

THE EFFECTS OF FAMILY CONFLICT ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND EXTERNALISING BEHAVIOUR OF PREADOLESCENTS

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Families play an important role in the development of individuals. The experiences that occur in the family can either promote or hinder the development of its members. This study aimed to determine the effects of family conflict on preadolescents' basic psychological needs and externalising behaviour using the Family Environment Scale (FES), Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS), Youth Self-Report (YSR) and Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ). A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was employed. The sample consisted of 128 preadolescents (MeanAge = 11.15). The findings indicated a significant positive relationship between family conflict, psychological needs and the externalising behaviour of preadolescents.

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## INTRODUCTION

Usually, it is within families that we discover, develop and grow as individuals (Corey, 2009; Department of Social Development, 2013). Yet not all families provide an environment that allows for healthy discovery, development and growth, as many families experience family conflict (Saxbe, Ramos, Timmons, Rodriguez & Margolin, 2014). Children who witness family conflict may experience dysfunction later in life (Habib, Toumbourou, Mcritchie, Williams, Kremer, Mckenzie, & Catalano, 2014; World Health Organisation [WHO], 2014) such as displaying concerning psychological and behavioural responses (Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009; Saxbe *et al.*, 2014). These psychological and behavioural responses play a role in preadolescent functioning at school, home and the community (Liu, 2004; Cummings & Schatz, 2012).

Preadolescence forms part of the developmental stage referred to as middle childhood. According to Uhls and Greenfield (2012), preadolescence is the period of age 10-12 years, marking the beginning of significant changes within the family, especially in terms of adjusting to the behavioural, emotional and physical changes, such as mood changes, peer influences, testing boundaries and becoming rebellious, forming identity, bodily changes, puberty and trying to be less dependent on care-givers (Marin, Bohanek & Fivush, 2008). Family conflict may intensify preadolescents' reactions to challenging experiences, as they may feel overwhelmed with the emotional, physical and social changes occurring during this period (Lewinsohn, Roberts, Seeley, Rohde, Gotlib, & Hops, 1994; Uhls & Greenfield, 2012).

Family conflict involves active opposition between family members (Marta & Alfieri, 2014). This refers to "arguments, abusive behaviour, fights and violence between marital or de facto partners, or other people within the home" (Habib *et al.*, 2014). When the family environment does not provide suitable pathways to fulfil the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, individuals are not able to satisfy the needs which are essential for their on-going psychological growth, integrity and wellbeing. The need for autonomy is explained by Ryan and Deci (2017) and Darner (2009) as having a sense of choice and decision in the regulation of behaviour. Louw and Louw (2014: 336) assert preadolescents want and need to be involved in decision-making as this facilitates growth and allows them to be less dependent on their parents or other family members. Competence is described by Ryan and Deci (2017) as energising human activity, which alludes to using one's abilities to the best of one's ability. The preadolescent must feel competent in an age-appropriate or skill-appropriate task (Darner, 2009). If the preadolescent is successful in this stage, s/he will need, and want, accomplishments, strive for the completion of tasks and seek recognition for work well done. If competence is not

achieved, preadolescents will encounter a sense of uselessness, inferiority and inadequacy, and their need would be frustrated (Erikson 1968, Gilmore & Meersand, 2014). Relatedness, according to Ryan, Huta and Deci (2008), refers to being loved and cared about by others, as well as loving and caring for others, thereby creating a sense of belonging. The ability to satisfy one's need for relatedness, or belonging, provides a motivational basis for internalisation. As a result groups (peers, family) share knowledge, skills and feelings with the individual, which promotes cohesive social organisation. If preadolescents do not have a sense of belonging, or relatedness, they may experience feelings of alienation, loneliness and social isolation (Maestas, Vaquera & Munoz Zehr, 2007). In essence, self-determination theorists (SDT) argue that the basic psychological needs of children who live in homes that are not nurturing may be frustrated (Deci and Ryan, 2000), because the three basic psychological needs pave the way towards achieving effectiveness, connectedness and coherence throughout the individual's life. The family environment either enhances or hinders the satisfaction of an individual's needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

SDT theorists Deci and Ryan (2000) state that when there is some form of family conflict, such as arguments or abusive behaviour, then externalising behaviour (behaviours that tend to have a negative impact on the environment) may develop as a behavioural response. This occurs because family conflict contributes to the influencing and shaping of each family member's behaviour (Saxbe *et al.*, 2014). Cummings and Schatz (2012) argue that children need not be a part of, or even present in, the family conflict to be affected by it, as the environment will feel tense.

According to Arditti (2014) and Krahe (2013: 145), externalizing behaviours such as aggression and antisocial behaviour are common when preadolescents are exposed to family conflict. Aggression is described as bullying, threatening or intimidating others, initiating physical fights, forcing someone into sexual activity, stealing while confronting a victim with a weapon, or being physically cruel to people and/or animals (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Yau (2014) identifies antisocial behaviour as being intimidating, aggressive, destructive, destroying another person's quality of life, harassing, causing alarm and distressing others. Dunleavy and Leon (2011) describe antisocial behaviours as cruelty to animals, shoplifting, assault, lying and vandalism. Piotrowska, Stridde, Croft, & Rowe (2015) assert that antisocial behaviours are associated with a lack of guilt and empathy. In essence, family conflict shapes and impacts on behaviour.

This study focused on the effects of family conflict on the basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and externalising behaviour (aggression and antisocial behaviour) of preadolescents. The hypothesis is that (1) family conflict frustrates the psychological needs of preadolescents, and (2) family conflict is related to externalising behaviour. To date, no studies have been found that explored the variables collectively. It is hoped that the outcome of this study may accelerate the need for government to fund projects that assist in minimising family conflict, and give families an insight into their preadolescent's behaviour, consequently allowing them to implement alternative strategies for managing externalising behaviour and fostering an

environment within which basic psychological needs can be met. Additionally, it may provide teachers with insight into the preadolescent's behaviour that could instruct and enable them to employ more suitable behaviour management techniques.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample characteristics**

The sample consisted of 128 preadolescents between the ages of 10 and 12 years ( $M = 11.15$ ,  $SD = .72$ ). The preadolescents attended a community school and were in Grades 4 (28.9 %), 5 (45.3 %) and 6 (25.8 %). The preadolescents lived with a minimum of one person in the house and a maximum of 32 people in a house. The preadolescents lived in a low socio-economic community in Cape Town. Fifty-six (56) of the preadolescents were male and seventy-two (72) were female. In terms of race, 95 (74.2 %) of the participants identified themselves as being Coloured (of mixed race), 30 (23.4 %) identified themselves as Black African and 1 (0.8%) identified as White. The majority of the participants speak English (77 (60.2 %)), followed by Afrikaans (24 (18. %)) and IsiXhosa (16 (12.5 %)). When the family structure was analysed to identify the head of the home, the majority of the participants indicated that the mother was the head of the home (50 (39.1 %)), with one person (1 (0.8 %)) living in a child-headed household.

### **Procedure**

Once permission was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department and the school principal, the researcher approached the school secretary, who provided the number of preadolescents in the school as well as their names and grades. Each child received a consent form, assent form and information letters in English and Afrikaans for themselves and their parents or caregivers. The parent consent form and information was sent home with the child in a sealed envelope. They had one week to return the form. They could respond in their preferred language. The sample consisted of children aged between 10-12 years who had agreed to participate in the study and whose parents had consented. Approximately 15 children at a time came to a classroom where they could complete the self-report questionnaire. No financial or other incentives were offered to the participants or their families in this research.

### **Measures**

The data were collected with a battery of instruments. The instruments were self-reported and translated into Afrikaans, as it is the home language of many of the preadolescents. The participant was able to choose if s/he preferred an English or Afrikaans version. The questionnaire was structured as follows: Section A – Demographic Information; Section B – Family Conflict; Section C – Basic Psychological Needs; Section D – Antisocial Behaviour; and Section E – Aggression. Each of these sections is described in detail below.

#### ***Section A: Demographic Information***

A self-constructed demographics questionnaire was developed specifically for the present study. Participants were required to indicate their age, grade, area of residence, race, employment status and number of family members living in the house.

### ***Section B: Family Conflict –Family Environment Scale (FES)***

The Family Environment Scale has three dimensions: relationship, personal growth and system maintenance. This study focuses on the nine-item conflict sub-scale, which is located within the relationship dimension (Moos & Moos, 1981). The family conflict sub-scale was used to determine the preadolescent's perception of family conflict (Moos & Moos, 1981). Items include "Family members sometimes get so upset they throw things", and "We fight a lot in our family" (Jaycox & Repetti, 1993: 347). According to Moos and Moos (1981), FES has internal consistency reliabilities (alphas) of 0.61-0.78, and test-retest reliabilities of 0.54-0.86. Further studies have reported alphas of 0.20-0.87 and test-retest reliabilities of 0.68-0.99. In the South African context, Roman (2008) conducted a study on the family environment of 411 preadolescents aged 10 to 12 years. According to Roman (2008), face and content validity of the instrument are supported by clear statements about family situations that relate to sub-scale domains. Moos and Moos (1981) provide evidence of construct validity in the manual. The manual also presents the following: descriptions of normal and distressed family samples; descriptions of responses by families with two to six, or more, members; comparisons of parent responses with those of their adolescent children; descriptions of families with a single parent, of minority families, and of older families. Roman (2008) notes that there is further validity evidence in the manual that is supported by references to summaries of some 150 research studies.

### ***Section C: Basic Psychological Needs - Balanced Measure of Psychology Needs Scale (BPNS)***

Self-determination theory holds that meeting the basic psychological needs of preadolescents (autonomy, competence and relatedness) is essential for psychological growth. These needs are innate. Sheldon and Hilpert (2012) use the Balanced Measure of Psychology Needs Scale to assess people's sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. This is an 18-item measure; the scale consists of 6 items per need. Within each scale, three items measure negative effect and three items measure positive effect. The participants are asked to rate their feelings of the previous week, using the scale 1 (= not at all) to 4 (= very true). An example of an item: Relatedness – Positively worded relatedness item: I felt a strong sense of intimacy with the people I spent time with. Relatedness – Negatively worded item: I was lonely (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). The Cronbach Alpha of this instrument reveals that for the six 3-item BMPN sub-scales, coefficients of 0.71 and 0.85 for positively worded relatedness were found; 0.71 and 0.70 for positively and negatively worded competence; and 0.69 and 0.72 for positively and negatively worded autonomy (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012).

The Cronbach Alpha of this instrument reveals that for the six 3-item BMPN sub-scales, coefficients of 0.71 and 0.85 for positively worded relatedness were found; 0.71 and 0.70 for positively and negatively worded competence; and 0.69 and 0.72 for positively and negatively worded autonomy (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). Sheldon and Hilpert (2012) tested for evidence of convergent validity. The  $D \nu^2$  was significant ( $\nu^2(23) = 236.819$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the difference in practical fit ( $D CFI = .088$ ) was substantial, suggesting that independent measures of needs were correlated. They tested for evidence of convergent

validity of the satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors by comparing model 1 with model 3. The  $\chi^2$  was significant ( $\chi^2(21) = 223.89, p < .001$ ) and the difference in practical fit (D CFI = .084) was substantial, suggesting that independent measures of the same method factor (satisfaction versus dissatisfaction) were correlated. They tested for evidence of discriminant validity of the needs. The  $\chi^2$  was significant ( $\chi^2(2) = 16.23, p < .001$ ) and the difference in practical fit (D CFI = .006) was not substantial, providing little evidence that needs factors should be distinguished from each other by using data generated from the BPNS. There was no important difference in the BPNS data between a model that distinguished between needs factors and one that did not.

#### ***Section D: Antisocial behaviour - Youth Self-Report (YSR)***

The Youth Self-Report (YSR) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987) is used to examine externalising and internalising behaviour problems of youths. This study uses the 9-item delinquent sub-scale to measure antisocial behaviour. Responses are expressed on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= untrue) to 3 (= true). Sample items included: "I steal things from home and other places", "I disobey at school" and "I lie or cheat". The total possible score is 27, with higher scores indicating that the young adults engage in more antisocial behaviours. Validity and reliability of the YSR broad band, syndrome and DSM-oriented scales have been documented, and extensive normative data are available for children aged 11 to 18 years (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987). According to Ebesutani, Bernstein, Martinez and Chorpita, (2011), younger youths are able to provide reliable reports on the YSR broad band internalising and externalising scales, although less so on the narrow band scales. Across all scales, the externalising scales performed more favourably than the internalising scales among both younger and older youths, and therefore the measure is considered valid when used for determining externalising behaviour (Ebesutani, Bernstein, Martinez, & Chorpita, 2011). The alpha reliability of the youth self-report was 0.78 in a study by Achenbach and Edelbrock (1987) that examined externalising and internalising behaviour problems of youths.

#### ***Section E: Aggression - The Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ)***

The Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) assesses aggression by means of four sub-scales: physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility (Buss & Perry, 1992). The Buss and Perry AQ is based on the Buss and Durkee Hostility Inventory (1957); however, based on its shortcomings, Buss and Perry (1992) designed a new instrument that would consider the analysis of aggression in terms of a number of factors, but with more modern psychometric standards (Valdivia-Peralta, Fonseca-Pedrero, González-Bravo & Lemos-Giráldez, 2014). The Buss and Perry AQ uses a Likert-type response format, which ranges from 1 (extremely uncharacteristic of me) to 5 (extremely characteristic of me), and the exploratory factor analysis yields four factors: Physical Aggression (9 items), Verbal Aggression (5 items), Anger (7 items) and Hostility (8 items). The questionnaire consists of 29 items, yielding a minimum score of 29 points and a maximum score of 145 (Valdivia-Peralta *et al.*, 2014).

Buss and Perry (1992) found that the internal consistency coefficients were as follows: Physical Aggression,  $\alpha = .85$ ; Verbal Aggression,  $\alpha = .72$ ; Anger,  $\alpha = .83$  and Hostility,

$\alpha = .77$ , with the internal consistency being  $\alpha = .89$ . Test-retest reliability (nine weeks) for the sub-scales and total score ranged from  $\alpha = .72$  to  $\alpha = .80$ . According to Valdivia-Peralta *et al.* (2014), men obtained a significantly higher mean score than women in Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression and Hostility, but not in Anger, in terms of assessing construct validity. To assess construct validity, the authors asked the opinion of peers about the traits measured by the sub-scales and examined the correlations of the AQ results. The results were significant (Valdivia-Peralta *et al.*, 2014). The Buss and Perry AQ has been validated in different countries and has been used with preadolescents and adolescents (Valdivia-Peralta *et al.*, 2014; Reyna, Ivacevich, Sanchez & Brussino, 2011).

### Data analysis

Once data were obtained from the participants, the information was computed into the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) V23. The data were then coded, cleaned and checked for errors. The nature of the study required the researcher to use descriptive and inferential data analysis. Descriptive analysis is used to describe the population, for example, age, grade, race, number of people living in the house, and area of residence. Once computed, a summary value (such as a mean or standard deviation) was used to analyse the population. Descriptive statistics included percentages, means and standard deviations. Inferential statistical analysis involves using information from a sample to make inferences, or estimates, about the population, for example: How do preadolescents perceive family conflict? The data were coded. True and false responses were coded into 0 (false) and 1(true). For the current study, coding was done in Microsoft Excel V2013; this was followed by the process of data cleaning (removing or amending data that were incorrect, incomplete, improperly formatted, or duplicated). Lastly, the data were checked to ensure clean, correct and useful data.

### RESULTS

Table 1 indicates that the participants have a greater sense of competence ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ). Fewer participants have a sense of relatedness ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ). Overall more participants have a sense of need satisfaction ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ) compared to need frustration ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
**THE PREVALENCE OF BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS**

Variables	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Relatedness	1.67	4.00	2.80	.42
Competence	1.00	4.00	3.00	.54
Autonomy	1.50	4.00	2.88	.52
Need Satisfaction	2.11	4.00	3.26	.40
Need Frustration	1.33	4.00	2.52	.58

Table 2 suggests that the most prevalent form of aggression is anger ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ), followed by verbal aggression ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ). Physical aggression appears to be the least common ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) among the participants in the study.

**TABLE 2**  
**THE PREVALENCE OF AGGRESSION**

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD
Physical Aggression	1.00	4.00	2.46	.61
Verbal Aggression	1.00	4.00	2.6	.57
Anger	1.00	4.00	2.63	.61
Hostility	1.00	4.00	2.55	.59

Table 3 shows that there is a significant positive relationship between antisocial behaviour and relatedness ( $r = 0.25, p = 0.01$ ), autonomy ( $r = 0.29, p = 0.01$ ) and needs frustration ( $r = 0.41, p = 0.01$ ). There is a significant positive relationship between physical aggression and relatedness ( $r = 0.27, p = 0.01$ ), competence ( $r = 0.36, p = 0.01$ ), autonomy ( $r = 0.30, p = 0.01$ ), needs frustration ( $r = 0.45, p = 0.01$ ) and antisocial behaviour ( $r = 0.43; p = 0.01$ ). There is a significant positive relationship between verbal aggression and competence ( $r = 0.30, p = 0.01$ ), autonomy ( $r = 0.24, p = 0.01$ ), needs frustration ( $r = 0.31, p = 0.01$ ) and antisocial behaviour ( $r = 0.32, p = 0.01$ ). There is a significant positive relationship between anger and relatedness ( $r = 0.28, p = 0.01$ ), competence ( $r = 0.43, p = 0.01$ ), needs frustration ( $r = 0.43, p = 0.01$ ) and antisocial behaviour ( $r = 0.24, p = 0.01$ ). There is a significant positive relationship between hostility and relatedness ( $r = 0.22, p = 0.05$ ). There is a significant positive relationship between hostility and competence ( $r = 0.36, p = 0.01$ ), autonomy ( $r = 0.26, p = 0.01$ ), needs frustration ( $r = 0.37, p = 0.01$ ) and antisocial behaviour ( $r = 0.23, p = 0.01$ ). There is a significant positive relationship between family conflict and competence ( $r = 0.19, p = 0.05$ ), antisocial behaviour ( $r = 0.20, p = 0.05$ ) and hostility ( $r = 0.21, p = 0.05$ ). There is a significant positive relationship between family conflict and relatedness ( $r = 0.26, p = 0.01$ ), autonomy ( $r = 0.26, p = 0.01$ ), needs frustration ( $r = 0.33, p = 0.01$ ), physical aggression ( $r = 0.24, p = 0.01$ ) and anger ( $r = 0.24, p = 0.01$ ). In summary, results of the correlation table show that there is a significant positive relationship between family conflict and preadolescents' psychological needs, antisocial behaviour and aggression (with the exception of verbal aggression).

**TABLE 3**  
**CORRELATION SCORES FOR THE VARIABLES**

VARIABLES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Relatedness	-									
2. Competence	.41**									
3. Autonomy	.37**	.27**								
4. Needs Satisfaction	.39**	.46**	.55**							
5. Needs Frustration	.69**	.66**	.56**	.10						
6. Antisocial Behaviour	.25**	.14	.29**	-.04	.41**					
7. Physical Aggression	.27	.36**	.30**	.12	.45**	.43**				
8. Verbal Aggression	.15	.30**	.24**	.13	.31**	.32**	.59**			
9. Anger	.28**	.43**	.17	.10	.43**	.24**	.49**	.49**		
10. Hostility	.22	.36**	.26**	.17	.37**	.28**	.59**	.60**	.44**	
11. Family Conflict	.26**	.19	.26**	.10	.33**	.20	.24**	.16	.24**	.21*

Table 4 presents the results of a regression analysis, which assesses the effects of family conflict, psychological needs and aggression on antisocial behaviour. The final model



includes all the predictors accounting for 22% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.22$ ) of the variance in antisocial behaviour. The results suggest that only physical aggression ( $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), as well as need frustration, significantly predicted antisocial behaviour ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ).

**TABLE 4**  
**PREDICTING ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b>
<b>Antisocial Behaviour</b>							
Constant	5.94	.00	.87				
Need Satisfaction			-.08	.07	-.10	-1.20	.23
Need Frustration			.17	.06	.28	2.98	<b>.00*</b>
Family Conflict			.01	.02	.06	.68	.50
Physical Aggression			.17	.06	.31	2.75	<b>.01*</b>
Verbal Aggression			.10	.07	.17	1.55	.13
Hostility			-.05	.06	-.08	-.80	.43
Anger			-.07	.06	-.13	-1.13	.26

$\Delta R^2 = 0.22$ ,  $p < .001$

Table 5 presents the results of separate regression analyses, which assess the effects of family conflict, psychological need and antisocial behaviour on aggression. For physical aggression, the final model includes all the predictors accounting for 26% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.26$ ) of the variance in physical aggression. The results suggest that only need frustration ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ) and antisocial behaviour, significantly predicted physical aggression ( $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ).

For verbal aggression, the final model includes all the predictors accounting for 12% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.12$ ) of the variance, with only antisocial behaviour ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) significantly predicting verbal aggression.

For anger, the final model includes all the predictors accounting for 17% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.17$ ) of the variance, with only need frustration ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ) significantly predicting anger.

For hostility, the final model includes all the predictors accounting for 13% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.13$ ) of the variance with only need frustration ( $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) significantly predicting hostility.

**TABLE 5**  
**PREDICTING AGGRESSION**

	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b>
<b>Physical Aggression</b>							
Constant	11.38	.00	.33				
Need Satisfaction			.15	.12	.10	1.25	.22
Need Frustration			.30	.10	.28	3.12	<b>.00*</b>
Family Conflict			.03	.03	.08	.96	.34
Antisocial Behaviour			.53	.16	.30	3.43	<b>.00*</b>
<b>Verbal Aggression</b>							
Constant	5.30	.00	1.01				
Need Satisfaction			.15	.12	.11	1.26	.21
Need Frustration			.18	.10	.18	1.83	.07
Family Conflict			.01	.03	.04	.49	.63
Antisocial Behaviour			.41	.16	.24	2.59	<b>.01*</b>

<b>Anger</b>							
Constant	7.11	.00	1.05				
Need Satisfaction			.10	.13	.06	.76	.45
Need Frustration			.37	.10	.35	3.72	<b>.00*</b>
Family Conflict			.03	.03	.10	1.17	.25
Antisocial Behaviour			.11	.16	.06	.69	.49
<b>Hostility</b>							
Constant	5.81	.00	.72				
Need Satisfaction			.24	.13	.16	1.87	.07
Need Frustration			.27	.10	.26	2.69	<b>.01*</b>
Family Conflict			.03	.03	.09	1.03	.31
Antisocial Behaviour			.17	.16	.10	1.07	.29

$\Delta R^2 = 0.26, p < .001$  [Predicting physical aggression]

$\Delta R^2 = 0.12, p < .001$  [Predicting verbal aggression]

$\Delta R^2 = 0.17, p < .001$  [Predicting anger]

$\Delta R^2 = 0.13, p < .001$  [Predicting hostility]

## DISCUSSION

The study found that preadolescent participants have a greater sense of competence, followed closely by autonomy. This is consistent with the view of Markstrom and Marshall (2007), who argue that preadolescents are in a stage where they desire to achieve and have a sense of competence. Beilin and Pufall (2013) assert that preadolescents feel successful when they are able to identify their success based on hard work and ability. A sense of competence is key in this developmental stage; therefore it is not surprising that preadolescents experience a greater sense of competence, compared to autonomy and relatedness (Erikson, 1968). Deci and Ryan (2000), as well as Louw and Louw (2007), hold the view that preadolescents rely less on parents and family members, and will therefore develop a strong sense of autonomy. Gilmore and Meersand (2014) found that preadolescents enjoy making decisions about their lives and are dissatisfied with being told, or instructed, what to do. Fewer preadolescents who participated in the study have a sense of relatedness. Preadolescents tend to seek a sense of belonging with peers and with families; however, when families experience family conflict, the child's sense of belonging might not feel as secure (Corey, 2009). This finding is corroborated by the finding in the current study, which found that relatedness is present in the lives of the preadolescents, but to a lesser extent than competence and autonomy. Kader and Roman (2016) state that, if preadolescents do not experience any sense of relatedness, they will experience feelings of loneliness, alienation and social isolation. Overall, more participants had a sense of needs satisfaction compared to needs frustration. Ryan and Deci (2017) highlight that satisfaction of needs occurs differently for different people, yet satisfaction is needed for optimal development. In this population, all three needs have been met to some extent, illustrating that preadolescents have a greater sense of needs satisfaction compared to needs frustration.

This study measured externalising behaviour in terms of antisocial behaviour and aggression. The results of the study indicated that preadolescents sometimes engage in antisocial behaviour. This view is consistent with those of Buckley, Chapman, &

Sheehan (2012), Ehrensaft, Wasserman, Verdelli, Greenwald, Miller & Davies (2003) and Park, Lee, Sun, Vazsonyi, & Bolland (2010), who all found that preadolescents sometimes engage in antisocial behaviour. Buckley, Chapman, & Sheehan, (2012) found that antisocial behaviour is often related to injury to self or others; Ehrensaft *et al.*, (2003) found that antisocial behaviour is associated with inconsistent boundaries or negative consequences that preadolescents experience; and Park *et al.*, (2010) found that personal and biological attributes play a large role in predicting antisocial behaviour, but the context in which one lives is equally important for preadolescents who engage in antisocial behaviour. This study, on the other hand, found that the most prevalent form of antisocial behaviour among the participants was swearing or using offensive language.

In terms of aggression, the study found that the most prevalent form of aggression was anger. Physical aggression appears to be the least prevalent among preadolescents. Robertson, Daffern & Bucks (2012) found that, traditionally, hostility was the most common form of aggression. Currently, their findings show that there are multiple motives responsible for aggression, and the form of aggression becomes apparent depending on the intended objective of using aggression.

In the current study there is a positive significant relationship between family conflict and competence, relatedness, autonomy, as well as needs frustration. There is no relationship between family conflict and needs satisfaction. The findings of this study indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between family conflict and preadolescents' psychological needs. Family conflict was significantly related to needs frustration in a positive way. Therefore, hypothesis 1 (family conflict frustrates the basic psychological needs of preadolescents) was found to be true. This relationship is consistent with the findings of Marin *et al.* (2008) that families who communicate effectively were correlated with relatedness and competence. This finding concurs with the finding of the current study that family conflict is correlated with needs frustration, and does not correlate with needs satisfaction. According to Russell and Bakken (2002), when family conflict is present, preadolescents rely less on the family, and autonomy becomes more apparent. Therefore, there is a link between family conflict and autonomy.

This study found that family conflict does not predict the psychological needs or externalising behaviour of preadolescents. There are two possible reasons for this finding: (1) the sample size was too small; or (2) the research shows that the parent-child relationship has more effect than the family environment, because the child is closer to the parent or parental figure than other family members or siblings who are in conflict, or simply the family environment (Roman, 2008). Roskam, Meunier, Stievenart & Noël (2013) refer to this parent-child relationship as proximal factors, which means that the parent or parental figure would have a more direct effect on the preadolescent than the family environment. Marin *et al.* (2008) have a similar view and claim that poor parent-preadolescent communication prevents the preadolescent from getting the necessary support from parents when their needs are frustrated. Roskam *et al.* (2013) hold the view that proximal factors, such as parenting, have a great influence on the development of

psychological needs – when negative control is exercised, it is more likely that psychological needs will be frustrated. Ehrensaft *et al.* (2003) corroborate this view by arguing that inter-parental conflict and parent-child conflict are associated with antisocial behaviour, negative consequences and misbehaviour. Roskam *et al.* (2013) assert that proximal factors, such as parenting, have a greater impact on the development of externalising behaviour, which is the reason why family conflict does not predict externalising behaviour.

There is a significant positive relationship between family conflict, antisocial behaviour and certain aspects of aggression, namely hostility, physical aggression and anger. There is no relationship between family conflict and verbal aggression. Therefore, hypothesis 2 (family conflict is related to the externalising behaviour of preadolescents) is true. This finding is consistent with the findings of Saxbe *et al.* (2014) that physical aggression, insults, anger outbursts and threats are negative effects arising from family conflict. Conversely, Saxbe *et al.* (2014) also found that family conflict is related to verbal aggression as well, and contributes to shaping and influencing the behaviour of family members. In most cases preadolescents normalise certain negative behaviours in the family and often view aggressive and antisocial behaviour as normal and acceptable, as it is a way of protecting and defending themselves. Based on these findings, it is not surprising that family conflict is related to antisocial and aggressive behaviour (Marcus, Linddahl, & Malik, 2001).

## LIMITATIONS

No research is without its limitations. For this study the limitations have been identified as follows:

- (1) Probability sampling does not guarantee that the sample will be a true representative sample, as it makes use of a random selection of participants from a target population, which means that any differences between the population and the sample are due to chance. A different sampling technique, such as non-probability sampling could be used, in future, to address this limitation;
- (2) The study made use of a small number of preadolescents (N = 128) and, therefore, a larger sample may produce different results. In future a larger sample could be used to address this limitation;
- (3) The sample was from two low socio-economic communities (sub-areas) in one larger area. However, conducting the study in more than one area would address this limitation;
- (4) The study made use of self-report questionnaires – in such reports it is expected that participants may be tempted to present themselves in a more ‘socially desirable’ way. This would ultimately affect the results. To address this limitation, data could be collected from other participants, such as family members, or perhaps taking a qualitative approach would produce different results;
- (5) The research was conducted at one point in time; therefore, the situation may provide different results if another time-frame had been chosen. For example, if, on another occasion, the preadolescent had recently experienced an incident of family conflict,

would the results differ? This study could be conducted at a different point in time, or a longitudinal study could be conducted to determine the effect of family conflict on the psychological needs and externalising behaviour at different times, to see if the findings would be similar.

### **RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Further research studies are recommended in the area of family conflict and preadolescence, as there is limited research in these areas. It is recommended that the research should focus on family conflict as a construct – clearly articulating what family conflict is and what it is not. The research could focus on the difference between family conflict and domestic violence, as well as compare the effects of family conflict on preadolescents' psychological needs and externalising behaviour to domestic violence and its effects on preadolescents' psychological needs and externalising behaviour. The research could further focus on the effects of family conflict on preadolescents' internalising behaviour. It would be interesting to read about the same study but including the view of teachers and parents in addition to the view of the preadolescent. Future research could determine whether aggression is a precursor for antisocial behaviour and how registered counsellors, psychologists, child and youth care workers could intervene to prevent this. Additionally, it should be ascertained what family conflict is precisely and the extent to which these professionals consider it problematic. This study has covered only two components of externalising behaviour; further research could focus on the other components of externalising behaviour. Further research could conduct a similar study in middle- and high-income communities to determine the difference in result – implying that the researcher would determine to what extent socio-economic status plays a role in family conflict and the effects on preadolescents' psychological needs and externalising behaviour. The study could be replicated on a much larger scale in different contexts, different times of the year, different age groups and different cultural groups.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS**

In terms of intervention, there are very few organisations and programmes in South Africa that focus on family work, such as building resilient families; reunification work; parenting workshops; family counselling and support; psychoeducation and awareness about families; and creating healthy and effective families. Families would benefit from programmes that aim to build resilient families and equip families with knowledge on how to deal effectively with family conflict. Teachers, principals and teacher's assistants need to receive training by social work professionals on how to manage a child who comes from a home burdened by family conflict. Teachers need to be better equipped to manage aggression and externalising behaviour. Preadolescents need to belong to a mentorship programme that would allow them to get the necessary guidance to be effective citizens, if the family environment does not create this opportunity for the child. Preadolescents and families should have access to counselling services in their communities. Empowerment programmes are needed to allow adults and preadolescents to feel a sense of competence. Opportunities should be created in the communities where youths reside so that they can belong to healthy and effective groups, and in this way develop a sense of belonging. Families should be educated on

boundaries, consequences and how autonomous a child should be. Some of these recommendations are directed at government, but it is believed that community members are also able to mobilise such programmes.

## CONCLUSION

This study focused on determining the effects of family conflict on preadolescent psychological needs and externalising behaviour. Preadolescence is a unique and important stage of development. The family plays an important role in the socialisation, values, attitudes, beliefs and norms of preadolescents. Preadolescents are affected by what happens in their family environment. Family conflict in the family environment has an effect on preadolescents' psychological needs, such as their sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as well as their externalising behaviour. The main results yielded by this study indicate that there is a relationship between family conflict and preadolescents' psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. The study also found that family conflict is related to preadolescents' externalising behaviour (antisocial behaviour and aggression, with the exception of verbal aggression). On the basis of these findings, it is possible to claim that both hypotheses of this study have been proved. However, the study found that family conflict does not predict the psychological needs or externalising behaviour of preadolescents, suggesting that parents may have a greater impact on preadolescents than the other family members do. However, because of limited research in the area of family conflict and preadolescents, it is difficult to find much research to support this view.

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