

# The Application and Effectiveness of Family Therapy in Adolescents with Anxiety and Depression

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the application and effectiveness of family therapy in adolescents with anxiety and depression. Through literature review and empirical research, the current status of adolescent anxiety and depression, the theoretical foundations of family therapy, and commonly used methods were analyzed. The study found that family therapy can effectively alleviate anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents and promote the healthy development of family functioning. This research provides new insights for adolescent mental health interventions and holds significant guiding importance for the practical application of family therapy.*

**Keywords:** Adolescent; Anxiety; Depression; Family Therapy.

## 1. Introduction

For many years, adolescent anxiety and depression have become increasingly severe, emerging as a global public health problem that seriously affects their physical and mental health and future development. While traditional pharmacological and individual psychological treatments have some effect, they often overlook the significant impact of the family environment on adolescent mental health. Family therapy, as a systemic psychological intervention method, has garnered increasing attention in recent years for treating adolescent anxiety and depression. This study aims to investigate the application and effectiveness of family therapy in this context, providing new ideas and methods for improving the mental health status of adolescents.

## 2. Current Status and Influencing Factors of Adolescent Anxiety and Depression

The incidence of depression in China has been rising annually, with adolescent mental health issues becoming a major focus of societal concern, particularly anxiety and depression. Adolescence is a critical period for individual physical and mental development and a high-risk period for psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. Over the past two decades, the incidence of depressive disorders among Chinese adolescents has risen rapidly, from 18.6% in 2000 to 24.6% in 2020, with a trend towards earlier onset, making it one of the primary psychological issues among adolescents in China [1]. Studies have found that over 40% of individuals with depressive disorders experience their first episode during adolescence, with the 15-19 age group being a high-risk period for onset [2]. These psychological problems not only affect adolescents' learning, social interactions, and quality of life but can also lead to serious consequences such as self-harm and suicide. Adolescent anxiety disorders are a group of emotional disorders characterized by excessive anxiety and worry [3].

The factors influencing adolescent anxiety and depression are multifaceted. A study investigating factors related to

adolescent anxiety and depression which examined 152 affected adolescents, found an anxiety disorder incidence rate of 23.03%. Significant differences in the incidence of anxiety disorders were observed concerning gender, only-child status, academic performance, paternal parenting style, maternal parenting style, parental conflict, and negative life events [4]. Contemporary adolescents experience earlier physical development but often lack sufficient psychological preparedness and have limited ability to handle psychological problems [5]. The inner vulnerability and sensitivity of adolescents also make them prone to becoming stubborn when facing various pressures, leading to the occurrence of anxiety and depressive disorders. Research indicates that controllable environmental factors for adolescent depression involve multiple aspects. Focusing on the family, school, and social environments of adolescents—by changing parenting models, parent-child attachment, school belonging, peer relationships, social media, etc.—can effectively prevent and control depressive moods in adolescents [6].

In summary, firstly, external factors such as academic pressure, peer relationships, and family environment are primary triggers. Secondly, internal factors like adolescents' personality traits and emotion regulation abilities also play important roles. Furthermore, multiple studies suggest that the family environment is considered one of the most critical influencing factors [7-8]. Dysfunctional family dynamics, such as parental conflict, strained parent-child relationships, and poor family communication, can exacerbate anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents. Therefore, conducting interventions starting from the family system is of great significance for improving adolescent mental health. Thus, analyzing the factors influencing adolescent anxiety disorders and implementing targeted interventions can help avoid adverse outcomes.

## 3. Theoretical Basis and Common Methods of Family Therapy

Family therapy is a psychological treatment method that takes the family as the unit. While its development in Western

countries has spanned half a century, it has only been introduced in China for just over 20 years [9]. Its theoretical foundation primarily stems from systems theory, communication theory, and attachment theory. Systems theory emphasizes that the family is an interconnected whole, and an individual's behavior and psychological state are profoundly influenced by the family system. Bertalanffy, Bateson, and others indicated that the family is not simply the sum of individuals but a web of relationships; to understand a child's behavior, one needs to interview their family, not just the child [10]. Communication theory focuses on the interaction patterns among family members, positing that poor communication patterns are a significant cause of psychological problems. Zhu Wenqi based on the "Person-Environment Interaction" theory, verified that family communication patterns can significantly influence the adoption of support-seeking behaviors by adolescents and the alleviation of depressive symptoms [11]. Attachment theory emphasizes the long-term impact of early parent-child relationships on individual mental health. Attachment theory and family therapy share many commonalities and can complement and integrate with each other.

In the treatment of adolescent anxiety and depression, commonly used family therapy methods include Structural Family Therapy, Strategic Family Therapy, and Multisystemic Therapy. Structural Family Therapy focuses on improving family structure and boundaries to promote positive interactions among family members. Du Lifeng utilized the Structural Family Therapy model to intervene in a client's family: from "breaking" to "building"—dismantling the original dysfunctional family structure, identifying the operational mechanisms of inherent problems within the family field, and then constructing a new family structure or exploring a mechanism for change [12]. This proved that the Structural Family Therapy model has a certain effect in alleviating and adjusting conflicts in marital relationships, clarifying family boundaries, easing spousal subsystem relationships, and strengthening parent-child relationship attributes. Strategic Family Therapy designs specific intervention strategies to change dysfunctional interaction patterns within the family. Multisystemic Therapy approaches from a broader social system perspective, integrating resources from family, school, and community to provide comprehensive support for adolescents. These factors include family aspects (parental conflict, parent-child relationships, parenting styles, family functioning), school factors (school climate, connection to school, physical activity time), and social factors (community factors, social media, etc.) [6]. These methods have their own characteristics and can be flexibly applied in practice according to specific situations.

#### **4. Application of Family Therapy in Adolescent Anxiety and Depression**

The application of family therapy in adolescent anxiety and depression typically includes the following steps: First, the therapist needs to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the family, understanding the family structure, communication patterns, problem-maintaining factors, etc. Second, treatment goals are established collaboratively with family members, identifying the family interaction patterns that need change. Then, through family sessions, role-playing, homework

assignments, etc., family members are helped to improve communication, resolve conflicts, and establish healthy interaction patterns. Finally, treatment gains are consolidated to prevent relapse. Xu Chaofan based on multiple family therapy theories, provided services including family therapy, parent training, and family stress management in a "parent-child classroom" format to 30 "problem adolescents," including those with anxiety and depression, confirming that family therapy continuously improves children's problem behaviors and family relationships [13]. A case analysis of a girl with mixed anxiety and depressive disorder using the "Solution-Focused" family systems therapy model reported on a 16-year-old girl with mixed anxiety and depressive disorder [14]. Through 11 sessions of Solution-Focused family systems therapy, it was confirmed that family systems therapy can promote the alleviation of mixed anxiety and depressive symptoms and improve social adaptation. Another study showed that family therapy combined with general health education is more effective in improving somatic symptoms and anxiety/depression moods in patients with somatization [15].

In practice, family therapy faces some challenges, particularly in single-parent or reconstituted families. For example, family members may be resistant to therapy or find it difficult to adhere to long-term treatment. Additionally, factors such as cultural differences and family structure diversity require special attention from the therapist. To address these challenges, therapists need good communication skills and cultural sensitivity, flexibly applying various therapeutic techniques and adjusting treatment plans according to the specific circumstances of the family.

#### **5. Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Family Therapy for Adolescent Anxiety and Depression**

Numerous studies have shown that family therapy has significant effects in improving anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents. A study by Westera JJ involving 923 adolescents indicated that hospitalized adolescents generally had higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms compared to adolescents receiving community-based family therapy [16]. Li Daolin pointed out that family therapy holds certain value for depressed patients with somatic symptoms [17]. In a study on the efficacy evaluation and neural mechanisms of Mentalization-Based Family Therapy for adolescent depressive disorder 17 adolescents with anxiety and depression received family therapy intervention in addition to basic pharmacological treatment [18]. The results showed that Mentalization-Based Family Therapy can improve anxiety and depression in adolescent patients, improve parent-child relationships, and enhance functional connectivity between the amygdala and brain regions like the right superior temporal gyrus, as well as global brain functional connectivity. Yang Kun conducted Systemic Family Therapy for 73 individuals under 18 with psychological problems in families [19]. The results showed a softening of rigid relational realities, a reduction in family relational control, a shift in general illness beliefs towards "the patient can make a difference," and an increase in the level of individuation. Liu Meiling [20] through a case study of an adolescent with depressive episode who received 8

sessions of Satir Model-assisted therapy in a hospital psychology department, showed that based on medication, the client's depressive and anxious moods significantly improved after psychotherapy, suicidal ideation and risk significantly decreased, and they basically returned to normal study and life, achieving enhanced self-esteem. Fan Yanfei [21] in a study exploring the impact of family therapy on depressive symptoms in adolescent patients with depression, used a randomized controlled trial to show that fluoxetine combined with family therapy, compared to fluoxetine combined with general psychotherapy, could to some extent better alleviate depressive symptoms, reduce patient stigma, and potentially improve parental mood and reduce stress. Therefore, by improving family functioning and enhancing family support, family therapy can not only alleviate adolescents' anxiety and depressive symptoms but also improve their self-esteem and social skills. Long-term follow-up studies indicate that adolescents receiving family therapy have lower relapse rates and more stable mental health.

The advantage of family therapy lies in its systemic and comprehensive nature. It focuses not only on individual symptoms but also on the improvement of the entire family system, thereby creating a healthier growth environment for adolescents. However, family therapy also has some limitations. For example, the treatment process can be lengthy and requires active participation and cooperation from family members. Furthermore, for certain severe mental disorders, family therapy may need to be combined with other treatment methods.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the application and effectiveness of family therapy in adolescent anxiety and depression. Research indicates that family therapy can effectively improve anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents and promote the healthy development of family functioning. As a systemic intervention method, family therapy provides new solutions for adolescent mental health issues. Future research should further explore the combination of family therapy with other treatment methods and its application effects in different cultural contexts to better serve the cause of adolescent mental health.

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