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Beyond Parental Behavioral Control: The Mediating Role of Child Disclosure in Adolescent Externalizing Problems

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Abstract

Externalizing problems are influenced by family dynamics, yet the specific mechanisms linking parental control to distinct externalizing problem behaviors remain unclear. This study examined the effects of parental behavioral control on proactive aggression, reactive aggression, and delinquent behavior, focusing on the mediating role of child disclosure. Data were collected from 3818 adolescents (aged 10–18) and their parents in Hong Kong. Results revealed that child disclosure served as a robust mediator. For mothers, full mediation was observed across all three outcomes. For fathers, full mediation was found for both subtypes of aggression, whereas partial mediation was observed for delinquent behavior. The indirect pathways were invariant across gender, suggesting the mechanism is universal. Notably, the model significantly predicted reactive aggression through a full mediation model from both mother and father. The study highlights the unique dual-pathway role of fathers—combining structural deterrence for delinquent behavior with relational communication for aggression and supports the efficacy of trust-based interventions for diverse externalizing problems. These findings suggest that effective parenting operates primarily by fostering a disclosure-promoting context rather than mere surveillance.

Keywords: parent behavioral control; child disclosure; adolescent; externalizing problems; proactive and reactive aggression; delinquent behavior; gender

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a significant developmental transition that is marked by massive changes in biological, psychological, and social reorganization [1]. Adolescence is a critical phase in personal growth, but at the same time, there is a deeper risk of accruing externalizing problems such as aggressive and delinquent behaviour [2]. Such behaviors in the short term have serious effects on psychosocial functioning, causing poor performance at school, peer rejection, and family conflicts [3–5]. Longitudinal studies consistently reveal that externalizing behavioral problems will cause adverse personal and social issues, such as increased lasting joblessness, societal mental illness, criminal offending, and substance abuse rates [6–8]. This highlights the necessity to view the problem as a compelling shift toward determining relevant, changeable protective variables in the ecology of an adolescent that promote adaptive family and individual resistance [9,10]. Family context has always been identified as the most ideal social environment where adolescents are socialized, especially from the relationship between parent and child [11,12]. The parental modeling and the emotional atmosphere provided by the family are the primary environments

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where children develop important skills in emotional regulation and social behavior [13]. Consequently, positive parenting practices remain a fundamental protective factor against behavioral and psychological risks [14]. There has been a substantial body of research showing that the overall parenting practice is one of the most important predictors of adolescent externalizing problems [15,16].

Influential work by Barber [17], published in 1996, provided a critical distinction between parental behavioral control and parental psychological control. Parental behavioral control is defined as the beneficial management of children's conduct through setting rules and supervision, while parental psychological control is considered a harmful practice involving manipulative tactics. Historically, the implementation of behavioral control was largely equated with parent monitoring. Parent monitoring, as defined by Dishion and McMahon [18], was the combination of practices that parents employ to monitor the lives of their children, including setting rules and actively seeking information. The theoretical basis was extended by the study of Stattin and Kerr [19]. Their most important discovery was that the information that parents had about the lives of their children was not a result of active monitoring, but a result of the voluntary disclosure on behalf of the adolescents. Thus, the parents ceased to be the central focus of the field, and the quality of the parent–child relationship became its central focus [20,21]. Later studies have also concurred with this point of view by showing that successful parental monitoring is related more significantly to adolescent disclosure than to conventional monitoring techniques, which tend to assume that the parents participate in control practices [5,22,23]. Parental behavioral control represents the structural component of parenting, including the active setting of boundaries and rules to limit opportunities for deviance [24]. In the context of adolescent externalizing problems, emotional warmth provides a supportive background, but effective intervention requires distinct regulatory processes.

To understand the effectiveness of parenting practices on externalizing problems, it is crucial to distinguish between different forms of externalizing problem behaviors. Externalizing problems include aggressive behavior and delinquent behavior, with the aggressive behavior further divided into two subtypes, reactive aggression and proactive aggression. Existing evidence suggests that there is a difference in developmental patterns between proactive and reactive aggression and delinquent behavior [25,26]. Specifically, delinquent behavior, including non-aggressive rule-breaking, frequently reflects the developmental peak in sensation-seeking and autonomy assertions [27]. Importantly, delinquency is differentially related to the two forms of aggression: proactive aggression shows strong and consistent associations with both violent and non-violent delinquent behavior, whereas reactive aggression is more variably linked to delinquency and often co-occurs with emotional and interpersonal difficulties [28]. Proactive aggression often functions as a goal-oriented strategy to establish social dominance within increasingly complex adolescent peer hierarchies [4]. Research indicates that adolescent proactive aggression is associated with callous-unemotional traits, moral disengagement, low empathy, and stable patterns of antisocial behavior, distinguishing it from the emotionally reactive nature of reactive aggression [4,28]. Proactive aggression and delinquent behavior are typically characterized as instrumental, driven by outcome expectations and social-learning [3,29,30]. On the other hand, reactive aggression is indicated by an impulsive, defensive response influenced by emotional dysregulation and hostile attribution bias [29,30]. Empirical research consistently shows that adolescent reactive aggression is closely linked to heightened negative emotionality, anxiety, impulsivity, and emotion regulation difficulties, suggesting that it reflects problems in affective and stress-response systems rather than antisocial intention [4,26,30]. Considering that reactive aggression is a result of internal deficits in emotions, and the instrumental behaviors, including proactive aggression and delinquent behavior, are a

result of learned external consequences, they are prone to varied mechanisms in the process of parenting [28,31]. A unitary approach to such behaviors as antisocial behavior overlooks the differing etiological pathways and does not portray the holistic process of parenting influence. Consequently, it is essential to establish a comprehensive model that simultaneously examines the relationships between parental control and these three distinct forms of externalizing problems: delinquent behavior (non-aggressive rule-breaking behaviors), proactive aggression (instrumental, goal-oriented acts), and reactive aggression (impulsive adverse reactions to the perceived threat).

Current studies suggest that parental behavioral control is effective in constraining planned, goal-oriented behaviors. For instance, research has found that paternal behavioral control exerts a deterrent effect on delinquent behavior [21,27,32,33]. However, evidence regarding reactive aggression remains inconsistent. One study indicates that rule-based parental control is ineffective in intervening in emotion-driven aggressive responses [31]. This is because reactive aggression often occurs under immediate emotional arousal, making it difficult for external rules to directly modify internal emotional processes. Meanwhile, another study has found that parental behavioral control positively predicts adolescents' proactive and reactive aggression [30]. These contradictory findings suggest that examining the direct effects of control alone may be insufficient. However, relying solely on parental action is often insufficient during adolescence, a period marked by increasing autonomy and privacy. Child disclosure may be the key factor explaining these inconsistent results, as it might reflect the adolescent's active agency in the parent–child transaction. Stattin and Kerr's work proposed that the protective effect of control depends on the child's willingness to share information voluntarily [19]. From this perspective, the behavioral control is not only constraining but also forms the expression of concern and investment from parents. In the Hong Kong context, it has been found that adolescents exhibit higher well-being levels when the behavioral control is high and psychological control is low [34]. In the Chinese culture, behavioral control is commonly considered a good socialization tactic, offering behavioral boundaries as well as being a reflection of parental contribution and expectation. More importantly, the function of self-disclosure may vary depending on the behavioral outcome. For delinquent behavior and proactive aggression, disclosure provides parents with critical information to intervene in the peer environment. For reactive aggression, we propose that child disclosure can act as an emotional support and co-regulatory process, which can solve the emotional malregulation of reactive aggression. In the present study, we hope to provide a more precise examination of the functional process of parental supervision: how rules are set and how information is exchanged, which is theoretically distinct from the emotional climate of the family.

Boys and girls are raised within distinct communicative cultures. Girls are usually taught to express their emotions and be intimate; on the other hand, boys tend to repress their feelings [35]. Consistent with this, current studies always report that boys show higher-level delinquent behavior and proactive aggression than girls [27,28]. Nonetheless, the gender differences in reactive aggression are less coherent as studies found similar scores in boys and girls [25,30]. This contradiction indicates that reactive aggression is an emotion-based reaction that can have cross-gender universalism. Therefore, whether parental control influences externalizing problem behaviors via child disclosure, and whether this mechanism varies by gender, requires empirical verification.

Building directly on these identified gaps, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive, nuanced model. We move beyond examining simple associations to formally test a moderated mediation model. We hypothesize that child disclosure is the key mechanism explaining how parental control leads to fewer externalizing problems, while this mechanism is conditional upon both the type of outcome (proactive aggression, reactive

aggression, or delinquent behavior) and the gender of the adolescent. We propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *Parental control and child disclosure show a significant negative correlation with proactive aggression and delinquent behavior, but no significant association with reactive aggression.*

Hypothesis 2: *Child disclosure will mediate the relationship between parental control and externalizing problems.*

Hypothesis 3: *The indirect effect of parental control on proactive aggression and delinquent behavior through child disclosure would be significant and stronger for girls compared to boys.*

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Initially, 3818 adolescents (1933 boys and 1885 girls), aged 10 to 18 years (M = 13.19; SD = 1.18), completed the questionnaire survey. The study invited all middle schools in Hong Kong to participate in this study on school violence. 94 out of 800 schools accepted the invitation; 10 were randomly selected for inclusion. This random selection minimized selection bias and ensured the representativeness of the sample across diverse school settings and socio-cultural backgrounds within the adolescent population in Hong Kong. Additionally, 5381 biological parents, including 3238 mothers aged 26 to 65 (M = 42.83; SD = 4.96) and 2314 fathers aged 31 to 78 (M = 48.08; SD = 6.49) of the adolescents, completed a questionnaire survey. All participants were Chinese residents of Hong Kong.

2.2. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee of the City University of Hong Kong (Reference No.: 3-12-202003-02). Informed consent was obtained from the parents of all participants. Both participants and parents were informed that the purpose of the study was to explore the behaviors and needs of adolescents in Hong Kong. They were clearly informed that the survey was anonymous, participation was entirely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study without any negative effects at any time.

Data collection was conducted during school hours by trained research assistants. Participants completed the self-report questionnaires in a controlled and private environment with minimal distractions. Participants were given standardized instructions, and trained research assistants were available to answer questions and ensure that questionnaires were completed independently. Students were instructed to answer truthfully and were encouraged to provide subjective responses. No teachers were present in the classroom to avoid influencing the students' responses. For parents, questionnaires were taken home by the students and returned in sealed envelopes after being filled out independently by each parent. After completion, all questionnaires were collected and kept securely for analysis. Given the sensitive nature of items regarding aggression and behavioral problems, students were encouraged to contact their school counselors if they felt distressed after participating in the study.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Reactive–Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (RPQ)

The RPQ [28] was used to assess children's reactive aggression and proactive aggression. The Chinese version of the RPQ [25] was adopted. The measure consisted of 23 behavioral items rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = *never*; 1 = *sometimes*; 2 = *often*), with 11 items for reactive aggression (e.g., "reacted angrily when provoked by others") and

12 items for proactive aggression (e.g., "hurt others to win a game"). Scores were summed to form measures of reactive aggression and proactive aggression, ranging from 0 to 69. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .80 for Reactive Aggression and 0.84 for Proactive Aggression.

2.3.2. Child Behavior Checklist—Youth Self-Report (CBCL-YSR)

Externalizing problems were measured by the CBCL-YSR [36]. The Chinese version of the CBCL-YSR translated by Leung in 2006 [37] was applied. Respondents rated items according to how they felt at that moment or within the past three months on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true or often true*). Aggressive behavior was measured by the Aggressive Behavior subscale (CBCL-Aggressive, 19 items, e.g., "I destroy things belonging to others"), and delinquent behavior by the Delinquent Behavior subscale (CBCL-Delinquent, 11 items, e.g., "I lie or cheat"). Scores from subscales were summed to produce a total score for externalizing problems (CBCL-Externalizing Problems), with a possible range from 0 to 60. Higher scores indicate more severe externalizing behavioral issues. The Chinese version of the CBCL-YSR has demonstrated consistent reliability and validity across similar samples [38,39]. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these subscales were .85 for CBCL-Aggressive behavior, .68 for CBCL-Delinquent behavior, and .88 for Externalizing Problems.

2.3.3. Parental Control and Child Disclosure

The parent questionnaire consisted of demographic items and questions related to parent control and child disclosure, developed by Stattin and Kerr [19]. Items were back-translated into Chinese by the authors [40]. Using a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *never*; 1 = *seldom*; 2 = *sometimes*; 3 = *often*; 4 = *usually*). Parents answered 6 items on parent control (e.g., "You demand that you know where your child is in the evenings, who he/she is going to be with, and what he/she is going to do") and 5 items on child disclosure (e.g., "Your child spontaneously tells you about his/her friends (which friends he/she hangs out with and how they think and feel about various things)"). Scores were summed to make a total score for parent control (ranging from 0 to 24) and child disclosure (ranging from 0 to 20). Cronbach's alpha coefficients in the present study were .87 for Parent Control and .61 for Child Disclosure. As Cronbach's alpha is sensitive to the number of items, scales with few items often have lower alpha values [41]. Hence, the coefficient of .61 suggests acceptable reliability.

2.4. Data Analysis

All data were statistically analyzed using SPSS v.29.0. All statistical tests were two-tailed with the significance level set at $p < 0.05$. First, the normality of the data distributions was assessed. While most study variables showed satisfactory normality (Skewness and Kurtosis within ± 2), proactive aggression (Skewness = 4.50; Kurtosis = 28.71) and delinquent behavior (Skewness = 2.12; Kurtosis = 8.32) exhibited non-normality. However, considering the large sample size of the current study ($N > 3000$), independent *t*-test and Pearson correlation are considered robust to deviations from normality [42]. We used pairwise deletion to handle missing values to maximize the use of all available data and ensure statistical power.

To better examine gender differences in both externalizing problems and parental variables, the independent *t*-tests were conducted with adolescent gender as the grouping variable. To test Hypothesis 1, we calculated Pearson correlation coefficients to examine the bivariate associations between parental control, child disclosure, and the transformed outcomes of proactive aggression, reactive aggression, and delinquent behavior. To further explore gender discrepancies in these variables, a series of independent samples *t*-tests was

conducted. To test Hypothesis 2, which proposed the mediating role of child disclosure, we utilized the PROCESS macro (v. 4.2) for SPSS (Model 4). This analysis examined whether child disclosure mediated the relationship between parental control and the outcomes of proactive aggression and delinquent behavior based on the model proposed by Stattin and Kerr [19]. Finally, for Hypothesis 3, we conducted moderated mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 14) to test whether adolescent gender moderated the indirect effect of parental control on externalizing problems through child disclosure. Adolescent age and parent age were included as covariates in all Model 4 and Model 14 analyses to control for developmental and generational effects. All mediation-based models utilized 5000 bootstrap samples to generate 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the estimation of indirect effects.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Independent T-Test

The descriptive statistics were presented in Table 1. Maternal control was slightly higher than paternal control. Similarly, child disclosure to mothers was higher than to fathers.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Independent *t*-test by gender.

	M (SD)			*Independent T-Test*	
	Total (N = 3818)	***Boy (N = 1933)***	***Girl (N = 1885)***	***t (df)***	**Cohen's *d***
Parental Variables					
Maternal control	22.65 (6.38)	22.04 (6.55)	22.79 (6.25)	−3.29 (3190) **	−0.12
Paternal control	21.70 (6.42)	21.28 (6.44)	21.83 (6.41)	−2.04 (2285) *	−0.09
Child disclosure to mother	17.17 (3.80)	16.77 (3.73)	17.58 (3.83)	−6.05 (3207) ***	−0.21
Child disclosure to father	16.39 (3.60)	16.14 (3.49)	16.64 (3.70)	−3.35 (2291) ***	−0.14
Adolescent's Variables					
RPQ-Reactive aggression	4.50 (3.45)	4.52 (3.71)	4.48 (3.17)	0.38 (3816)	0.01
RPQ-Proactive aggression	0.82 (2.05)	1.15 (2.50)	0.49 (1.32)	10.26 (3816) ***	0.33
CBCL-Aggressive behavior	6.45 (5.33)	6.58 (5.61)	6.31 (5.03)	1.56 (3816)	0.05
CBCL-Delinquent behavior	2.29 (2.31)	2.48 (2.48)	2.09 (2.12)	5.32 (3816) ***	0.17

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation. Statistical significance is indicated by * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Cohen's *d* represents the effect size. Positive values indicate higher scores for boys; negative values indicate higher scores for girls.

In terms of adolescents' behavior, the average score for reactive aggression ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 3.45$) is significantly higher than proactive aggression ($M = 0.82$, $SD = 2.05$). For externalizing problems assessed by the CBCL, the mean score for delinquent behavior was 2.29 ($SD = 2.31$), and for aggressive behavior was 6.45 ($SD = 5.33$). Although the mean scores suggest a non-clinical community sample on average, the substantial standard deviations and wide ranges indicate significant individual heterogeneity, with a subset of adolescents exhibiting elevated levels of externalizing problems.

In order to investigate the gender difference, independent samples t-tests were conducted (Table 1). Results suggested that compared to girls, boys had significantly more proactive aggression with a moderate small effect (Cohen's $d = 0.33$), and delinquent behavior with a small effect (Cohen's $d = 0.17$). There was no significant gender difference in reactive aggression and aggressive behavior ($p > 0.05$). We also found significant gender differences in parenting variables. According to reports from mothers (Cohen's $d = -0.12$), and from fathers (Cohen's $d = -0.09$), the negative *t*-values and Cohen's *d* values indicate that the mean scores for girls were higher than for boys on these variables. Similarly, both mothers and fathers reported that daughters disclosed more information than sons. However, the effect sizes for all these parenting style differences were small.

3.2. Correlations

Pearson correlations were conducted to determine the relationship between parent control and child disclosure, reactive and proactive aggression, and externalizing behavioral problems. The correlation matrix of the variables was presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Maternal control	1							
2	Paternal control	0.35 ***	1						
3	Child disclosure to mother	0.62 ***	0.31 ***	1					
4	Child disclosure to father	0.21 ***	0.58 ***	0.35 ***	1				
5	RPQ-Reactive aggression	−0.01	−0.07 ***	−0.02	−0.06 **	1			
6	RPQ-Proactive aggression	−0.05 **	−0.11 ***	−0.07 **	−0.08 ***	0.50 ***	1		
7	CBCL-Aggressive behavior	−0.04 *	−0.12 ***	−0.05 *	−0.09 ***	0.67 ***	0.51 ***	1	
8	CBCL-Delinquent behavior	−0.06 **	−0.16 ***	−0.10 ***	−0.11 ***	0.53 ***	0.59 ***	0.67 ***	1

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

Results from Pearson correlations suggested that both maternal and paternal control showed significant but negligible negative associations with proactive aggression, aggressive behavior, and delinquent behavior. But both maternal and paternal control showed a non-significant association with reactive aggression. Moreover, child disclosure to mother showed a weak negative correlation with proactive aggression and a comparatively stronger association with delinquent behavior. Child disclosure to father also presented negligible associations with reactive aggression, proactive aggression, and aggressive behavior, but with a weak association with delinquent behavior.

In contrast to the weak associations found with behavioral outcomes, correlations among family process variables were notably stronger. Specifically, maternal control showed a moderate positive correlation with child disclosure to mother ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, paternal control was strongly correlated with child disclosure to father ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). Inter-parental consistency was also evident, with a moderate correlation between maternal and paternal control ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and a moderate association between disclosure to mothers and fathers ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$).

3.3. Separate Group Correlation

To further investigate the gender difference, Pearson correlations were conducted separately for both genders (Table 3). For boys (below diagonal), maternal control didn't show significant correlations with adolescent outcomes. Paternal control had weak correlation with delinquent behavior and a negligible correlation with proactive aggression. Child disclosure to mother and father showed weak but significant negative correlations with delinquent behavior, and negligible associations with proactive aggression, but not with reactive aggression or aggressive behavior. For girls (above diagonal), a similar pattern emerged, but with some distinct differences. Notably, for girls, paternal control showed comparatively stronger associations with four behavioral outcomes, particularly for delinquent behavior ($r = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$) and aggressive behavior ($r = -0.17$, $p < 0.01$). Disclosure to mothers was significantly negatively correlated with aggressive behavior and delinquent behavior. Girls' disclosure to fathers was significantly negatively correlated with all four externalizing outcomes. Overall, while maternal control showed negligible direct associations with behavior for both genders, paternal control and parent–child disclosure emerged as consistent correlates of lower externalizing problems.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix grouped by boys and girls.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Maternal control	1	0.32 **	0.61 **	0.21 **	−0.02	−0.05	−0.05	−0.09 **
2	Paternal control	0.37 **	1	0.29 **	0.59 **	−0.09 **	−0.11 **	−0.17 **	−0.19 **
3	Child disclosure to mother	0.63 **	0.31 **	1	0.34 **	−0.04	−0.06	−0.09 **	−0.12 **
4	Child disclosure to father	0.21 **	0.57 **	0.35 **	1	−0.09 **	−0.09 **	−0.13 **	−0.11 **
5	RPQ-Reactive aggression	−0.01	−0.05 *	0.01	−0.03	1	0.41 **	0.66 **	0.48 **
6	RPQ-Proactive aggression	−0.04	−0.09 **	−0.07 *	−0.06 *	0.56 **	1	0.43 **	0.44 **
7	CBCL-Aggressive behavior	−0.03	−0.07 **	−0.02	−0.04	0.68 **	0.58 **	1	0.64 **
8	CBCL-Delinquent behavior	−0.03	−0.12 **	−0.07 *	−0.11 **	0.56 **	0.66 **	0.69 **	1

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. *Correlations among boys are presented below the diagonal. Correlations among girls are presented above the diagonal. Sample sizes vary due to pairwise deletion (Ns range from 988 to 1933 for boys and 933 to 1885 for girls).*

3.4. Mediation Analysis

3.4.1. The Mediating Role of Mother-Child Disclosure

The results for maternal control presented a full mediation model across all three outcomes, after controlling for adolescents' gender and age, and mothers' age. Regarding the covariates, adolescent's gender ($B = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$) and age ($B = -0.30$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly and positively associated with the mediator (child disclosure to mother). Additionally, gender significantly and negatively correlated with proactive aggression ($B = -0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and delinquent behavior ($B = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$), while mother's age was not a significant covariate in any model. In the main mediation model, maternal control significantly and positively predicted child disclosure to mother ($B = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, child disclosure to mother was negatively associated with reactive aggression ($B = -0.07$, $p < 0.001$), proactive aggression ($B = -0.05$, $p < 0.001$), and delinquent behavior ($B = -0.09$, $p < 0.001$). Crucially, the Bootstrap Confidence Intervals for the indirect effects did not include zero for any of the outcomes (Reactive aggression: effect = −0.014, 95% CI [−0.022, −0.008]; Proactive aggression: effect = −0.010, 95% CI [−0.014, −0.006]; Delinquent behavior: effect = −0.018, 95% CI [−0.023, −0.014]), confirming significant mediation. Furthermore, the direct effects of maternal control on all adolescent outcomes were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the protective effect of maternal control on externalizing problems operates primarily through the promotion of mother-child disclosure.

3.4.2. The Mediating Role of Father-Child Disclosure

The results for paternal control presented a mixed pattern of mediation, after controlling for adolescent's age, gender, and father's age. Regarding covariates, adolescent's gender ($B = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$) and age ($B = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$) significantly correlated with child disclosure to father. Gender also significantly associated with proactive aggression ($B = -0.60$, $p < 0.001$) and delinquent behavior ($B = -0.33$, $p < 0.001$), while father's age was not significant. In the mediation analysis, paternal control significantly and positively correlated with father-child disclosure ($B = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, child disclosure to father was significantly and negatively associated with reactive aggression ($B = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$), proactive aggression ($B = -0.03$, $p < 0.05$), and delinquent behavior ($B = -0.05$, $p < 0.001$). The Bootstrap CI for the indirect effects did not include zero for any of the outcomes (Reactive aggression: effect = −0.010, 95% CI [−0.019, −0.002]; Proactive aggression: effect = −0.006, 95% CI [−0.010, −0.001]; Delinquent behavior: effect = −0.009, 95% CI [−0.014, −0.004]), confirming significant mediation across all models. However, unlike the maternal model, the mediation model varied by outcome. Full mediation was observed for reactive and proactive aggression, as the direct effects of paternal control were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, for delinquent behavior, the direct effect remained a

weak but significant effect ($B = -0.02$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates a partial mediation model for delinquent behavior, suggesting that paternal control inhibits adolescents' delinquent behavior both directly and indirectly through facilitating disclosure to father.

3.5. Moderated Mediation Analyses

To further investigate whether the observed indirect effects of parental control on externalizing problems via child disclosure varied by gender, we conducted moderated mediation analyses (Model 14). The index of moderated mediation was used to test the significance of the difference between the conditional indirect effects for boys and girls.

As presented in Table 4, the Bootstrap CI for the index of moderated mediation included zero across all models for both maternal and paternal control. These results indicate that the mediating role of child disclosure is invariant across gender. In other words, the protective mechanism of parental control operating through enhanced parent–child disclosure functions similarly for both boys and girls.

Table 4. Mediation and Moderated Mediation Analysis.

Predictor Outcome	Path A *B* (*SE*)	Path B *B* (*SE*)	Direct Effect *B* (*SE*)	Indirect Effect (AB) [95% CI]	Index of Moderated Mediation Model	R^2
Mother						
Reactive aggression	0.20 *** (0.01)	−0.07 *** (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.014 [−0.021, −0.007]	-	0.007
Proactive aggression		−0.05 *** (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.010 [−0.014, −0.006]	-	0.037
Delinquent behavior		−0.09 *** (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.018 [−0.023, −0.014]	-	0.035
Father						
Reactive aggression	0.19 *** (0.01)	−0.05 * (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.010 [−0.019, −0.002]	-	0.006
Proactive aggression		−0.03 * (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.005 [−0.010, −0.001]	-	0.034
Delinquent behavior		−0.05 *** (0.01)	−0.02 ** (0.01)	−0.010 [−0.014, −0.005]	-	0.023
Mother						
Reactive aggression	0.20 *** (0.01)	−0.06 (0.05)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.016 [−0.025, −0.007]	−0.002 [−0.015, 0.011]	0.007
Proactive aggression		−0.09 ** (0.03)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.008 [−0.012, −0.004]	0.005 [−0.003, 0.014]	0.038
Delinquent behavior		−0.07 * (0.03)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.020 [−0.026, −0.014]	−0.003 [−0.012, 0.006]	0.035
Father						
Reactive aggression	0.19 *** (0.01)	0.01 (0.06)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.014 [−0.024, −0.004]	−0.008 [−0.023, 0.008]	0.007
Proactive aggression		−0.05 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.004 [−0.008, −0.001]	0.003 [−0.007, 0.012]	0.034
Delinquent behavior		−0.05 (0.04)	−0.02 ** (0.01)	−0.009 [−0.015, −0.003]	0.001 [−0.008, 0.010]	0.023

Note. *X* = Parental Control (Maternal control/Paternal control); *M* = Child Disclosure (to mother/to father); *W* (Moderator) = Adolescent's Gender. Model 4 analyses included gender, adolescent's age, and parents' age as covariates. Model 14 analyses tested gender as a moderator and included adolescent's age and parents' age as covariates. Unstandardized coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. CI = Confidence Interval. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

4.1. Findings and Explanations

The main objective of the current study was to test the independent comparative mechanisms that parental control and child disclosure relate to three different types of externalizing behavior in adolescence, including proactive aggression, reactive aggression, and delinquent behavior. Additionally, the study aims to explore to find out whether such family processes have different effects on adolescent boys and girls. The study goals were partly achieved, showing that there was a coherent relationship between parenting control and adolescent behavioral outcomes.

Firstly, hypothesis 1 was supported. As expected, parental control and child disclosure were negatively associated with proactive aggression and delinquent behavior. Further-

more, the results indicated significant negative associations between reactive aggression and paternal control, but not with maternal control. Hypothesis 2, which proposed that child disclosure would mediate the relationship between parental control and externalizing outcomes, was also supported. The mediation analysis indicated that for mothers, the influence of behavioral control on all outcomes operated indirectly through child disclosure. For fathers, a similar full mediation pattern was observed according to two subtypes of aggression, although a direct effect remained significant for delinquent behavior. However, hypothesis 3 was not supported. As opposed to our expectation that the indirect effect would be greater among girls, the result of moderated mediation analysis indicated that there were no significant gender differences in the indirect pathways. These findings suggest that the mediating effect of child disclosure is moderately gender-invariant in the current sample.

The present study shows that parental control does not have a direct effect on adolescents' externalizing behavioral problems but operates through an indirect pathway by child disclosure to parents. The results provide empirical evidence for the theoretical framework proposed by Stattin and Kerr, which suggests that parental knowledge is not gained only due to one-sided surveillance, but it is achieved due to voluntary disclosure from the child [19]. The current findings indicate that behavioral management, when used alone, is not effective in reducing the level of aggressive or delinquent tendencies; it relies on the child's voluntary disclosure. This disclosure serves as the proximal mechanism for reducing behavioral risks [14]. Unlike parental psychological control, which might be viewed as intrusive, parental behavioral control, including solicitation and rule-setting, might encourage a trust-based relational setting. Teenagers may not perceive behavioral control as a strong form of restriction but as an aspect of parental investment, hence conveying that disclosure is a safe activity [20,43,44].

Another significant finding of this study is that the mediation mechanism also significantly predicts reactive aggression. Previous studies have typically distinguished the arousal pathways and different psychobiological factors of reactive and proactive aggression [4,26,31]. For proactive aggression in our study, disclosure to parents primarily provides information about adolescents' daily interactions and activities. This allows parents to intervene timely manner in maladaptive social behaviors. However, for reactive aggression, the pathway may differ. Reactive aggression is more based on emotional dysregulation compared to proactive aggression, which is statistically predicted by social learning processes [4]. Therefore, the effectiveness of external rule-based control is not commonly considered a means of correcting reactive aggression. Moreover, there are contradictory results of empirical studies. For instance, Gao et al. [31] found that restrictive or dominating control was associated with higher levels of reactive aggression in a Hong Kong sample. Similarly, a longitudinal study revealed that both parent psychological and behavioral controls were a consistent predictor of increased reactive aggression in both children and adolescents [30]. In contrast to these studies, our findings indicate that child disclosure has a significant negative predictive effect on reactive aggression. This suggests that self-disclosure may serve a dual function, including the informational function and the emotional regulatory function. We speculate that the co-regulation by parents and children is the fundamentals of the mechanism. The process not only contributes to the exchange of information when adolescents communicate their frustrations or conflicts with their parents, but is also an opportunity for emotional venting and receiving comfort. Such interaction may assist in altering the hostile attribution bias and mitigating the impulsive reactions. This interpretation aligns with previous findings from family atmosphere research, which observed that warm and positive parent–child relationships are associated with reduced levels of aggression [27,34]. The key lies not in control itself, but in the emotional

context in which control is exercised. Therefore, this study demonstrates that establishing communication channels is a viable pathway for intervening in reactive aggression.

Although the full mediation effect predominates in the overall model, the paternal model on delinquent behavior exhibits a partial mediation model. After controlling for child disclosure, paternal behavioral control is a consistent direct predictor of decreased levels of delinquent behavior. This finding reveals a two-pathway mechanism of the role of fathers' control on delinquent behavior. First, the direct path aligns with previous research findings. Existing literature suggests that paternal behavioral control has a deterrent impact on intended goal-driven behavior, which is most strongly conveyed to delinquent behavior [21,45–47]. Meta-analytic results also observe that the predictive value of paternal monitoring on delinquent behavior is usually better than that of mothers [48]. Fathers in the Chinese culture are normally socialized as the enforcers of rules and representatives of power, in which explicit rules can automatically decrease the chances of delinquent behavior [27]. This implies that intervention for delinquent behavior should involve clear legal or moral boundaries, where paternal control constitutes a deterrence effect. This structural constraint operates as a baseline regulator, capable of inhibiting violations independently of intimate parent–child communication. However, the partial mediation model equally underscores the importance of relational processes. Despite the effectiveness of direct control, the indirect pathway through child disclosure remains significant. As noted by Shek and Zhu [27], rigid parental control may become counterproductive as adolescents mature. Thus, the partial mediation model illustrates that the father directs structural constraints, and meanwhile, the father allows active communication [33,34]. This model is more effective in inhibiting delinquent behavior than control alone. A critical contribution of this study is the re-examination of the father's role. This discovery challenges the traditional view that characterizes mothers as relational and fathers as authoritative merely [49,50]. Modern fathers are becoming more involved in emotional attachment, and the power of their control is also dependent on the mediation of communication. Overall, paternal control is contextually adaptively dual-pathway by using structural constraints on delinquent behavior and communication through relations on both proactive and reactive aggression. This calls for theoretical models in the future to take a multidimensional approach to the conceptualization of fathering functions.

In contrast to Hypothesis 3 and our expectations, no significant moderated mediation effects were found in this study. This finding aligns with previous empirical evidence that there are no differences in reactive aggression [30]. Despite the existence of descriptive data that suggested that girls tend to report higher levels of self-disclosure than boys, the indirect path has no difference across genders. After the establishment of the communication channels, boys also derive protective benefits from parental control that are similar to those of girls. This implies that trust and communication are universal and central protection mechanisms in adolescence stage.

Given that adolescence is a dynamic developmental stage accompanied by significant cognitive and psychosocial changes, this study controlled for both adolescent and parental age in the models. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between adolescent age and self-disclosure to parents in both maternal and paternal models. The results are consistent with development theories on adolescent de-idealization. When adolescents become mature, they usually develop a greater sense of psychological boundaries and remain conscious of some personal information, which leads to a normative decrease in voluntary disclosure to parents [20,30,47]. Nevertheless, even after considering these effects of adolescents' age, the mediation pathway was still important. This implies that the mechanism is consistent across all stages of adolescence. Even though the older adolescents are less open to disclosing, the protective effect still exists as long as there is a channel of

communication. In addition, the age of parents was included, and it was not significant in all the models. This implies that the process of the stimulation of disclosure by parental attention is relatively constant between various generations of parents. It implies that the psychological mechanism of establishing trust and communication is likely a fundamental, cross-generational protective factor within the family, largely impervious to the specific age of parents or generational cultural differences. It is important to contextualize the magnitude of the observed effects. As shown in the results, the explained variance for the externalizing outcomes ranged from 0.006 to 0.038, and the indirect effects, while statistically robust, were modest in size. From a statistical perspective, these values are considered small [51]. However, in the context of developmental psychology and socialization research, such effect sizes are not uncommon and remain practically relevant for several reasons. First, adolescent externalizing behavior is multi-determined by a complex array of biological, peer, school, and neighborhood factors. Consequently, it is rare for any single family variable to account for a large proportion of the variance. The significance of the present findings lies not in the size of the effect, but in the consistency of the mechanism that identifies that parental control operates almost exclusively through child disclosure provides a precise leverage point for intervention. Second, small effects can have cumulative consequences over time. Socialization is a daily, reiterated process. A modest increase in a child's willingness to disclose information, repeated over years of development, may cumulatively contribute to significantly lower risks of delinquency and aggression. As noted by Funder and Ozer [52], in the context of behavioral outcomes with serious societal consequences, even small effect sizes represent meaningful shifts in risk probability at the population level. Thus, interventions enhancing parent–child communication, even if they produce only modest immediate changes, are practically valuable

4.2. Practical Implications

This study offers important practical guidance for educators, counselors, and the design of parenting intervention programs. Our results suggest a necessary shift in intervention focus, that we should transfer our perspective from simple behavioral monitoring to building environments promoting disclosure. First, intervention strategies should transcend gender stereotypes and emphasize the universality of communication mechanisms. Our data show that parent–child disclosure reduces externalizing problems effectively for both boys and girls. Therefore, programs should not overemphasize gender differences. All parents need coaching on how to listen and communicate better. Curriculum and parent-oriented interventions should implement core skills like non-judgmental listening and emotional acceptance, which can create psychological safety. Second, parents should use communication for emotional regulation. This is vital for adolescents prone to reactive aggression. Our study identifies disclosure as a key solution rather than traditional punishment. Counselors could guide parents to see the deeper value of casual conversation. Chats are not just for information retrieval, but also serve as resources for emotional co-regulation. Daily communication helps teens identify and control their feelings, which reduces hostile thoughts and stops impulsive behavior. Third, social workers should not just assess how strict parents are, but also assess the willingness of the child to disclose. The goal is to build a supportive structure where adolescents should see parental control as expressions of care rather than restrictions. This perception encourages them to open up voluntarily.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the contributions, this study has several limitations that offer directions for future research.

First, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to determine causality. Our model relies on the theoretical assumption that parental control promotes disclosure, which then reduces problem behaviors. However, the reverse is also possible. Well-behaved adolescents may simply be more willing to share information. Alternatively, parents might relax their control over children who show fewer problems. Future research needs longitudinal designs or cross-lagged models. These methods are essential to confirm the direction of these effects and to explore how adolescent behavior might erode parental knowledge over time.

Second, future research should take a more holistic approach. We focused on behavioral control, but parenting is multidimensional. Psychological control, often involving guilt induction, may destroy the trust needed for disclosure. This could neutralize the benefits of behavioral control. Additionally, family processes exist within a broader economic context. Parenting strategies adapt to environmental demands. Validating our model across different socioeconomic backgrounds is crucial for establishing ecological validity. Future studies should incorporate psychological control and diverse socioeconomic conditions.

Third, we relied on self-report measures. This reliance introduces potential bias and social desirability effects [53]. Although we collected data from both parents and adolescents, the assessment of externalizing problems depended largely on the adolescents' subjective view and the child disclosure was reported by their parents. Future studies would benefit from a multi-informant approach, adapting child disclosure from children and incorporating teacher reports or peer nominations, would capture aggressive behavior and disclosure from children more objectively. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha for the child disclosure scale was 0.61. While acceptable for a short scale, this internal consistency is modest. Researchers should consider reviewing translated items to better fit the cultural context and improve reliability.

Finally, we statistically controlled for age and confirmed the model's robustness across the sample. However, early and late adolescence differ significantly in autonomy needs and conflict levels. Future research could use multi-group analysis to compare these stages. Direct paternal control may be effective in early adolescence, while the mediating role of disclosure becomes critical for older adolescents seeking independence.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study reveals the model linking parental behavioral control to distinct forms of adolescent externalizing problems. Our findings demonstrate that the primary efficacy of parental behavioral control is fostering a trust-based context that promotes voluntary child disclosure. This disclosure serves as the proximal mechanism for reducing externalizing problems, including delinquent behavior, reactive aggression and proactive aggression. Crucially, the study reveals the complexity of the paternal role. We identified a dual-pathway model for fathers, while retaining a structural deterrent effect on delinquent behavior. Furthermore, the robust mediation effect on reactive aggression suggests that open communication serves as a vital resource for emotional co-regulation, extending its function beyond mere information exchange. Finally, the gender invariance of these pathways underscores a universal developmental feature, including the need for trust, psychological safety, and supportive communication. Ultimately, these results suggest that parenting practices provide effective protection against externalizing problems depending on the quality of the parent–child connection that promotes voluntary disclosure.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript

Abbreviations	Full Text
M	Mean
SD	Standard Deviation
RPQ	Reactive–Proactive Aggression Questionnaire
CBCL-YSR	Child Behavior Checklist—Youth Self-report
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
CI	Confidence Interval

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