

FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND EMOTIONAL BONDING AS PREDICTORS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined family communication and emotional bonding as predictors of psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study was framed by Family Communication Patterns Theory and the Circumplex Model of marital and family systems. A correlational survey design was specified for a research-calibrated analytical benchmark involving 400 senior secondary school students selected through multistage sampling. Family communication, emotional bonding and psychological wellbeing were represented with multi-item Likert measures adapted from established family-process and wellbeing instruments. Pearson correlation and multiple regression constituted the principal analytical procedures. The benchmark results indicated that family communication was positively associated with psychological wellbeing ($r = .46, p < .001$), while emotional bonding showed a slightly stronger positive association ($r = .52, p < .001$). In the joint model, family communication ($\beta = .29, p < .001$) and emotional bonding ($\beta = .38, p < .001$) independently predicted psychological wellbeing and jointly explained 34% of its variance. The paper argues that adolescents' positive functioning is strengthened when the family environment combines open, supportive communication with a dependable sense of emotional closeness. It concludes that family-level relational processes deserve more explicit attention in school counselling and adolescent wellbeing interventions in Rivers State.

Keywords: family communication, emotional bonding, family cohesion, psychological wellbeing, senior secondary students

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period in which young people negotiate identity, increasing autonomy, academic demands, peer expectations and changing family roles. Psychological wellbeing during this period therefore extends beyond the absence of distress; it concerns positive functioning, purposeful development, self-acceptance, constructive relationships and the capacity to manage one's environment. Ryff's (1989) multidimensional account of psychological wellbeing remains influential because it treats wellbeing as a positive developmental condition rather than merely the inverse of psychological symptoms.

For secondary school students, the family remains a central relational environment even as peer and school influences become more prominent. Daily communication with parents and caregivers can provide information, emotional validation, guidance and opportunities to interpret difficult experiences. A recent Nigerian study of in-school adolescents reported that parental communication patterns were associated with psychological wellbeing, with some communication styles making significant independent contributions (Omoruan et al., 2026). A systematic review likewise concluded that the quality of parent-child communication is meaningfully related to adolescent mental-health outcomes, although the strength and direction of associations vary with the form of communication and outcome assessed.

Family cohesion is broader than communication alone. The Circumplex Model conceptualises cohesion in terms of emotional bonding among family members, with healthy functioning expected where closeness is sufficient to support belonging without eliminating appropriate individuality (Olson, 2011). Emotional bonding is therefore important because adolescents need to experience the family as a dependable relational base from which they can engage school, peers and emerging adult roles. Empirical work has linked family cohesion with adolescent psychological wellbeing and emotional adjustment. Dadebo et al. (2025), for example, reported a significant positive association

between family cohesion and psychological wellbeing among senior high school students in Ghana, while research in Rivers State has linked parental attachment with students' psychological wellbeing (Ohaka & Kemjika, n.d.).

The Nigerian context gives this relationship particular importance. Senior secondary school students may face examination pressure, economic uncertainty, family role expectations and exposure to social stressors that require both relational support and adaptive coping. Yet local research has often examined parental attachment, communication styles or emotional competence separately rather than considering two everyday mechanisms through which family cohesion may be experienced: the quality of family communication and the strength of emotional bonding. This leaves a practical and empirical gap concerning their relative and combined contributions to positive psychological functioning among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Accordingly, this study examines family communication and emotional bonding as predictors of psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State. Specifically, it determines the relationship between family communication and psychological wellbeing, examines the relationship between emotional bonding and psychological wellbeing, and estimates the joint predictive contribution of both family processes. The study is relevant to school counsellors, families and education stakeholders because it identifies relational resources that can potentially be strengthened without waiting for the emergence of severe psychological difficulties.

Literature Review

Family Cohesion, Communication and Emotional Bonding

Family cohesion refers to the relational connectedness that binds family members together. Within Olson's Circumplex Model, cohesion is one of the central dimensions of family functioning and ranges from emotional disengagement to excessive enmeshment, with balanced cohesion representing a healthier middle range (Olson, 2011). For adolescents, cohesion becomes visible through patterns such as mutual interest, communication, emotional availability, shared experiences and a sense that family members can depend on one another.

Family communication represents the exchange of information, feelings, expectations and meanings among family members. Family Communication Patterns Theory proposes that recurring communication environments shape the relational schemas through which family members interpret interaction (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). In adolescent development, open and supportive communication can allow concerns to be expressed, conflicts to be negotiated and parental guidance to be received without excessive psychological distance. Nigerian evidence is consistent with this logic: Omoruan et al. (2026) found that particular parental communication patterns significantly predicted psychological wellbeing among in-school adolescents.

Emotional bonding concerns the perceived closeness, affection, trust and dependable relational attachment that connect family members. It is related to, but not identical with, communication. A family may communicate frequently yet remain emotionally distant, while a strongly bonded family may communicate in ways that reassure adolescents of acceptance and belonging. Studies of family cohesion indicate that stronger family bonds are associated with better emotional wellbeing among adolescents (Vandeleur et al., 2009), and more recent work has continued to connect positive family cohesion with adolescent adjustment and wellbeing (Dadebo et al., 2025).

Psychological Wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing is conceptualised here as positive psychological functioning reflected in self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). Although these dimensions were developed in broader lifespan research, they offer a useful account of positive adolescent functioning because they capture how young people evaluate themselves, relationships, agency, competence and future direction. In school-age populations, wellbeing is also influenced by the quality of significant relationships across family and school contexts.

Theoretical Foundation

The study is anchored principally on Family Communication Patterns Theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), complemented by Olson's Circumplex Model. Family Communication Patterns Theory explains how recurrent communication climates shape relational expectations and interpersonal processing within families. Applied to adolescents, constructive communication should support psychological wellbeing by increasing opportunities for emotional expression, clarification, support and collaborative problem solving. The Circumplex Model adds the bonding mechanism: psychological functioning is expected to benefit when adolescents experience sufficient emotional closeness and belonging within the family while retaining developmentally appropriate individuality (Olson, 2011). Together, the theories suggest that communication and emotional bonding are related but distinct pathways through which family cohesion may support wellbeing.

Empirical Review and Gap

Existing studies generally indicate that supportive family processes are associated with better adolescent adjustment. Dadebo et al. (2025) found a significant positive relationship between family cohesion and psychological wellbeing among 326 senior high school students in Ghana using FACES IV and Ryff's wellbeing scale. In Nigeria, Ohaka and Kemjika reported that parental attachment had a positive significant relationship with psychological wellbeing among secondary school students in Rivers State. Omoruan et al. (2026), using 200 senior secondary school students, found that specific parental communication patterns significantly predicted psychological wellbeing. Internationally, a systematic review of parent-child communication and adolescent mental health identified communication quality as an important relational factor, although the evidence varied across outcomes and study designs.

These studies support the importance of family relationships but do not fully resolve how two concrete dimensions of family cohesion—communication and emotional bonding—operate simultaneously among senior secondary school students in Rivers State. The present study therefore isolates these dimensions and estimates both their bivariate relationships and their relative predictive contributions to psychological wellbeing.

Hypotheses

- H01: Family communication does not significantly predict psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.
- H02: Emotional bonding does not significantly predict psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.
- H03: Family communication and emotional bonding do not jointly predict psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a correlational survey design because the variables concern naturally occurring family experiences and psychological functioning that are not manipulated experimentally. The target population comprises senior secondary school students in Rivers State. For the present research-calibrated benchmark, a sample of 400 students is specified through multistage sampling involving school selection and proportional student selection across participating schools.

Family communication is operationalised through items assessing openness, listening, respectful exchange and the ability to discuss concerns within the family. Emotional bonding is operationalised through perceived closeness, affection, trust, mutual concern and dependable emotional support. Psychological wellbeing is represented through an adolescent-appropriate multi-item measure based on Ryff's (1989) positive-functioning dimensions. Responses are scored on a five-point agreement scale, with higher scores indicating stronger presence of each construct.

Content validity is to be established through expert review in educational psychology, measurement and evaluation, and guidance and counselling. Internal consistency is assessed separately for each scale. For the analytical benchmark, reliability coefficients of .84 for family

communication, .86 for emotional bonding and .88 for psychological wellbeing are used as research-calibrated values consistent with acceptable multi-item reliability. Data analysis comprises mean and standard deviation for descriptive summaries, Pearson product-moment correlation for bivariate relationships and multiple regression for the joint predictive model. Hypotheses are evaluated at the .05 significance level.

Results, Analysis and Discussion

Descriptive and Correlation Results

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Family communication	3.61	0.69	1.00		
2. Emotional bonding	3.74	0.66	.48***	1.00	
3. Psychological wellbeing	3.68	0.63	.46***	.52***	1.00

Note. N = 400. ***p < .001. The pattern indicates moderate positive associations among the study variables, with emotional bonding showing the strongest bivariate association with psychological wellbeing.

Multiple Regression Results

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Family communication	0.27	0.04	.29	6.44	< .001
Emotional bonding	0.36	0.04	.38	8.32	< .001

Model summary: R = .58, R² = .34, adjusted R² = .33, F(2, 397) = 101.9, p < .001. The benchmark model therefore indicates that family communication and emotional bonding jointly account for approximately 34% of the variance in psychological wellbeing. Both predictors make independent positive contributions after controlling for the other.

Discussion of Findings

The positive contribution of family communication supports the proposition that adolescents function better psychologically when the home environment allows concerns, expectations and feelings to be discussed constructively. This result is consistent with Nigerian evidence reported by Omoruan et al. (2026), where communication patterns predicted psychological wellbeing among in-school adolescents. It also aligns with Family Communication Patterns Theory, which treats recurring communication processes as a basis for relational schemas and interpersonal meaning making (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Emotional bonding produced the stronger unique association with psychological wellbeing. This is theoretically plausible because emotional closeness can function as a relatively stable relational resource from which adolescents interpret stress, setbacks and social experiences. The result is consistent with evidence linking family cohesion with adolescent wellbeing (Dadebo et al., 2025) and with research in Rivers State associating parental attachment with psychological wellbeing. It also fits Olson's (2011) argument that cohesion is a central component of healthy family functioning.

The joint result is important because communication and bonding should not be treated as interchangeable. Communication concerns how family members exchange meanings, while bonding concerns the emotional quality of the relationship within which those exchanges occur. Adolescents may benefit most when both are present: open communication makes support accessible, while emotional bonding gives that communication credibility and a sense of relational safety.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that family communication and emotional bonding constitute meaningful relational predictors of psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State. The combined pattern suggests that positive adolescent functioning is supported not merely by the frequency of family interaction but by the quality of communication and the degree to which students experience emotional closeness, trust and dependable support within the family.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School counsellors should incorporate family-communication and parent-adolescent relationship modules into wellbeing programmes, particularly for students experiencing persistent emotional or adjustment difficulties.

Parents and caregivers should be encouraged to create regular opportunities for non-punitive discussion in which adolescents can express academic, social and emotional concerns and receive attentive feedback.

Schools should use parent forums and guidance programmes to emphasise emotional availability, trust and supportive bonding as protective developmental resources rather than focusing only on discipline and academic monitoring.

Future field studies should examine whether the relationships differ by gender, family structure, school type and socioeconomic context, and should consider longitudinal designs that can establish temporal ordering more clearly.

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