

Article

The Relationship between Parenting Styles and Preschool Children's Behavior: The Mediating Role of Preschool Children's Social-Emotional Competence

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Abstract: Parenting attitudes and specific parenting behaviors play a subtle yet fundamentally guiding role in the comprehensive development of young children's emotional competence and subsequent behavioral patterns. To systematically explore the influence of various parenting styles on preschool children's behavior, as well as to elucidate the underlying psychological mechanisms, this empirical study administered the Parental Rearing Style Scale, the Social-Emotional Assessment for Preschool Children, and the Child Behavior Questionnaire. The participants comprised parents of children recruited from the junior, intermediate, and senior kindergarten classes across two representative kindergartens. Following rigorous data screening, a total of 490 valid questionnaires were obtained for quantitative analysis. The statistical results demonstrated that parenting styles, preschool children's social-emotional competence, and their observable behaviors were significantly and intricately correlated with one another. Specifically, an authoritative parenting style indirectly promoted children's positive prosocial behavior by significantly enhancing their foundational social-emotional competence. In contrast, an authoritarian parenting style not only directly precipitated a higher incidence of problem behaviors in children but also partially influenced their behavior indirectly by undermining their social-emotional competence, thereby yielding an overall negative developmental effect. Furthermore, the study conclusively found that the stronger the social-emotional competence exhibited by preschool children in this region, the fewer behavioral problems they displayed, highlighting the critical mediating role of emotional regulation in early childhood development.

Keywords: parenting styles; child behavior; early childhood; mediating effect

1. Introduction

The renowned educator Chen Heqin once stated, "Children are not 'little adults.' Their psychology differs from that of adults. Childhood is not merely a preparation for adulthood but possesses its own value [1, 2]. We should respect children's personality and cherish their innocent nature." In his book *Family Education*, Chen Heqin also argued, "Early childhood (from birth to age seven) is the most important period in life. Habits, language, skills, thoughts, attitudes, and emotions all form their foundation during this period. If this foundation is not solidly laid, a healthy personality cannot easily be formed." The psychologist Adler similarly observed, "Adaptation to life and the environment (particularly parental upbringing) compels the child to integrate and unify his or her responses. This mode of response not only constitutes the child's character but also individualizes his or her actions and distinguishes him or her from other children." In other words, the preschool stage (ages 3–6) plays a critical role. It influences personality formation, behavioral habit development, and social development. Problem behaviors during this stage may also affect a child's future development. In recent years, China has paid increasing attention to emotional and behavioral problems among preschool children. Multiple surveys have revealed that these issues are common. In 2023, a survey

Received: 09 March 2026

Revised: 26 April 2026

Accepted: 09 May 2026

Published: 13 May 2026



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of 1,145 preschool children from four ordinary kindergartens in southern Hebei Province found that 23.82% of these children had emotional and behavioral problems. The prevalence was 26.23% among girls and 21.67% among boys. Another investigation of preschool children from ten kindergartens in Haidian District, Beijing found a similar detection rate, close to 20%. In 2021, a survey of children from twelve kindergartens in Hefei City reported the following detection rates: 15.5% for emotional symptoms, 23.2% for conduct problems, 22.4% for hyperactivity, 38.2% for peer relationship problems, and 29.5% for prosocial behavior difficulties [3, 4]. Some scholars have also studied Tibetan children aged 0 to 5. Their research shows that the detection rate of deviant psychological and behavioral development among these children is 24.68%. In the social domain, the detection rate of deviant development is 12.73%. Thus, emotional and behavioral problems among preschool children are becoming increasingly prominent. These problems urgently require focused attention. Both the healthcare and education sectors need to address them.

The family is the first and most important system children encounter during development. It has a direct and profound impact on preschool children's behavioral development. According to ecological systems theory, children's development is nested within a series of interacting environmental systems. These systems interact with the individual and influence development. They fall into five categories: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The family is one of the closest microsystems to the child. As such, it directly and foremost shapes children's behavioral patterns. While ecological systems theory explains which environmental factors influence children's behavioral development, it does not specify how the environment influences that development. Social learning theory fills this gap. According to this theory, most children's social behaviors are acquired through observational learning and imitation. Children learn social behaviors by observing the actions of significant figures in their lives. Parents are the most important influencers in early childhood development. They serve as initial models for children's socialization. A large body of empirical research shows that several factors are closely related to children's behavioral problems. These include family structure, the number of children in the family, family atmosphere, and parenting styles. Thus, problem behaviors in preschool children are not caused by any single factor [5]. Instead, they result from the interplay of multiple factors, including parenting styles and family structure. Many surveys and studies have fully confirmed that parenting styles are closely associated with children's behavior. However, research on the internal mechanisms behind this relationship remains relatively scarce. In particular, few studies have examined the mediating role of children's own factors—specifically, social-emotional competence. Social-emotional competence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, express, and regulate one's own and others' emotions. It also includes the ability to establish and maintain positive social relationships. This competence is one of the core abilities in early childhood development. It plays a fundamental role in school readiness and subsequent social adaptation. Therefore, this study has significant theoretical value and practical implications. It explores the internal mechanisms between parenting styles and preschool children's behavior. In the family environment, a key theoretical question deserves in-depth investigation: how do parenting styles influence children's behavioral performance through their social-emotional competence.

Based on ecological systems theory and social learning theory, this study constructs a mediation model. In this model, parenting styles influence children's behavior through their impact on children's social-emotional competence. From the perspective of ecological systems theory, the family is one of the most immediate microsystems that children encounter. Within this family system, parenting styles directly affect the development of children's emotion regulation abilities. These styles can be authoritative or authoritarian. Better emotion regulation then influences children's behavioral performance in broader social interactions. In addition, social learning theory helps us understand this mediating pathway. According to this theory, children acquire many behaviors by observing, imitating, and remembering the behaviors of significant others in

their environment. In terms of emotional management and behavioral regulation, children watch how their parents express emotions and act [4, 6]. They then gradually form their own emotional responses and behavioral strategies.

Based on the above points, this study proposes the following hypotheses: Parenting styles can significantly predict preschool children's behavior. Parenting styles can significantly predict preschool children's social-emotional competence. Children's social-emotional competence can significantly predict children's behavior [4, 7]. Children's social-emotional competence mediates the relationship between parenting styles and children's behavior. Different types of parenting styles may also exhibit different patterns of mediating effects.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were parents of children from the junior, intermediate, and senior kindergarten classes [8, 9]. These children attended two urban kindergartens. Data collection was conducted using the Questionnaire Star platform. Prior to the formal measurement, researchers provided detailed instructions on questionnaire completion requirements to the teaching affairs office of each kindergarten. The teaching affairs office then informed the homeroom teachers, who communicated the measurement content and requirements to the parents through class groups and distributed the questionnaire QR codes. A total of 544 questionnaires were collected, of which 490 were valid. The sample distribution was as follows: Parental education level: High school education or below: 24.3%; Junior college/vocational college degree: 15.1%; Bachelor's degree: 54.3%; Graduate degree or above: 6.3%. Child gender: Boys: 235 (47.96%); Girls: 255 (52.04%). Child grade: Junior class: 211 children (43.06%); Intermediate class: 86 children (17.55%); Senior class: 193 children (39.39%).

2.2. Measurement Instruments

Parenting Style Evaluation Scale: This scale has two dimensions: authoritative and authoritarian. It includes a total of 24 items. In the present study, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on this scale. The analysis yielded a KMO value of 0.907. Bartlett's test of sphericity reached a significant level ($\chi^2 = 4573.829$, $df = 253.000$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Two factors were extracted using the principal component method. The rotated factor loadings ranged from 0.529 to 0.789. All items loaded above 0.50 on their respective factors. The factor structure was consistent with the theoretical dimensions. Furthermore, the correlation coefficient between authoritative and authoritarian parenting was 0.142 ($p < 0.01$). This weak correlation demonstrates good discriminant validity between the two dimensions. In this study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) of the scale was 0.813.

Social-Emotional Assessment Scale for Preschool Children: This scale has six dimensions: empathy, interpersonal interaction, social adaptation, self-regulation, emotional expression, and autonomy. It includes a total of 21 items. The development process involved literature review, expert interviews, and kindergarten observation procedures, ensuring good content validity. Correlation analysis showed that the correlation coefficients between the six dimensions and the total scale ranged from 0.746 to 0.866 (all $p < 0.001$). The inter-dimension correlation coefficients ranged from 0.470 to 0.773. These moderate correlations suggest that the scale has good construct validity and discriminant validity. In this study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) of the scale was 0.927.

Child Behavior Questionnaire: This scale has three dimensions: extraversion/surgency, negative affectivity, and effortful control. It includes a total of 36 items. This questionnaire is the short very short form of the Children's Behavior Questionnaire. This short form is widely used internationally and has good content validity. Correlation analysis showed the following results. The correlation coefficients between the three dimensions and the total scale were 0.933, 0.938, and 0.845, respectively

(all $p < 0.001$). The inter-dimension correlation coefficients ranged from 0.663 to 0.681 ($p < 0.001$). These moderate correlations suggest that the scale has good construct validity and discriminant validity. In this study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) of the scale was 0.932.

2.3. Common Method Bias Test

To examine whether common method bias existed in this study, Harman's single-factor test was conducted using unrotated exploratory factor analysis on all items [10]. The results showed that the first factor accounted for 16.493% of the total variance, which is well below the critical threshold of 40% or 50%, indicating that common method bias was not a serious problem in this study.

2.4. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for the variables in this study are presented in Table 1. Authoritative parenting was significantly positively correlated with children's social-emotional competence ($r = 0.463$, $p < 0.001$), but its correlation with children's behavior was not significant ($r = 0.070$, $p = 0.124$). Authoritarian parenting was significantly positively correlated with children's social-emotional competence ($r = 0.126$, $p = 0.005$) and significantly negatively correlated with children's behavior ($r = -0.206$, $p < 0.001$). Children's social-emotional competence was significantly positively correlated with children's behavior ($r = 0.207$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients among Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Authoritative parenting	3.92	0.51	-			
Authoritarian parenting	3.77	0.48	0.142**	-		
Children's social-emotional competence	3.99	0.48	0.463***	0.126**	-	
Children's behavior	4.99	0.78	0.070	-0.206***	0.207***	-

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

2.5. Mediation Effect Analysis

We used the SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 4) to test the mediating effects. Specifically, we tested whether children's social-emotional competence mediated the relationship between parenting styles and children's behavior. We examined two types of parenting styles: authoritative parenting and authoritarian parenting. We conducted bootstrap resampling with 5,000 iterations and calculated 95% confidence intervals.

2.5.1. Mediation Model for Authoritative Parenting

We conducted a mediation analysis in which authoritative parenting served as the independent variable, children's social-emotional competence acted as the mediator, and children's behavior was the dependent variable [3, 11].

The results indicated that the indirect effect was significant. Authoritative parenting influenced children's behavior through children's social-emotional competence ($\beta = 0.103$, $p < 0.001$). However, the direct effect of authoritative parenting on children's behavior was not significant ($\beta = -0.033$, $p = 0.506$). This finding suggests that children's social-emotional competence fully mediates the relationship between authoritative parenting and children's behavior. In other words, authoritative parenting does not directly impact children's behavior but instead exerts its influence indirectly by enhancing children's social-emotional competence, which subsequently promotes positive behavior or mitigates problem behaviors (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mediation Effect Test of Authoritative Parenting on Children's Behavior

Effect type	Path	Standardized effect	SE	95% CI	p-value
Direct effect	$X \rightarrow Y$	-0.033	0.050	[-0.131, 0.065]	0.506
Indirect effect	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	0.103	0.024	[0.055, 0.150]	< 0.001
Total effect	$X \rightarrow Y$	0.070	0.045	[-0.019, 0.158]	0.122

Note: X = authoritative parenting, M = children's social-emotional competence, Y = children's behavior.

2.5.2. Mediation Model for Authoritarian Parenting

A mediation analysis was conducted with authoritarian parenting as the independent variable, children's social-emotional competence as the mediator, and children's behavior as the dependent variable. The results showed that the indirect effect of authoritarian parenting on children's behavior through social-emotional competence was significant ($\beta = 0.030$, $p = 0.013$), and the direct effect of authoritarian parenting on children's behavior was also significant ($\beta = -0.236$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that children's social-emotional competence partially mediates the relationship between authoritarian parenting and children's behavior. Authoritarian parenting not only directly and negatively predicts children's behavior—meaning that more authoritarian parenting is associated with more problem behaviors—but also indirectly influences behavior through children's social-emotional competence. Although the indirect effect is positive, the overall effect remains negative due to the negative direct effect (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mediation Effect Test of Authoritarian Parenting on Children's Behavior

Effect type	Path	Standardized effect	SE	95% CI	p-value
Direct effect	X → Y	-0.236	0.042	[-0.319, -0.153]	< 0.001
Indirect effect	X → M → Y	0.030	0.012	[0.006, 0.053]	0.013
Total effect	X → Y	-0.206	0.043	[-0.291, -0.122]	< 0.001

Note: X = authoritarian parenting, M = children's social-emotional competence, Y = children's behavior.

3. Discussion

3.1. Authoritative Parenting Indirectly Shapes Behavior via Children's Social-Emotional Competence

This study found that authoritative parenting on its own did not directly predict children's behavior in a significant way. Instead, its influence operated entirely through children's social-emotional competence. In other words, the mediating pathway played a crucial role. This result aligns well with ecological systems theory and social learning theory. Typically, authoritative parents are warm and communicative. They provide children with appropriate autonomy and explain things rationally. By doing so, they create a safe environment where young children feel free to express their emotions. These parents also teach children how to identify emotions, discuss them, and manage them effectively. Once preschoolers develop stronger social-emotional skills, they tend to exhibit fewer behavioral issues. Problems such as aggression and hyperactivity become less frequent. These children are also more likely to resolve conflicts in constructive ways. This mechanism appears to remain consistent across different cultural contexts. This finding underscores an important point: social-emotional competence serves as a protective factor for children, and this seems to apply across various settings.

Another noteworthy finding is that the overall effect of authoritative parenting on children's behavior was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.070$, $p = 0.122$). However, the indirect effect—mediated through social-emotional competence—was highly significant ($\beta = 0.103$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern indicates that authoritative parenting does not directly alter children's behavior. Instead, its positive influence is entirely indirect and somewhat hidden. The process unfolds as follows: authoritative parenting enhances a child's social-emotional competence, which includes skills such as recognizing, expressing, and regulating emotions [12–14]. This improved competence subsequently leads to better behavior and fewer problems over time. The key takeaway is clear: the benefits of authoritative parenting are channeled entirely through the development of social-emotional competence. To improve children's behavior, focusing on building their emotional skills is an effective strategy.

3.2. *The Two Sides of Authoritarian Parenting: Direct Harm and a Tiny Compensatory Boost*

Authoritarian parenting turned out to have two different kinds of effects. First, there was a clear and negative direct effect on children's behavior. Second, there was a small positive indirect effect that worked through children's social-emotional competence [12, 15]. What does that direct negative effect look like in real life? Parents who rely on physical punishment, yelling, or force tend to trigger anxiety, withdrawal, or defiance in young children. This matches conclusions from prior research. Now, what about the indirect positive effect? It was statistically significant, but we have to be honest about its size. The magnitude was very small ($\beta = 0.030$). This is the pathway where authoritarian parenting affects behavior by first shaping emotional competence. Why would that happen, even a little? One possible reason is the complexity of "strict discipline" in Chinese culture. Sometimes, moderate rules and limits help young kids learn to control their impulses. But let's be clear. This small positive effect is nowhere near enough to make up for the damage caused by authoritarianism. Overall, we have to conclude that authoritarian parenting is a risk factor when it comes to children's behavioral problems.

The analysis also revealed something that might seem surprising at first. There was a modest but statistically significant positive correlation between authoritarian parenting and children's social-emotional competence ($r = 0.126$, $p < 0.01$). At first glance, this looks odd. After all, we usually think of authoritarian parenting as leading to negative outcomes. How can we explain this unexpected finding within the current research context? Here are a few possibilities. On the one hand, some parents who score high on authoritarian traits might also offer their children a fair amount of emotional guidance and explanation. They are strict, yes, but not cold. This could reflect a locally flavored mix of control and care. On the other hand, we cannot rule out social desirability bias. Parents filled out these questionnaires themselves [16–18]. They might have unintentionally painted a rosier picture of their children's emotional skills. Or they might have downplayed how harsh their own parenting really is. Still, the mediation model gives us a clear bottom line. The direct negative effect of authoritarian parenting on children's behavior ($\beta = -0.236$) is much larger than its weak positive indirect effect ($\beta = 0.030$). So when you add these two pathways together, the net effect is still clearly harmful. Authoritarian parenting makes children's behavior worse, despite that tiny compensatory detour through emotional competence.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights three interconnected factors: parenting styles, preschool children's social-emotional competence, and children's behavioral outcomes. Social-emotional competence was found to fully mediate the relationship between authoritative parenting and child behavior, while it served as a partial mediator for authoritarian parenting. Authoritative parenting indirectly promotes positive behavior by enhancing children's social-emotional capacities. In contrast, authoritarian parenting directly exacerbates behavioral problems, with only a minor positive indirect effect that is insufficient to offset its overall negative impact. These findings support the core principles of ecological systems theory and social learning theory, demonstrating their applicability in the cultural context. Social-emotional competence emerges as a universal protective factor, effective across diverse cultural settings. Practically, parents are encouraged to prioritize fostering their children's social-emotional skills, reduce authoritarian practices such as physical punishment, and adopt an authoritative approach that combines warmth and encouragement with clear rules and expectations. Kindergartens can play a supportive role by implementing interventions like emotion-based lessons and structured parent training programs to facilitate the adoption of positive parenting strategies. A key takeaway from the full mediation finding is that parents should focus on building their child's emotional skills as a foundation, rather than addressing every behavioral issue reactively.

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, its cross-sectional design prevents definitive conclusions about causality. Second, the reliance on parent-reported questionnaires introduces the potential for social desirability bias, as respondents may have provided answers that reflect favorably on themselves rather than accurate accounts. Third, the sample was limited to children from urban kindergartens, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other populations, such as families in rural or nomadic settings. Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships, incorporating multiple data sources such as teacher ratings and direct observations to validate findings, and expanding the sample to include rural and nomadic populations to test the model's applicability across diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, the child behavior measure used in this study focused on temperamental tendencies rather than clinically diagnosed behavioral problems. Future studies should include clinical measures to further validate and extend these findings.

Funding: This work is part of a national-level student research project. The project was funded by the 2025 Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program for College Students at Xizang University (Grant No.202510694018). Its full title is "The Influence of Parenting Styles on Preschool Children's Emotions and Behaviors: A Case Study of Kindergarten Children in Lhasa City."

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