve relationships (Andreev, 2023).

Adolescent conflict is often a normative extension of conflict in early childhood relationships and a precursor to conflict in early adulthood intimate relationships (Narayan et al., 2014). This implies that adolescents and parents with a history of sensitive, responsive interactions and with high-quality relationships in childhood tend to experience temporary and minor relational difficulties during adolescence, whereas those in relationships of lower quality tend to experience more severe relational difficulties (Branje, 2018). In a study by Hadiwijaya et al (2017), adolescents reported turbulent relationships with parents characterized by low support and high conflict. According to Tucker et al. (2003), adolescents who have more conflicts with their parents have more externalizing and internalizing problems; lower levels of self-esteem, well-being, and adjustment to school;

and more frequent substance use. These incidences of conflict among adolescents as opined by Ambhore (2022) could be attributable to poor conflict management skills and negative communication in the family which in the long run could result in psychological and social problems in children as well as parents. This study, therefore, determined whether there is a relationship between how adolescents in Udenu local government area, manage conflicts and the communication patterns practised in their families.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of the study was to determine the relationship between family communication patterns and conflict management styles of adolescents in Udenu local government area. The specific objectives were to:

1. determine the family communication patterns of adolescents in Udenu local government area;
2. ascertain the conflict management styles of adolescents in the study area; and
3. assess and specify the relationship between family communication patterns and conflict management styles of adolescents.

Methodology

Study design: The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional study is a type of

observational study that analyzes data from a population, or a representative subset at a specific point in time (Setia, 2016).

Study population: The population for the study comprised 5,238 students in the 16 secondary schools in Udenu Local government area, Enugu State according to the information obtained from the Post-Primary School Management Board (PPSMB) Obollo zone (2022).

Sample size selection procedure: The WHO (2013) guideline for the calculation of sample size in a survey was used to obtain the sample size of 358 respondents. Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted in selecting the respondents for this research. In stage one, forty per cent (40%) of the 16 secondary schools were calculated giving a total of six schools. The six schools were selected from the list of schools using circular systematic random sampling. This is done by selecting every third school on the list. In the second stage, proportionate sampling was used to determine the sample size for each selected school. In the third stage, simple random sampling without replacement was used to select students for the study to give everyone an equal chance of being recruited. A five per cent (5%) increase in sample size was added to bring the sample size up to 376. The 376 students gave their consent and participated in the study.

Instrument for data collection: Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and two standardized questionnaires. The first standardized questionnaire called the Revised Family Communication Pattern (RFCP) Instrument was used to measure adolescents' family communication patterns. The RFCP consists of 26 items measuring two underlying dimensions of family communication patterns: Conversation orientation (15 items) and Conformity orientation (11 items). The responses are given on a 4-point scale from disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Using the scale scores, family communication types were categorized as having a high or low conversation and conformity orientation. The second standardized questionnaire, Conflict Style Questionnaire (CSQ) is a 25-item questionnaire that measures avoidance, competition, compromise, accommodation and collaborative management style. Responses were on a five-point Likert scale from never (1), to always (5). The instrument was to assess the respondents to determine their more dominant and less dominant conflict styles. The structured questionnaire was used to elicit information on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents.

Validity and reliability: The questionnaires were face and content validated by three lecturers in the Department of Home Science and Management, University of Nigeria,

Nsukka. Their corrections and their suggestions were considered in producing the final instrument. Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient of 0.79 was obtained from testing the instrument on 20 students in Nsukka local government area. This shows a fairly good internal consistency of the test items.

Method of data collection: The questionnaires were administered to the respondents by the researchers with the help of two trained research assistants. The questionnaires were distributed to the students by hand. Then the researchers and assistants returned on another day to collect them. Out of the 376 that were distributed, only 360 were returned. This gave a 96% return rate.

Data and statistical analysis: The participants' scores on the sub-scales of the RFCP instrument were summed to obtain a composite score for conversation and conformity orientations. The total obtainable scores for conversation orientation ranged from 1-60 and 1-44 for conformity orientation. Participants with a total score range of 1-30 on the conversation orientation were categorized as having low conversation orientation while scores from 31-60 reflected high conversation. For conformity orientation, a total score of 1-21 was categorized as low conformity and 22-44 indicated high conformity. These scores were then used to categorize respondents into different types of

family communication patterns as follows. Participants who scored low on conformity and conversation were categorized as laissez-faire pattern; those with low scores on conversation and high scores on conformity were classified as protective pattern; those who scored high on conversation and low on conformity were grouped as pluralistic pattern; and those who scored high on conformity and conversation were categorized as consensual communication pattern.

The data obtained was coded into the computer program Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS, version 23.0). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation were used for data analysis. The chi-square test was used to determine the relationship between categorical variables. A p-value < 0.05 was considered significant.

Results

Socio-economic/demographic characteristics of the respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents showed that there are 63.1% of females and 36.9% of males in the population. The majority (60.6%) of the respondents were aged between 14-17 years. A greater proportion (96.4%) of the respondents practice the Christian religion and 98.9% of them belong to the Igbo ethnic group. More than half (51.7%) of the respondents' fathers were secondary school graduates while 7.8% of them had no

formal education. More than a third (48.6%) of the respondents' mothers were secondary school graduates while 5.8% had no formal education. Trading was the major occupation for the respondents' parents (38.1% Fathers and 61.9% Mothers). A greater proportion (43.3%) of respondents had a household monthly income of less than ₦20,000 and 48.6% of them had a household size of 5-8 persons.

Family communication patterns

Table 1 shows the family communication patterns of participants. From the table, the majority (93.3%) of the respondents had a consensual family communication pattern followed by a pluralistic family communication pattern (3.1%), a protective family communication pattern (2.2%) and a laissez-faire family communication pattern (1.4%).

Table 1: Family communication patterns of adolescents

Family communication pattern	Frequency	Percentage
Laissez-faire	5	1.4
Protective	8	2.2
Pluralistic	11	3.1
Consensual	336	93.3
Total	360	100.0

Conflict management styles

Table 2 shows the conflict management styles of the participants. More than a third (35.6%) of the respondents had a

collaborative conflict management style, 32.8% had the avoidance style, 14.7% had the accommodation style, 9.2% had the compromise style and 7.8% had the competitive conflict management style.

Table 2: Conflict management styles of adolescents

Conflict management style	Frequency	Percentage
Avoidance	118	32.8
Competition	28	7.8
Compromise	33	9.2
Accommodation	53	14.7
Collaboration	128	35.6
Total	360	100.0

Relationship between family communication pattern and conflict management style

Table 5 shows the relationship between family communication patterns and the conflict management styles of the respondents. At $p < 0.05$ level of significance, there was a significant relationship between family communication patterns and the conflict management style of adolescents in the study area. Adolescents with avoidance conflict management style were mostly (62.5%) from families with protective communication patterns. The majority (81.1% and 80.0%) of respondents with collaboration resolution styles belonged to families with pluralistic and laissez-faire communication patterns respectively.

Table 5: Relationship between family communication patterns and conflict resolution styles of the respondents

Variables	Avoidance F (%)	Competition F(%)	Compromise F(%)	Accommodation F (%)	Collaboration F (%)	Total
Laissez-faire	0 (0.0)	1 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (80.0)	5 (100.0)
Protective	5 (62.5)	1 (12.5)	11 (12.5)	0 (0.0)	11 (12.5)	8 (100.0)
Pluralistic	1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	9 (81.1)	11 (100.0)
Consensual	112(33.3)	25 (7.4)	32 (9.5)	53 (15.8)	114 (33.9)	336 (100.0)

$\chi^2 = 23.214, df = 12, p = 0.026^*$

χ^2 = Chi-square value; p = Level of significance; df = degree of freedom;

*Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$

Discussion

Communication within the family is extremely important because it enables members to express their needs, wants, and concerns to each other, especially when it is open and honest. The finding of this study showed that the majority of the respondents had consensual (high conversation and high conformity) family communication patterns in their households. This suggests that while family members are allowed to openly express their thoughts, feelings, and activities, parents are the final decision-makers about important issues. According to Cuncic (2023), tensions arise as a result of these two seemingly opposing tendencies, which are motivated by a desire to be open while maintaining control. The resultant effect is that although children come to value family interactions, they are however more likely to agree with their parents' beliefs and values (Lock, 2023). Consensual families also attempt to avoid conflict since it undermines the hierarchical system in which the parents make decisions for the family and the authority they wield (Cuncic, 2023). Supporting this finding, the result of a study by Lertsuwan and Hale (2018) showed that a greater proportion of participants have a consensual style of communication in their families. The findings of the current study also showed that few respondents had protective, pluralistic and laissez-faire communication patterns in their families. Children in protective households are taught not to publicly argue with their parents or engage in conversations where there may be conflicts of opinion. The mutuality of respect and shared interests that promote both competence and communication are emphasized in a pluralistic communication system. Children in laissez-faire families are likely to be influenced by external factors like the media and peers because there is little parent-child interaction (Wrench et al.,

2023). Supporting these findings, McLeod et al. (2002) identified laissez-faire, protective, pluralistic and consensual patterns as the four basic types of family communication patterns.

Since conflict is inevitable, importance is now placed on the management of conflict (Afzalur, 2011). Conflict management refers to the process by which disputes are resolved, where negative results are minimized and positive results are prioritized (Alper et al., 2000). The finding of this study showed that a greater percentage of the adolescents were high conflict managers as they mostly opted for collaborative or avoidance means to resolve conflicts. This implies that while most adolescents seek a win-win solution to conflict situations that leaves everybody satisfied, another percentage aims to reduce conflict by ignoring it, removing the conflicted parties, or evading it in some manner (Andreev, 2023). Supporting this finding, studies by Lertsuwan and Hale (2018), Howell (2014) and Mboya et al. (2016) showed that a collaborative conflict resolution style was preferred by the participants. According to Herrity (2022), a collaboration conflict management style is important, when several people are impacted by the resolution; when it involves an important relationship; and when the interests of all involved parties need to be considered. Similarly, a study by Drakulevski et al. (2020) also showed that the second preferred conflict management style is avoidance, which can result in negative feelings, additional problems, and unresolved situations, as well as a further delay of confrontations.

Findings of this study that showed competition style as the lowest preferred resolution method corroborates that of Drakulevski et al. (2020) in which the competing style was rarely used by the participants.

A competing style is a win-lose approach that relies on an aggressive style of communication, low regard for future relationships and coercive power.

In families with high conformity (protective and consensual), parents tend to avoid conflicts and disputes to preserve harmony and connectedness within the family, resulting in children who are unskilled communicators during conflict situations. On the other hand, high-conversation families allow children to express their opinions and engage in family discussions, resulting in children with communication skills that allow them to accept the opinions of others and defend their ideas (Lertsuwan & Hale, 2018). Findings showed that the protective communication pattern (high conformity) was associated with avoidance management style while the pluralistic pattern (high conversation) was associated with collaboration conflict resolution style. This suggests that during conflict situations, adolescents from families that encourage dialogue look for solutions that will satisfy both parties while those from families that emphasize conformance to family beliefs tend to ignore or withdraw themselves from conflict situations. Supporting this finding, a study by Dumalo and Botta (2000) showed that being in a protective family predicted avoiding style of conflict management while participants from pluralistic families recorded higher collaborating style. Similarly, a survey by Lertsuwan and Hale (2018), showed that respondents who reported protective communication patterns scored higher on the avoiding conflict management style compared to other groups. In this study, the Laissez-faire communication pattern was also associated with a collaborative management style.

The implication is that families that do not engage each other and allow children to make their own decisions are likely to

produce adolescents who strive for a win-win solution during conflicts. In contrast, the result of a study by Dumalo and Botta (2000) reported that participants with a laissez-faire pattern had lower collaborating conflict management styles. The finding further showed that consensual communication pattern was associated with collaboration and avoidance of conflict management styles. In other words, families that value conversation and enforce adherence to family values are likely to produce children who either avoid conflict or cooperate with conflicting parties to find a solution. This finding corroborates that of Lertsuwan and Hale (2018) which showed that participants with consensual patterns scored higher on collaborating and avoiding styles. Dumalo and Botta (2000) also reported that individuals from consensual homes had higher collaborating conflict resolution styles. Adolescents in consensual families are open and free to discuss with their parents, and parents also expect agreement from their children. This result suggests that when conflict arises, adolescents in the study vary in the conflict styles that they employ in response to the situation.

Conclusion

This study showed the relationship between family communication patterns and conflict management styles of adolescents in Udeno local government area, Enugu State, Nigeria. A consensual pattern of communication, characterized by high conversation and high conformity, was mostly practised by adolescents. They also usually engaged in the collaboration and avoidance styles of conflict resolution. The pattern of communication within their families was associated with the various conflict management styles adopted by adolescents.

Adolescents whose families practised protective patterns of communication patterns were likely to handle conflict by avoiding confrontations while those who practised the pluralistic pattern of communication showed more tendency for a more collaborative way of conflict resolution. The uninvolved or laissez-faire communication pattern also correlated with the collaboration style while the consensual pattern was associated with both collaboration and avoidance conflict management styles. This study, therefore, concludes that family communication environments encourage the creation of a relational framework that young people employ to manage conflicts in their relationships with other people.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study.

1. The government and primary school administrators should liaise and implement policies that will educate students and parents on the proper family communication patterns as well as better conflict management styles for adolescents to be better citizens in society.
2. Parents and pupils should be adequately informed of the benefits of a proper family communication pattern.
3. There should be further studies to examine the association between family communication patterns and conflict management styles of other members of the family

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