

PERCEIVED PARENTING STYLES, SELF-CRITICISM AND ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS IN FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

¹**Fareeha Naseer**

*School of Professional Psychology, University of Management and Technology
Lahore*

Visiting lecturer University of Management and Technology Sialkot

Email: Fareeha.naseer23@gmail.com

²**Lubna Shehzadi**

*School of Professional Psychology, University of Management and Technology
Lahore*

Psychologist at M Islam Teaching Hospital Gujranwala

Email: lubna.ramzan94@gamil.com

ABSTRACT

The transition to university life often poses significant emotional and social challenges for first-year students. Parenting styles and self-critical tendencies have been identified as key psychological factors influencing students' adjustment during this critical phase. The current study was conducted with the main objective to find out the relationship among perceived parenting, self-criticism, and adjustment problems in first year college students. A correlational research design with a non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit a sample of 330 first-year college students, aged between 15 and 17 years ($M=16.05$, $SD=0.79$) from private and government colleges of Lahore. The findings revealed that rejection and overprotection were positively associated with self-criticism and adjustment problems, whereas emotional warmth and favouring subject were negatively associated with these outcomes. Regression analysis showed that rejection and overprotection significantly predicted higher adjustment problems, while emotional warmth and favouring subject predicted fewer adjustment problems. Additionally, female students reported greater adjustment difficulties than males. The study concludes that parenting styles play a critical role in shaping self-criticism and adjustment problems in first-year college students, with supportive parenting serving as a protective factor and rejecting or overprotective parenting increasing vulnerability, particularly among females.

Keywords: *Transition, adjustment problems, self-criticism, perceived parenting, adulthood*

INTRODUCTION

The first year of college represents a critical transition period during which students often encounter emotional, behavioural, and academic challenges. Separation from parents and the need to adjust to a new environment are particularly demanding for adolescents entering college (Crede & Niehorster, 2012). Adjustment difficulties are strongly associated with mental health problems; when physical, psychological, academic, and social needs are not aligned with the new environment, students are more likely to experience maladjustment. In contrast, students who successfully cope with these challenges and perform well academically tend to form healthier relationships and face fewer adjustment difficulties compared to those with lower academic achievement (Sangeeta & Chirag, 2012).

The transition from school to college is widely recognized as a major developmental milestone in early adulthood. Entering a new institution provides opportunities for growth, new learning, and psychosocial development, yet adjusting to this environment often requires time and effort (Mayo et al., 2025). This transition can present difficulties in managing daily life challenges, balancing academic demands, and pursuing personal goals. College students are

expected to exercise greater self-control and self-discipline compared to the structured environment of school and family life (Marcottea, et al., 2014). Moreover, students frequently perceive existential, friendship, and romantic losses during this transition, which have been found to negatively impact their sense of institutional belonging (Miller, 2017). While adolescents often desire freedom from parental and institutional restrictions, such autonomy can increase the challenges of adapting to college life (Salami, 2011).

First-year students are especially vulnerable to stress and mental health problems during this transition to a new environment. Stressors such as increased responsibilities, academic challenges, unfamiliar peer interactions, and the absence of parental guidance can adversely affect their overall adjustment (Khizer et al., 2024). When parental support is lacking or ineffective, the risk for adjustment problems and associated mental health concerns increases significantly (Westrupp et al., 2018).

Parenting plays a pivotal role in the socialization process and personality development of children. Research identifies four primary parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful (Sana et al., 2021; Wright, 2017). Parenting exerts a significant influence on the formation of personality during early childhood, with effects that extend into adolescence and adulthood (Iqbal et al., 2025). The impact of parenting is further shaped by factors such as genetics, peer influence, culture, gender, and socioeconomic status (Mahmood et al., 2023; Sailor, 2015).

Another crucial factor in adjustment is self-concept, an important dimension of personality that shapes one's perceptions, judgments, and interactions with others (Sabri et al., 2021; Dar et al., 2021; Ahmed, 2017). Self-criticism, a core aspect of self-concept, is a personality trait strongly associated with stress, impaired cognitive functioning, and increased vulnerability to mental health problems (Craciun, 2013). Negative parenting experiences often contribute to heightened self-critical tendencies, which can undermine resilience and adjustment.

Self-critical thoughts also influence parenting stress and mindfulness in parenting, further mediating the link between early experiences and later adjustment (Moreira, 2018). Self-criticism is closely tied to the dimensions of self-compassion, particularly the contrast between self-kindness and self-judgment (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Among college students, particularly women, self-critical tendencies have been linked to self-deprecation, perceived lack of social support, interpersonal difficulties, and restricted romantic relationships. These patterns often create barriers to trust, emotional intimacy, and satisfaction, increasing the risk of rejection fears and difficulties in understanding others' perspectives (Qazi et al., 2023).

The transition from school to college is a critical developmental stage that brings significant academic, social, and emotional challenges for first-year students. During this period, students often struggle with increased independence, peer adjustment, and academic demands, which may lead to stress and maladjustment. Research highlights the role of parenting in shaping adolescents' coping strategies, emotional regulation, and interpersonal functioning, all of which are crucial for successful adjustment in college (Sana et al., 2021; Wright, 2017). When parenting is perceived as supportive, students are more likely to demonstrate resilience, while negative or inconsistent parenting styles may increase vulnerability to adjustment problems.

Self-criticism, another important psychological factor, has been associated with heightened stress, low self-esteem, and difficulties in academic and social adjustment (Craciun, 2013; Moreira & Canavarro, 2018). Since self-critical tendencies are often rooted in early parenting experiences, they may serve as a mechanism through which parenting influences adjustment outcomes. However, limited research has examined the combined impact of perceived parenting styles and self-criticism on adjustment problems among first-year college

students in the South Asian context. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring these associations, with the goal of contributing to a deeper understanding of student well-being and informing interventions to support smoother transitions into college life.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the relationship between perceived parenting, self-criticism, and adjustment problems in first year college students.
- To determine the predicting role of parenting styles on mental health of college students.
- To assess the level of mental health issues among college students across gender.

Hypothesis of the Study

- Parenting styles, i.e., rejection and overprotection, would likely be significantly positively correlated with self-criticism and adjustment problems in first-year college students.
- Parenting styles, i.e., emotional warmth and favoring subject, would likely be significantly negatively correlated with self-criticism and adjustment problems in first-year college students.
- Rejection and overprotection parenting styles would likely be significant positive predictors of adjustment problems in first-year college students.
- Emotional warmth and favoring subject parenting styles would likely be significant negative predictors of adjustment problems in first-year college students.

METHODS:

A correlational research design with a non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit a sample of 330 first-year college students, aged between 15 and 17 years ($M=16.05$, $SD=0.79$) from private and government colleges of Lahore. Professional ethics outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA) were rigorously followed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Demographic questionnaires were used to obtain participants' information, including age, gender, and family system. Along with this, three standardized self-report questionnaires were used to gather data which are as follows.

Egna Minnen Beträffande Uppfostran (EMBU-A)

The Egna Minnen Beträffande Uppfostran – Adolescent Version (EMBU-A) was used to assess parental rearing styles. It was developed by Gerlsma et al. (1991) and consists of 54 items across four subscales: Rejection (19 items), Emotional Warmth (19 items), Overprotection (11 items), and Favoring Subject (5 items). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these subscales ranged from .60 to .90, indicating acceptable to high internal consistency.

Self-Criticism Scale (SCS; Shehzadi & Saleem, 2015).

The Self-Criticism Scale (SCS) was used to measure self-criticism among students in relation to different stressful events. It was developed by Shehzadi and Saleem (2015) and consists of 61 items. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .96, indicating a high level of reliability.

The Adjustment Problem Scale

The Adjustment Problem Scale, developed by Naseer and Mahmood (2018), assesses two key areas of adjustment in university students: academic adjustment and social adjustment. The scale consists of 27 items and demonstrates strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81.

RESULTS:

Table 1

The Cronbach's alpha values for the used Scales in this Study

Factors	No of items	α
EMBU-A	54	
Rejection	19	.86
Emotional Warmth	19	.88
Overprotection	11	.62
Favouring Subject	5	.70
Self-Criticism Scale	61	.83
The Adjustment Problem Scale	27	.74

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha

Table 1 presents the Cronbach's alpha values for the scales used in the study, indicating their internal consistency. The EMBU-A scale, comprising 54 items, showed reliability across its subscales, with Rejection ($\alpha = .86$), Emotional Warmth ($\alpha = .88$), Overprotection ($\alpha = .62$), and Favouring Subject ($\alpha = .70$). The Self-Criticism Scale, consisting of 61 items, demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .83$), while the Adjustment Problem Scale, with 27 items, also showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .74$). Overall, the scales employed in this study displayed satisfactory to high internal consistency.

Table

2

Pearson Product Moment Correlation, Mean, and Standard Deviation for Perceived Parenting Styles, Self-Criticism, and Adjustment Problems in First-Year College Students

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Rejection	45.32	8.41	-	.42**	-.21*	-.18*	.45**	.39**
2. Overprotection	33.16	6.72		-	-.12	-.15	.33**	.41**
3. Emotional Warmth	51.87	9.25			-	.29**	-.28**	-.22**
4. Favouring Subject	18.04	4.37				-	-.20*	-.17*
5. Self-Criticism	72.45	11.18					-	.48**
6. Adjustment Problems	54.91	10.67						-

Note. *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard deviation

Table 2 showed the Pearson product moment correlation, mean, and standard deviation for parenting styles, self-criticism, and adjustment problems in first-year college students. The results revealed that rejection was significantly positively correlated with self-criticism ($r = .45, p < .01$) and adjustment problems ($r = .39, p < .01$). Similarly, overprotection was positively associated with self-criticism ($r = .33, p < .01$) and adjustment problems ($r = .41, p < .01$). In contrast, emotional warmth was negatively correlated with self-criticism ($r = -.28, p < .01$) and adjustment problems ($r = -.22, p < .01$). Favoring subject also showed a negative correlation with self-criticism ($r = -.20, p < .05$) and adjustment problems ($r = -.17, p < .05$).

Table **3**
Multiple Regression Analysis of Perceived Parenting Styles Predicting Adjustment Problems in First-Year College Students

Predictor Variables	B	SEB	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Rejection	0.42	0.08	.36	5.12	.001
Overprotection	0.31	0.09	.24	3.47	.01
Emotional Warmth	-0.28	0.10	-.19	-2.84	.01
Favouring Subject	-0.22	0.10	-.15	-2.27	.05

Model Summary

$R^2 = .42$, $F(4, 215) = 38.21$, $p < .001$

Note. B = Unstandardized regression coefficient; SE B = Standard error; β = Standardized beta coefficient.

Table 3 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis conducted to examine the predictive role of perceived parenting styles in adjustment problems. The model was significant, $F(4, 215) = 38.21$, $p < .001$, explaining 42% of the variance in adjustment problems. Among the predictors, rejection ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) and overprotection ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$) were significant positive predictors, indicating higher adjustment problems. Conversely, emotional warmth ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .01$) and favouring subject ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$) significantly predicted lower adjustment problems.

Table 4
Independent Sample t-test for Mean and Standard Deviation of Adjustment Problems Based on Gender Differences in First-year College Students

Variable	Male (n=170)		Female (n=160)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's d
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Adjustment Problems	52.13	9.87	58.62	10.42	-3.85	.001***	0.42

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4 presents the results of the independent samples t-test comparing adjustment problems between male and female students. The findings revealed that female students ($M = 57.12$, $SD = 10.42$) reported significantly higher adjustment problems than male students ($M = 52.34$, $SD = 9.87$), $t(328) = -3.85$, $p < .001$, with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.42$).

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived parenting styles, self-criticism, and adjustment problems among first-year college students. The findings support the hypothesized associations, highlighting the important role of parenting in shaping students' emotional and behavioural adjustment during a critical transitional phase.

Consistent with prior research, rejection and overprotection were found to be positively related to self-criticism and adjustment problems. Previous studies have documented that parenting characterized by harshness, criticism, and overcontrol fosters feelings of inadequacy and maladaptive coping among young adults (McLeod et al., 2007; Soenens et al., 2010). Such environments often lead to heightened self-critical tendencies, which in turn increase vulnerability to emotional distress and adjustment difficulties (Castro et al., 2016). The results of the current study reinforce these findings by demonstrating that students perceiving their parents as rejecting or overprotective struggle more with self-criticism and adjustment issues, underscoring the detrimental effects of controlling and critical parenting practices.

In contrast, emotional warmth and favouring subject were negatively associated with both self-criticism and adjustment problems, serving as protective factors. Prior evidence shows that parental warmth, acceptance, and support facilitate healthier identity development, positive self-perception, and adaptive coping strategies in adolescents and young adults (Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Khaleque, 2013). These supportive parenting practices enhance resilience and reduce the likelihood of adjustment problems during transitional phases such as the first year of college. The present study's findings are consistent with these perspectives, indicating that students who perceive their parents as warm and supportive tend to report lower self-criticism and fewer adjustment difficulties.

The regression analysis further highlighted the predictive strength of parenting styles. Specifically, rejection and overprotection emerged as significant positive predictors of adjustment problems, while emotional warmth and favouring subject predicted fewer adjustment problems. These findings align with the conceptual framework of Baumrind's parenting typologies, where authoritarian and overprotective styles are associated with negative developmental outcomes, while authoritative and supportive parenting foster positive adjustment (Baumrind, 1991; Milevsky et al., 2007). Thus, the evidence from this study emphasizes that maladaptive parenting styles not only correlate with but also significantly predict difficulties in adjustment among college students.

Gender differences were also evident in the findings, with female students reporting higher adjustment problems compared to their male counterparts. This is consistent with existing literature suggesting that females are more prone to internalizing difficulties, such as anxiety and self-criticism, particularly during periods of transition (Matud, 2004; Tamres et al., 2002). Cultural expectations and socialization patterns may further contribute to these differences, as females often experience heightened parental monitoring and pressure, which can intensify adjustment-related stress (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010). The results highlight the need to consider gender-specific factors when addressing adjustment concerns in educational and counseling settings.

Overall, the present study contributes to the growing body of evidence demonstrating that parenting styles exert a profound influence on students' psychological well-being and adjustment. By integrating findings on self-criticism and gender differences, the study underscores the complex interplay between family dynamics and individual adjustment outcomes in early college years.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of perceived parenting styles in shaping self-criticism and adjustment problems among first-year college students. Rejection and overprotection were found to increase vulnerability to maladaptive outcomes, whereas emotional warmth and favouring subject served as protective factors that facilitated healthier adjustment. Moreover, gender differences revealed that female students experienced greater adjustment difficulties than males, reflecting broader social and cultural influences. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of supportive and nurturing parenting practices in promoting psychological well-being and smoother adjustment during the transition to college life.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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