

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENT – CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AND ADOLESCENT PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

The patterns of relationships formed between parents and adolescents play a critical role in either the development or prevention of problem behaviors during adolescence. This study aims to explore the relationship between two aspects of positive parenting – **unconditional acceptance** and **positive discipline** – and adolescents' problem behaviors. A qualitative research design was employed, using in-depth interviews with a total of 20 participants: ten adolescents (aged 12–17) and their parents. The interviews explored the patterns of parent–child relationships, parenting styles, and the participants' perceptions of behavioral difficulties and their contributing factors. The findings suggest that both unconditional acceptance and the use of positive discipline by parents significantly affect adolescents' behavioral challenges. One notable result highlights the distinct contributions of each parent: positive discipline practices by fathers and unconditional acceptance by mothers appear to be particularly influential in reducing problem behaviors in adolescents. The analysis emphasizes the psychosocial resources that promote adolescent well-being and act as protective factors against risky behaviors. Based on the findings, the study proposes recommendations for professionals in the field of psychological counseling, particularly in work with parents, as well as for educational and preventive programs aimed at reducing adolescent behavioral problems.

Keywords: *Adolescent problem behavior, Parenting style, Unconditional acceptance, Positive discipline*

1. Introduction

Adolescence is one of the most dynamic and sensitive stages of human development, characterized by the intense interplay of biological, psychological, and social changes. During this period, the influence of the environment – particularly the family context and parent–child relationships – becomes increasingly significant in shaping adolescent behavior and psychosocial well-being.

Contemporary research emphasizes that warm, consistent, and empathetic parent–child relationships are associated with better emotional regulation, lower levels of aggression, more effective stress-coping strategies, and increased motivation for both academic and personal achievement (Ary, et.al., 1999; Chambers, et.al., 2001). In contrast, distant, inconsistent, or hostile relationships with parents significantly increase the risk of developing both externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, theft) and internalizing difficulties (e.g., anxiety, depression) (Hoeve, et. Al., 2009; Hoeve, et.al., 2011).

Modern theoretical approaches to adolescent psychosocial development recognize positive parenting as a key factor in fostering healthy adaptation. Positive parenting is

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grounded in two fundamental components: **unconditional acceptance** and the practice of **positive discipline** (Kaufman, et.al., 2000; Kaufman, et.al., 2020). Unconditional acceptance refers to recognizing and loving the adolescent as an independent individual, regardless of their behavior, thereby fostering a sense of self-worth (Coatsworth, 2015; Milevsky, et.al., 2007; Nelsen, J., 1981). Positive discipline, in turn, is based not on authoritarian control or punishment, but on empathetic, explanatory approaches and the setting of clear boundaries, which promote a sense of responsibility and the development of self-regulation skills (Khaleque, A., 2013).

Despite the extensive discussion of these topics in international literature, empirical evidence from Georgia remains limited. Existing data primarily focus on general parenting styles and rarely explore the specific links between parenting components – such as disciplinary practices or the degree of acceptance – and adolescent behavior. Moreover, differentiated analyses of maternal and paternal roles are particularly scarce, creating a significant research gap in this field (Dreikurs, 1999).

The present study, which employs a qualitative approach, aims to analyze the subjective experiences and perceptions that adolescents hold regarding their relationships with parents, particularly in the context of unconditional acceptance and positive discipline. The study involved in-depth interviews with adolescents aged 12–17 and their respective parent pairs. The interviews addressed topics such as the nature of parent–child relationships, disciplinary practices, the level of perceived support, and manifestations of problem behavior. This method allowed us to explore not only behavioral tendencies but also the personal interpretations that adolescents assign to their experiences of parental relationships and behavioral challenges.

2. Literature Review

The study of the adolescent problem behavior is one of the most relevant and complex fields in psychology. Problem behavior is defined as a deviation from social and/or legal norms that results in a response from mechanisms of social control, such as neglect, disapproval, condemnation, administrative punishment, or, in extreme cases, incarceration. This behavior is considered to be the result of the interaction between protective and risk factors across the biopsychosocial developmental spectrum. Common manifestations include aggression, theft, substance use, self-harm, and running away from home (Jessor, 1991).

Adolescence is a particularly sensitive period for the emergence of problem behavior due to the biopsychosocial transformations characteristic of this developmental stage. These transformations involve hormonal changes, increased emotional instability, impulsivity, and identity exploration (Berger, 2018; Gagoshidze, 2021). Adolescents at risk, such as those referred to the Juvenile Referral Center of the LEPL National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-Custodial Sentences, and Probation, likely have needs and characteristics that differ substantially from those in the general population. These adolescents often face multiple stressors, including poverty, domestic violence, and mental health issues. These factors must be considered when interpreting their behavior and perceptions. The

subjective experiences of this high-risk group are the central focus of this analysis (Center for Referral of Juveniles, 2024).

When examining the context of adolescent problem behavior, it is important to consider the form and quality of their relationships with their parents, as these relationships play a significant role in adolescent development. Adolescents strive to maintain an emotional connection with their parents while also seeking autonomy. Parental bonding significantly impacts adolescents' self-esteem, self-regulation, and internalization of social behavioral norms (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012).

Diana Baumrind's theory of parenting styles is a classic model that suggests different styles directly influence adolescents' behavioral and psychological outcomes. The theory classifies parental behavior based on two primary dimensions: level of control and expression of warmth (Baumrind, 1967; 1991). Based on combinations of these dimensions, the model identifies four major styles: authoritarian, authoritative, indifferent (neglectful), and permissive. Studies show that the authoritative style, which combines high warmth with moderate control, fosters adolescent independence and responsibility (Baumrind, 1991; Steinberg, 2001). In contrast, the indifferent and authoritarian styles are frequently linked to behavioral problems and psychological distress (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). While each style has its own characteristics, they all shape the relationship between parental behavior and adolescents' social and psychological adaptation. Thus, it is crucial to focus on discipline, one of the most practical and frequently applied aspects of parenting, which can be either positive or negative and significantly influence adolescent behavior and mental health.

Discipline is a vital component of parenting that shapes children's behavior. Positive discipline is based on empathy, explaining rules, and involving adolescents in decision-making (Gershoff, 2002). In contrast, negative discipline, which often involves punishment, threats, and control, tends to increase resistance, aggression, and distrust in family and school environments (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Recent studies confirm that positive discipline is more effective in motivating positive behavior and reducing negative behavior in adolescents (Kazdin, 2005). Therefore, understanding how adolescents perceive different forms of parental discipline is important, especially in contexts where parental acceptance – either unconditional or conditional – is a critical factor influencing emotional support and behavioral outcomes.

The way a parent expresses acceptance of their child's personality can have a significant impact on the child's psychological development and behavioral outcomes. Unconditional acceptance implies recognizing and lovingly accepting the child regardless of their behavior (Rogers, 1961; Rohner, 2004). This approach fosters adolescents' self-esteem, sense of safety, and emotional well-being (Rohner, 2004). In contrast, conditional acceptance communicates that a child's worth depends on their behavior and the extent to which they meet others' expectations (Rohner, 2004). Such parenting practices are often associated with anxiety, depression, and an increased risk of externalizing behavioral problems (Barber et al., 2010).

A review of the theoretical and empirical literature reveals a connection between parenting style, disciplinary approaches, and adolescents' behavioral and emotional develop-

ment. Baumrind's theory of parenting styles and related studies emphasize the impact of parental attitudes and disciplinary methods on adolescents' psychological well-being and social adaptation. The role of positive discipline and unconditional acceptance in fostering self-esteem and autonomy, as well as preventing problem behaviors, is particularly emphasized. In contrast, negative discipline and conditional acceptance are associated with internalizing and externalizing psychosocial difficulties. Based on this theoretical framework and empirical findings, the present study aims to explore how adolescents perceive different parental disciplinary approaches and parenting styles and how these perceptions relate to their behavioral and emotional responses. Additionally, the study aims to identify parenting practices that reduce the likelihood of problem behavior.

3. Method

1.1. Study Participants

Participant selection for this qualitative research was based on two main criteria: 1. Age – minors between the ages of 9 and 17 and their parents; 2. Behavioral problems exhibited by the adolescent, which led to their referral to the Juvenile Referral Centers of the LEPL National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-custodial Sentences, and Probation.

Prior to commencing the research, an official letter was submitted to the Center outlining the research objectives, and data collection began after obtaining formal consent.

The study involved 10 minors (aged 9–17) and their parents. Of the minors, 8 were boys and 2 were girls; among the parents, 7 were mothers and 3 were fathers. A verbal informed consent was obtained from each respondent to participate in the interviews. The purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained. All participants were informed in advance about the audio recording of the interviews. The interviews were conducted between May and June 2024.

1.2. Data Collection and Analysis

To collect qualitative data, **semi-structured in-depth interviews** were conducted. The average duration of each interview was approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were carried out in the premises of the Juvenile Referral Centers of the LEPL National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-custodial Sentences, and Probation – specifically in Tbilisi and Batumi.

After the data collection, full transcriptions of the interviews were prepared. In the next phase, **qualitative content analysis** was applied to systematically summarize the large volume of textual data and identify key findings.

Thematic content analysis followed these stages: **Extraction of condensed units of analysis** – reducing the text while preserving its essential meaning; **Coding** – assigning labels to describe each condensed unit of meaning; **Categorization** – grouping codes based on contextual and semantic similarities. Categories were developed to answer the questions: *What? Where? When? Who?* **Theme formulation**, based on the categories, interpretation of the data was conducted to answer the core research questions: *What? How? Why?*

4. Results

Based on the qualitative content analysis of interviews with parents and adolescents, several themes were identified and are discussed in the results section. These themes include: the parenting style used by parents and the nature of parent-child relationships in the past and present; adolescents' problematic behavior and how parents perceive its causes and strategies for managing it; adolescents' attitudes toward the behavioral control strategies employed by parents; and parents' perspectives on the potential future changes in their relationships.

4.1. Parenting Style and Parent-Child Relationships in the Past and Present

The analysis revealed that families of children with problematic behavior typically display three main parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent. Each style involves a different approach, but in all cases, negative effects on the child's behavior and personal development were observed. Parenting style also determines the quality of the parent-child relationship – in many cases, this relationship becomes conflictual and negative, reducing the chances for rational communication. According to the interviews, in some families, the mother and father adopt different parenting styles. One parent often exercises strict control, while the other shows a more lenient attitude:

“My dad is more of a ‘chill’ type, he takes everything philosophically. He doesn’t impose bans, while my mom is the opposite.” (Boy, 14)

“When mom forbids something, she supports me. For example, if dad takes away my phone, mom gives it back. I can ask mom for things and she usually agrees, but not dad.” (Boy, 13)

“When I did something wrong in the past, my mom would sit me down and explain, using examples, why something was wrong and what the right way would be. But my dad would immediately start yelling, he didn’t have the patience to explain. His solution was always prohibition – you can’t go here, you can’t go there.” (Boy, 14)

“My dad always expresses everything harshly and negatively, he wants me to do things out of fear, but that worked more when I was younger, not anymore. I’ve always had a closer relationship with my mom.” (Boy, 12)

The differences in parenting styles are linked to how children perceive each parent. Adolescents with problematic behavior often face difficulties at school or with law enforcement, but they tend to share these issues with the parent who expresses less criticism and more support:

“If there’s a problem, I tell my dad, not my mom. I tell him what started the argument and how things unfolded. I don’t tell mom. She gets really mad, starts yelling, and scolds me for not telling her earlier... So, I usually lie and say I didn’t do anything. Dad tries to explain – ‘this won’t help you, you won’t get anywhere that way’ and so on.” (Boy, 13)

“I have a very good and close relationship with my mom. I don’t think there’s a topic I can’t talk to her about. She’s my friend.” (Girl, 16)

“If my dad hears about a problem, he starts arguing and forbidding things, but I don’t even react to that anymore and do things my way. My mom gets mad too, but usually forgets quickly and tries to explain things. She also wants me to do things for her sake – like come home earlier or answer her calls. Sometimes I listen to her requests, sometimes, when I’m angry, I don’t.” (Boy, 14)

Some respondents do not share their problems with either parent. The reasons vary: some believe that opening up is a sign of weakness – an idea often reinforced by fathers, who promote the belief that “boys should solve their problems themselves.” Others refrain from sharing due to fear of negative reactions or concern for the emotional state of their parents. The research showed that some children have low expectations regarding parental support:

“I don’t know, why should I share my problems with anyone? Not with my dad or my mom... I solve them myself and will keep doing so in the future.” (Boy, 13)

“I don’t share my problems with anyone. I’ve been taught that snitching is shameful, so I deal with things on my own.” (Boy, 14)

“If I have a problem, I usually tell my mom, but I guess it depends on the problem. She reacts differently in different situations, so if it’s something serious, I might not tell her.” (Girl, 17)

“I usually don’t share anything – neither problems nor good news. They’re always tired and often don’t have the energy to talk. If something happens, I try to deal with it myself – not because asking for help is bad, I just want to learn to cope. I think too much openness is a bad thing.” (Boy, 14)

“One time I was falsely accused of vandalizing school property, and later it turned out someone else did it. But before that, my mom blamed me and scolded me.” (Boy, 12)

The interviews revealed that adolescents with problematic behavior often have a history of conflict with their parents. These conflicts include psychological and physical violence, prohibitions, tense conversations, and confrontations:

“In the past, I had more problems with my parents, we just didn’t understand each other. Once I even reported my dad – he was violent toward me. Compared to then, we have a much better relationship now.” (Boy, 14)

“I had a difficult relationship with my parents when I was a child. They also fought with each other a lot, constantly arguing.” (Boy, 15)

“Now I have a normal relationship with my parents. It’s not like it used to be. They react more reasonably now. The therapy helped both me and them a lot.” (Boy, 14)

The study also found that conflicts between minors and parents can stem not only from behavior but also from appearance. Many respondents have a non-traditional appearance

– colorful hair, tattoos, piercings, and unique clothing styles. These often provoke dissatisfaction among parents or other family members, leading to verbal insults and prohibitions. Children are compared to homeless people or described as shameful for the family:

“I’ve always had an edgy style. I used to change my clothes a lot. My parents didn’t like it and tried to forbid it, but that never worked.” (Boy, 14)

“My grandmother tells me almost every day how awful I look. She says, ‘God knows what the neighbors think of us.’” (Boy, 13)

In the families of the respondents, ineffective parenting styles – authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent – are common, often leading to conflictual and emotionally distant relationships with parents. Children tend to trust one parent more – usually the one who shows more empathy and less control. Parental attitudes often reflect traditional, sometimes violent, forms of discipline, with little emphasis on emotional regulation and support. The concealment of problems, lack of communication, and criticism based on appearance create an unstable psychosocial environment, which contributes to the intensification of risky behavior and the development of defense mechanisms rooted in mistrust toward parents.

4.2. Factors of Difficult Behavior and Management Strategies: Parents’ Perspective

During the interviews, we asked parents what they consider as a “difficult” behavior in their children. It emerged that some parents adequately assessed the difficulty of the behavior and described forms such as theft, suicide attempts, self-harm, conflicts with peers and teachers, and psychoactive substance use. According to parents’ experience, the difficulty of behavior manifested individually: in some cases during adolescence, while in others earlier.

“I think difficult behavior, in general, is behavior that harms both oneself and others. In my child’s case, it’s early alcohol use, smoking tobacco and substances, skipping school, and forming friendships with unclear backgrounds. I first noticed difficult behavior probably during the pandemic, which coincided with adolescence.” (Mother)

“They were 9 years old when I first noticed it. Difficult behavior is stealing. They leave home and don’t come back for several days.” (Mother)

“I think difficult behavior is frequent stealing; we are always at the police for questioning. They leave home and sometimes don’t come back for days or come very late. I never know where they are; they don’t answer the phone.” (Mother)

“His difficult behavior is that he has conflicts with teachers and fights with other kids.” (Father)

Despite this, several parents did not recognize the behavior as difficult and attributed it to childish mischief or age-specific traits:

“I don’t think he is a child with difficult behavior, he’s just a mischievous child. Problems arise because of that.” (Mother)

“This is just typical for his age. After some time it will sort itself out.” (Father)

Parents' narratives about the causes of difficult behavior are diverse. Some consider the absence of parental responsibility in child-rearing as their own fault, while others emphasize environmental factors and the child's personality traits. They also mentioned lack of attention from both parents, absence of the father figure, or association with a criminal environment negatively affecting the child. Parents pointed to differences in parenting styles within the family (for example, the mother's warm approach and the father's violent behavior), which also had a significant influence on the adolescent's behavior.

“In general, I think difficult behavior was caused by the environment and his character, both together... I am also heartbroken that he does not have a father... His situation worsened after my second marriage because there were constant conflicts.” (Mother)

“First of all, I think because I wasn't close to the children, neither was the father, this caused it... It's true I bought everything, but they lacked a different kind of attention.” (Mother)

“I think it's my social circle... at that time he befriended kids who didn't have good behavior.” (Father)

“Sometimes he shows this kind of behavior if he is feeling bad, and that's our fault.” (Mother)

Some parents were unclear about the cause or linked the behavior to technology use:

“I really don't understand why he behaves like this and what might have caused it.” (Father)

“I think his difficult behavior was caused by frequent phone use.” (Mother)

Some parents focused on the maintaining factors of the behavior, specifically family instability, negative peer groups, and adolescent age or personality traits.

Regarding difficult behavior management strategies, it emerged that in the past parents mostly used violent and punitive strategies – physical punishment, threats, insults – which, as they admit, were ineffective and worsened their relationship. Now they try to change their approaches and rely on specialists' advice.

“I used to shout, fight, even slap him... now I try to support and be patient. I treat him warmly... I'm afraid he might do something else.” (Mother)

“Once, because of these behaviors, I even hit him... Now there is some positive change, I try to explain and speak calmly.” (Mother)

Some parents consider sharing their own experience with the child and a dialogue-based approach more effective:

“Recently, we had a talk that I was young when I became a mother too... I tried every way to make him see some things.” (Mother)

“I try to make him realize what he does means. Fighting and shouting won’t work.”
(Father)

“When he does something, I prioritize talking first... but the child does more what is forbidden.” (Mother)

The interviews also revealed the influence of the family system – often a parent (mostly the mother) is detached from control over the upbringing process due to conflicts, differing opinions, and pressures within the family.

“The bad thing is that many people are involved in these methods – me, my husband, grandmother, and grandfather... When I try to explain or ask, my husband argues... grandmother and grandfather too... Often, they blame me.” (Mother)

Parents consider difficult behavior to include theft, running away from home, suicide and self-harm attempts, conflicts, and substance use, though some attribute it to age-related mischief. They identify causes both as personal responsibility – including emotional distance from parents and absence of the father figure – and environmental factors such as unhealthy peer groups, technology, and individual traits. Family conflicts and differences in parenting styles often underlie the problem. Past prevalent violent and punitive methods were recognized as ineffective, and parents have shifted toward dialogue-based strategies supported by specialists. The family system’s influence was evident, with mothers often feeling detached from the upbringing process due to other family members’ interference and conflicts.

4.3. Adolescents’ Reaction to Parents’ Behavior Management Strategies

Adolescents’ reactions to parents’ behavior management methods are varied. Parents’ accounts suggest that most adolescents respond negatively to aggressive approaches or show no reaction but continue the behavior. In cases of positive approaches, children generally respond positively. Strict or neglectful parental attitudes are often associated with distant relationships.

“When I talk calmly and quietly, he is happy and comes to kiss me; if I act otherwise, he gets angry, might slam the door and go to his room. When I change my behavior to a positive one, I recently notice he doesn’t tend so much toward bad things.”
(Mother)

“He doesn’t dare to tell me anything directly, but the next day he might leave home and not come back for a few days. Then I have to look for him yelling and making a fuss, bring him back home, and then it’s the same – endless cycle.” (Father)

“When we argue, he often tries to come at me aggressively, showing hostile reactions.” (Mother)

“At this stage, I often can’t find him; when I talk to him, I try to find out how he is, where he is, and who he is with. I ask what he plans to do. Now he says he’s looking for a job and wants to move out separately. I no longer try to interfere – I try to observe and wait for self-discovery. I hope he somehow manages to survive.” (Mother)

4.4. Desire for Change

At the end of the interviews, some parents expressed a wish that some things had gone differently in the past. Some admitted the negative aspects of their own behavior and wished their child had grown up independently – deciding their own upbringing style and form of communication. Some parents emphasized that they wanted more focus on the child's emotional or material needs, which they said they lacked due to the child's age.

One important theme was the stigmatized societal attitude toward adolescents with difficult behavior. Parents said their children often become victims of false accusations, insults, and violence from completely unknown people.

“Of course, I would want changes. For example, if I were older, I would be more focused on the child. I was 19, studying and working, and didn't understand many things; I was not stable. I would spend more time so that later he would be calmer and have more support.” (Mother)

“He had a conflict with the buffet seller, and the seller said, ‘You, street-raised kid,’ and my son responded aggressively. Since my child goes to the day center, he is not street-raised. If he were not on the street, he wouldn't be there exactly. There are thousands of circles there; he is busy all day.” (Mother)

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, we examined two core aspects of positive parenting – unconditional acceptance and positive discipline – determinants of adolescent problem behavior. The study's findings further underscore the critical importance of these two components. Unconditional acceptance from a mother fosters a secure emotional environment, trust, and openness, as well as a healthy self-esteem in adolescents. Positive discipline from the father, on the other hand, maintains a balanced approach encompassing boundaries, empathy, and involving adolescents in decision-making.

The research results revealed that families of adolescents with challenging behavior frequently exhibit maladaptive parenting styles, including authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent styles. Each style, with its own characteristics, fails to adequately address the child's emotional regulation, self-esteem, and healthy relationship needs. The authoritarian approach, based on control and fear, significantly damages relationships and often triggers protest, distancing, and distrust in adolescents. Permissive or indifferent styles cause unclear boundaries and deprive adolescents of an external meaningful framework, which is especially problematic for preventing high-risk behaviors.

Interviews also clearly showed that differing approaches between parents – one parent being strict and the other lenient – create an imbalance and disrupt the consistency of the parental figure in the child's eyes. As a result, the adolescent tends to choose one parent as the “helper” or “friend,” while perceiving the other as a source of control, punishment, or restriction. Children often share their problems with the parent who is less critical and more empathetic. This is further exacerbated, in some cases, by experiences of vio-

lence and stigmatization due to appearance, which intensifies conflicts between parents and children.

It is important to note that some children do not trust either parent with their feelings and problems – perceiving such communication as “listening” that they fear emotionally, or having low expectations of receiving support. These relationships indicate that the communication space is often unsafe and the child’s perspective is neglected.

Parents’ perceptions of their children’s challenging behavior vary. Some described serious problems (theft, self-harm, substance use), while others still attribute such behaviors to mere childishness. This points to different parental perceptions of the problem’s magnitude and highlights the need for adequate assessment.

Based on the results of the study, several recommendations can be made for professionals in the field of psychological counseling. These recommendations aim to strengthen the parent-child relationship and foster an environment in which adolescents feel safe and understood. Particular emphasis should be placed on promoting positive discipline and unconditional acceptance in parenting. During counseling sessions, efforts should be made to reinforce emotional acceptance and consistent, constructive disciplinary skills, because integrating these two aspects creates the most supportive environment for a child’s development.

In working with parents of adolescents with challenging behavior, psychocounselors play a crucial role in helping parents realize that extremely authoritarian or, conversely, permissive parenting styles harm the child’s emotional and social development. Support toward an authoritative style is essential, where clear boundaries are balanced with an empathetic attitude. Special attention should be given to promoting parents’ communication skills development, including active listening, empathetic responses, and non-judgmental approaches. Such an approach creates a safe and empowering communication environment for the child, where problems can be identified and addressed at early stages.

Work in psychocounseling should also focus on strengthening emotional regulation skills not only among adolescents but among parents as well. Supporting parents in understanding how to manage their own emotions in conflict situations and behave in ways that promote positive child development is important. Parents should be informed about the normality of physical changes during identity formation in adolescence and the harm of stigmatization and restrictions. Furthermore, counseling should promote agreement and consistency in parenting approaches between parents to ensure a stable and coherent family environment. It is particularly important to work with parents who minimize adolescents’ behavioral difficulties, as their informed engagement is critical for preventing long-term negative outcomes.

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