



# The Relationship of Family Communication Pattern with Adolescents' Assertiveness

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## Abstract

**Background:** Adolescence is among the most critical stages of life, during which assertiveness starts to develop. Parents and their communication patterns have significant roles in adolescents' successful transition to adulthood. The present study aimed to examine the relationship of family communication patterns with adolescents' assertiveness.

**Methods:** This descriptive - analytical study was conducted on 400 high - school students in Birjand, Iran. Students were selected via multistage random sampling. A demographic questionnaire, the 26 - item Revised Family Communication Patterns, and the 30 - item Rathus Assertiveness Schedule were employed for data collection. The SPSS software (v. 16) was used to analyze the data by conducting the one - way analysis of variance, the Chi - square test, and the stepwise multivariate regression at a significance level of less than 0.05.

**Results:** The most and the least common family communication patterns among participants were pluralistic (73 students, 28.1%) and protective (58 students, 22.3%) patterns, respectively. Students with pluralistic family communication patterns obtained significantly higher assertiveness scores than those with laissez - faire ( $P < 0.001$ ) and protective ( $P = 0.004$ ) patterns. The conversation orientation dimension of family communication pattern explained 9% of the total variance of students' assertiveness.

**Conclusions:** The conversation orientation dimension of family communication pattern is a significant predictor of adolescents' assertiveness. Parents can increase their adolescents' assertiveness through creating a more hospitable and open atmosphere in their families and encouraging adolescents to express and discuss their ideas and feelings.

**Keywords:** Family Communication Pattern, Assertiveness, Adolescents

## 1. Background

Adolescence is among the most critical stages of life. The most striking characteristics of adolescence are independence seeking and peer relations (1, 2). Peers have considerable effects on adolescents' behaviors and hence, adolescents are at great risk for unhealthy lifestyle habits, high - risk behaviors, social deviance, identity crisis, emotional disorders, and familial and occupational problems (3, 4).

Assertiveness can protect adolescents against peer pressure and health threats (5). It is the ability to fight for personal rights and express thoughts, feelings, and beliefs appropriately, directly, and honestly, without infringing others' rights (6-8). Assertive adolescents respect themselves and others, are not passive, do not allow others to misuse their abilities, and have stronger social support. Conversely, unassertive adolescents may be passive or aggressive (4). Assertiveness is closely correlated with un-

healthy behaviors (such as cigarette smoking and drug abuse), self - esteem, self - confidence, academic failure, and anxiety, particularly academic anxiety (6, 9). Parents usually recommend their adolescents to use social assertiveness in order to moderate the negative effects of peers (10, 11). Assertiveness can also improve the self - efficacy of the adolescent (12) and thereby, positively affects their self - esteem and self-confidence (10, 12), interpersonal relationships, personality, and internal control (10).

Assertiveness is affected by genetic, personality, and environment. In other words, it is both a personality characteristic and an acquired social ability, which can be improved over time. Family is the most basic factor behind assertiveness development. It is the most accessible source of information, which helps individuals learn social interactions (13). It can facilitate socialization and physical and mental development. Moreover, family communications have significant roles in the development of adolescents'

personality characteristics and behaviors (14). Therefore, family studies can help obtain a better understanding about its members (15).

Interpersonal communication between parents and children, called family communication, is the basis for children's emotional development. Family communication helps children learn how to communicate with others, interpret their behaviors, and experience different feelings. The 2 key dimensions of family communication patterns (FCPs) are conversation orientation and conformity orientation (16). Conversation orientation means that family members have constant and self-motivated interactions with each other, while conformity orientation refers to the homogeneity of family members' attitudes, values, and beliefs as well as children obedience to their parents and older family members (17). The different interactions of conversation orientation and conformity orientation create the following 4 types of FCPs or 4 types of families:

1. Consensual families: These families have high conversation orientation and high conformity orientation. Parents in these families are deeply interested in their children and their opinions, but are the ultimate decision makers.
2. Pluralistic families: These families have high conversation orientation and low conformity orientation. Parents in these families tend to accept their children's attitudes and opinions and allow them equally participate in decision making.
3. Protective families: These families are characterized by low conversation orientation and high conformity orientation. Parents in protective families believe that they should make all decisions for their families and children.
4. Laissez-faire families: These families have both low conversation orientation and low conformity orientation. In these families, parents have little, if any, communications with their children and allow them to make their own decisions (17, 18).

In protective and laissez-faire families, conversation orientation is very low and therefore, children are at risk for different threats (18). Moreover, in laissez-faire families, there is no investment on children's decision-making and therefore, they are in a state of emotional divorce. On the other hand, pluralistic families encourage children to engage in decision-making and therefore, conformity orientation in these families is low (19).

FCP significantly affects the different aspects of family members' personality characteristics (20). For instance,

it may indirectly contribute to the formation of assertiveness among adolescents, so that adolescents in pluralistic and consensual families are more assertive than their counterparts in laissez-faire and protective families (13, 20). Some studies also showed a significant correlation between childrearing styles and students' assertiveness (21, 22).

Despite the importance of assertiveness in adolescence, our literature search (in online databases such as PubMed, Sciondirect, Magiran, SID, and EMBASE) showed that there is limited information about the roles of FCP in Iranian adolescents' assertiveness. Therefore, the present study aimed to examine the relationship of FCP with adolescents' assertiveness.

## 2. Methods

This was a descriptive-analytical study. The study population included all high-school students in Birjand, Iran. A random sample of 400 students was selected via multistage random sampling in the following steps. First, a list of all high schools in Birjand city was created and the city was divided into the 4 regions of north, east, west, and south. After that, the lists of all high schools in each region were created and 1 boys' and 1 girls' school were randomly selected from each region. Finally, one class was selected from each educational grade in each school (3 classes in total) and 17 students were selected from each class through simple random sampling. The sample size was calculated using the results of a study by Seyyed-Fatemi et al. (2008), which reported a standard deviation of 20.75 (23). Therefore, with a type I error of 0.05 and a  $d$  of 1/10 of standard deviation, 396 students were estimated to be necessary. The selection criteria included agreement to participate in the study, living with both parents, and no history of mental disorders or drug abuse among parents. Recruited students were informed about the aim of the study and were ensured of the confidential handling of their information. Then, informed consent was obtained from them and they were asked to complete the study questionnaires.

A total of 3 instruments were used for data collection. The 1st instrument was a demographic questionnaire with items such as age, gender, educational grade, and place of residence, as well as parents' employment and educational status. The 2nd instrument was the Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP). As a self-administered questionnaire, RFCP was developed in 2002 by Koerner and Fitzpatrick. It assesses FCP and contains 26 items on conversation orientation (15 items) and conformity orientation (11 items). Each item is scored from 1 ("Completely disagree") to 5 ("Completely agree"). In order to determine the most common FCPs among students, conversation and

conformity orientation scores, which fell between the 41 and the 60 percentiles were excluded and the scores between the 1st and the 40 percentiles were considered as the low conversation or conformity group, while the scores between the 61 to the last percentile were considered as the high conversation or conformity group. After that, FCPs were determined through the interaction of the groups of the dimensions (18). Students with high conversation and conformity orientation, high conversation orientation and low conformity orientation, low conversation orientation and high conformity orientation, and low conversation and conformity orientation were respectively classified into consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire families. The Cronbach's alpha values of the conversation orientation and the conformity orientation of the original RFCP were 0.89 and 0.79, respectively (19). These values for the Persian RFCP were 0.87 and 0.81 (24), respectively. Moreover, these values in the present study were 0.93 and 0.78, respectively. The 3rd instrument used in this study was the 30-item Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS). The possible responses to RAS items include "Very much like me" (scored 3), "Rather like me" (scored 2), "Slightly like me" (1), "Slightly unlike me" (scored -1), "Rather unlike me" (scored -2), and "Very much unlike me" (scored -3). Therefore, the total score of RAS can range from 90 to -90. Higher positive scores stand for higher assertiveness. The inter-item correlation coefficient of the original RAS was 0.78 (25) and the 2-week test-retest correlation coefficient of the Persian RAS was 0.83 (12). Moreover, the Cronbach's alpha of RAS in the present study was 0.83.

Data analysis was carried out through the SPSS software (v.16) and by conducting the one-way analysis of variance, the Chi-square test, and the stepwise multivariate regression at a significance level of less than 0.05. Data were described using the measures of descriptive statistics such as absolute and relative frequencies, mean, and standard deviation.

### 3. Results

A total of 400 students participated in this study. Their age was  $16.03 \pm 0.8$ , on average. They were mostly the first child of their families (34%) and lived in urban areas (69.25%). Most of their fathers and mothers held a high-school diploma (40.25% and 41.75%, respectively). Moreover, 35.25% of fathers were self-employed and 77% of mothers were housewives (Table 1).

The mean scores of conversation and conformity orientation were  $46.7 \pm 14.03$  and  $31.02 \pm 8.5$ , respectively. The most to least common FCPs in students' families were respectively pluralistic (73 students, 28.1%), consensual (69

students, 26.5%), laissez-faire (60 students, 23.1%), and protective (58 students, 22.3%).

FCP was significantly correlated with students' gender, educational grade, and age as well as with their fathers' and mothers' educational and employment status ( $P < 0.05$ ). Accordingly, the most common FCPs in the families of female and male students were pluralistic and consensual patterns, respectively ( $P = 0.007$ ). Moreover, the most common FCPs reported by 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-year students were laissez-faire, pluralistic, and consensual patterns, respectively ( $P = 0.007$ ). On the other hand, the most common FCPs among 15-, 16-, and 17-year-old students were protective, pluralistic, and consensual patterns, respectively ( $P = 0.031$ ). Besides, the laissez-faire pattern was the most common FCP in the families of students whose mothers or fathers were illiterate ( $P < 0.05$ ). Finally, students whose fathers were laborers reported that the most common FCP in their families was the laissez-faire pattern ( $P < 0.001$ ), while the most common FCP in the families of students whose mothers were laborers was the protective pattern ( $P = 0.014$ ). Table 1 shows the frequency distributions of FCPs based on students' and their parents' characteristics.

The mean score of assertiveness was  $1.5 \pm 16.2$ . Students' assertiveness was not significantly correlated with their and their parents' demographic characteristics ( $P > 0.05$ ). The results of the one-way analysis of variance illustrated that students with different FCPs differed significantly from each other respecting their assertiveness mean scores ( $P = 0.002$ ; Table 2). The Least Significant Difference post hoc test showed that students with pluralistic FCP obtained significantly higher assertiveness scores than those with laissez-faire FCP ( $P < 0.001$ ) and protective FCP ( $P = 0.004$ ).

Correlation analysis indicated that students' assertiveness was significantly correlated only with the conversation orientation dimension of FCP ( $r = 0.291$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ). Stepwise regression analysis also revealed that the conversation orientation dimension of FCP explained 9% of the total variance of students' assertiveness ( $P < 0.001$ ; Table 3).

### 4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the relationship of FCP with adolescents' assertiveness. The most and the least common FCPs among participants were pluralistic and protective patterns, respectively. In other words, conversation orientation was high in most families of our participants. In line with our findings, 3 previous studies on adolescents reported pluralistic patterns as the most common FCP in their families (18, 24, 26).

**Table 1.** FCPs Based on Participants' and Their Parents' Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	FCPs								P Value
	Pluralistic		Consensual		Protective		Laissez - faire		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
<b>Gender</b>									P = 0.007
Female	48	35	30	22.1	23	16	35	25	
Male	25	20	39	31	35	28	25	20	
<b>Educational grade</b>									P = 0.007
First - year	18	18	18	18	28	29	31	32	
Second - year	30	34	25	28	17	19	15	17	
Third - year	25	32.1	26	33	13	16	14	17	
<b>Age (Years)</b>									P = 0.031
15	17	20.2	16	19	28	33.3	23	27.4	
16	29	34.5	24	28.6	13	15.5	18	21.4	
17	27	29.3	29	31.5	17	18.5	19	20.7	
<b>Place of residence</b>									P = 0.548
Urban areas	54	29.2	52	28.1	40	21.6	39	21.1	
Rural areas	19	25.3	17	22.7	18	24	21	28	
<b>Type of residence</b>									P = 0.760
With parents	62	29.5	55	26.2	46	21.9	47	22.4	
In dormitory	11	22	14	28	12	24	13	26	
<b>Father's educational status</b>									P = 0.000
Illiterate	10	21	12	25	6	12	19	40	
Diploma	31	28	28	25	25	23	24	22	
Associate	8	25	9	29	8	25	6	19	
Bachelor's	14	28	17	34	11	22	8	16	
Master's and higher	10	41	3	12	8	33	3	12	
<b>Mothers' educational status</b>									P = 0.008
Illiterate	18	23.1	18	23.1	14	17	28	35	
Diploma	30	26	32	28	25	22	26	23	
Associate	9	40	4	18	8	36	1	4	
Bachelor's	10	27	15	40	8	21	4	10	
Master's and higher	6	60	0	0	3	30	1	10	
<b>Father's employment status</b>									P = 0.000
Self - employed	26	26	24	24	20	20	27	27	
Laborer	4	16	4	16	6	24	11	44	
Employee	25	32	22	28	20	25	10	12	
Farmer	7	31	8	36	3	13	4	18	
Military staff	5	25	8	40	2	10	5	25	
Other	6	37	3	18	6	37	1	6	
<b>Mother's employment status</b>									P = 0.014
Laborer	1	10	2	20	4	40	3	30	
Employee	12	27.9	16	37.2	12	27.9	3	7	
Housewife	55	28.1	50	25.5	37	18.9	54	27.6	
Other	5	45.5	1	9.1	5	45.5	0	0	

Study findings also showed that adolescents with pluralistic FCP had significantly higher assertiveness scores than those with laissez - faire and protective FCPs. More-

over, the conversation orientation dimension of FCP was significantly correlated with assertiveness. Similarly, an earlier study reported that students with pluralistic FCP

**Table 2.** Comparing Adolescents' Assertiveness Based on Their FCPs

FCPs	Assertiveness			
	N	%	Mean $\pm$ SD	P Value
Laissez - faire	60	23.1%	-3.17 $\pm$ 14.7	P = 0.002
Pluralistic	73	28.1%	6.8 $\pm$ 14.2	
Protective	58	22.3%	-1.2 $\pm$ 20.3	
Consensual	69	26.5%	2.04 $\pm$ 13.9	

were more assertive than those with laissez - faire FCP (20). Another study showed that the democratic childrearing style was associated with greater assertiveness, while the autocratic style was associated with lower assertiveness among students (21). Children in families with high control and low kindness usually have low assertiveness and vice versa (22). Conversation orientation was also reported to be positively correlated with self-esteem and the source of internal control among adolescents (16), while high self - esteem and self - concept, in turn, can improve assertiveness (27). Therefore, conversation orientation can improve adolescents' assertiveness due to the fact that families with high conversation orientation involve adolescents in decision - making and thereby, provide them with self - expression opportunity. Unlike our findings, a study reported that autocratic childrearing style among African Americans was associated with higher assertiveness and independence among female adolescents (28).

Our findings also indicated that the most common FCPs among male and female students were consensual and pluralistic patterns, respectively. In other words, conformity orientation among the families of male students was higher than the families of female students. Similarly, an earlier study showed stronger emotional relationships between parents and female children (29). However, in contradiction with our findings, a study showed the higher prevalence of conversation orientation among male adolescents (18). Such a contradiction can be due to the fact that different factors such as culture, self - esteem, depression, and gender can affect assertiveness (30).

Study findings also indicated that most participants whose fathers or mothers were illiterate reported laissez - faire FCP in their families, while most participants whose fathers or mothers were laborers reported, respectively, laissez - faire or protective FCPs in their families. These findings highlight the effects of culture and social class on FCP. We also found that the most common FCPs in the families of 1st -, 2nd -, and 3rd - year students were laissez - faire, pluralistic, and consensual patterns, respectively. In other words, conversation orientation was less prevalent in the families of 1st - year students. It seems that when adoles-

cents enter a new educational level (for example from primary school to guidance school), their families move towards higher conformity orientation in order to protect them against potential problems and threats.

Another finding of the study was the insignificant difference between male and female participants respecting their assertiveness, denoting the insignificant effect of gender on adolescents' assertiveness. Two earlier studies also reported the same finding (23, 31). However, some studies showed higher assertiveness among male adolescents (30, 32) while another study reported higher assertiveness among female adolescents (8). These contradictions may be due to the differences among the studies respecting their samples, sampling methods, sample sizes, assertiveness measurement tools, and cultural contexts.

Study findings also revealed an insignificant relationship between adolescents' assertiveness and their parents' educational status. This finding was in agreement with the findings of a previous study (31). However, another study reported the significant relationship of adolescents' assertiveness with parents' educational status (12). This contradiction may be due to differences in the educational grades or other characteristics of participants in these studies. We also found that adolescents' assertiveness was not significantly correlated with their age. An earlier study reported the same finding (12). Conversely, 2 other studies reported significantly higher assertiveness among older adolescents probably because of their greater ability to establish interpersonal and social relationships and greater self - confidence (33, 34).

Finally, study findings indicated that only 9% of the total variance of adolescents' assertiveness was explained by the conversation orientation dimension of FCP. Apparently, different overt and covert factors can affect adolescents' assertiveness. Assessment of these factors and determination of their contributions to the variance of assertiveness can be areas of investigation in future studies.

#### 4.1. Conclusion

The conversation orientation dimension of FCP is a significant predictor of adolescents' assertiveness. Parents can increase their adolescents' assertiveness through creating a more hospitable and open atmosphere in their families and encouraging adolescents to express and discuss their ideas and feelings. Adolescent affairs organizations and authorities, particularly the Department of Education, are recommended to provide parents with adequate information about the effects of FCP on adolescents' assertiveness.



**Table 3.** Prediction of Assertiveness Based on the Dimensions of FCP

Predictors	B Statistic	Beta	t	P Value	R	Adjusted R Square	F	P Value
Constant	-14.21	-	-4.24	> 0.001	0.29	0.085	23.93	>.0.001
Conversation orientation	0.336	0.291	4.89	> 0.001				

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