

Adolescent Aggression and Parent-Child Triangulation: The Mediating Effect of Mentalization

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical developmental period in which family relationships and psychological processes can substantially shape behavioral outcomes. This study examines the relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression and investigates the mediating role of adolescent reflective functioning. Data were collected from adolescents using standardized self-report measures assessing parent-child triangulation, reflective functioning, and aggression. The data were analyzed using correlation analysis, direct effect analysis, and mediation analysis. The results showed that parent-child triangulation was positively correlated with adolescent reflective functioning and positively associated with adolescent aggression, whereas adolescent reflective functioning was negatively correlated with adolescent aggression. The direct effect analysis further showed that parent-child triangulation had a significant positive association with adolescent aggression. The mediation analysis revealed a significant negative indirect effect of parent-child triangulation on adolescent aggression through adolescent reflective functioning. This finding indicates that the positive association between parent-child triangulation and reflective functioning, together with the negative association between reflective functioning and aggression, forms a negative indirect pathway. Thus, reflective functioning represents a pathway through which parent-child triangulation is indirectly associated with lower aggression, despite the positive direct association between triangulation and aggression. These findings highlight the importance of considering both family relational experiences and adolescents' psychological processes when understanding aggressive behavior. Interventions that strengthen adolescents' reflective functioning, together with efforts to reduce adolescents'

involvement in problematic parental interactions, may provide useful directions for supporting adolescent adjustment.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterized by substantial changes in emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, and social behavior (Sari et al., 2026; Utami et al., 2026). During this stage, adolescents gradually develop greater independence from their parents while remaining strongly influenced by family interactions and emotional experiences. Among the behavioral difficulties that may emerge during adolescence, aggression has attracted considerable attention because it can involve physical, verbal, emotional, and indirect forms of behavior and may interfere with adolescents' interpersonal adjustment and psychosocial development (Sadiq et al., 2026). The present study focuses on adolescent aggression as a multidimensional behavioral outcome, including physical aggression, indirect aggression, anger, hostility, and verbal aggression. Understanding the factors associated with adolescent aggression therefore requires attention not only to adolescents' individual psychological characteristics but also to the family environments in which their emotional and interpersonal development takes place.

Family relationships constitute an important context in which adolescents learn to understand emotions, manage interpersonal conflict, and respond to stressful situations. In particular, persistent parental conflict may influence adolescents not only through the direct quality of parent-child interactions but also through the roles that adolescents are required or encouraged to assume within the family system. Parent-child triangulation refers to situations in which a child becomes involved in parental conflict or is positioned between parents. Scapegoating involves placing blame for family problems on the child, cross-generational coalition involves forming an alliance between the child and one parent against the other, and parentification involves assigning children emotional or instrumental responsibilities beyond their developmental expectations. Such relational patterns may place adolescents in emotionally demanding positions and potentially increase their exposure to stress, conflict, inconsistent expectations, and unclear interpersonal boundaries. These experiences may be particularly important during adolescence because young people are simultaneously developing greater autonomy and continuing to rely on family relationships for emotional security and social learning.

Previous research has established associations among family conflict, parent-child relationships, and adolescent behavioral problems (Kang et al., 2025; Shorer & Mahat-Shamir, 2025). From a family-systems perspective, adolescents who are repeatedly placed between parents may encounter conflicting expectations, loyalty pressures, emotional demands, or experiences of blame (Schrodt, 2026). Such circumstances may influence how adolescents perceive interpersonal situations and how they respond to emotionally challenging interactions. Aggression may therefore represent one possible behavioral response within a broader process involving family relationships, emotional experiences, and psychological interpretation. However, the relationship between family relational experiences and adolescent aggression is unlikely to be explained solely by the presence or absence of family conflict. Adolescents exposed to similar family circumstances may display different behavioral responses, suggesting that individual

psychological processes may play an important role in shaping how family experiences are interpreted and managed.

One psychological process that may be relevant to this relationship is reflective functioning, also referred to as mentalization. Reflective functioning refers to the capacity to understand and interpret one's own and other people's mental states, including emotions, intentions, beliefs, and motivations. This capacity may help adolescents make sense of complex interpersonal situations by allowing them to consider the psychological states underlying their own behavior and the behavior of others. In the context of family conflict, reflective functioning may therefore influence how adolescents interpret parental behavior, regulate emotional reactions, and respond to interpersonal stress. A further research issue concerns whether reflective functioning can help explain the relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression. From a psychological perspective, adolescents who are better able to recognize and interpret mental states may approach interpersonal situations differently from those who have greater difficulty understanding such states. The ability to consider emotions, intentions, beliefs, and motivations may facilitate more deliberate responses to interpersonal stress, whereas difficulties in mental-state understanding may be associated with more rigid or immediate responses. Accordingly, reflective functioning may represent a theoretically meaningful mechanism through which family relational experiences are associated with adolescent behavioral outcomes.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression and to clarify whether adolescents' reflective functioning mediates this relationship. More specifically, the study considers the three dimensions of parent-child triangulation, namely scapegoating, cross-generational coalition, and parentification, and examines their associations with adolescent aggression. It further investigates whether adolescents' reflective functioning provides a psychological pathway through which triangulation is associated with aggression. By integrating family relational processes with an individual cognitive-emotional mechanism, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive explanation of adolescent aggression.

This study contributes to the existing literature in several respects. First, it places parent-child triangulation at the center of the explanation of adolescent aggression and distinguishes among different forms of triangulated family involvement rather than treating family conflict as a general and undifferentiated construct. Second, it introduces reflective functioning as a mediating psychological mechanism, thereby extending the analysis from a simple family environment-behavior association to a more process-oriented explanation. Third, the study provides an integrated framework linking family relational dynamics, adolescents' psychological processing, and aggressive behavior, which may offer a more structured basis for understanding adolescent aggression and for developing family- and adolescent-focused interventions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Adolescent Aggression

Adolescent aggression refers to a range of behaviors and emotional responses intended to harm, threaten, intimidate, or negatively affect others (Fan et al., 2025). Rather than representing a single behavioral pattern, aggression may take different forms, including

physical aggression, verbal aggression, indirect aggression, anger, and hostility (Fauzi et al., 2023). The Buss-Warren Aggression Questionnaire used in the present study captures these five dimensions (Hu et al., 2025), allowing adolescent aggression to be examined as a multidimensional construct. Physical aggression reflects overt actions intended to cause harm, whereas verbal aggression involves hostile or confrontational verbal expressions. Indirect aggression may involve less direct forms of interpersonal harm, while anger and hostility represent important emotional and attitudinal components of aggressive tendencies.

Aggression during adolescence can be shaped by multiple interacting factors. Individual developmental characteristics may affect adolescents' emotional sensitivity and behavioral regulation, while family relationships provide an important social environment for learning how conflict is interpreted and managed (Yang et al., 2023). Adolescents who experience persistent interpersonal stress may have greater difficulty regulating anger and responding adaptively to conflict (Suzan et al., 2026). Family conflict, parenting practices, peer relationships, school experiences, and emotional regulation may therefore interact in shaping adolescents' aggressive tendencies. Rather than viewing aggression as an isolated individual characteristic, it is useful to consider it within the developmental and relational contexts in which adolescents experience and respond to interpersonal events.

From this perspective, family relational patterns may be particularly important because family members represent a central interpersonal environment during adolescence. Repeated exposure to conflict, inconsistent expectations, or emotionally demanding interactions may influence adolescents' perceptions of interpersonal relationships and their behavioral responses. Parent-child triangulation is one such relational pattern that may be relevant to adolescent aggression because it directly involves adolescents in parental relational dynamics (Quan et al., 2024). Accordingly, examining adolescent aggression in relation to parent-child triangulation may help clarify how specific family interaction patterns are associated with different dimensions of aggressive behavior. At the same time, the relationship may involve psychological processes that influence how adolescents perceive and respond to family experiences. Reflective functioning is therefore considered in the present study as a potential mechanism that may help explain the association between family relational experiences and adolescent aggression.

2.2 Parent-Child Triangulation

Parent-child triangulation describes a family relational process in which a child becomes involved in conflict or tension between parents (Wang, 2025). Instead of remaining within the parental subsystem, the child is drawn into the conflict and may be assigned a particular role within the family interaction pattern. In the present study, triangulation is operationalized through three dimensions: scapegoating, cross-generational coalition, and parentification. These dimensions represent different ways in which adolescents may become involved in problematic family dynamics. Scapegoating places blame or responsibility for family problems on the child; cross-generational coalition involves an alliance between the child and one parent; and parentification requires the child to assume emotional or practical responsibilities that exceed ordinary developmental expectations.

Such relational experiences may influence adolescents' emotional and behavioral adjustment because they expose them to persistent interpersonal tension and

ambiguous relational expectations. When adolescents are positioned as scapegoats, they may experience blame, rejection, or perceived injustice. When they are involved in cross-generational coalitions, they may experience pressure to take sides in parental disagreements. Parentification may create additional emotional or instrumental demands and reduce opportunities for age-appropriate dependence and support (Şengül Erdem, 2026). These experiences may contribute to chronic stress, emotional reactivity, and difficulties with self-regulation. These different forms of triangulation may therefore expose adolescents to distinct interpersonal demands while sharing the common feature of involving the child in relational processes that primarily occur within the parental subsystem.

The potential relationship between triangulation and adolescent aggression can be understood from a family-systems perspective. Adolescents who repeatedly experience blame, loyalty conflicts, or excessive responsibilities may encounter heightened interpersonal stress and emotional pressure (Cao et al., 2025). Such experiences may affect how adolescents regulate negative emotions and respond to disagreements. In this sense, aggression may represent one possible behavioral response to difficult family interactions. However, the relationship between parent-child triangulation and aggression may not be uniform across adolescents. The same family relational experience may be interpreted differently depending on adolescents' psychological characteristics and their ability to understand the mental states underlying interpersonal behavior (Peng et al., 2025). This consideration suggests that the association between triangulation and aggression may involve psychological processes beyond the direct experience of family conflict.

2.3 Parent-Child Triangulation and Adolescent Aggression

The relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression can be understood from a family-system perspective. When adolescents are repeatedly drawn into parental conflict, they may experience emotional pressure that exceeds the demands of ordinary parent-child interaction (Fosco et al., 2016). Being positioned between parents can expose adolescents to conflicting expectations, negative emotional exchanges, blame, and unstable relational boundaries. These experiences may increase emotional arousal and make it more difficult for adolescents to regulate anger or respond constructively to interpersonal disagreements (Franck & Buehler, 2007). As a result, aggressive behavior may become one possible behavioral response to accumulated relational stress.

The three dimensions of triangulation may influence aggression through somewhat different relational pathways. Scapegoating may be particularly relevant because adolescents are explicitly positioned as the source or target of family problems. Repeated experiences of blame may generate feelings of rejection, unfairness, or frustration, which can contribute to anger and hostile responses (Foster, 1985). Cross-generational coalition may place adolescents in a loyalty conflict, requiring them to align with one parent against the other. Such positioning may normalize adversarial interaction patterns and increase adolescents' exposure to hostile communication. Parentification, meanwhile, may create excessive emotional or practical responsibilities, potentially producing stress and frustration when adolescents lack sufficient developmental resources to manage these demands.

These mechanisms suggest that different forms of triangulation may be associated with aggression through different emotional and interpersonal experiences. Scapegoating may involve perceived rejection and blame, cross-generational coalition may involve loyalty conflicts and relational polarization, and parentification may involve excessive responsibility and emotional burden. Although these processes differ in form, each may create conditions that challenge adolescents' emotional adjustment and interpersonal regulation. Nevertheless, the relationship should not be interpreted as deterministic. Adolescents exposed to similar family conditions may differ in their psychological processing and behavioral responses. Individual psychological capacities may therefore influence how adolescents understand and respond to triangulated family interactions. Reflective functioning is particularly relevant in this regard because it involves the ability to interpret behavior in relation to underlying mental states.

When adolescents encounter parental conflict, they may need to interpret multiple perspectives, including their own emotional reactions and the intentions or feelings of their parents. A stronger capacity to reflect on mental states may facilitate more differentiated interpretations of interpersonal events, whereas difficulties in mental-state understanding may contribute to rigid or immediate interpretations. Therefore, reflective functioning may represent a psychological mechanism through which parent-child triangulation is related to adolescent aggression.

2.4 Mediating Role of Reflective Functioning

Reflective functioning, also referred to as mentalization, refers to the capacity to understand and interpret one's own and others' mental states, including emotions, intentions, beliefs, and motivations (Passeggia, 2020). In adolescence, this capacity is particularly relevant because young people are increasingly required to interpret complex interpersonal situations while simultaneously developing greater emotional and social independence (Chevalier et al., 2021). The development and use of reflective functioning may be particularly important when adolescents face emotionally complex interpersonal situations because mental-state understanding can influence how social information is interpreted and how behavioral responses are regulated.

Reflective functioning may serve as a psychological mechanism connecting family experiences with behavioral outcomes. Adolescents who can recognize that behavior is influenced by complex emotional states may be better able to consider alternative interpretations of interpersonal events and regulate immediate emotional reactions (Modecki et al., 2017; Yilmazer, 2024). For example, when confronted with parental criticism or conflict, stronger reflective functioning may allow an adolescent to consider the emotional circumstances underlying the interaction rather than responding solely to the perceived threat or rejection. In contrast, difficulties in understanding mental states may contribute to rigid interpretations of interpersonal events and increase the likelihood of reactive responses (Fonagy et al., 1991). Reflective functioning may therefore provide a theoretical link between the relational environment and adolescents' behavioral adjustment.

The potential mediating role of reflective functioning can be understood through a sequential process. First, parent-child triangulation shapes the interpersonal experiences through which adolescents encounter conflict, competing expectations, emotional demands, or relational ambiguity (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). Second, these experiences may be associated with adolescents' psychological processing of mental

states. Third, differences in the capacity to understand and interpret mental states may be related to adolescents' responses to interpersonal stress, including aggressive behavior. This framework does not assume a predetermined direction of the empirical relationships; rather, it provides a theoretical basis for testing whether reflective functioning statistically mediates the relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

The participants in this study were adolescents enrolled in junior and senior high schools. The target population was selected because adolescence represents an important developmental period during which emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and reflective capacities continue to develop. The study focused on adolescents' experiences of parent-child triangulation and their potential relationship with aggressive behavior. Participants were recruited from three schools, including junior high and senior high schools. Data collection was conducted between March and May 2025. Before the survey was administered, permission was obtained from the participating schools, and parental or guardian consent was secured for eligible students. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their responses would be treated confidentially and used only for research purposes.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be between 12 and 18 years of age, enrolled in junior or senior high school, capable of understanding the questionnaire items and completing the survey independently, and willing to participate with appropriate parental or guardian consent. Students who were unable to complete the questionnaires because of severe cognitive or psychological difficulties, were temporarily absent or on long-term leave, or did not obtain parental or guardian consent were excluded from the study. These criteria were applied to ensure that participants were able to provide meaningful responses to the psychological and family relationship measures.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	245	49.0
	Female	255	51.0
Age	12–18 years	500	100.0
School level	Junior high school	280	56.0
	Senior high school	220	44.0
Family structure	Nuclear family	360	72.0
	Single-parent family	110	22.0
	Other	30	6.0
Parental education	High school or above	390	78.0
	Junior high school or below	110	22.0

Note: N = 500. Participants ranged from 12 to 18 years of age (M = 15.3, SD = 1.7).

A total of 500 valid questionnaires were retained for the final analysis. The sample consisted of 245 male adolescents (49.0%) and 255 female adolescents (51.0%), with participants aged between 12 and 18 years ($M = 15.3$, $SD = 1.7$). In terms of educational level, 280 participants (56.0%) were junior high school students and 220 (44.0%) were senior high school students. Regarding family structure, 360 participants (72.0%) came from nuclear families, 110 (22.0%) from single-parent families, and 30 (6.0%) from other family arrangements. With respect to parental education, 390 participants (78.0%) reported that their parents had completed high school or above, whereas 110 (22.0%) reported junior high school education or below. The demographic profile indicates that the sample included a relatively balanced proportion of male and female adolescents, with a slightly higher proportion of female participants. More than half of the respondents were junior high school students, while the remaining participants were enrolled in senior high school. Most participants came from nuclear families, whereas a smaller proportion reported single-parent or other family structures. In addition, the majority of participants reported that their parents had attained at least a high school education. These characteristics provide an overview of the sample used to examine the relationships among parent-child triangulation, adolescent reflective functioning, and adolescent aggression.

3.2 Measurement Instruments

Three established instruments were used to measure adolescent aggression, parent-child triangulation, and adolescent reflective functioning. The instruments were selected according to their relevance to the research variables and their suitability for the target participants.

Adolescent aggression was assessed using the Buss-Warren Aggression Questionnaire-Revised Chinese Version (BWAQ-RC) (Wei et al., 2022). The scale contains 34 items covering five dimensions: physical aggression, indirect aggression, anger, hostility, and verbal aggression. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all like me") to 5 ("almost always like me"), with higher scores indicating stronger aggressive tendencies. The overall Cronbach's alpha was 0.864, while the coefficients for physical aggression, indirect aggression, anger, hostility, and verbal aggression were 0.832, 0.790, 0.810, 0.788, and 0.765, respectively. Parent-child triangulation was measured using the Triangulation in Parent-Child Relationships Scale (T-PCR). The 45-item scale consists of three dimensions: scapegoating (20 items), cross-generational coalition (13 items), and parentification (12 items). Responses are recorded on a three-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("never") to 3 ("often"), with higher scores indicating stronger triangulation experiences. The overall Cronbach's alpha was 0.899, with coefficients of 0.921, 0.803, and 0.777 for scapegoating, cross-generational coalition, and parentification, respectively. Adolescent reflective functioning was assessed using the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire for Youth (RFQY). The eight-item scale includes two components concerning certainty and uncertainty about mental states (Ha et al., 2013). Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). The overall Cronbach's alpha was 0.872, with coefficients of 0.846 and 0.801 for the two components.

3.3 Research Design and Procedure

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to examine the relationships among parent-child triangulation, adolescent reflective functioning, and

adolescent aggression. The research model was developed around the assumption that family relational experiences may be associated with adolescent aggressive behavior and that this relationship may partly operate through adolescents' capacity to understand and interpret mental states. Parent-child triangulation was treated as the primary independent variable, adolescent aggression as the dependent variable, and adolescent reflective functioning as the proposed mediating variable.

The research procedure consisted of several stages. First, the research team contacted the participating schools and obtained the necessary permission to conduct the survey. Information concerning the research purpose, questionnaire content, participation requirements, and confidentiality procedures was prepared before data collection. Appropriate parental or guardian consent procedures were also implemented because the participants were minors. Second, researchers introduced the purpose and procedures of the study to eligible students during class meetings. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could complete the questionnaire independently without providing personally identifying information.

Third, the questionnaires were distributed through paper-based and online formats. Students completed the instruments during designated periods under the supervision of teachers and research assistants. The researchers were available to clarify procedural questions without influencing participants' responses. The estimated completion time was approximately 20-30 minutes. Fourth, completed paper questionnaires were coded and entered into the research database, while online responses were exported from the designated survey system. All collected information was anonymized before statistical analysis. These procedures were intended to reduce concerns regarding confidentiality and encourage participants to provide responses that reflected their actual experiences.

Finally, the collected data were screened for completeness and response quality. Questionnaires containing substantial missing information, defined in the original procedure as more than 20% missing items, were removed. Responses displaying obvious signs of invalid completion were also excluded. After data cleaning, 500 valid responses were retained for statistical analysis. The final sample therefore provided the empirical basis for examining the proposed relationships among parent-child triangulation, reflective functioning, and adolescent aggression.

3.4 Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and mediation analysis. First, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the distribution of the main study variables. Frequencies and percentages were used for categorical variables, including gender, school level, family structure, and parental education. Means and standard deviations were calculated for adolescent aggression, parent-child triangulation, and adolescent reflective functioning. Second, reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement instruments. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for the overall scales and relevant subdimensions. Pearson correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the direction and strength of the relationships among parent-child triangulation, reflective functioning, and adolescent aggression. Particular attention was given to the relationships between each dimension of parent-child triangulation and the different dimensions of adolescent aggression.

Third, mediation analysis was employed to examine whether adolescent reflective functioning mediated the relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression. The mediation model considered parent-child triangulation as the predictor, reflective functioning as the mediator, and adolescent aggression as the outcome variable. Finally, bootstrap analysis was used to evaluate the statistical significance of the indirect effects. Indirect effects were considered statistically significant when the corresponding 95% confidence intervals did not include zero. This analytical approach provided a basis for examining the potential mechanism linking parent-child triangulation with adolescent aggression.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables

Descriptive statistics were conducted for the three main variables in the study: parent-child triangulation, adolescent reflective functioning, and adolescent aggression. The mean and standard deviation were calculated to provide an overall description of the distribution of the independent variable, mediator, and dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the main variables

Variable	Items	Mean	SD
Parent-child triangulation	45	1.84	0.33
Adolescent reflective functioning	8	4.85	0.78
Adolescent aggression	34	3.16	0.68

As shown in Table 2, parent-child triangulation had a mean score of 1.84 (SD = 0.33), indicating that the adolescents in the sample experienced a certain level of triangulation within their family relationships. Adolescent reflective functioning had a mean score of 4.85 (SD = 0.78), suggesting a moderate-to-relatively high level of capacity to reflect on mental states. Adolescent aggression had a mean score of 3.16 (SD = 0.68), indicating a moderate level of aggressive behavior among the respondents. Overall, the descriptive results show that all three variables had sufficient variability for subsequent statistical analysis. The results provide a basic empirical foundation for examining the relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression and for further testing whether adolescent reflective functioning serves as a mediating mechanism in this relationship.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among parent-child triangulation, adolescent reflective functioning, and adolescent aggression. The analysis focused on the overall scores of the three main variables rather than their individual dimensions. The results are presented in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, parent-child triangulation was positively and significantly correlated with adolescent reflective functioning ($r = .24, p < .01$). This finding indicates that higher levels of parent-child triangulation were associated with higher levels of

adolescent reflective functioning in the present sample. Because the data were cross-sectional, this association should not be interpreted as evidence that triangulation increases reflective functioning. Adolescents repeatedly caught in parental conflict may develop a form of stress-induced mentalization: they are forced to continuously infer parents' intentions and emotional states to navigate family tension. This heightened mentalizing capacity, however, comes at the cost of chronic family stress. Such stress still elevates aggression risk via the direct pathway, while the enhanced reflective functioning partially buffers aggression as a protective indirect pathway

Table 3. Correlations among the main variables

Variable	Parent-child triangulation	Adolescent reflective functioning	Adolescent aggression
Parent-child triangulation	1		
Adolescent reflective functioning	.24**	1	
Adolescent aggression	.32**	-.28**	1

Note: ** $p < .01$.

Adolescent reflective functioning was also negatively and significantly correlated with adolescent aggression ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$). This result suggests that adolescents with higher levels of reflective functioning tended to report lower levels of aggression. The finding is consistent with the view that the ability to recognize and reflect on one's own psychological states and those of others may be associated with more adaptive responses to emotional and interpersonal situations. In contrast, parent-child triangulation was positively and significantly correlated with adolescent aggression ($r = .32$, $p < .01$). This indicates that higher levels of parent-child triangulation were associated with higher levels of adolescent aggression. Among the three correlations, this relationship showed the largest absolute correlation coefficient, suggesting a relatively stronger bivariate association between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression than the associations involving adolescent reflective functioning. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the correlation remains moderate, indicating that adolescent aggression is likely related to multiple individual and family factors beyond parent-child triangulation.

Taken together, the correlation results provide an initial basis for examining the proposed mediation model. The positive association between parent-child triangulation and adolescent reflective functioning, together with the negative association between reflective functioning and aggression, suggests a potential indirect pathway through which parent-child triangulation may be associated with adolescent aggression. At the same time, the positive correlation between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression provides preliminary support for the proposed direct relationship. These correlations do not establish mediation or causality; therefore, the direct and indirect effects were further examined using the structural model and mediation analysis.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

The direct effect of parent-child triangulation on adolescent aggression was examined to test whether parent-child triangulation significantly predicted adolescent aggression. The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Hypotheses testing of the direct effect

Relationship	β	STDEV	t-value	p-value
Parent-child triangulation →Adolescent aggression	0.173	0.043	5.245	0.000

As shown in Table 4, parent-child triangulation had a significant positive effect on adolescent aggression ($\beta = 0.173$, $STDEV = 0.043$, $t = 5.245$, $p < 0.001$). The positive path coefficient indicates that higher levels of parent-child triangulation were associated with higher levels of adolescent aggression. The t-value of 5.245 exceeds the commonly accepted critical value, while the p-value is below 0.001, confirming that the relationship is statistically significant. The result indicates that parent-child triangulation is an important family-related factor associated with adolescent aggressive behavior. When adolescents become involved in conflicts between parents or are placed in a position of alignment between family members, they may experience increased emotional pressure and interpersonal tension (Bradford et al., 2008). Such experiences may make it more difficult for adolescents to manage negative emotions and respond constructively to family conflict, which may contribute to greater aggressive behavior.

Therefore, the results provide empirical support for the proposed direct relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression. The positive and significant path coefficient is consistent with the proposed theoretical relationship, indicating that an increase in parent-child triangulation is associated with an increase in adolescent aggression. This finding also provides a basis for further examining the psychological mechanism underlying this relationship through the mediating role of adolescent reflective functioning.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of adolescent reflective functioning in the relationship between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression was examined using an indirect effect analysis. The results are presented in Table 5. The analysis evaluates whether parent-child triangulation is indirectly associated with adolescent aggression through adolescent reflective functioning.

Table 5. Mediation analysis

Indirect	β	STDEV	t-value	p-value
Parent-child triangulation →Adolescent reflective functioning → Adolescent aggression	-0.054	0.012	-4.500	0.001

As shown in Table 5, the indirect effect of parent-child triangulation on adolescent aggression through adolescent reflective functioning was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.054$, $STDEV = 0.012$, $t = -4.500$, $p = .001$). The significant indirect effect indicates that adolescent reflective functioning statistically mediates the association between parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression. Specifically, the positive association between parent-child triangulation and reflective functioning, together with the negative association between reflective functioning and aggression, produced a negative indirect effect. Thus, higher levels of parent-child triangulation

were associated with higher levels of reflective functioning, while higher levels of reflective functioning were associated with lower levels of aggression.

When considered together with the direct effect reported in Table 4, parent-child triangulation showed a significant positive direct association with adolescent aggression ($\beta = 0.173$, $p < .001$), whereas its indirect association through reflective functioning was negative ($\beta = -0.054$, $p = .001$). The opposite signs of the direct and indirect effects indicate an inconsistent mediation pattern, in which the indirect pathway operates in the opposite direction to the direct pathway. However, because the study used cross-sectional data, these findings should be interpreted as statistical associations rather than evidence of a causal process.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between parent-child triangulation, adolescent reflective functioning, and adolescent aggression. First, parent-child triangulation was found to be positively associated with adolescent aggression. The direct effect analysis showed that parent-child triangulation had a significant positive effect on adolescent aggression, indicating that adolescents who experience greater involvement in parental conflict, scapegoating, cross-generational coalition, or parentification tend to report higher levels of aggressive behavior. This finding highlights the importance of family relational experiences in understanding adolescent behavioral and emotional difficulties. Second, adolescent reflective functioning was significantly related to both parent-child triangulation and adolescent aggression. The correlation analysis showed that parent-child triangulation was positively associated with reflective functioning, while reflective functioning was negatively associated with aggression. Third, the mediation analysis demonstrated a significant negative indirect effect of parent-child triangulation on adolescent aggression through reflective functioning. The positive association between parent-child triangulation and reflective functioning, combined with the negative association between reflective functioning and aggression, resulted in a negative indirect pathway. Together with the significant positive direct effect, these results indicate that reflective functioning constitutes an important psychological pathway through which family relational experiences are indirectly associated with adolescent aggression.

Based on these findings, several practical implications can be proposed. Families should reduce adolescents' involvement in parental disputes and avoid assigning them blame, loyalty-based responsibilities, or excessive emotional and instrumental duties. Parents may also benefit from improving their ability to recognize and respond appropriately to adolescents' emotions, thoughts, and psychological needs. Schools and youth-support services can provide programs focusing on emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, conflict management, and reflective functioning. Such interventions may help adolescents better understand their own and others' mental states when facing stressful family interactions. In addition, cooperation among parents, schools, and professional counselors may provide a more comprehensive support system for adolescents experiencing persistent family conflict.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, the study employed a cross-sectional survey design, which limits the ability to establish temporal order or causal relationships among parent-child triangulation, reflective functioning, and aggression. Second, the data were primarily based on adolescents' self-reports, which may be

affected by recall bias, social desirability, or differences in subjective interpretation. Third, participants were recruited from three schools, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to adolescents from different regions, educational settings, or family backgrounds. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how triangulation and reflective functioning develop over time and how they influence changes in aggression. Multi-informant data from adolescents, parents, teachers, and counselors could also provide a more comprehensive assessment. Future studies may further examine other psychological and family-level mechanisms, such as emotional regulation, attachment, parenting style, family cohesion, and parental reflective functioning, to develop a more comprehensive explanation of adolescent aggression.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee before data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of eligible participants, and assent was obtained from the adolescents before participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential and that they could withdraw from the study in accordance with the approved research procedures.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the present research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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