

Family relational dynamics and young adult outcomes: The mediating role of adolescent emotion regulation

by

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B.S., Southern Connecticut State University, 2014

M.A., Fairfield University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Health and Human Sciences
College of Health and Human Sciences

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Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

Family relational dynamics play a crucial role in adolescents' emotional functioning and later adjustment; however, it remains unclear how adolescents' emotion regulation shapes the association between family dynamics and young adult well-being. This study examined whether adolescents' emotion regulation mediates the longitudinal association between parent-adolescent connectedness (Parent 1 = primary caregiver, Parent 2 = other caregiver), parental conflict and triangulation, and young adult life satisfaction and depression, controlling for adolescent biological sex. Utilizing data from the Flourishing Families Project (N = 647; 50.9% female; M age = 11.33, SD = 1.02), structural equation modeling revealed a good-fitting model. Parent 1-adolescent connectedness at Wave 1 predicted greater young adult life satisfaction at Wave 10, whereas parental conflict at Wave 1 was indirectly associated with both young adult life satisfaction and depressive symptoms at Wave 10 through adolescent emotion regulation at Wave 3. Females reported lower emotion regulation, higher depressive symptoms, and greater life satisfaction in young adulthood compared to males. Results underscore the importance of parents' role in adolescents' emotional development, with a strong parent-adolescent relationship and lower parental conflict supporting emotion regulation and long-term well-being.

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Family relational dynamics play a crucial role in adolescents' emotional functioning and later adjustment; however, it remains unclear how adolescents' emotion regulation shapes the association between family dynamics and young adult well-being. This study examined whether adolescents' emotion regulation mediates the longitudinal association between parent-adolescent connectedness (Parent 1 = primary caregiver, Parent 2 = other caregiver), parental conflict and triangulation, and young adult life satisfaction and depression, controlling for adolescent biological sex. Utilizing data from the Flourishing Families Project ($N = 647$; 50.9% female; M age = 11.33, $SD = 1.02$), structural equation modeling revealed a good-fitting model. Parent 1-adolescent connectedness at Wave 1 predicted greater young adult life satisfaction at Wave 10, whereas parental conflict at Wave 1 was indirectly associated with both young adult life satisfaction and depressive symptoms at Wave 10 through adolescent emotion regulation at Wave 3. Females reported lower emotion regulation, higher depressive symptoms, and greater life satisfaction in young adulthood compared to males. Results underscore the importance of parents' role in adolescents' emotional development, with a strong parent-adolescent relationship and lower parental conflict supporting emotion regulation and long-term well-being.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Research indicates that family relational dynamics during adolescence are linked to young adult well-being, with parents exerting a particularly important influence (Aquilino & Supple, 2001; Chen et al., 2019). Parents have a profound role in adolescents' health and development (Aquilino & Supple, 2001) and their well-being into adulthood (Morris et al., 2007). Moreover, adolescents who have positive relationships with their parents often develop better emotion regulation skills, which in turn enhances their interpersonal regulation in young adulthood (Wilson et al., 2024). Emotion regulation is vital because it is associated with lower internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety), externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, conduct issues), and promotes positive psychological functioning (Daniel et al., 2020). Skills such as cognitive reappraisal, rather than suppression, are particularly important for healthy development (Brewer et al., 2016). Adolescents who experience warmth and nurturance tend to develop stronger emotion regulation abilities (Brody & Ge, 2001).

Despite this, research on the indirect effects of adolescent emotion regulation in the association between family relational dynamics and young adult well-being persists to be limited. This study aimed to investigate whether adolescent emotion regulation mediates the link between family relational dynamics and young adult well-being using data from the Flourishing Family Project (N = 553 adolescents and young adults). Structural equation modeling was used to test family relational dynamics (Wave 1) as predictors of young adult outcomes (Wave 10), with adolescent emotion regulation (Wave 3) as a mediator.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Attachment theory and the emotional security framework form the theoretical basis for this study. Attachment theory proposes that early parent-child relationships shape attachment security through relational processes (Bowlby, 2003; Bretherton, 1992). Parental warmth and responsiveness foster secure attachment, promote healthy self-esteem in children (Salter Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), support the development of children's emotion regulation skills (Cassidy, 1994), and facilitate positive adjustment into adulthood (E. S. Young et al., 2019). However, during adolescence, parent-adolescent interactions frequently become more distant, which in turn weakens the bond and parental influence (Steinberg, 1988). This decrease in parental influence can be detrimental for adolescents, as research indicates parents help youth develop emotion regulation skills in earlier years through secure attachment (Brumariu, 2015). Parents likewise influence adolescents' ability to develop these skills by demonstrating sensitivity and availability (Morris et al., 2017). Moreover, recent research shows that parental responsiveness, a central element of a secure parent-child relationship, plays a key role in promoting healthy emotional expression among adolescents (Qualitza et al., 2025). Attachment security is fundamental for multiple developmental functions, including emotion regulation, social relatedness, arousal modulation, and curiosity (Sroufe, 2005). Adolescents with strong connectedness trust that their parents will function as a safe haven during periods of distress (Allen & Manning, 2007). Consistent with attachment theory, lower perceived parent-adolescent relationships quality is linked with adolescents reporting higher levels of depressive symptoms (Branje et al., 2010).

Emotional security builds on attachment theory, proposing that children's and adolescents' adjustment and development are heavily influenced by how safe and secure they feel within their families (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Cummings & Schatz, 2012). Emotional security framework helps explain how repeated exposure to parental conflict threatens the adolescents' sense of safety and security (Cummings et al., 2006; Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015). When parental conflict involves triangulation, it can undermine children and adolescents' emotional security by drawing youth into disputes and creating loyalty binds, which erodes their sense of safety in attachment relationships (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Schrodtt, 2025). As a result, children and adolescents whose security is compromised become vulnerable to emotional dysregulation, which interferes with the development of effective emotion regulation skills (Davies & Martin, 2013). Emotional security functions as a protective factor for children and adolescents against the negative effects of parental conflict, and it plays a key role in youth adjustment (Davies & Martin, 2014, 2013). Parallel research suggests early negative family interactions impair adolescents' ability to regulate emotions (Buehler & Welsh, 2009), leaving them emotionally underprepared for life's challenges, whereas increasing vulnerability to dysregulation and mental health issues in young adulthood (Wade et al., 2022). Conversely, positive family dynamics that foster emotional regulation can redirect the developmental pathway towards healthier outcomes.

Family Relational Dynamics and Adolescent Emotion Regulation

The building blocks of positive parent-adolescent relationships – such as secure attachment, warmth, support, and responsiveness – promote strong emotion regulation skills in adolescents (Barreto Carvalho et al., 2025; Brumariu, 2015; Fosco & Grych, 2013; Morris et al., 2007; Van Lissa et al., 2019). Moreover, parents serve as role models and provide emotion

coaching, shaping adolescents' ability to regulate emotions (Fosco & Grych, 2013; Morris et al., 2007). Positive parental dynamics also have lasting consequences on young adults' well-being and adjustment (Chen et al., 2019). In contrast, relational dynamics that undercut adolescent emotion regulation include parental conflict (Fosco & Grych, 2013), unsupportive or harsh parenting (Jin et al., 2017), and triangulating adolescents into couple relational dynamics (Fosco & Grych, 2010; Schrodtt, 2025). Adolescent emotion regulation is determined by interactions with environmental factors (e.g., parenting, peers, and traumatic experiences), genetics, brain development, and temperament (Gupta & Gehlawat, 2020). Gross (1998) defined emotion regulation as the ability to influence the emotions we experience and determine when and how we express them. He proposed five stages: (1) situation selection, (2) situation modification, (3) attention deployment, (4) cognitive change, (5) response modulation. In essence, when a situation occurs, the individual modifies the situation, directs attention, reappraises its meaning, and responds accordingly. Building on these stages, McRae and Gross (2020) refined the model by introducing an enactment cycle of four stages – identification, selection, implementation, and monitoring – which focus on emotion regulation strategies. Among these strategies, cognitive reappraisal – the ability to change how one thinks about a situation – is an effective, adaptive, and widely used emotion regulation strategy, often more beneficial than emotion suppression (McRae & Gross, 2020). Emotion regulation strategies are particularly critical during adolescence, a period signaled by hormonal changes and elevated emotional experiences (Fombouchet et al., 2023). Given the key role parents have in both the positive and negative relational dynamics, understanding their influence on adolescents' emotion regulation is crucial for predicting young adult well-being.

Parent Adolescent Connectedness and Adolescent Emotion Regulation

During adolescence, parent-child relationships often experience a decrease in connectedness as conflict becomes more common (Branje, 2018); however, this relationship is fundamental for adolescent development, especially since adolescents use parents as models in developing emotion regulation skills (Morris et al., 2007). A well-established literature shows the importance of the parent-adolescent relationship (Brumariu, 2015), parental supportiveness (Asiegbu, 2024; Criss et al., 2016; Ningrum, 2023; Van Lissa et al., 2019), and parental warmth and care (Asiegbu, 2024; Barreto Carvalho et al., 2025; Fosco & Grych, 2013; Rosharudin et al., 2023) in the development of adolescent emotion regulation. Parent-adolescent connectedness built on open communication and parent responsiveness to adolescents' needs can help adolescents build strong emotional regulation skills (Ningrum, 2023). Specifically, Ningrum (2023) found that when family interactions included parental emotional support, adolescents developed strong emotion regulation skills, and this served as a protective factor against problems such as depressive symptoms and maladaptive adolescent behaviors. In addition, Fosco and Grych (2013) explored how positive parental dynamics, such as emotional support, emotion coaching, a positive family environment, and maternal warmth and sensitivity, contribute to adolescents' emotion regulation. They found that greater parental support contributed to parent-adolescent connectedness and was associated with better emotion regulation. Parents play a significant role in adolescents' emotion regulation as adolescents report better affect when around parents (Asiegbu, 2024). Furthermore, Barreto and Carvalho (2025) recently investigated how adolescent emotion regulation is linked to earlier parent-child attachment (e.g., warmth and safety) and parental neglect. The study, which examined adolescents aged 11 to 21, found that both positive (e.g., parental trust, childhood memories of warmth and safety, parental communication) and negative (e.g., maternal neglect, parental alienation, maternal antipathy)

family dynamics influence emotion regulation. Specifically, the positive family dynamics enhance adolescents' emotion regulation abilities (Barreto Carvalho et al., 2025). In addition, Azpiazu and colleagues (2021) investigated how parents' support and adolescent emotion regulation predict adolescent life satisfaction. They found that parental support predicted greater adolescent emotion regulation, and this in turn predicted adolescent life satisfaction (Azpiazu Izaguirre et al., 2021). In sum, parent-adolescent connectedness is foundational to adolescents' emotion regulation – an essential aspect to their mental health (Ningrum, 2023; Van Lissa et al., 2017) and their life satisfaction (Azpiazu Izaguirre et al., 2021).

Parental Conflict and Adolescent Emotion Regulation

Parental conflict has been identified as detrimental to children and adolescents because it increases internalizing and externalizing problems (Barthassat, 2014; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Hess, 2022; Krishnakumar et al., 2003; McCoy et al., 2009; Rhoades, 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Parental conflict, sometimes referred to as interparental conflict (Kumar & Mattanah, 2018; Neighbors et al., 1997; Turner & Kopiec, 2006) has been defined in various ways: verbal disagreements and observable tension between caregivers (Neighbors et al., 1997), unresolved emotional tension (Riggio, 2004), and the frequency of parents' arguments (Musick and Meier, 2010). For this study, parental conflict will be defined as frequency of arguments between parents, following Musick and Meier (2010).

A variety of family-level dynamics influence adolescents' emotion regulation. However, which aspects of the affective climate uniquely shape this process remains unclear. Fosco and Grych (2013) addressed this question in a multi-method study, finding that a positive family emotional climate was a direct and unique predictor of better adolescent emotion regulation (Fosco & Grych, 2013). Previously, Rhoades (2008) reviewed research on how exposure to

parental conflict influences adolescents' emotion regulation. The author found that children and adolescents' interpretation of parental conflict was strongly linked to difficulties in emotion regulation, particularly for internalizing problems (Rhoades, 2008). Drawing on emotional security theory, parental conflict may threaten adolescents' sense of emotional security, thereby undermining their capacity to regulate their emotions and respond appropriately to everyday demands, which then increases vulnerability to emotion dysregulation (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Furthermore, Barthassat (2014) examined research on how children's emotion regulation and behavior were affected by both constructive and destructive parental conflict. The review concluded that destructive conflict was associated with maladjustment in children, but constructive conflict helped children develop emotion regulation and conflict-resolution skills (Barthassat, 2014). Extending this line of research, Asiegbu (2024) reviewed research examining whether different parenting interactions—both positive (e.g., emotional support, coaching, positive parental affect) and negative (e.g., expressed anger, psychological control, criticism) – impacted emotion regulation. Asiegbu (2024) concluded that adolescents demonstrated better emotion regulation when parents engaged in positive dynamics, but poorer emotion regulation when parents used psychological control, criticism, and expressed anger. Similarly, Hameed (2023) examined how parental conflict affects adolescents' capacity to tolerate stress and regulate their emotions. The study found that higher levels of parental conflict had a significant negative effect on both adolescents' emotion regulation ability and their stress tolerance (Hameed, 2023). In sum parental dynamics whether constructive or destructive shapes adolescents' sense of safety and emotional security, which in turn influences their ability to modulate emotions. Regardless of growing evidence of these associations, continued research is

needed to better discern the long-term consequences of parental conflicts for adolescents' emotional wellbeing.

Parental Triangulation and Adolescent Emotion Regulation

Although the research is limited, some existing work suggests that parental triangulation may be linked to diminished well-being in adolescents and young adults. Triangulation has been described in two ways: as a noun, it refers to triangular relationships among members in a system, and as a verb, it describes the process by which one person is drawn into a dyadic relationship, creating a triangle and influencing interactional patterns and emotional dynamics (Dallos & Vetere, 2012). For instance, when a child feels torn between loyalties or pulled into parents' marital conflict, they enter a triangle (Schrodt, 2025). Studies show that in divorced families where parents frequently argue, parental triangulation is inevitable, which in turn ignites feelings of entrapment and decreases the child's or adult's subjective well-being (Schrodt, 2025; Schrodt & LaFreniere, 2022). In this study, triangulation will be considered as referring to adolescents being drawn into their parents' conflict (Dallos & Vetere, 2012).

When there is conflict in the parental relationship, it often draws children or adolescents into the conflict through triangulation (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Buehler & Welsh, 2009), a process in which youth feel pressure to take sides. Emotional security theory would suggest such involvement is particularly problematic as it threaten children's sense of safety and security within their family (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Adolescents who are triangulated into their parents' disputes, their emotional security is compromised which increase their emotion dysregulation and challenging regulatory abilities. Consequently, parental triangulation has been linked with elevated risk for emotion dysregulation among children and adolescents (Colton & Godleski, 2025; Fosco & Grych, 2013). McCauley et al. (2021) further explored differences

between parents' and adolescents' perceptions of triangulation and their links to family functioning. They found that adolescents reported significantly higher levels of triangulation and lower family cohesion compared to parents. Although the study does not directly examine how parental triangulation affects adolescents' emotion regulation, it highlights the broader negative effects that parental conflict and triangulation can have on adolescents' overall adjustment within the family (McCauley et al., 2021) impeding their feeling secure and safe within the family. In summary, the existing studies indicate that parental triangulation negatively affects adolescents' adjustment, underscoring the need to better understand its long-term effects on adolescent emotion regulation.

Family Relational Dynamics and Young Adult Outcomes

Young adults' overall well-being is shaped by social, emotional, and environmental factors, but many of the most influential experiences originate in childhood and adolescence – particularly family relational dynamics involving parents (Mastorci et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). From an attachment theory framework, early family relationships are foundational to the development of attachment security, as recurring interactions with caregivers develop internal working models of self and others (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Key parental relational factors, including parent-adolescent connectedness, relational conflict, and triangulating adolescents into disputes, which can shape how young people perceive their lives in adulthood.

Parent-Adolescent Connectedness and Young Adult Outcomes

Parent-adolescent connectedness is critical for healthy adolescent development. Parent warmth, support, and emotional responsiveness promote adolescent well-being (Blum et al., 2022; Lezin et al., 2004; Too et al., 2022). The parent-adolescent relationship has received substantial attention in the literature (e.g., Chiang et al., 2024; Ebbert et al., 2019; Ford et al.,

2023; Ratliff et al., 2023). This relationship develops through the emotional closeness and high-quality interactions fostered by parents (Boutelle et al., 2009). Extensive research has examined how parental practices influence adolescent development (e.g., Boutelle et al., 2009; Chainey & Burke, 2021; Goldner et al., 2019), identifying the parent-adolescent relationship as a protective factor against internalizing problems (Whitaker et al., 2024). Moreover, studies have explored the role of attachment in promoting adolescent well-being. For instance, Young et al. (1995) investigated how three types of parental support—intrinsic, extrinsic, and closeness—predicted adolescent life satisfaction. Their findings revealed that intrinsic parental support was the strongest predictor and was associated with increased prosocial behaviors, reduced aggression, improved emotion regulation, fewer depressive symptoms, and better overall adjustment (Ratliff et al., 2023; M. H. Young et al., 1995). In addition, reduced closeness in the parent-adolescent relationship has been linked with increased externalized behaviors (Fosco & Grych, 2008; Kerig, 1995). Thus, studies indicate the benefits of the parent-adolescent connection for adolescents' well-being, but do these benefits persist into young adulthood? Longitudinal studies have revealed the positive effects of parent-adolescent connection during adolescence, showing that stronger parent-adolescent bonds predict better well-being in both adolescence and young adulthood (Aquilino & Supple, 2001; Buehler, 2020). Such bonds strengthen emotional and psychological health (Chainey & Burke, 2021), increase social integration (Dearth-Wesley et al., 2025), increase adult flourishing, and reduce depressive symptoms in adulthood (Whitaker et al., 2024).

Steiner and colleagues (2019) investigated the associations between adolescents' connectedness to their family and peers and various health outcomes in adulthood. They found that adolescents who felt more connected were at lower risk of emotional distress and lower odds

of engaging in health-risk behaviors in adulthood than those with low family and peer connectedness (Steiner et al., 2019). Chainey and Burke (2021) examined whether parent-adolescent relationship quality affected young adults' emotional and psychological well-being. They found that greater connectedness plus supportive parenting practices were linked to better psychological and emotional outcomes in young adults. Similarly, Whitaker et al. (2024) reported that adults (ages 25 to 74) who had strong emotional bonds with parents during childhood and adolescence experienced greater adult flourishing and fewer depressive symptoms. Overall, parent-adolescent connectedness is vital for adolescent development and positive young adult outcomes.

Parental Conflict and Young Adult Outcomes

Research consistently links parental conflict with negative outcomes for children and adolescents. For example, Vandewater and Lansford (1998) found that family structure – whether intact or divorced – matters less than the level of parental conflict. Children exposed to high levels of parental conflict were more likely to feel sad (Rhoades, 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Krishnakumar et al. (2003) examined the long-term effects of parental conflict by studying adolescents aged 10 to 18 who grew up in families with high levels of parental conflict and found that greater exposure predicted higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems (Krishnakumar et al., 2003). Furthermore, children and adolescents exposed to parental conflict experience difficulty with peer relationships (Hess, 2022; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998), exhibit behavioral problems (Barthassat, 2014; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Krishnakumar et al., 2003; Rhoades, 2008), show reduced prosocial behaviors (Hess, 2022; McCoy et al., 2009), and experience decreased emotional security (Barthassat, 2014; McCoy et

al., 2009). Such initial exposure also influences how adolescents evaluate and handle future conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2002).

Although there are numerous studies on the effects of parental conflict on children and adolescents, fewer studies have examined the long-term effects during adolescence into adulthood. For example, Musick and Meier (2010) conducted one of only two longitudinal studies examining how parental conflict during adolescence and young adulthood (up to early 30's) affects developmental outcomes. Using two models, they found adolescents who witnessed parental conflict had higher odds of early school dropout, poor academic performance, and substance use (e.g., smoking, binge drinking). They were also at greater risk of early sexual activity, unplanned pregnancy, and relationship breakdowns (Musick & Meier, 2010). Neighbors et al. (1997) explored whether past or recent parental conflict impacted adolescents (early to middle adolescence) and young adults (six years later). Although the study found that parental conflict in adolescence was not strongly linked to problems in later in adulthood, it emphasized that recent parental conflict in adulthood showed a stronger impact on young adult externalizing behaviors (Neighbors et al., 1997).

Turner and Kopiec (2006) found that during young adulthood, vulnerability to mental health issues – specifically depression and alcohol abuse – was greater among those exposed to parental conflict during earlier years (Turner & Kopiec, 2006). Importantly, this study shows that even non-violent interactions, such as parental conflict, can have long-term detrimental effects that continue into adulthood. More recently, Kumar and Mattanah (2018) found that parental conflict was associated with depressive symptoms and loneliness among young adults. In sum, although some studies have examined how parental conflict during adolescence relates to young adult outcomes, further longitudinal research is needed to clarify these associations.

Parental Triangulation and Young Adult Outcomes

Parental triangulation has been linked to internalizing problems in children (Kerig, 1995) and mental health issues in adolescents (Grych et al., 2004) and young adults (Schrodt & LaFreniere, 2022). Among adolescents, parental triangulation is associated with increased internalizing symptoms, decreased hope (Buehler & Welsh, 2009), and increased feelings of self-blame (Fosco & Grych, 2010). Furthermore, numerous studies have found that parental triangulation continues to affect the parent-child relationship during adolescents (Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Fosco & Grych, 2010; Grych et al., 2004).

Few studies have examined the longitudinal effects of parental triangulation on young adult well-being. Buehler and Welsh (2009) investigated how parental triangulation influences adolescent outcomes over time. Their study followed adolescents aged 11 to 15 who were drawn into parental conflict, focusing on their emotional responses. Findings indicated that parental triangulation predicts greater emotional reactivity and internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, in adolescents aged 15 to 19 (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). Parental triangulation is common in families experiencing divorce, as children and adolescents often become caught in their parents' marital discord (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Perrin et al. (2013) examined family boundary issues, including parental triangulation, during adolescence in both intact and divorced families, pertaining to their impact on young adults' psychological well-being. They found that boundary diffusion occurred in both groups but was more prevalent in divorced families. Adolescents from divorced families experienced poorer psychological outcomes in young adulthood, and parental triangulation was strongly associated with these negative outcomes (Perrin et al., 2013). From an emotional security theory perspective, when children or adolescents become triangulated into parental disputes, their emotional security is compromised

as they are pressured to choose sides between parents (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Such boundary violations intensify emotional distress, undermine adolescents' sense of security within their family, and place developmentally inappropriate emotional burdens on them (Kerig, 1995; Fosco & Grych, 2008).

Recent research by Schrodtt and LaFreniere (2022) found that interparental conflict often precedes triangulation and contributes to psychological difficulties in adolescents and young adults. Their study reported that parental triangulation mediated the link between witnessing conflict and mental health outcomes. These findings underscore the impact of parental triangulation on young adults and highlight the importance of further understanding these longitudinal associations.

Adolescent Emotion Regulation and Young Adult Outcomes

The ability to regulate one's emotions is critical across all stages of development; therefore, developing strong emotion regulation before adulthood is essential. Individuals with strong emotion regulation skills tend to experience greater psychosocial well-being, stronger relationships, and enhanced resilience (Barthel et al., 2018). Given that emotion regulation is central to positive human development, it is vital that we understand how adolescents' emotion regulation relates to life satisfaction and depressive symptoms in young adulthood.

Adolescent Emotion Regulation and Young Adult Life Satisfaction

Emotion regulation is considered an essential, teachable competence that is protective against the development of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Daniel et al., 2020). Moreover, it has been widely studied in relation to various developmental and social outcomes (Barthel et al., 2018; Cavicchioli et al., 2023; Daniel et al., 2020), including its influence on attachment relationships (Cassidy, 1994). Research shows that emotion regulation promotes

positive outcomes for adolescents, such as reductions in internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Daniel et al., 2020), and improvements in social functioning, attachment, and well-being (Barthel et al., 2018). Longitudinal studies indicate that adolescents with low cognitive reappraisal skills who grow up in unpredictable home environments experience lower social connectedness in young adulthood, highlighting the importance of emotion regulation during adolescence for later well-being (Meyer et al., 2025). Despite this, few studies have examined the link between adolescent emotion regulation and young adult life satisfaction. A cross-sectional study by Verzeletti et al. (2016) explored associations between adolescent emotion regulation and psychosocial outcomes. They examined whether cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression were linked to adolescent psychosocial well-being and found that cognitive reappraisal was positively associated with life satisfaction, social support, and positive affect, whereas expressive suppression correlated with greater negative affect and loneliness. Similarly, Bartel and colleagues' (2018) review demonstrated that interpersonal emotion regulation in children and adolescents protects well-being, highlighting the role of social context and relationships – particularly parental influence – in shaping emotion regulation.

Young adulthood is marked by major life transitions – launching into independence, moving out of family homes, pursuing higher education, entering the job market, and establishing romantic relationships. The transitions play a significant role in shaping life satisfaction, often through heightening well-being in the early twenties but then increasing strains and demand later on (Switek & Easterlin, 2018). During this period, life satisfaction typically shifts non-linearly (Henkens et al., 2022; Switek & Easterlin, 2018), and having emotion regulation tools is essential for maintaining well-being (Dargan & Imran, 2025).

Brewer et al. (2016) evaluated whether cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression longitudinally predicted changes in psychosocial adjustment among young adults. Using a person-centered latent transition analysis, the study assessed whether emotion regulation strategies – cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression – influenced psychosocial profile membership across an eight-month period and how each strategy predicted changes in specific psychosocial outcomes. Findings indicated that both strategies significantly impact psychosocial functioning, with mental health and social adjustment showing the strongest effects (Brewer et al., 2016). Although prior research has examined how emotion regulation strategies affect adolescent life satisfaction and young adults' psychosocial adjustment, no research could be located that examined the longitudinal association between adolescent emotion regulation and young adult life satisfaction. Therefore, additional research is needed to clarify this association.

Adolescent Emotion Regulation and Young Adult Depression

Emotion regulation is strongly linked to various mental health problems. The association between adolescent emotion regulation and mental health is particularly important because when adolescents lack the ability to effectively regulate their emotions, they are at greater risk for internalizing (Compas et al., 2017; Silk et al., 2003) and externalizing problems (Daniel et al., 2020). Internalizing issues such as anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, unhealthy coping strategies, and stress can be mitigated through effective emotion regulation strategies (Compas et al., 2017). Numerous studies have examined the link between emotion regulation and depression in adolescents (Cavicchioli et al., 2023; Compas et al., 2017; Schäfer et al., 2017; Silk et al., 2003; K. Young et al., 2019). To illustrate, Betts and colleagues (2009) reviewed studies to determine whether adolescent emotion regulation was associated with adolescent depression and which factors might indicate greater risks. Their analysis revealed that adolescents with

depressive symptoms tended to rely on emotion regulation strategies characterized by high suppression and low cognitive reappraisal (Betts et al., 2009). Nearly a decade later, Schäfer and colleagues conducted a meta-analytic review to examine links between habitual emotion regulation strategies and depressive symptoms among adolescents ages 13 – 18. They found that maladaptive emotion regulation strategies such as rumination and avoidance were positively associated with depressive symptoms, while adaptive strategies such as reappraisal and acceptance were negatively linked to depressive symptoms (Schäfer et al., 2017). Furthermore, K. Young et al., (2019) examined whether adolescents' ability to regulate positive and negative emotions was linked to depression and anxiety. They found that disruptions in emotion regulation strategies for both positive and negative emotions are linked to higher levels of depression, with the regulation of negative emotions showing stronger associations (K. Young et al., 2019). Recently, a review by Daniel et al. (2020) explored whether emotion regulation serves as a protective factor against internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety. Their findings indicate that emotion regulation strategies enhance youths' internal and external well-being, promoting positive development across various contexts (Daniel et al., 2020), supporting Gross's (1998) assertion that emotion regulation is fundamental to mental health.

However, there are fewer studies that have explored this association to young adulthood (Compare et al., 2014; Shapero et al., 2019), leaving an important gap in the literature. Compare and colleagues' (2014) narrative review explored whether emotion regulation is linked to depression and if adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation act as a mediator between depression and mental or physical health problems. The review found strong evidence that the way people regulate their emotions is closely linked with depression, with maladaptive strategies playing a particular influential role in its establishment (Compare et al., 2014). Additionally,

emotion regulation helps explain how depressive symptoms can become a precursor to other psychological problems in adults (Compare et al., 2014). Furthermore, to examine the effects of emotion reactivity on depression in young adults, Shapiro et al., (2019) investigated how young adults respond to stress with intense emotions. They found that emotion dysregulation was associated with increased depressive symptoms. Moreover, these emotion regulation strategies are teachable, resilience-building, and critical for preventing mental health problems (Compas et al., 2017). Overall, research demonstrates that emotion regulation is beneficial for adolescents and young adults, and adaptive strategies can be taught to reduce depression risk.

Mediation Between Family Relational Dynamics and Young Adult Well-Being Outcomes

Emotion regulation has been shown to mediate the association among parental behavior, family dynamics, and parent-adolescent relationship patterns with adolescents' and young adults' positive and negative outcomes (Chiang et al., 2023; Herd et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2025). For example, Jin et al. (2017) examined whether adolescents' emotion regulation mediated the link between parental emotion socialization (based on Chinese parents' and adolescents' reports) and adolescent psychological adjustment. They found that when parents responded with warmth and support, their adolescents were better able to regulate their emotions, which in turn was associated with fewer adolescent internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Chiang and colleagues (2023) examined how changes in the parent-adolescent relationship are linked to adolescents' life satisfaction and whether adolescent emotion regulation mediates this association. They found that parental closeness was linked to greater life satisfaction, but increases in conflict were associated with lowered life satisfaction, particularly among adolescents with greater emotion dysregulation.

Furthermore, one study has explored parental attachment styles in relation to adolescent outcomes, with emotion regulation as a mediator (Ratliff et al., 2023). Ratliff et al. (2023) examined the direct and indirect paths between parental support and adolescent socio-emotional adjustment, with emotion regulation as a mediating factor. They found full mediation in which a supportive parent-adolescent relationship was associated with stronger adolescent emotion regulation, which, in turn, predicted better adolescent prosocial behaviors, less aggressive behaviors, and fewer depressive symptoms (Ratliff et al., 2023). This suggests that a supportive parent-adolescent relationship enhances adolescent adjustment and emotion regulation. More recently, Cheng et al. (2024) examined association between family conflict and adolescent social responsibility, with emotion regulation as a mediator. Their findings were somewhat surprising; although higher levels of family conflict predicted poorer adolescent emotion regulation, lower emotion regulation was linked with greater social responsibility (Cheng et al., 2024). This study sample consisted of adolescents of Chinese descent, which may help explain these findings. Cultural values in many non-Western contexts emphasize social cohesion, family obligation, and harmony, possibly encouraging a greater sense of social responsibility despite higher family conflict.

Lin and colleagues' (2024) review explored whether parental behaviors such as psychological control, interparental conflict, unsupportive parenting, poor parental emotion regulation, and mental health problems were linked to adolescents' internalizing problems, such as depression, with adolescent emotion regulation mediating this link. They found that adolescents' emotion regulation mediated the relationship between family factors and adolescents' psychological problems, such as depression (Lin et al., 2024). Furthermore, Herd et al. (2023) examined whether adolescent emotion regulation mediates the link between changes in parenting and

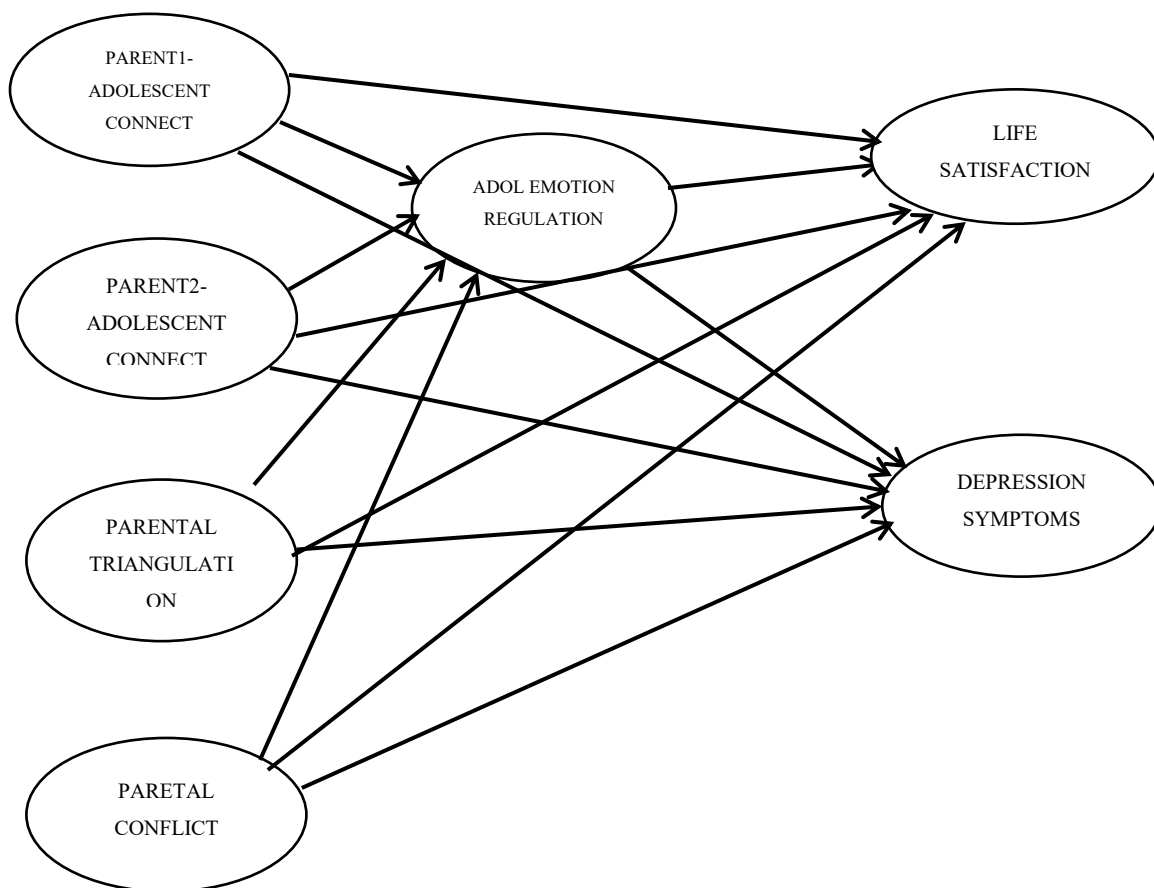
negative externalizing symptoms in adolescents as antecedents to young adult behaviors. They found that adolescents who experienced negative parenting had difficulty developing emotion regulation skills, which was associated with greater externalizing symptoms; these symptoms, in turn, increased the likelihood of engaging in higher health risk behaviors in young adulthood (Herd et al., 2023). Similarly, Meyer and colleagues (2025) investigated whether emotion regulation mediates the association between household unpredictability and young adults' social connectedness. They found that adolescents who experienced household unpredictability showed lower social connectedness in young adulthood, but better emotion regulation buffered the negative effects of an unpredictable household (Meyer et al., 2025). As noted above, only a handful of studies have examined whether adolescent emotion regulation mediates the association between family relational dynamics during adolescence and young adulthood. However, research remains limited on how adolescent emotion regulation functions as a mediator in the links between parent-adolescent connectedness, parental conflict, and triangulation, and young adult life satisfaction and depressive symptoms. The present study aims to address this gap by investigating these associations with adolescent emotion regulation as a mediating mechanism.

Present Study

Research has yet to examine how family relational dynamics – such as parent-adolescent connectedness, parental conflict, and triangulation – relate to young adult life satisfaction and depressive symptoms. This study will explore these associations and test whether adolescent emotional regulation serves as a mediator. Thus, the present study proposes to test the following hypotheses:

- 1) Higher parent-adolescent connectedness scores at Wave 1 will be positively associated with young adult life satisfaction and negatively associated with young adult depression at Wave 10.
- 2) Higher parental conflict and triangulation scores at Wave 1 will be negatively associated with young adult life satisfaction and positively associated with young adult depression at Wave 10.
- 3) Partial mediation in which indirect effects with adolescent emotion regulation at Wave 3 mediate the association between Wave 1 parent-1 adolescent connectedness, parent-2 adolescent connectedness, parental conflict, triangulation, and Wave 10 young adult life satisfaction and depression (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Hypothesized Structural Model



Parent income was originally considered as a potential control because research on Family Stress Model shows that adverse economic pressures within families are linked with adolescents reporting increased internalizing and externalizing problems through higher parental conflict (Conger et al., 1994). Similarly, race/ethnicity was included because Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes that children/adolescents' development is rooted within broader societal structures, including race-based inequalities that impact family dynamics and cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (García Coll et al., 1996; Vélez-Molina et al., 2017). Finally, adolescent biological sex was included as a control because research has demonstrated sex differences in adolescent emotional expression (Hameed, 2023), and differences in parent emotion socialization practices for boys and girls (Do et al., 2025). Findings from the current study may underscore the importance of intervention programs that strengthen parent-adolescent connectedness, reduce parental conflict and triangulation, and promote parental support for adolescent emotional development to enhance young adult well-being.

Chapter 3 - Method

Sample and Procedures

This study used a secondary dataset, the Flourishing Families Project (FFP), an ongoing longitudinal study spanning an 11-year period. Participant families for FFP were selected from Utah and Washington states using the Polk Directories National Database that collected data using telephone, magazines, and internet subscriptions. Data collection in Utah and Washington state occurred between Waves 1 and 5, while Waves 6 through 11 included only Washington state. This study's baseline data for Wave 1 included only adolescent participants between the ages of 10 and 13 and their families. Adolescents were interviewed with their parents during the

first eight months of 2007. Parent 1 (P1) was identified by the adolescent as the family member who provides the majority of caregiving. In two-parent families, the other parent was identified as Parent 2 (P2). In Wave 1, 96.5% (657) of adolescents identified mothers as the primary caregiver, and 3.5% (24) identified fathers as the primary caregiver. Of those identified as Parent 2, 98.6% (490) were fathers and 1.4% (7) were mothers. Yearly follow-up interviews for families occurred for the second (2008), third (2009), fourth (2010), and fifth Waves (2011). Each Wave was spaced one year apart. Wave 1 to 5 parents and adolescents completed in-home surveys, and Waves 6 to 10, they completed online surveys. FFP study's Wave 1 assessment included a total of $n = 500$ families, 682 children, 337 two-parent families, and 163 single-parent families. During data collection, the researchers noticed that recruitment disproportionately underrepresented families of lower SES status due to limited access to phones, magazine subscriptions, or internet services; therefore, they expanded data collection through referrals and fliers. This ensured a broader and more representative sample of the local milieu. Retention across the Waves was high with 87.6% of participants in Wave 10 (Rollins & Crandall, 2021).

Data from Waves 1, 3, and 10 were included in this study. The sample for this study has the following characteristics at baseline, W1: 318 males (49.1%) and 329 females (50.9%) adolescents, ages 10 to 13, with an average age of 11.33 ($SD = 1.02$). The sample has some variability in ethnicity, including European Americans (69.9%), African Americans (9.1%), Hispanic (1.3%), Asian Americans (3.1%), multi-ethnicity (8.7%), and less than 1% who identified as an "other race or ethnicity." At Wave 1, Parent 1 reported a mean monthly income of \$3,912.06, whereas Parent 2 reported \$6,734.88. At Wave 10, the sample included $n = 438$ young adults aged 20-23 years, with an average age of 20.29 ($SD = 1.04$).

Measures

Parent-Adolescent Connectedness

At Wave 1, parent-adolescent social connectedness was measured using 6 items assessing the degree to which the adolescent feels socially connected to each parent. The measure was adapted from the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (Lee, Draper & Lee, 2001). A latent variable was computed for each parent using six items as indicators. Sample items include “even though I am very close to my parent, I feel I can be myself” and “I am comfortable with some degree of conflict with my parent.” The item responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater parent-child social connectedness. The factor loadings for the Parent 1 latent variable ranged from .47 to .61 and from .48 to .69 for the Parent 2 latent variable. The alpha for parent 1 ($\alpha = .70$) and parent 2 ($\alpha = .74$) was acceptable.

Parental Conflict/Triangulation

At Wave 1, adolescents’ exposure to their parents’ conflict (six items) and parents’ attempts to draw them into triangulation (four items) were measured using items from the Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Item responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), with sample items: “I see my parents arguing or disagreeing” and “I feel caught in the middle when my parents argue.” Scores on items 1-6 indicated higher levels of parental conflict ($\alpha = .89$). The factor loadings for the parental conflict latent variable ranged from .64 to .84. For the triangulation measure, item 7 was excluded because it lowered reliability and was redundant with an existing item. A latent variable was constructed from the remaining three items as indicators, with factor loadings ranging from .63 to .91. Higher scores on items 8-10 indicate higher levels of triangulation ($\alpha = .85$).

Adolescent Emotion Regulation

At Wave 3, adolescent emotion regulation was measured using five items that assessed adolescents' ability to regulate their negative emotions. Sample items include "I have a hard time controlling my temper" and "I get distracted by little things." The item responses ranged from 1 (*never true*) to 4 (*always true*). Some items were adjusted slightly for reading level. The items were reverse-coded so that higher scores indicated adolescents' better ability to regulate their emotions ($\alpha = .82$). A latent variable was computed from the five items, with indicator loadings ranging from .51 to .81.

Young Adult Depression

At Wave 10, young adult depression was assessed using the 20-item self-report Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES-DC) (Weissman et al., 1980). Depression was rated by the degree to which participants experienced symptoms of depressive symptoms in the prior week. Sample items included, "I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me," and "I felt lonely, like I didn't have any friends." Items were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*), with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptoms ($\alpha = .92$). To improve measurement stability of such a large scale, the depression symptom scale was parceled using the balancing method, in which items were grouped based on item-total correlations (Little et al., 2022). Specifically, the item with the highest item-total correlation was paired with the item with the lowest item-scale correlation, then the second-highest with the second-lowest, and so on, resulting in three parcels. Remaining items were added in descending order of correlation, one paired item per parcel, until all items were assigned (Little et al., 2022). Items in each of the three parcels were averaged to create the parcel scores in SPSS. The

depression latent variable was created from three parcels as indicators in *Mplus* (factor loadings ranging from .86 to .89).

Young Adult Life Satisfaction

At Wave 10, life satisfaction was assessed using five items that were adapted from Blais et al. (1989) and Diener et al. (1985). Items measured participants' feelings about several domains of their lives at that time point. Sample items included, "I am satisfied with my life", and "I am satisfied with my work." Item responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction ($\alpha = .83$). A latent variable was created from the five items as indicators with factor loadings ranging from .59 to .86.

Control Variable

Control variables included W1 adolescent biological sex, race/ethnicity, and parents' income. Parents reported on adolescents' biological sex, race/ethnicity, and parents' monthly income at Wave 1 through an in-person interview.

Data Analysis

When checking for non-normal distributions in SPSS, absolute values greater than two for skewness and seven for kurtosis are problematic (Chou & Bentler, 1995). Because one item exhibited kurtosis at 8.44, the maximum likelihood robust (MLR) estimator was selected to account for non-normality (Hancock & Mueller, 2013) when estimating the hypothesized structural equation model (SEM) in *Mplus* 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). MLR estimation with Satorra-Bentler (S-B) scaling (Satorra & Bentler, 2010) adjusts the model chi-square, fit indices, and standard errors based on the degree of non-normality in the data. Because MLR estimation was utilized, the preferred method for evaluating mediation, bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals, cannot be implemented in *Mplus*. Instead, *Mplus* applies the

Delta method, originally proposed by Sobel (1987), to compute the standard error associated with indirect effects.

Consistent with Bollen's (1989) two-step rule for SEM identification, the analysis proceeded first by evaluating the fit of the measurement model, followed by evaluation of the structural model. In Step 1, the latent constructs were correlated for parent-adolescent connectedness, parental conflict, and triangulation during adolescence (predictors at W1); adolescent emotion regulation (mediator at W3); and young adult life satisfaction and depressive symptoms (outcome W10). Once the measurement model demonstrated adequate fit, the structural paths were then analyzed (Step 2; Bollen, 1989). A good model fit was interpreted using conventional criteria: a non-significant chi-square statistic, CFI and TLI values exceeded .95, and RMSEA and SRMR values were below .05 (Kline, 2018). This two-step procedure supports the identification of a parsimonious yet well-fitting structural model based on factor covariances (Bollen, 1989). Guided by prior literature, demographic characteristics were examined as potential covariates in the preliminary analysis (adolescent biological sex, race/ethnicity, and parents' income).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Mean scale scores were used to evaluate the bivariate associations in the hypothesized model using SPSS (see Table 1). The preliminary analysis (e.g. ANOVA/t-test) indicated no significant differences across racial/ethnic groups with the main study variables (all $p > .05$); therefore, race/ethnicity did not function as a confound in the study and was therefore not included in the main analysis. Furthermore, parents' income was not significantly associated with the main study variables. Because the bivariate correlations were in the expected directions, all hypothesized

associations were therefore tested using structural equation model. Only adolescent biological sex demonstrated associations with the current study variables and was therefore retained as covariate in all models to maintain parsimony.

Measurement Model

First, the residual variances for matching items asked of each adolescent for the parent-adolescent connectedness constructs were correlated to capture common measurement method variance. The measurement model with latent variables correlated (see Table 3) showed an overall good fit to the data with the robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimator: $\chi^2(500) = 855.17, p < .001$; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .03, with a 90% confidence interval of .03-.04; SRMR = .05.

Structural Model Direct Effects

With the measurement model fitting the data well, the structural paths were added to the model to test hypothesized directional associations between constructs over time, resulting in a well-fitting model: $\chi^2(531) = 902.35, p < .001$; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .03, with a 90% confidence interval of .03-.04; SRMR = .05. At W1, only adolescent-connectedness with Parent 1, but not with Parent 2, was positively associated with young adult life satisfaction at W10 ($b = .47, p < .05, \beta = .25$). No W1 predictors were directly associated with W10 depression. The only direct effect on the mediator, W3 adolescent emotional regulation, was W1 parental conflict ($b = -.16, p = .001, \beta = -.18$). Higher W3 adolescent emotion regulation was positively associated with young adult life satisfaction at W10 ($b = .28, p < .001, \beta = .20$) and negatively associated with depression in young adults at W10 ($b = -.15, p < .001, \beta = -.18$). However, females reported lower levels of emotion regulation at W3 ($b = -.20, p < .001, \beta = -.16$), higher levels of

depressive symptoms at W10 ($b = .15, p < .001, \beta = .14$), and greater life satisfaction at W10 ($b = .26, p < .001, \beta = .14$).

Structural Model Indirect Effects

Tests of indirect effects revealed parental conflict at W1 was indirectly associated through W3 adolescent emotion regulation with both young adult life satisfaction ($b = -.04, \beta = -.03$) and young adult depression ($b = .02, \beta = .03$) at W10. Higher parental conflict, when mediated by poorer adolescent emotion regulation, was linked to decreased life satisfaction and increased depressive symptoms in young adulthood. Specifically, parental conflict predicted lower levels of life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms in adulthood via its negative influence on adolescent emotion regulation. No other indirect effects were found.

Discussion

This study examined how family relational dynamics – specifically parental connectedness and parental conflict and triangulation – shape young adults' well-being, and whether these associations operate through adolescent emotion regulation. Across longitudinal analyses, I found partial but meaningful support for the hypothesized pathways. Most notably, adolescent emotion regulation emerged as a key mechanism linking early family dynamics to later life satisfaction and depressive symptoms in young adulthood.

The hypothesis that higher parent-adolescent connectedness scores at Wave 1 would predict greater life satisfaction and lower depressive symptoms in young adulthood at Wave 10 was partially supported. Parent-adolescent connectedness was positively associated with young adult life satisfaction, but this effect emerged only for Parent 1 (primary caregivers). Greater parent-adolescent connectedness for Parent 1 was associated with higher life satisfaction in

young adulthood. This result supports prior work showing that adolescents often perceive their relationship with mothers (the large majority of primary caregivers in this sample) as more nurturing, supportive, and emotionally intimate (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Consistent with attachment theory (E. S. Young et al., 2019), these findings suggest that adolescent warm, supportive relationships with their primary caregiver contribute to positive adjustment in early adulthood. Prior research has broadly linked positive parent-child relationships to better young adult outcomes (Aquilino & Supple, 2001; Dearth-Wesley et al., 2025; Whitaker et al., 2024). For example, one study found that high-quality mother-child (ages 12 to 18 months) relationships predicted greater stability in adulthood (age 32), attributing this effect to stronger attachment security (E. S. Young et al., 2019). However, much of the prior research has relied on cross-sectional designs that depend on young adults' retrospective reports of earlier relationships (Dearth-Wesley et al., 2025) or on a broader young-adult outcome variable (Aquilino & Supple, 2001). The current study extends this work by prospectively examining the link between parent-adolescent connectedness during adolescence and young adult life satisfaction.

In contrast, connectedness with Parent 2 (non-primary caregivers) was not linked with young adult outcomes. As mentioned earlier, most non-primary caregivers (Parent 2) in this sample were fathers. This finding differs from prior research showing that adolescents who perceive greater warmth and connection from fathers experience fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). It is not surprising that the association was significant for primary caregivers and not for non-primary caregivers, given their closer and presumably more impactful relationship. Note that in the sample for the current study, the 24 fathers who were primary caregivers were not included with the Parent 2 variable (largely fathers), which

may explain the differing results between prior research on fathers and the present findings relative to Parent 2.

Furthermore, the current results indicated no association between parent-adolescent connectedness and young adult depressive symptoms at W10. This finding contrasts with prior research illustrating that childhood parental connectedness is associated with lower depressive symptoms in young adulthood (Whitaker et al., 2024). One potential explanation for the difference is that Whitaker et al. (2024) relied on retrospective reports of childhood experience from participants ranging in age from 25 to 74, potentially introducing recall bias and the inability of the study design to establish temporal order between relational experiences and depressive symptoms. In contrast to this approach, the current study relied on adolescent contemporaneous report of mother and father connectedness, which reduces recall bias and retrospective reinterpretation

The hypothesis that higher parental conflict at Wave 1 would predict lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms in young adulthood at Wave 10 was not supported: higher parental conflict was not directly associated with young adult life satisfaction or young adult depressive symptoms. Because previous studies have linked parental conflict to broad adverse developmental and behavioral outcomes in young adulthood (Musick & Meier, 2010), the non-significant findings were unexpected. Turner and Kopiec (2006), using adults' retrospective reports of parental conflict experiences during adolescence, found that the link between parental conflict and adult depressive symptoms was mediated by continued strain in parent-adult child relationship. The indication of the importance of continued relationship strain and the use of retrospective reports may signal that the findings are more likely linked to current dynamics than to the prior parent-adolescent relationship.

A test of mediation for Hypothesis 3 revealed two significant pathways. In the first path, adolescent emotion regulation mediated the associations between parental conflict and young adult life satisfaction. Specifically, higher parental conflict during adolescence was associated with diminished emotion regulation, which in turn predicted lower life satisfaction in young adulthood. These findings align with prior research showing that parental conflict can hinder emotional functioning (Rhoades, 2008) and undermine adolescents' emotional security (Barthassat, 2014; McCoy et al., 2009), contributing to long-term developmental risks. Emotional security theory further supports this interpretation, positing that when parental conflict threatens adolescents' sense of safety, their capacity to regulate emotions and respond effectively to daily demands is compromised, leading to greater emotion dysregulation (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Although some degree of conflict is expected in all families, what matters is how parents manage it. Research suggests that constructive conflict resolution, in which parents model healthy communication and problem solving, can promote adolescents' emotion regulation and socioemotional development (Barthassat, 2014). Conversely, poor emotion regulation skills can lead adolescents to rely on maladaptive strategies such as emotional suppression or rumination, which may hinder subjective well-being in adulthood (Fagan et al., 2025).

In the second significant mediated pathway, higher levels of parental conflict was associated with poorer adolescent emotion regulation, which in turn predicted greater depressive symptoms in young adulthood. This pattern is partially consistent with work showing that parental conflict is associated with adolescent depressive symptoms through disruptions in emotion regulation (LaMontagne et al., 2023). Other research has shown that emotion regulation mediates the link between parental conflict and adolescent social responsibility, with different

developmental consequences than those examined in the present study (Cheng et al., 2024). The present findings extend prior literature by highlighting that parental conflict may influence young adult depressive symptoms indirectly, in part, through its detrimental impact on adolescents' emotion regulation. Emotional security theory provides a useful framework to conceptualize this pattern. When parental conflict disrupts adolescents' safety and emotional security, their capacity to develop effective emotion regulation skills may be compromised (Rhoades, 2008), heightening their risk for negative outcomes in later development (Herd et al., 2023).

In further emphasizing the developmental importance of emotion regulation, the present findings show that adolescents with stronger emotion regulation skills are more likely to report higher levels of life satisfaction in adulthood. These emotion regulation skills, in turn, may lay the groundwork for positive developmental outcomes across adolescence. This is consistent with attachment theory, which proposes that relationships characterized by appropriate autonomy granting and responsive caregiving foster adolescents' sense of safety and security during distress (Sroufe, 2005). This interpretation also aligns with emotional security theory, which proposes that when adolescents feel secure and safe within their family, they are more willing to trust parental guidance and engage in adaptive coping (Davies & Cummings, 1994). This sense of security – rooted in earlier attachment experiences – shapes the emotion regulation strategies adolescents learn from parents and use through development (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015).

The hypothesis that parental connectedness is associated with young adult life satisfaction via adolescent emotion regulation was not supported. This finding contrasts with previous research that focused on adolescent outcomes. For instance, parent-adolescent connectedness has been associated to greater life satisfaction during adolescence through stronger adolescent emotion regulation ability (Chiang et al., 2023). However, this discrepancy

may be due to variations in developmental timing and measurement. Whereas Chiang et al. (2023) relied on adolescents' self-reports of life satisfaction, the current study assessed life satisfaction in young adulthood. Furthermore, the present study did not find significant associations between mother and father connectedness and young adult depressive symptoms through adolescent emotion regulation, which was unexpected. Ratliff et al. (2023) found that adolescent emotion regulation mediated the link between parental support and lower levels of adolescent depression. Again, the current study extends prior research examining outcomes during adolescence to those in young adulthood. The variability of life experiences between adolescence and young adulthood may attenuate the influence of hypothesized associations.

The hypothesis that higher parental triangulation at Wave 1 would predict lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms in young adulthood at Wave 10 was not supported. Higher levels of parental triangulation were not directly associated with young adult life satisfaction or depressive symptoms. Previous research has demonstrated that parental triangulation is associated with lower psychological well-being (Perrin et al., 2013) and lower subjective well-being in young adults (Amato & Afifi, 2006). One possible explanation for this inconsistency is that Perrin et al. (2013) depended on retrospective reports of parental triangulation during adolescence, whereas the current study utilized prospective data. By contrast, Amato and Afifi (2006) examined whether young adults who were raised in families with high conflict may experience elevated feelings of being triangulated and whether this predicts their subjective well-being. They found that young adults who grew up in homes with high parental conflict, reported feelings of being triangulated into parents' disputes and this reduced their subjective well-being. Amato and Afifi (2006) relied on parental conflict mediated through triangulation to predict young adult well-being, whereas the current study assessed

parental triangulation to predict young adult well-being. Combined, these mixed findings suggest that further research is warranted to clarify the developmental timeline and processes through which parental triangulation may impact well-being outcomes in adulthood.

Sex with Emotion regulation, Life satisfaction, Depression

The study revealed a significant association between biological sex and adolescent emotion regulation, with females reporting lower levels of regulation. Prior research is mixed, with some studies showing females have lower (Hameed, 2023) and others showing that females have higher (Barreto Carvalho et al., 2025) levels of emotion regulation. Attachment theory may provide an explanatory framework, suggesting that differences in females and males emotional expression indicate learned attachment is shaped by caregiver responsiveness in early child years, rather than inherent gender differences (Bretherton, 1992). Intense emotional expression and emotional suppression are considered adaptive strategies which were established to ensure closeness to caregivers. Furthermore, societal norms and gender socialization may bolster these strategies, as parents often respond differently to emotional expression in males and females, thereby perpetuating gendered stereotypes surrounding emotion regulation (Morris et al., 2007). Together, these findings underscore the importance of considering gender differences within the context of early caregiving experiences as they play an essential role in shaping emotional development.

Additionally, females, in the present study, reported greater life satisfaction in young adulthood than males, supporting previous research (Erdemir & Kis, 2024; Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2020). One possible explanation based on emotional security theory: as individuals transition from adolescence to young adulthood, they usually gain autonomy and independence and form new relationships through higher education or workforce entry; these shifts can

enhance life satisfaction, which may increase feelings of safety and security (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Davies & Martin, 2013) even when emotional capacities are lower. Noticeably, similar benefits in life satisfaction have been recognized for both males and females in the 22-26 age range (Switek & Easterlin, 2018), and the present study findings extends this research by revealing comparatively higher levels of life satisfaction among females. In sum, the transition-related increases in autonomy and social connection may offset some difficulties in emotion regulation during this period, specifically for females.

Lastly, the findings of the current study showed that more females than males reported increased depressive symptoms in adulthood, corresponding with previous research (Li et al., 2023, Shi et al., 2021). Li and colleagues (2023) found that from 1990 to 2019, females had a higher global prevalence of depressive symptoms, with the largest sex differences observed among younger adolescents in more developed nations. Multiple factors likely contribute to sex differences in mental health problems. Biological factors, including crucial life changes such as puberty, menstrual cycle, pregnancy, postpartum period, and menopause, have been associated with increased risk for depressive symptoms among females. Sociocultural factors, such as gendered societal norms and gender-based biases, are also key influences (Baños & Miragall, 2024). Moreover, some scholars assert that differences in depressive symptomatology and diagnostic profiles, may increase females' likelihood of receiving a depression diagnosis (Baños & Miragall, 2024).

Strengths

The study had several notable strengths. First, it utilized longitudinal data collected across multiple waves. Notably, the Flourishing Families Project is a relatively large dataset, which enabled the use of advanced statistical techniques, such as full structural equation

modeling, and the discovery of more nuanced patterns and developmental trajectories over an 11-year span. Furthermore, the study relied on adolescent and young adult self-reports, thereby strengthening its methodological design. Consistent with prior research, adolescents provide more accurate accounts of their own experiences than parental reports (Colton & Godleski, 2025; McCauley et al., 2021).

Limitations

The study had some limitations. Gold standard measures were not implemented due to the extensive battery and the designers' use of shortened measures. The findings may not be generalizable, as most participants were European American families, which limited racial diversity. While African American and multi-ethnic groups were included, numbers of Hispanic and Asian Americans were low, reducing cultural nuance and restricting findings mainly to European American families. Reliance exclusively on adolescent and young adult self-reports is a limitation, as it may introduce biases such as social desirability, recall, and reporting accuracy, potentially leading to over- or under-reporting. Participants also interpreted items differently, influenced by individual, cultural, and contextual factors, which may introduce measurement error. A final limitation is the lack of Wave 10 data for the Utah state sample.

Future Research

Future studies may consider building on these findings in multiple meaningful ways. First, given that my study utilized secondary data and non-gold standard measures, future research may consider incorporating multi-method assessments of parental conflict, connectedness, and adolescent emotion regulation – for example, observational coding of behavioral interaction that enhances construct validity. Secondly, future work may consider incorporating more diverse samples, as cultural context and family dynamics may shape

adolescents' emotion regulation and attachment processes. Third, future research may explore potential moderators, such as parent mental health or peer and romantic relationships, as prior studies suggest these factors can interact with attachment to influence developmental outcomes (Sroufe, 2005). Finally, intervention and prevention research should directly test whether enhancing the parent-adolescent relationship and addressing parental conflict would affect later adult well-being.

Implications

This study underscores the essential role of parents in adolescents' lives, suggesting the need for prevention programs that support parents in fostering strong parent-adolescent connectedness to enhance future well-being. Specifically, it is imperative that providers equip parents with skills and interventions that can strengthen the parent-adolescent relationship, thereby promoting adolescents' sense of safety and security within the family and ensuring they view their parents as supportive guides. When adolescents have developed a strong connection with their parents over the years, they are more likely to develop effective emotion regulation, which has an important influence throughout development (Barthel et al., 2018). Evidence-based interventions, such as Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT), can further strengthen parent-adolescent relationships and help families resolve past relationship ruptures that may undermine adolescents' sense of safety (Diamond et al., 2021). Given the detrimental effects of parental conflict on adolescent emotion regulation, young adult depressive symptoms, and overall life satisfaction, interventions that help parents resolve conflict constructively may serve as vital preventative means. Supporting parents in managing parental conflict in healthier ways has the potential to offer significant benefits for adolescents' psychological well-being and overall life satisfaction.

Clinicians may consider assessing the couple relationship for conflict when families and couples are entering therapy or seeking out child treatment. Measures such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) assess couples' overall relationship functioning and are well-established and widely used in both clinical and research settings. The DAS assists in clinical conceptualizing, treatment planning, and evaluating the couples' overall relationship well-being without isolating behaviors (Spanier, 1976). Additionally, the Communication Patterns Questionnaire-Short Form (CPQ-SF) provides assessment for adaptive and maladaptive communication patterns while identifying dysfunctional interactional patterns that maintain and exacerbate couple conflict. Specifically, the CPQ-SF provides insight into how couples engage while showing the clinician where to intervene (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). Utilizing such assessments has the potential to assist clinicians in providing parents with psychoeducation on the harm of parental conflict on children and adolescents. Clinicians may further support parents in buffering their children from their couple disputes by offering psychoeducation on parental alliance, interparental boundaries, and the implementation of emotion regulation within the family, with the goal of preserving children's and adolescents' emotional safety. Research shows that when parents model conflict-resolution skills constructively, this teaches children and adolescents how to regulate their emotions (Barthassat, 2014), while normalizing conflict as a part of life may reduce children's and adolescents' threat to their sense of safety.

Conclusion

This study highlights the important role of adolescent emotion regulation in linking parent dynamics to young adult outcomes. Extending previous research, the findings show that parental conflict is associated with adolescents' inability to regulate emotions effectively; this, in turn, is linked to lower life satisfaction and higher levels of depression in adulthood. These

results underscore the lasting impact of parental conflict on emotional adaptation and well-being across the lifespan. Additionally, my findings suggest that supportive parent-adolescent bonds are linked to later parent-adolescent connections. Prevention efforts that support parents in resolving disputes constructively while building and maintaining positive relationships with their children may be critical for promoting adaptive emotion regulation and improving long-term well-being outcomes.

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Table 1Descriptive Statistics ($N = 647$)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>n of items</i>	<i>α</i>
(W1) Adolescent-Parent1 Connection	4.08	.59	3.33	6	.70
(W1) Adolescent-Parent2 Connection	3.95	.65	4	6	.74
(W1) Parental Conflict	10.45	4.42	4	6	.89
(W1) Parental Triangulation	4.02	2.22	.05	3	.85
(W3) Adolescent Emotion Regulation	2.93	3.43	.45	5	.82
(W10) Young-Adult Life Satisfaction	5.21	5.56	.39	5	.82
(W10) Young-Adult Depression	1.81	.57	2.95	20	.91
(W1) Adolescent Sex	1.50	.50	1		

Table 2

Standardized Factor Loadings for Latent Variables

<i>Latent Variable</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est/SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Wave1					
PAR1	CON1P1	0.50	0.05	9.07	<.001
PAR1	CON2P1	0.60	0.03	16.40	<.001
PAR1	CON3P1	0.60	0.04	14.83	<.001
PAR1	CON4P1	0.46	0.04	10.02	<.001
PAR1	CON5P1	0.47	0.05	8.56	<.001
PAR1	CON6P1	0.52	0.05	10.33	<.001
PAR2	CON1P2	0.53	0.05	9.77	<.001
PAR2	CON2P2	0.69	0.03	21.62	<.001
PAR2	CON3P2	0.59	0.05	11.44	<.001
PAR2	CON4P2	0.54	0.04	11.86	<.001
PAR2	CON5P2	0.48	0.06	7.71	<.001
PAR2	CON6P2	0.53	0.05	10.78	<.001
PARCON	CONFL1_1	0.79	0.03	23.78	<.001
PARCON	CONFL2_1	0.77	0.02	29.51	<.001
PARCON	CONFL3_1	0.77	0.03	24.52	<.001
PARCON	CONFL4_1	0.84	0.02	33.44	<.001
PARCON	CONFL5_1	0.77	0.02	27.55	<.001
PARCON	CONFL6_1	0.63	0.04	16.53	<.001
PARTRI	CONFL8_1	0.90	0.03	23.81	<.001
PARTRI	CONFL9_1	0.62	0.05	11.62	<.001
PARTRI	CONFL10_1	0.90	0.03	29.49	<.001
Wave 3					
ADOLREG	EMREG1R	0.77	0.02	33.43	<.001
ADOLREG	EMREG2R	0.81	0.02	37.23	<.001
ADOLREG	EMREG3R	0.69	0.03	22.94	<.001

ADOLREG	EMREG4	0.71	0.02	25.30	<.001
ADOLREG	EMREG5	0.50	0.03	14.30	<.001
Wave10					
LIFESAT	LIFESAT5R	0.59	0.04	13.34	<.001
LIFESAT	LIFESAT4R	0.67	0.04	15.19	<.001
LIFESAT	LIFESAT3R	0.71	0.04	14.81	<.001
LIFESAT	LIFESAT2R	0.67	0.04	15.34	<.001
LIFESAT	LIFESAT1R	0.86	0.02	34.94	<.001
DEPRES	DEP_P1	0.89	0.01	62.06	<.001
DEPRES	DEP_P2	0.85	0.01	48.86	<.001
DEPRES	DEP_P3	0.88	0.01	51.27	<.001

PAR1 – *Parent1 Connectedness Adolescent*, PAR2 – *Parent2 Connectedness Adolescent*,
PARCON – *Parental Conflict*, PATRI – *Parental Triangulation*, ADOLREG – *Adolescent
Emotion Regulation*, LIFESAT – *Life Satisfaction*, DEPRES – *Depression*

Table 3

Wave 1, Parent1-Adolescent Connectedness, Parent1-Adolescent Connectedness, Parental Conflict, Parental Triangulation, Wave 3, Adolescent Depression, Wave 10, Young Adult Well-being: Life Satisfaction, Depression. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics ($N = 647$)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. (W1) Adolescent-Parent1 Connection	–						
2. (W1) Adolescent-Parent2 Connection	.78**	–					
3. (W1) Parental Conflict	-.12**	-.27**	–				
4. (W1) Parental Triangulation	-.17**	-.19**	.44**	–			
5. (W3) Adolescent Emotion Regulation	.14**	.14***	-.21**	.18**	–		
6. (W10) Young-Adult Life Satisfaction	.17**	.09	-.11*	-.08	.19**	–	
7. (W10) Young-Adult Depression	-.04	-.09	.09	.12*	-.20**	-.43**	–
8. (W1) Adolescent Sex	.07	.00	-.01	-.02	-.15**	.13**	.16**

Adolescent Sex = *male*, 1 = *female*. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4

Unstandardized, Standardized, and Significance Levels for Model in Figure 1 (Standard Errors in Parentheses; N = 647)

<i>Parameter Estimate</i>	<i>Young Adult Life Satisfaction (W10)</i>			<i>Young Adult Depression (W10)</i>			<i>Adolescent Emotion Regulation (W3)</i>		
<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
(W1) Parent1-Adolescent Connectedness	.47*	.22	.25	-.00	.13	-.00	.13	.14	.10
(W1) Parent2- Adolescent Connectedness	-.22	.19	-.13	-.03	.13	-.03	.07	.14	.06
(W1) Parental Conflict	-.09	.08	-.08	.01	.04	.02	-.15***	.05	-.18
(W1) Parental Triangulation	.01	.05	.01	.04	.03	.06	.06	.04	-.08
(W3) Adolescent Emotion Regulation	.28***	.09	.20	-.15***	.05	-.18			
(W1) Adolescent Sex	.26***	.09	.14	.15***	.05	.14	-.20***	.05	-.16

Note: $\chi^2(531) = 902.35$, * $p < .05$; $p < .01$ ** ; $p < .001$ ***

CFI = .95 ; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .03 ; SRMR = .05