

# ***Parental Psychological Control and Child Aggressive Behavior: A Chain Mediation of Security and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies***

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**Abstract:** This study examines the influence of parental psychological control on children's aggressive behavior, with focus on the roles of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. The research conducts a questionnaire survey among 573 students from three primary schools in Yanbian, Jilin Province. Results indicate three main findings: (1) Parental psychological control shows significant positive prediction of children's aggressive behavior. (2) Sensory security and cognitive-emotional regulation strategies mediate the relationship between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior. (3) These factors demonstrate chain mediation effects between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior. The study concludes that parental psychological control affects children's aggressive behavior both directly and indirectly through the sequential mediation of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

## **1. Introduction**

Aggressive behavior refers to the behavioral and psychological tendencies of intentionally harming others, which includes both physical and psychological harm [1, 2], as well as both direct and indirect aggression [3]. Children's aggressive behavior is influenced by various factors such as biological, social, and environmental factors. Among these, the influence of the family environment on children's aggressive behavior cannot be ignored.

Different parenting styles have different impacts on children's growth. Positive parenting styles contribute to children's development [4]. However, parental psychological control, as a subtle and negative parenting style, can affect children's autonomous development, inhibit their self-expression, and trigger feelings of guilt, etc. [5]. Some researchers have classified parental control into two types: behavioral control and psychological control. Parental psychological control refers to the control exerted by parents during the interaction between children and parents, which hinders the development of children's autonomy and identity [6]. Research shows that there is a significant positive correlation between parental psychological control and children's relational aggression [7].

The research by Liu Yihong and Li Hui indicates that negative parental psychological control, on the one hand, causes children to spread negative emotions from the family to peer interactions, and on the other hand, leads to direct aggressive behavior[8]. Children's aggressive behavior increases as the level of parental psychological control rises [9]. Therefore, the research proposes Hypothesis 1: Parental psychological control positively predicts children's aggressive behavior.

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that parents are crucial in children's growth process. If parents give children sufficient love, it will enable children to obtain a sense of security and establish a self-esteem, self-love, and independent world view [10]. Appropriate parental psychological control can help children build a sense of security and form good social connections [11]. However, excessive parental psychological control is not conducive to the formation of good social connections, breaks the sense of security between parents and children, and leads to a series of problem behaviors. Some scholars have studied left-behind children during the epidemic. The results show that there is a significant negative correlation between the sense of security and aggression of left-behind children [12]. Therefore, the research proposes Hypothesis 2: The sense of security plays a mediating role between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior.

Cognitive emotion regulation strategies refer to the process in which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their experiences and expressions in order to adapt to society and the environment when facing emotional events [13]. Some researchers have divided emotion regulation strategies into two dimensions: negative and positive, that is, non-adaptive cognitive strategies and adaptive cognitive strategies [14]. Research shows that if parents adopt scientific and effective parenting styles, children will adopt adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies rather than non-adaptive ones when facing stressful events [15]. And the incorrect use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies makes children more prone to aggressive behavior [16]. Therefore, the research proposes Hypothesis 3: Cognitive emotion regulation strategies play a mediating role between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior.

Existing research shows that an individual's sense of security can affect their cognitive emotion regulation strategies [17]. Children lacking a sense of security may form negative internal cognitive schemas and tend to choose negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies [17, 18], which in turn makes them prone to aggressive behavior. Excessive parental psychological control may reduce children's sense of security, cause them to generate negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies, and thus lead to aggressive behavior. Based on this, the research proposes Hypothesis 4: The sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies play a chain mediating role between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior.

In summary, this study will adopt a cross-sectional design to explore the relationship between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior, and introduce the sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies as mediating variables to further reveal the underlying mechanism.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1. Participants**

A cluster sampling method was used to select 573 primary school students from grades 3 to 5 in three primary schools in Yanbian, Jilin. After deleting invalid questionnaires, a total of 495 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective rate of 86%. Among them, there were 260 boys (52.53%) and 235 girls (47.47%). There were 157 third-graders (31.71%), 167 fourth-graders (33.74%), and 171 fifth-graders (34.55%). The age range was from 8 to 13 years old, with an average age of 11.47 years.

## **2.2. Research Instruments**

### **2.2.1. Children's Aggression Questionnaire**

The "Aggression Questionnaire" was used, which was developed by Demaray et al. [19] and revised by Chinese scholar Yang Shuya [20]. This questionnaire consists of 9 items and contains two dimensions: direct aggression and indirect aggression. It uses a 5-point scale, and the higher the score, the higher the frequency of children's aggressive behavior. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of this questionnaire in this study was 0.87.

### **2.2.2. Parental Psychological Control Questionnaire**

The parental psychological control level questionnaire developed by Chen Wei and Zou Xiaoyan [21] was adopted. This questionnaire has 34 items and includes two parts: positive psychological control and negative psychological control. It uses a 5-point scale. The higher the measurement score, the stronger the degree of parental psychological control. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of this questionnaire in this study was 0.93.

### **2.2.3. Sense of Security Questionnaire**

This questionnaire has 16 items and uses a 5-point scale [22]. The higher the score of this questionnaire, the higher the level of children's sense of security. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of this questionnaire in this study was 0.77.

### **2.2.4. Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire**

The simplified version of the children's cognitive emotion regulation questionnaire developed by Garnefski and Kraaij [23] was adopted. This questionnaire has 5 items and uses a 5-point scale. The higher the questionnaire score, the greater the possibility that children adopt adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of this questionnaire in this study was 0.87.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Common Method Bias Test**

The Harman single-factor test method was employed to examine the common method bias of variables in this study. A total of 22 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were obtained without rotation. The first factor explained 14.53% of the total variance, which was less than the critical value of 40%. Therefore, there was no significant common method bias problem in this study.

### **3.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis**

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted on each variable, and the results are shown in Table 1. Parental psychological control was significantly positively correlated with children's aggressive behavior. Parental psychological control was significantly negatively correlated with children's sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. There was a significant positive correlation between children's sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Children's aggressive behavior was significantly negatively correlated with their sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. In terms of parental psychological control, negative psychological control was not significantly correlated with children's aggressive behavior, but was

significantly negatively correlated with children's sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Positive psychological control was significantly positively correlated with children's aggressive behavior and significantly negatively correlated with children's sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. In terms of children's aggressive behavior, direct aggression was significantly positively correlated with parental psychological control and significantly negatively correlated with children's sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Indirect aggression was also significantly positively correlated with parental psychological control and significantly negatively correlated with children's sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

### 3.3. Mediation Effect Tests

#### 3.3.1. Mediation Role of Sense of Security

Under the control of gender and grade, Model 4 (simple mediation model) in Hayes' SPSS macro program PROCESS was used to test the mediation effect of the sense of security between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior. The results showed that parental psychological control significantly and positively predicted children's aggressive behavior ( $B = 0.552, t = 1.865, p < 0.01$ ). After adding the sense of security as a mediating variable, the predictive effect of parental psychological control on children's aggressive behavior remained significant ( $B = 0.156, t = 1.865, p < 0.01$ ). Parental psychological control significantly and negatively predicted the sense of security ( $B = -0.403, t = -7.742, p < 0.01$ ), and the sense of security significantly and negatively predicted children's aggressive behavior ( $B = -0.403, t = -7.838, p < 0.01$ ). As shown in Table 2, the 95% confidence intervals of the bootstrap for the direct effect of parental psychological control on children's aggressive behavior and the simple mediation effect of the sense of security therein did not contain 0. The total effect was  $e = 0.552$  (BC 95% CI [0.388, 0.716]), the direct effect was  $e = 0.156$  (BC 95% CI [0.008, 0.320]), and the mediation effect was  $e = 0.396$  (BC 95% CI [0.202, 0.504]). Moreover, the direct effect accounted for 28.26% of the total effect, and the mediation effect accounted for 71.74% of the total effect.

#### 3.3.2. Mediation Role of Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies

Parental psychological control significantly and positively predicted children's aggressive behavior ( $B = 0.552, t = 6.580, p < 0.01$ ). When the cognitive emotion regulation strategy was added as a mediating variable, parental psychological control still significantly and positively predicted children's aggressive behavior ( $B = 0.185, t = 2.075, p < 0.05$ ). Parental psychological control significantly and negatively predicted cognitive emotion regulation strategies ( $B = -0.616, t = -7.960, p < 0.01$ ), and cognitive emotion regulation strategies significantly and negatively predicted children's aggressive behavior ( $B = -0.596, t = -6.707, p < 0.01$ ). As shown in Table 3, the 95% confidence intervals of the bootstrap for the direct effect of parental psychological control on children's aggressive behavior and the simple mediation effect of cognitive emotion regulation strategies therein did not contain 0. The total effect was  $e = 0.552$  (BC 95% CI [0.388, 0.716]), the direct effect was  $e = 0.185$  (BC 95% CI [0.010, 0.316]), and the mediation effect was  $e = 0.367$  (BC 95% CI [0.250, 0.449]). Moreover, the direct effect accounted for 33.51% of the total effect, and the mediation effect accounted for 66.49% of the total effect.

#### 3.3.3. Serial Mediation Role of Sense of Security and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies

To further verify the serial mediation role of the sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies, Model 6 in the SPSS program was adopted and the model was tested through

the PROCESS add-in. With the total number of the original data sample  $N = 495$ , the Bootstrap method was applied. The subsample size was set to 5000, and the confidence level was selected as 95%. The specific effect values, the upper and lower limits of the confidence intervals and the test results are shown in Table 4.

As can be seen from Table 4, the total effect contains 3 paths, and the 95% confidence intervals of each path do not contain 0. Among them, the total effect of parental psychological control on children's aggressive behavior is  $e = 0.449$  (BC 95% CI [0.388, 0.716]); the simple mediation effect of the sense of security between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior is  $e = 0.286$  (BC 95% CI [0.102, 0.415]); the simple mediation effect of cognitive emotion regulation strategies between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior is  $e = 0.053$  (BC 95% CI [0.004, 0.109]); the serial mediation effect of the sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior is  $e = 0.110$  (BC 95% CI [0.023, 0.246]). The structural equation model of the study is as follows, as shown in Figure 1.

### 3.4. Figures, Tables and Schemes

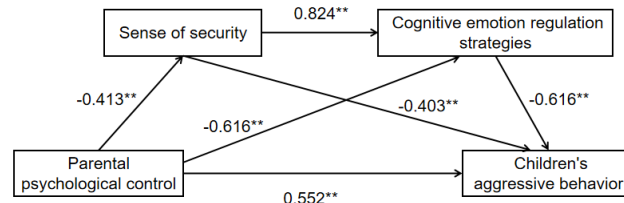


Figure 1. The Serial Mediation Model of the Sense of Security and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies

Table 1. Descriptive Statistical Results and Correlation Analysis among Variables.

	$\bar{x} \pm s$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Children's Aggressive Behavior	2.300 ± 0.768	1							
Direct Aggression	2.108 ± 0.916	0.960**	1						
Indirect Aggression	2.268 ± 0.921	0.973**	0.868**	1					
Sense of Security	3.317 ± 1.224	-0.803**	-0.740**	-0.807**	1				
Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies	2.941 ± 0.709	-0.745**	-0.658**	-0.772**	0.824**	1			
Parental Psychological Control	3.424 ± 0.717	0.690**	0.631**	0.696**	-0.697**	-0.680**	1		
Negative Psychological Control	3.289 ± 0.707	0.162	0.097	0.206*	-0.132	-0.232**	0.725**	1	
Positive Psychological Control	3.521 ± 0.952	0.804**	0.769**	0.784**	-0.828**	-0.754**	0.924**	0.410**	1

Table 2. Total, direct and mediating effects

	Effect value	Boot standard error	Lower limit of BootCI	Upper limit of BootCI	Relative effect value
Total effect	0.552	0.084	0.388	0.716	
Direct effect	0.156	0.085	0.008	0.320	28.26%
Mediation effect	0.396	0.012	0.202	0.504	71.74%

Table 3. Total, direct and mediating effects

	Effect value	Boot standard error	Lower limit of BootCI	Upper limit of BootCI	Relative effect value
Total effect	0.552	0.084	0.388	0.716	
Direct effect	0.185	0.065	0.010	0.316	33.51%
Mediation effect	0.367	0.051	0.250	0.449	66.49%

Table 4. Chain mediation effect analysis

Path	Mediation effect	Proportion of the total effect	Lower limit of BootCI	Upper limit of BootCI
Parental psychological control → Sense of security → Children's aggressive behavior	0.286	63.69%	0.102	0.415
Parental psychological control → Cognitive emotion regulation strategies → Children's aggressive behavior	0.053	11.82%	0.004	0.109
Parental psychological control → Sense of security → Cognitive emotion regulation strategies → Children's aggressive behavior	0.110	24.49%	0.023	0.246
Total mediation effect	0.449	100%	0.388	0.716

## 4. Discussion

This study, with school-aged children as the research sample, verified the relationship between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior, as well as the serial mediating role of the sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies therein.

### 4.1. The Relationship between Parental Psychological Control and Children's Aggressive Behavior

The research confirmed Hypothesis 1. Parental psychological control positively predicts children's aggressive behavior. Excessive parental psychological control can trigger children's aggressive behavior, which is in line with the conclusions of existing studies. The General Aggression Model posits that the generation of an individual's aggressive behavior is the result of the combined action of the individual and the situation. The generation of an individual's aggressive behavior goes through three stages, namely input variables, the individual's internal state, and outcome output. The individual's internal state includes three aspects: emotion, cognition, and arousal. Parental psychological control can evoke children's negative emotions and negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies, thus leading to children's aggressive behavior. Parental psychological control is a negative parenting style that has an adverse impact on children's social



connections and gives rise to problem behaviors such as aggressive behavior [24]. Higher levels of parental psychological control and parental emotional dysregulation result in more children's aggressive behavior [25].

#### **4.2. Mediating Roles of the Sense of Security and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies**

**Mediating Role of the Sense of Security** The study confirmed Hypothesis 2, indicating that the sense of security plays a mediating role between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior. Parental psychological control can directly and positively predict children's aggressive behavior, and it can also indirectly influence such behavior through the sense of security. Relevant research has found a significant correlation between parenting styles and children's sense of security [26]. As a specific form of parenting style, parental psychological control is closely associated with the establishment of children's sense of security. When children are exposed to excessive parental psychological control over an extended period, their levels of psychological security and sense of control over uncertain events tend to be relatively low. Consequently, they often adopt negative coping strategies such as avoidance when facing difficulties. However, the impact of the sense of security on aggressive behavior is often subtle and easily overlooked [26, 27]. A study by Sun Lijun et al. verified the mediating roles of the sense of security and loneliness between childhood psychological abuse and aggressive behavior. It was found that a low sense of security is a key factor contributing to the increase in aggressive behavior among adolescents who have experienced childhood abuse. Therefore, parents should focus on cultivating children's sense of security during their growth to reduce the occurrence of aggressive behavior [28].

**Mediating Role of Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies** The study confirmed Hypothesis 3, suggesting that cognitive emotion regulation strategies play a mediating role between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior. Parental psychological control can directly and positively predict children's aggressive behavior, and it can also indirectly affect such behavior through cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Previous studies have shown that parental psychological control restricts children's emotional, behavioral, self-awareness, and moral development, which leads to the unfulfillment of children's autonomy needs and poor psychological development [5, 29]. Excessive parental psychological control makes children more prone to negative emotions, thereby increasing the use of negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies. In turn, negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies are associated with an increased likelihood of aggressive behavior [30]. Conversely, a warm parenting style can significantly predict children's use of positive emotion regulation strategies [4]. Existing research has demonstrated that an authoritative parenting style that grants children more autonomy is associated with higher levels of children's emotion regulation and lower levels of behavior problems, while an authoritarian parenting style with less autonomy is related to lower levels of children's emotion regulation and higher levels of behavior problems [31]. Therefore, excessive parental psychological control encourages children to rely more on negative cognitive emotion regulation strategies, leading to the emergence of aggressive behavior.

**Serial Mediating Role of the Sense of Security and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies** The study confirmed Hypothesis 4, showing that the sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies play a serial mediating role between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior. Parental psychological control can directly influence children's aggressive behavior, and it can also indirectly affect such behavior through the sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. This finding validates the positive predictive effect of parental psychological control on children's aggressive behavior and emphasizes the mediating roles of the sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation. Some studies have indicated that there is a

positive correlation between emotion regulation efficiency and the sense of security, which can effectively enhance positive emotions and appropriately reduce negative emotions [32]. Children with a high sense of security in middle childhood tend to show better emotional adjustment in the classroom and use more adaptive coping strategies to manage negative emotions [33]. Parental psychological control restricts children's emotional needs, such as the need for a sense of security [34], and leads to negative self-evaluations through different cognitive emotion regulation strategies, ultimately resulting in aggressive behavior[35]. This research finding suggests that intervening in children's aggressive behavior from the perspectives of parental psychological control, the sense of security, and cognitive emotion regulation strategies can help reduce the occurrence of such behavior and promote the development of children's sense of security and positive cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

### 4.3. Research Limitations

Firstly, the cross-sectional research method employed makes it difficult to establish a causal relationship between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior. The mediating mechanism between them requires further verification. Additionally, since school-aged children are in a stage of rapid development, future research could use longitudinal tracking to explore how the relationship between parental psychological control and aggressive behavior changes over time. Secondly, the sampling scope and size of this study are limited. Future research can expand the sample to improve the reliability and validity of the conclusions. Thirdly, this study used the self-report method to collect data on variables, which may be affected by the social desirability effect. Future research can combine teacher ratings and other methods with the self-report method to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the conclusions.

## 5. Conclusions

Through this investigation, this study identified the following relationships: (1) Parental psychological control can positively predict children's aggressive behavior; (2) The sense of security mediates the relationship between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior; (3) Cognitive emotion regulation strategies mediate the relationship between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior; (4) The sense of security and cognitive emotion regulation strategies play a serial mediating role between parental psychological control and children's aggressive behavior.

These findings imply that when researching and intervening in children's aggressive behavior, the influence of parental control should be given priority consideration. In school education, emphasis can be placed on teaching knowledge and skills related to emotion regulation strategies, and support can be provided in terms of students' sense of security. In this way, comprehensive and effective education, intervention, and prevention can be carried out.

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