

Prioritization of Psychological and Contextual Factors Contributing to Parent–Child Relationship Quality

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify and prioritize the key psychological and contextual factors that influence the quality of parent–child relationships among Malaysian families.

Methods and Materials: This research employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design consisting of two distinct phases. In the qualitative phase, a systematic literature review was conducted to identify psychological and contextual determinants of parent–child relationship quality until theoretical saturation was achieved. The data were coded and categorized thematically using NVivo 14 software. Seven major themes emerged: emotional regulation and expression, communication quality, parenting style and discipline, attachment and bonding, contextual family environment, cultural and social values, and parental psychological well-being. In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire derived from the qualitative findings was distributed to 210 Malaysian parents selected through stratified random sampling. Participants rated each factor on a 5-point Likert scale, and data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, applying descriptive statistics and the Friedman ranking test to determine the relative importance of each factor.

Findings: The results indicated significant differences in the perceived importance of the seven identified factors ($\chi^2 = 64.21$, $p < .001$). Emotional regulation and expression received the highest mean importance score ($M = 4.65$), followed by communication quality ($M = 4.52$), parenting style and discipline ($M = 4.41$), and attachment and bonding ($M = 4.38$). Contextual family environment ($M = 4.26$), cultural and social values ($M = 4.11$), and parental psychological well-being ($M = 4.03$) ranked lower but remained statistically significant. These findings highlight the predominance of emotional and communicative processes in shaping family relationship quality.

Conclusion: The study concludes that parent–child relationship quality in Malaysian families is primarily determined by emotional regulation, communication, and parenting style, while contextual and cultural factors play complementary roles.

Keywords: Parent–child relationship; emotional regulation; communication quality; parenting style; attachment.

1. Introduction

The parent–child relationship represents one of the most fundamental and formative bonds in human development, shaping emotional, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes across the lifespan (Abbasi et al., 2023). Quality in this relationship has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional warmth, mutual trust, open communication, and consistent caregiving practices. The nature of this bond influences children’s emotional regulation, social competence, and attachment security, while also shaping parents’ sense of efficacy, satisfaction, and identity (Walsh & Zadurian, 2022). Over the past two decades, researchers have increasingly explored the interplay of psychological and contextual determinants of parent–child relationship quality, emphasizing that both internal parental characteristics and broader sociocultural environments contribute to relationship outcomes (Li et al., 2025). Despite the extensive theoretical attention devoted to the topic, limited empirical efforts have attempted to systematically prioritize these multidimensional factors, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts such as Malaysia, where familial norms and values may differ substantially from those observed in Western societies.

Parent–child relationship quality is often evaluated in terms of affective closeness, communication style, mutual responsiveness, and attachment security (Huang, 2021). Secure attachment has long been recognized as the foundation of emotional resilience and psychological well-being in children (Kim et al., 2021). According to attachment theory, parental sensitivity, emotional availability, and responsiveness to a child’s needs promote a sense of safety and trust, which in turn facilitates adaptive emotion regulation and social functioning (Čerešník, 2023). Conversely, inconsistent or neglectful caregiving can lead to insecure attachment styles, manifesting as anxiety, avoidance, or ambivalence in children (Nordahl et al., 2020). These attachment disruptions can persist into adolescence and adulthood, influencing relationship satisfaction, coping styles, and mental health outcomes (Šimonji-Černak & Mićanović-Cvejić, 2020). Thus, the relational patterns established in early family life are not static but have enduring implications for emotional and interpersonal development.

Parenting styles constitute another significant determinant of relationship quality, reflecting a blend of behavioral strategies, emotional attitudes, and disciplinary

practices. The authoritative style, characterized by warmth, consistency, and autonomy support, has been repeatedly linked to higher relationship satisfaction and secure attachment (Bahmani et al., 2022). By contrast, authoritarian or permissive styles—marked by overcontrol or indulgence—often undermine mutual trust and increase conflict frequency (Čerešník, 2023). Empirical studies demonstrate that maladaptive parenting behaviors, including emotional withdrawal and punitive discipline, are associated with child anxiety, behavioral problems, and reduced relational harmony (Moradi et al., 2023). The interdependence of parenting style and attachment suggests that both emotional and behavioral components of parenting interact to shape the relational climate within families (Wu, 2024).

Communication processes are integral to sustaining healthy parent–child dynamics. Open, empathetic, and consistent communication fosters emotional safety and trust, whereas critical or dismissive exchanges contribute to relational tension and emotional distance (Abbasi et al., 2023). Parents’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors—such as tone of voice, responsiveness, and physical proximity—serve as indicators of emotional attunement (Zvara et al., 2020). The capacity to engage in reflective dialogue, validate the child’s feelings, and negotiate conflict constructively predicts stronger relational bonds and fewer behavioral difficulties (Rosu, 2020). Moreover, as children progress through adolescence, communication becomes an essential vehicle for autonomy development, requiring parents to balance control and independence (Walsh & Zadurian, 2022). Consequently, communication is not only a relational outcome but also a dynamic process through which attachment, discipline, and emotional regulation are expressed.

Psychological well-being and emotional competence of parents significantly influence their capacity to sustain positive relationships with their children. Parental stress, depression, or emotional dysregulation can impair responsiveness and increase the likelihood of harsh or inconsistent parenting (Lyubushina, 2025). Emotional regulation—defined as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modulate emotional reactions—is central to effective parenting (Lavenda & Hertz, 2024). Parents with stronger emotion-regulation skills tend to display patience, empathy, and reflective responses, whereas those with poor regulation may react impulsively, contributing to conflict escalation and emotional withdrawal (Hofstra et al., 2023). Studies indicate that interventions aimed at improving parental

emotional regulation enhance both parental satisfaction and children's socioemotional outcomes (Ankori et al., 2025). Emotional regulation also serves as a mediating process linking parental psychological well-being to overall relationship quality, suggesting that emotional resilience operates as a protective mechanism against relational stress (Yun et al., 2020).

Attachment-based frameworks continue to dominate research on parent-child relational quality, though contemporary models increasingly emphasize interactional and contextual dimensions. Attachment theory, originally developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth, posits that early caregiving experiences form internal working models that guide future relational expectations (Huang, 2021). Recent empirical studies have expanded this view to include parental reflective functioning—the ability to understand one's own and the child's mental states—which has been shown to predict adaptive parenting and reduce the risk of child psychopathology (Koycheva, 2021). Moreover, cross-cultural evidence suggests that the expression of attachment and caregiving behaviors varies according to sociocultural norms, underscoring the importance of cultural adaptation in attachment-based interventions (Hoenicka et al., 2022). For example, collectivist societies, such as those in East and Southeast Asia, often prioritize interdependence and family harmony, which can moderate the influence of attachment patterns on relational outcomes (Zaharim & Hashim, 2022).

Beyond psychological constructs, contextual factors play an indispensable role in shaping the parent-child relationship. Family cohesion, socioeconomic stability, and interparental harmony serve as environmental supports for effective parenting (Li et al., 2025). In contrast, economic hardship, marital discord, and social isolation can undermine parents' emotional availability and responsiveness. Empirical research indicates that financial strain contributes to parental stress, which indirectly disrupts attachment security and child well-being (Lyubushina, 2025). The mediating role of parental mental health in linking contextual stressors to child outcomes highlights the systemic nature of family functioning. Studies conducted in both Western and Asian contexts have demonstrated that family harmony and shared rituals enhance relational satisfaction and resilience against external pressures (Zaharim & Hashim, 2022). Therefore, any comprehensive assessment of parent-child relationship quality must integrate contextual as well as individual-level determinants.

Cultural and societal values represent a broader framework through which parenting behaviors and

relationship expectations are filtered. In collectivist cultures, respect for authority, filial piety, and family interdependence are emphasized, influencing parental expectations and communication patterns (Li et al., 2025). Religious and moral orientations also provide a normative framework for family interactions, offering parents ethical guidelines and coping strategies during times of conflict (Svendsrud et al., 2023). For example, families that incorporate spiritual practices into parenting often exhibit higher cohesion and perceived relational stability (Rosu, 2020). However, cultural norms can also impose rigid gender expectations that shape parenting roles and child socialization, as seen in patriarchal societies where caregiving is primarily associated with mothers (Parameswasri, 2023). As global modernization accelerates, these traditional structures are increasingly challenged by changing gender roles, technological influences, and evolving conceptions of parental authority (Tan et al., 2023). These cultural transitions create both opportunities and stressors, necessitating adaptive parenting strategies that balance tradition with modernity.

Parental self-efficacy and mentalization have recently emerged as bridging constructs linking individual and contextual dimensions of the parent-child relationship (Lavenda & Hertz, 2024). Parental self-efficacy refers to parents' belief in their ability to influence their child's development positively, while mentalization involves understanding and reflecting on the child's inner emotional world. Research shows that parents with higher levels of self-efficacy engage in more consistent, supportive, and emotionally responsive interactions, even under stressful conditions (Lavenda & Hertz, 2024). Similarly, reflective parenting reduces emotional misattunement and fosters mutual empathy between parents and children (Koycheva, 2021). The absence of these competencies, by contrast, often results in misunderstanding, coercion, or emotional disengagement (Bahmani et al., 2022). Thus, strengthening parental self-efficacy and reflective capacities can enhance resilience and relationship quality across diverse family systems.

The developmental consequences of parent-child relational quality are extensive, affecting children's emotional stability, academic achievement, and interpersonal competence (Tan et al., 2023). Secure and supportive relationships promote autonomy and resilience, while conflictual or neglectful interactions can precipitate anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems (Abbasi et al., 2023). Longitudinal studies have found that children

exposed to harsh or inconsistent parenting show elevated risk of emotional dysregulation, poor impulse control, and insecure attachment patterns later in life (Nordahl et al., 2020). Conversely, positive parent–child relationships serve as protective factors, buffering against environmental risks and enhancing psychological adjustment (Moradi et al., 2023). The integration of emotional, behavioral, and contextual influences underscores the need for a holistic framework capable of identifying and prioritizing the factors most predictive of relationship quality.

Although extensive research has examined the antecedents of parent–child attachment and parenting practices, few studies have adopted a mixed-methods approach to systematically identify and rank psychological and contextual predictors of relationship quality. Moreover, the majority of previous investigations have focused on single variables—such as attachment or discipline—without integrating the full spectrum of emotional, communicative, and sociocultural determinants (Hoenicka et al., 2022; Huang, 2021; Li et al., 2025). Studies conducted in Western contexts may not generalize to Asian or Middle Eastern cultures, where family structures, values, and expectations differ significantly (Zaharim & Hashim, 2022). In Malaysia, where collectivist traditions coexist with modern individualistic influences, understanding the balance between psychological and contextual drivers of family relationships is particularly important (Lyubushina, 2025). Recent scholarship has called for research that bridges micro-level psychological mechanisms (such as emotion regulation and attachment) with macro-level contextual influences (such as socioeconomic stability and cultural norms) to construct an integrated, culturally sensitive model of relational functioning (Hofstra et al., 2023; Wu, 2024).

Additionally, the growing emphasis on father–child dynamics represents an important development in the field. Historically, studies have focused predominantly on maternal influences, neglecting the unique contributions of fathers to emotional development and attachment formation (Svendsrud et al., 2023). Contemporary findings suggest that paternal emotional availability and communicative engagement are equally critical for secure attachment and behavioral regulation (Hofstra et al., 2023). Fathers' participation in caregiving and emotional support fosters children's confidence, self-regulation, and social competence (Li et al., 2025). Integrating paternal and maternal perspectives thus provides a more comprehensive understanding of family systems and relational diversity.

In summary, the current literature converges on the notion that parent–child relationship quality is a product of intricate interactions between psychological variables (such as emotional regulation, attachment, and self-efficacy) and contextual variables (including socioeconomic stability, family cohesion, and cultural values). Yet, despite a vast body of evidence, no consensus exists regarding which of these factors exert the strongest influence on relational outcomes within different sociocultural contexts. The Malaysian context—with its multicultural composition and evolving family values—provides an ideal setting for such an investigation. Therefore, the present study employs a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach to first identify and then prioritize psychological and contextual factors influencing parent–child relationship quality among Malaysian families, aiming to establish a framework for future family-oriented interventions and policy development.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design, combining a qualitative phase to identify key psychological and contextual factors influencing parent–child relationship quality, followed by a quantitative phase to rank and prioritize these factors. The exploratory qualitative phase focused on an in-depth review and synthesis of existing literature, while the subsequent quantitative phase employed statistical analysis to determine the relative importance of the identified factors.

In the quantitative phase, the study involved 210 participants from Malaysia, including both mothers and fathers of school-aged children. Participants were selected using a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across different demographic backgrounds such as age, education, and socio-economic status. Inclusion criteria required participants to be parents of at least one child between 6 and 18 years old and to have resided in Malaysia for a minimum of five years. Ethical approval for the study was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

2.2. Measures

The qualitative phase involved a systematic literature review aimed at identifying psychological and contextual predictors of parent–child relationship quality. Relevant

peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published over the last two decades were reviewed using electronic databases such as Scopus, PsycINFO, and ScienceDirect. The inclusion criteria for sources were empirical studies and theoretical frameworks directly addressing family dynamics, parenting practices, attachment, communication, emotional regulation, and socio-cultural factors influencing parent–child relationships. The review process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—when no new categories or subthemes emerged from the literature.

All extracted data were systematically organized, coded, and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. This facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, key concepts, and relationships among variables. The outcome of this phase was a comprehensive conceptual model summarizing the psychological (e.g., emotional regulation, empathy, attachment style) and contextual (e.g., family structure, cultural values, socio-economic status) dimensions influencing parent–child relationship quality.

The quantitative phase aimed to statistically prioritize the identified factors. A structured questionnaire was developed based on the qualitative findings and distributed among the 210 participants in Malaysia through both online and paper-based formats. The questionnaire included items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“not important”) to 5 (“very important”), covering both psychological and contextual domains. Demographic information such as age, gender, education level, and family size was also collected to provide additional insights.

2.3. Data Analysis

In the qualitative phase, thematic content analysis was performed using NVivo 14. The analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding to categorize data into major themes and subthemes. Frequent co-occurrence of themes was examined to explore the interrelations between psychological and contextual dimensions. The coding process ensured internal consistency and reliability through iterative comparison and expert review.

In the quantitative phase, data were entered into SPSS version 26 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants’ demographic profiles and the mean scores of each identified factor. Friedman ranking test and mean importance scores were employed to prioritize the psychological and contextual factors based on participants’ responses. Additionally, reliability analysis (Cronbach’s alpha) was conducted to verify the internal consistency of the questionnaire.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase of this research aimed to identify the major psychological and contextual factors contributing to parent–child relationship quality through an extensive review of theoretical and empirical literature. Using NVivo 14, relevant texts were coded and categorized inductively until theoretical saturation was reached. The analysis generated seven overarching themes representing both psychological and contextual dimensions of the parent–child relationship. Each theme encompassed several subthemes and associated concepts derived from open coding. These findings form the conceptual foundation for the subsequent quantitative ranking phase.

Table 1

Thematic Structure of Psychological and Contextual Factors Influencing Parent–Child Relationship Quality

Main Theme (Category)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Regulation and Expression	Parental Emotional Control	Managing anger, regulating stress, emotion labeling, self-calming, mindfulness practice
	Child Emotion Awareness	Recognizing child’s feelings, empathy during conflict, reflective listening, validating emotions
	Emotional Modeling	Parents showing vulnerability, non-defensive communication, consistent affect expression
2. Communication Quality	Verbal Communication Patterns	Open dialogue, active listening, question–response quality, tone and warmth
	Nonverbal Cues	Eye contact, physical affection, gestures, proximity behavior
	Conflict Resolution Style	Problem-solving talk, negotiation, emotion-focused communication, repair attempts
3. Parenting Style and Discipline	Authoritative Parenting	Balanced control, warmth with structure, rule clarity, mutual respect
	Permissive/Authoritarian Styles	Overcontrol, inconsistent punishment, leniency, emotional withdrawal

	Positive Reinforcement Practices	Praise routines, token systems, shared goal setting, reward tracking
	Boundary Setting	Age-appropriate limits, mutual agreement on rules, consistent follow-up
4. Attachment and Bonding	Secure Attachment	Emotional availability, physical closeness, trust development
	Insecure Patterns	Avoidance behaviors, anxious seeking, inconsistent caregiving
5. Contextual Family Environment	Socioeconomic Stability	Financial security, stable housing, parental employment, access to resources
	Family Cohesion	Shared family time, rituals, co-parent cooperation, collective problem solving
	Marital Relationship Quality	Interparental support, conflict spillover, co-parent communication
	Family Stress and Conflict	Work–family imbalance, intergenerational tensions, economic strain
6. Cultural and Social Values	Collectivist Norms	Respect for elders, family loyalty, obedience expectations, shared identity
	Religious and Moral Orientation	Faith-based guidance, moral narratives, spiritual coping
	Gender Role Expectations	Role division, expectations for sons vs. daughters, patriarchal norms
7. Parental Psychological Well-Being	Mental Health Status	Parental anxiety, depressive symptoms, burnout, emotional fatigue
	Self-Efficacy and Competence	Confidence in parenting, coping with stress, perceived control
	Work–Life Balance	Time management, occupational stress, emotional spillover from work
	Social Support Availability	Extended family help, peer parenting networks, community resources

Theme 1: Emotional Regulation and Expression

Emotional regulation and expression emerged as a central psychological dimension in shaping the quality of the parent–child relationship. Parents’ ability to manage their own emotional responses—such as anger, frustration, or stress—directly influences the emotional climate of the household and the child’s emotional development. Effective emotional regulation among parents fosters an atmosphere of safety and acceptance, allowing children to express their feelings without fear of judgment. The subthemes of parental emotional control, child emotion awareness, and emotional modeling highlighted how mindfulness, empathy, and consistency in affective communication play a crucial role in maintaining emotional balance. Parents who model healthy emotional expression and demonstrate empathy during moments of conflict enable children to develop reflective emotional awareness, enhancing mutual understanding and closeness within the dyad.

Theme 2: Communication Quality

Communication quality was identified as another vital theme, reflecting how verbal and nonverbal exchanges contribute to relational harmony or discord. The analysis revealed that open dialogue, active listening, and warm tone in everyday interactions strengthen trust and intimacy, whereas dismissive or critical communication patterns erode relational security. Nonverbal communication—such as eye contact, affectionate gestures, and proximity—was also found to significantly influence perceived emotional connection. Additionally, the subtheme of conflict resolution style underscored that problem-solving discussions and emotional repair efforts after disagreements are essential to relationship resilience. In families where communication is characterized by empathy and openness,

both parents and children are more likely to develop effective interpersonal skills and experience reduced relational tension.

Theme 3: Parenting Style and Discipline

The third theme, parenting style and discipline, captures the behavioral and attitudinal patterns parents use in guiding and correcting their children. The findings emphasized that authoritative parenting—marked by warmth, structure, and consistent expectations—was associated with higher relationship quality. In contrast, authoritarian and permissive approaches tended to disrupt emotional balance by either overcontrolling or failing to provide clear boundaries. Subthemes such as positive reinforcement and boundary setting revealed that mutual respect, age-appropriate rules, and consistent follow-up foster cooperation and responsibility in children. When parents combine discipline with empathy and encouragement, children are more likely to internalize values and maintain emotional closeness, suggesting that effective parenting integrates both behavioral guidance and affective attunement.

Theme 4: Attachment and Bonding

Attachment and bonding form the emotional foundation of the parent–child relationship. Secure attachment, built on emotional availability, trust, and physical closeness, emerged as a key determinant of relational quality. Children who perceive their parents as consistently responsive develop confidence in seeking comfort and support, leading to stronger emotional ties. Conversely, patterns of insecure attachment—such as avoidance, anxiety, or inconsistent caregiving—often result in relational tension and miscommunication. The thematic analysis revealed that parents’ attunement to children’s emotional needs and their

ability to provide comfort during distressing moments significantly shape long-term emotional stability. Thus, attachment quality serves not only as a psychological construct but as an enduring relational process that determines how affection, trust, and dependency evolve over time.

Theme 5: Contextual Family Environment

The contextual family environment theme encompassed the broader structural and situational factors influencing relational dynamics within the family system. Subthemes included socioeconomic stability, family cohesion, marital relationship quality, and family stress. Financial security, stable housing, and parental employment were consistently linked to lower levels of conflict and greater parental patience. Family cohesion, expressed through shared rituals, cooperative decision-making, and co-parent collaboration, strengthened relational harmony. However, high family stress—arising from work–family imbalance or economic strain—often disrupted emotional availability and communication quality. The interplay between marital relationship quality and parenting practices was particularly evident, as interparental conflict often spilled over into the parent–child relationship. This theme highlighted that contextual stability serves as the backbone for consistent emotional and behavioral engagement within families.

Theme 6: Cultural and Social Values

Cultural and social values were found to play a significant contextual role in defining relational expectations and interactional norms between parents and children. Within collectivist cultural settings such as Malaysia, subthemes like collectivist norms, religious orientation, and gender role expectations strongly influenced parental beliefs and practices. Respect for elders, family loyalty, and moral adherence shaped both parenting goals and communication patterns. Religious and moral orientation provided parents with a framework for ethical guidance and emotional coping,

especially during family conflicts. Meanwhile, gender role expectations often determined the division of caregiving responsibilities and behavioral expectations for sons and daughters. The data revealed that cultural beliefs serve not merely as background variables but as active mediators of emotional expression, discipline strategies, and intergenerational attachment patterns.

Theme 7: Parental Psychological Well-Being

The final theme, parental psychological well-being, underscored the importance of parents' internal mental and emotional states in sustaining a positive relationship with their children. Subthemes such as mental health status, self-efficacy, work–life balance, and social support availability illustrated how stress, anxiety, or burnout could reduce emotional responsiveness and increase relational strain. Parents with higher psychological well-being displayed greater patience, empathy, and adaptability in handling daily parenting challenges. Work–life balance emerged as particularly critical in modern family systems, where occupational stress often spills over into home life. Access to social support from extended family, peers, or community networks mitigated stress and enhanced parental confidence. Collectively, this theme emphasized that nurturing parents' mental health is a prerequisite for nurturing emotionally secure and well-adjusted children.

Following the qualitative analysis, the quantitative phase aimed to statistically prioritize the identified psychological and contextual factors influencing parent–child relationship quality. Using data from 210 Malaysian parents, participants rated the importance of each factor on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“not important”) to 5 (“very important”). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26, applying descriptive statistics and Friedman ranking tests to determine the relative significance of each factor based on mean importance scores.

Table 2

Ranking of Psychological and Contextual Factors Affecting Parent–Child Relationship Quality (N = 210)

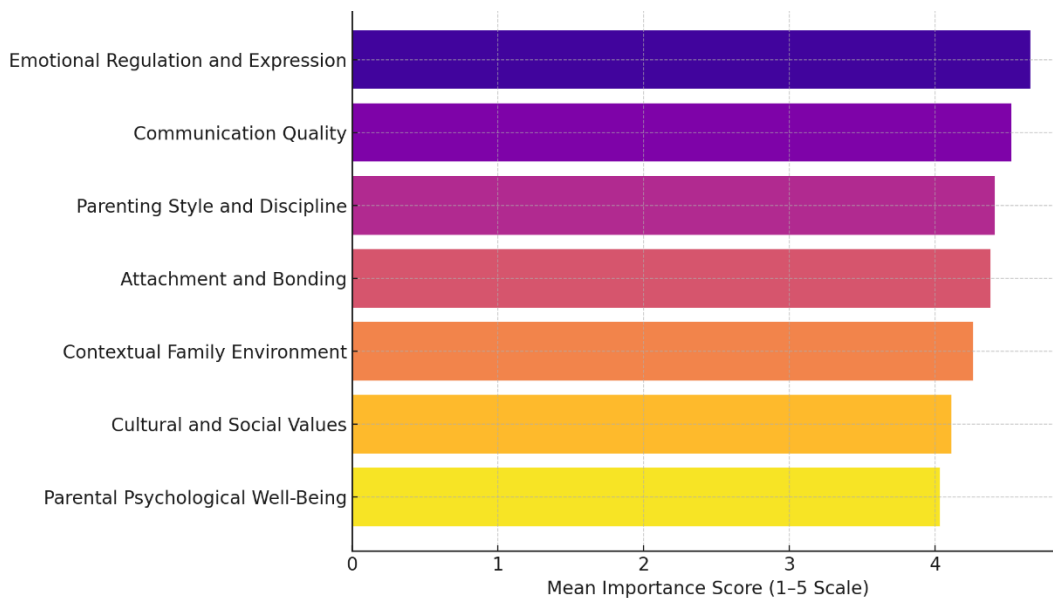
Rank	Factor	Mean Importance Score	Standard Deviation
1	Emotional Regulation and Expression	4.65	0.48
2	Communication Quality	4.52	0.55
3	Parenting Style and Discipline	4.41	0.57
4	Attachment and Bonding	4.38	0.60
5	Contextual Family Environment	4.26	0.63
6	Cultural and Social Values	4.11	0.66
7	Parental Psychological Well-Being	4.03	0.71

The results revealed that emotional regulation and expression ranked as the most influential factor affecting parent–child relationship quality ($M = 4.65$), highlighting the critical role of affective attunement and emotional self-control in maintaining positive familial bonds. Communication quality followed closely ($M = 4.52$), emphasizing the importance of open dialogue, active listening, and constructive conflict resolution in sustaining relational satisfaction. Parenting style and discipline ($M = 4.41$) and attachment and bonding ($M = 4.38$) also demonstrated high mean scores, indicating that consistent, empathetic parenting practices and secure emotional ties are central to relationship quality. Contextual variables such as

family environment ($M = 4.26$) and cultural and social values ($M = 4.11$) were rated moderately high, suggesting that environmental stability and sociocultural frameworks indirectly enhance relational harmony. Interestingly, parental psychological well-being ($M = 4.03$) ranked lowest, though it remained within a strong importance range, signifying that while parents' mental health is vital, participants perceived immediate relational behaviors and communication as more directly influential. Overall, the findings demonstrate that emotional and communicative competencies serve as primary determinants of parent–child relational strength within the Malaysian context.

Figure 1

Ranking of Psychological and Contextual Factors Influencing Parent–Child Relationship Quality



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the relative significance of psychological and contextual factors that shape parent–child relationship quality within Malaysian families. The results demonstrated that emotional regulation and expression ranked as the most influential determinant, followed by communication quality, parenting style and discipline, and attachment and bonding. Contextual variables, such as the family environment and cultural values, also contributed meaningfully, although they were ranked slightly lower than psychological domains. Finally, parental psychological well-being, while still

significant, occupied the lowest position in relative importance. These results reveal that relational dynamics between parents and children are primarily driven by immediate psychological processes and interactional behaviors, supported by—but not entirely dependent on—contextual conditions.

The high ranking of emotional regulation and expression underscores the pivotal role of affective processes in maintaining relational stability and intimacy. Parents' ability to regulate their emotions and model calm, empathetic responses directly influences the child's emotional development and attachment security (Ankori et al., 2025). Emotionally attuned parents create a climate of safety that allows children to explore their environment while

maintaining confidence in the availability of support (Abbasi et al., 2023). These findings align with attachment-based perspectives emphasizing that emotional regulation is a core mechanism linking parental well-being to the quality of attachment and communication (Nordahl et al., 2020). Similar to the current results, studies have shown that interventions aimed at improving parents' emotional regulation skills lead to improvements in child cooperation, emotional competence, and secure attachment formation (Hofstra et al., 2023). Moreover, as suggested by (Lavenda & Hertz, 2024), mentalization and emotional awareness enhance parents' ability to understand and respond to their child's emotional needs, further strengthening the relational bond. The present results thus reinforce the theoretical consensus that emotional regulation acts as both a predictor and mediator of family relationship quality across diverse cultural settings.

Closely related to emotional regulation, communication quality emerged as the second most significant factor. Effective communication enables parents and children to negotiate boundaries, express affection, and resolve conflicts constructively (Walsh & Zadurian, 2022). The participants' emphasis on communication reflects a cultural orientation toward relational harmony that is characteristic of collectivist societies such as Malaysia (Li et al., 2025). Open and empathetic dialogue between parents and children facilitates mutual respect and autonomy development, aligning with the findings of (Rosu, 2020), who argued that communication is the central mechanism through which family relationships are maintained. Consistent with previous research, warm and supportive communication styles have been shown to predict lower levels of behavioral problems and higher levels of academic and emotional adjustment among adolescents (Tan et al., 2023). Furthermore, (Huang, 2021) found that communication serves as an expression of attachment security, functioning as an observable behavioral correlate of deeper psychological connections. The prominence of communication in this study confirms its cross-cultural relevance as both a relational skill and a developmental resource.

The results also highlighted parenting style and discipline as one of the most influential predictors of relationship quality. Parents who adopt an authoritative style—characterized by consistent rules, emotional warmth, and autonomy support—were more likely to report harmonious and trusting relationships with their children (Bahmani et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with global evidence

suggesting that authoritative parenting fosters both compliance and emotional security (Čerešník, 2023). Conversely, authoritarian or permissive approaches were associated with diminished emotional closeness and higher relational conflict, echoing findings from (Moradi et al., 2023), who identified inconsistent discipline as a mediator of child behavioral problems. The Malaysian sample's prioritization of balanced discipline suggests that parents value both control and care—an integration that reflects the blending of traditional collectivist expectations with modern developmental psychology perspectives. Similar cultural hybridity has been observed by (Hoenicka et al., 2022) in cross-national comparisons of parenting behaviors, where family harmony and child obedience coexist with growing emphasis on individual emotional expression.

Attachment and bonding, which ranked fourth, remain the emotional foundation of the parent-child relationship. Secure attachment—marked by emotional availability, trust, and responsiveness—continues to be a central determinant of relational satisfaction and stability (Kim et al., 2021). The current findings support a large body of evidence demonstrating that secure attachment enhances emotional resilience, autonomy, and mental health in children (Nordahl et al., 2020; Svendsrud et al., 2023). In families where attachment insecurity exists—due to parental inconsistency or emotional unavailability—children often develop anxiety and avoidance patterns that weaken relational cohesion (Zvara et al., 2020). The fact that attachment ranked slightly below emotional regulation and communication may indicate that while attachment forms the foundation, its quality is largely expressed through daily affective and communicative exchanges. This interpretation is consistent with (Huang, 2021), who found that attachment and communication are interdependent, with the former shaping emotional readiness and the latter providing a behavioral channel for connection.

The contextual family environment ranked fifth, reflecting its indirect yet significant influence on relationship quality. Parental employment stability, marital harmony, and family cohesion contribute to emotional security and consistent caregiving (Li et al., 2025). Families with strong relational networks and supportive environments tend to display more cooperative parenting and fewer conflicts. Conversely, economic strain and stress undermine emotional availability, leading to inconsistency in parenting practices (Lyubushina, 2025). This finding corroborates the systemic perspective advanced by (Zaharim & Hashim, 2022), who identified family harmony and marital

relationship quality as mediators linking contextual stability to child well-being. The relatively moderate ranking of this factor in the present study suggests that while contextual factors shape the background of family functioning, immediate psychological and relational processes play more active roles in daily interactions. In other words, the context sets the stage for relationship quality, but the quality of interaction determines the outcome.

Cultural and social values, which ranked sixth, highlight the influence of collective norms and belief systems on parenting and relational expectations. In the Malaysian context, characterized by a blend of Malay, Chinese, and Indian traditions, cultural norms often emphasize obedience, respect for elders, and family loyalty (Li et al., 2025). These values serve as guiding principles for parental authority and child behavior, shaping emotional expression and conflict management. The results support (Parameswasri, 2023), who found that cultural scripts determine the coping styles and relational orientations of emerging adults. Moreover, religious orientation—an aspect of cultural identity—provides moral frameworks that guide parental decision-making and emotional expression (Svendsrud et al., 2023). However, the moderate ranking of this factor may reflect generational changes and the influence of modernization, as younger parents increasingly adopt more egalitarian and communicative models of parenting (Tan et al., 2023). These findings resonate with (Hoenicka et al., 2022), who observed that cultural norms interact dynamically with globalization, reshaping traditional family hierarchies and expectations.

Finally, parental psychological well-being ranked seventh but remained an important determinant of relationship quality. Parents experiencing anxiety, depression, or burnout often struggle to maintain consistent emotional engagement with their children (Lyubushina, 2025). Despite its lower ranking, this domain's significance lies in its function as a latent moderator influencing emotional regulation and communication quality (Lavenda & Hertz, 2024). Previous research confirms that poor mental health reduces parental sensitivity and increases the risk of reactive or withdrawn behaviors (Hofstra et al., 2023). Conversely, high parental well-being enhances resilience and patience, promoting secure attachments and harmonious family climates (Bahmani et al., 2022). The relatively lower importance assigned by participants may reflect cultural tendencies to underreport or deprioritize personal mental health in collectivist settings, where relational harmony and caregiving duties are often prioritized over individual well-being (Rosu, 2020). Nevertheless, this finding suggests a

potential area for intervention: supporting parents' psychological health may indirectly improve all other dimensions of family functioning.

Overall, the hierarchical structure observed in this study confirms that parent-child relationship quality is a multi-layered construct shaped by interconnected psychological and contextual factors. The prominence of emotional and communicative processes underscores the micro-relational nature of family functioning, whereas contextual and cultural variables define the macro-environment in which these interactions occur. This dual structure echoes (Huang, 2021)'s proposition that family dynamics should be analyzed through both intra-personal and socio-ecological lenses. The present findings also extend the work of (Abbasi et al., 2023) and (Moradi et al., 2023), who emphasized the mediating role of attachment and emotional regulation in predicting child adjustment and relational outcomes. By combining qualitative exploration with quantitative prioritization, this study contributes a structured model that identifies emotional regulation, communication, and authoritative parenting as primary drivers of relational quality in Malaysian families.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among the identified factors. Longitudinal research would better capture the developmental and dynamic nature of parent-child relationships. Second, the study relied partly on self-reported data, which are subject to social desirability bias and cultural response tendencies, particularly in collectivist settings where parental roles carry strong social expectations. Third, although the qualitative phase achieved theoretical saturation through extensive literature review, it did not include direct interviews or observational data that might have provided richer cultural nuances. Finally, the study's Malaysian sample, while diverse, may not generalize to other cultural contexts, limiting the global applicability of the findings.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal and multi-informant designs to trace the evolving influence of psychological and contextual factors on relationship quality across developmental stages. Incorporating direct qualitative data—such as interviews, focus groups, and observations—would yield deeper insights into cultural and gendered variations in parenting. Cross-cultural comparative studies

could explore how modernization, migration, and digitalization reshape traditional parent–child dynamics. Researchers may also employ advanced statistical techniques, such as structural equation modeling or network analysis, to examine interdependencies among emotional, behavioral, and contextual variables. Finally, intervention-based research should evaluate how improving emotional regulation and communication training for parents translates into measurable improvements in child adjustment and relational satisfaction.

The findings of this study carry meaningful implications for family therapists, educators, and policymakers. Practitioners should prioritize programs that strengthen parents' emotional regulation, reflective listening, and communication competencies. Parenting workshops emphasizing authoritative practices—balancing warmth with structure—can enhance mutual trust and cooperation. Schools and community centers can serve as platforms for preventive education, teaching parents the value of emotional awareness and mindfulness in everyday interactions. Policy initiatives should focus on supporting parental mental health through accessible counseling, family leave, and work–life balance policies. Culturally responsive interventions that integrate traditional values with contemporary psychological insights are essential to fostering stronger and more resilient family systems.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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