

# The Effectiveness of Intergenerational Communication-Based Intervention to Reduce Psychological Distress in Young Adults Experiencing Conflict Related to Marriage Plans

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## Abstract

Topics of wedding plans can trigger disagreements in communication between young adults children and parents. Communication problems with parents can reduce the quality of relationships and increase stress on individuals, particularly if the issue has escalated into conflict. The quality of the relationship between young adults and their parents is significant to note in maintaining mental health by reducing stress. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of intergenerational communication-based intervention in reducing stress in young adults who experience communication problems with their parents regarding marriage plans. We conducted group intervention for young adults aged 18 to 29 with communication problems with their parents regarding marriage. Changes in the way of communication were assessed with the Global Perceptions of Intergenerational Communication Scale (GPIC) score, stress level with the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) score, and life satisfaction with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) score given before and after the intervention. Results found that emotion regulation, perspective-taking, and assertive communication taught through group intervention effectively help improve intergenerational communication skills, reduce stress levels, and increase life satisfaction in young adults. Considering the contribution of conflict with parents to stress levels, interventions based on intergenerational communication are considered worthwhile in overcoming psychological distress.

**Keywords:** young adult; intergenerational communication; marriage; parents; stress

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## INTRODUCTION

As a source of emotional, financial, and social support between partners, marriage is substantially one factor that affects individual well-being, increasing happiness (Ndayambaje et al., 2020). Marriage in Western culture is viewed as an individual choice. In contrast, in Asian culture, particularly in Indonesia, people still believe in the universal value of marriage and still maintain it as a traditional value (Himawan, 2018). This puts single adults under social pressure to get married soon and is even perceived as deviant when they have entered the age of marriage based on social norms in Indonesia (Himawan, 2017; Himawan, 2020). Hence, the social demands related to marriage can potentially affect individual well-being.

Young adults (18-29 years old) are in the developmental phase to explore their identities and make their own choices regarding romantic partners and careers based on preferences and interests (Vangelisti, 2013). One aspect of a child's life that is often influenced by parental consent is marriage. In the context of marriage, parents' views of marriage can affect children's attitudes toward marriage (Willoughby et al., 2012; Movahedi, 2015). Parents who excel in family communication can help their children prepare for marriage well and avoid early marriage compared to parents with poor communication in the family (Angkasa, 2021).

Unfortunately, parent-child communication regarding marriage can be challenging due to differing views, such as on readiness for marriage or partner selection. Criteria for marriage readiness in young adults are associated with individual ways of managing risk and forming family values, which are influenced by the habits and values that currently exist in the family (Carroll et al., 2009). Thus, the opinions and attitudes of the family are very influential in determining the readiness to marry. Parents' and children's attitudes toward marriage readiness influence expectations of when children will marry while the parents' marital expectations influence children's actual marriage (Allendorf et al., 2021). In addition, parents also have a role in choosing a partner for marriage (Rosiana, 2018; Oladokun & Olatunji, 2022). Aside from social demands to get married soon, disagreements between children and parents regarding these marriage factors can also trigger pressure and stress on children. For example, parents have particular criteria regarding their children's potential partners. Thus, they do not support people who do not meet parental expectations. It can trigger stress for children if they do not agree with the criteria expected by parents. In addition, children who have entered young adulthood are also said to be the most prone to stress due to the need to be independent and make their own decisions, high demands from themselves and others, and the desire to prove their abilities (Cahaya, 2018; Widodo, 2018) which make disagreement with parents can further increase the stress.

Communication between generations has indeed been found to significantly affect psychological distress and psychological impact (depression, social support, stress, loneliness, and resilience) in young adults (Gecer and Yildirim, 2021; Tam et al., 2021). Intergenerational conflicts within the family affect the psychological adjustment (depression, negative affect, and self-worth) of these family members, particularly in Asian cultures that emphasize filial piety and obedience (Pham, Lui, & Rollock, 2020). Conflicts in communication between children and parents have an impact on psychological well-being, decreased quality of life, and increased stress (Almira et al., 2019; Newsom et al., 2005; Ward, 2008).

On the other hand, positive interactions within the family can affect individuals' social and emotional health (Telzer & Fuligni, 2013). A good relationship between

children and parents is also a factor that maintains the psychological well-being of each party (Almira et al., 2019). One of the prominent components in intergenerational relationships between children and parents is communication. Good communication can create balance within the family, whereas poor communication can exacerbate the relationship between children and parents, causing conflict (Olson, 2000).

Communication, which is an important component of the relationship between children and parents, has its challenges. Conflicts in communication between children and parents can occur due to disagreements, differences of opinion, as well as oppositional behavior between the two parties (Isabella & Saraswati, 2016). The difference in communication style can affect the smoothness of communication. Different communication styles between children and parents may lead to both parties having less satisfactory relationship quality, which will then affect their level of stress (Newsom et al., 2005; Ward, 2008). Dysfunctional communication styles can ultimately damage communication patterns and relationships (Tam et al., 2021).

In addition, parents who give excessive directions and disapprove of children's decisions can be a barrier to communication as it will make children tend to avoid communicating with parents (McCann et al., 2005; Lin, 2017). Parents' rejection of children's decisions, choices, or behavior indicates that parents fail to adjust their communication style to the child's needs (Lin, 2017). Barriers to this communication potentially cause children to behave or respond in ways that are not up to parents' par as their needs are not met. This situation induces parents to think that children do not understand, are detached, and are disrespectful of their parents (Lin, 2017).

The ambiguity of parents' expectations for their children is often exacerbated by communication patterns that are inclined to be implicit and reserved in Indonesian culture (Gupta & Sukamto, 2020). Indonesian culture tends to demand that children, as the younger generation comprehend their parents' expectations. However, on the other hand, it places great importance on respect for older people that assertive communication to convey opinions and feelings is sometimes seen as a form of disobedience (Gupta & Sukamto, 2020). It is a risk factor for conflict between children and their parents.

Based on the explanation above, young adults need to have the right communication techniques to deal with conflicts with parents to reduce stress. Communication interventions that are often given to overcome communication problems are interventions that focus on enhancing assertive communication. Unfortunately, assertive communication alone is deemed inappropriate when applied to Indonesian culture, which expects children always to obey their parents (Gupta & Sukamto, 2020), which leads to the need to add components that can support communication between generations. For this reason, it is necessary to provide additional capabilities to help individuals make peace with situations that are not following their expectations to reduce the intensity of negative emotions, for instance, stress, when communicating with parents.

The skills honed in this group intervention are emotion regulation, understanding others, and assertive communication. Emotion regulation and understanding others are part of developing empathy (Decety & Moriguchi, 2007). Individuals with good empathy skills can better interpret stimuli from the social environment (Van den Brink et al., 2012), which leads to the assumption that they will have good communication skills. In addition, the skill to empathize can also be a protective factor in the relationship between children and parents (Boele et al., 2018). This study aims to test the effectiveness of intergenerational communication-based group interventions by combining empathy

components: emotion regulation, perspective-taking, and assertive communication techniques for young adults to overcome communication issues with parents. We postulated that the intergenerational communication-based group intervention in this study might increase positive perceptions of communication styles with parents, reduce psychological distress, and increase life satisfaction in young adults who have communication problems with parents regarding marriage.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Procedure**

Design of this study is quasi experimental one group pretest-posttest design. Participants' conditions were assessed before and after the intervention. The Faculty of Psychology Universitas Indonesia's ethical review board approved the intervention protocol. Before the intervention programs, we conducted a literature study, determined participant criteria, and compiled the group intervention program module and the instruments for screening (pre-test) and evaluation (post-test). The intervention program was delivered in five sessions, with a duration of 120 minutes per session. Intervention sessions were conducted once a week for five consecutive weeks, online via Zoom video call. The following is the overview of the intervention procedure.

Table 1. Intervention Session Overview

Session	Topic	Objective
Before the session	Preparation and Interview	Providing information related to intervention programs, ensuring participant willingness, and giving pre-tests.
Session 1	Introduction to Intergenerational Communication	Introduction of participants and facilitators, identification of problems.
Session 2	Emotion Regulation	Providing participants with an understanding of emotions and emotion regulation, as well as practicing emotion regulation techniques.
Session 3	Understanding Other People's Perspective	Provides an understanding of the skill to understand other people and perspective-taking techniques.
Session 4	Assertive Communication	Provide an understanding of assertive communication and practice assertive communication skills.
Session 5	Integration and Evaluation	Integration of the material that has been given, session evaluation, and post-test administration.

### Participants

Participants in the intervention program were young adults aged 18-29 who were experiencing communication problems with their parents regarding marriage plans. The inclusion criteria in this intervention program were young adults (18-29 years), single, and currently having communication problems with their parents regarding marriage plans. Participants were recruited through publication via social media and filling out questionnaires online using the Google form. We contacted only participants who met the inclusion criteria to ask for their consent and to inform the confidentiality, suitability of schedules, and intervention procedures. We also conducted brief interviews to get an overview of the participants' current problems. Five participants met the criteria to take part in this intervention program.

### Instrument

Instruments administered are the Global Perceptions of Intergenerational Communication Scale (GPIC) from McCann et al. (2004) to get an overview of the experience of communicating with others, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) from Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) to measure stress levels, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) from Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) to assess participants' cognitive assessment of their life satisfaction.

### Data Analysis

We conducted data analysis qualitatively and quantitatively. The main data analysis was done qualitatively through thematic analysis using topics that emerged during the activity. The thematic analysis involves the data taken from the association between participants' presentation of the material presented during the group intervention activities with the participants' personal experiences. Quantitative data are obtained from the participants' answers to the questionnaire containing instruments to assess communication skills (GPIC), stress level (PSS), and life satisfaction (SWLS). Participants were assessed twice, before the intervention (pre-test) and after the intervention (post-test).

## RESULT

### Group Intervention Participants

Table 2. General Description of Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	GPIC* Score				PSS Score	SWLS Score	Problem Outline
				A	N	R	A			
AS	30	Female	Lecturer	19	19	13	9	19	21	Disagree with parents regarding partner selection
AA	23	Female	Nutritionist	18	26	18	13	28	13	Disagree with parents

										regarding readiness for marriage
DR	28	Female	Self-employed	18	15	14	8	21	14	Disagree with parents regarding partner selection
NA	27	Female	Doctor	17	26	11	15	29	16	Disagree with parents regarding partner selection
RA	22	Female	Employee	18	25	13	12	25	26	Disagree with parents regarding the age of marriage

\*GPIC's components: A = Accommodation; NA = Non-Accommodation; R = Respect; Av = Avoidant

### The Effectiveness of Group Interventions on Participants

The three main materials provided during the group intervention activities are emotion regulation, perspective-taking, and assertive communication. During the group intervention activities, the following were some of the themes that emerged from the reflections expressed by the participants:

#### 1. *Emotion regulation by recognizing emotions.*

The emotion regulation intervention provided in the study was adapted from Decety and Moriguchi's (2007) empathy theory, which is defined as the skill to be aware of one's own emotions (self-awareness) and manage emotions after realizing the feelings and thoughts that arise when interacting with others (regulatory process and emotion regulation). During the intervention, the participants shared that the main obstacle when they experienced communication conflict with their parents about marriage was the difficulty in managing the negative emotions that arose. Participants tend to react negatively or even refrain from expressing their emotions, resulting in unresolved conflicts. At the group intervention session that discussed emotion regulation, participants felt that the technique of emotion naming, which is emotion verbalizing, is very helpful in managing emotions since it can facilitate the process of recognizing emotions and reduce confusion about the emotions they are feeling. This technique also acts as a distraction to refrain from immediately reacting negatively and raises self-reflection, which helps the process of emotional regulation.

#### 2. *Understanding other people with perspective-taking*

Perspective-taking is understanding another person's point of view (Decety & Moriguchi, 2007). Perspective-taking is a crucial skill since a negative bias

towards advice conveyed by parents during conflicts makes the participants reluctant to accept differences of opinion. When participants and parents had different views about marriage, they tended to refuse to accept the differences since they assumed the parents' responses were negative. This then raises conflicts in communication. In this case, participants feel that perspective-taking can help in dealing with conflict situations by increasing their understanding of parents and reducing negative bias.

**3. Assertive communication barriers: embarrassment and unfamiliarity**

Assertive communication used in this intervention is the skill to convey thoughts and feelings openly using the I-message technique (Gordon, 1970). Assertive communication is still not widely practiced by participants in communication with parents. Most of the participants tend to use passive or aggressive communication styles. Participants admitted feeling embarrassed and not used to expressing their feelings and wish openly. In addition, the fear of being assessed negatively and receiving a negative response from parents made participants feel hesitant to communicate assertively. The I-message technique trained during the group intervention is expected to help participants better formulate things to convey to parents.

**Quantitative Results**

In general, all participants experienced a positive increase in perceived communication style (GPIC), decreased stress levels (PSS), and increased levels of life satisfaction (SWLS).

Table 3. GPIC's Pre-Post Measurement Score

Name	A_Pre	A_Post	NA_Pre	NA_Post	R_Pre	R_Post	Av_Pre	Av_Post
AS	19	21	19	21	13	14	9	7
AA	18	24	26	21	18	12	13	8
DR	18	21	15	15	14	16	8	9
NA	17	19	26	17	11	16	15	12
RA	18	23	25	21	13	16	12	12

Table 4. PSS's and SWLS's Pre-Post Measurement Score.

Name	PSS_Pre	PSS_Post	SWLS_Pre	SWLS_Post
AS	19	12	21	25
AA	28	11	13	19

DR	21	19	14	20
NA	29	25	16	22
RA	25	24	26	28

## DISCUSSION

All participants who participated in this group intervention had communication problems with their parents regarding marriage-related discussions marriage, for instance, discussions on partner selection, marriage age, and marriage readiness (Carroll et al., 2009; Allendorf et al., 2021; Rosiana, 2018; Oladokun & Olatunji, 2022). AS, NA, and DR did not agree with their parents regarding the criteria for choosing a partner, RA had different views from their parents regarding the age at which she must get married, and AA did not agree with her parents' opinion about marriage readiness. The similarity of these problems gives rise to mutual openness and a willingness to express oneself during group dynamics activities (Brabender et al., 2004). Interaction with others with similar issues might make participants feel they are not the only ones experiencing these problems. Participants can bring new perspectives regarding the conditions from each other and learn new strategies for dealing with issues (Malhotra & Baker, 2022).

The dynamics of sharing, discussing, and practicing during group activities also help participants better identify themselves by engaging in deep self-reflection. Participants reflect on their personal experiences to help identify the obstacles they experience while communicating with parents, one of which is from the emotional aspect. Family-related factors strongly influence an individual's emotion regulation. Parents who tend to show negative emotional reactivity might bring up the same emotional reaction in their children, a process that we define as emotion contagion (Morris et al., 2007). In this study, AS, NA, and RA stated to be used to showing negative emotional reactivity, particularly anger, during the conflict with their parents. They admit that this happens because parents are consistently outraged when conflicts arise when communicating. In this case, the emotional reactions shown by AS, NA, and RA are outcomes of years of observation of similar behavior displayed by their parents (Morris et al., 2007). Furthermore, DR and AA tend to be unable to express emotions when conflicts arise in communication with parents. The way parents express their emotions greatly influences the emotional development of children, which in turn influences the emotional nuances in the family (Morris et al., 2007). In the cases of DR and AA, parents who were not expressive in their emotions, both verbally and non-verbally, tended to make them feel awkward and uncomfortable expressing their emotions openly. Subsequently, DR and AA tend to suppress their emotions and avoid conflict situations.

Another hindrance the participants encountered when regulating emotions was confusion in recognizing the felt emotions, making it difficult to manage these emotions. One of the materials provided in the group intervention is emotion naming to overcome this. The naming emotions strategy or self-labeling is an implicit emotion regulation technique that helps reduce emotional reactivity (Moyal, Henik, & Anholt, 2014; Torre & Lieberman, 2018). However, there are mixed findings since other studies have found that

emotion naming might make emotions more resistant to modification since giving names to emotions can crystallize these emotional experiences (Nook, Satpute, & Ochsner, 2021). In this study, participants found the emotion naming strategy helpful since they could understand the feelings they were experiencing and could manage them properly. Giving a name to the felt emotions is a distraction technique (Torre & Lieberman, 2018) used by participants to not immediately react negatively when facing a problem. Emotion naming might also trigger participants to reflect on their emotional experiences. This is one of the main features of mindfulness skills training in emotion regulation (Torre & Lieberman, 2018). In addition, giving names to the felt emotions may reduce confusion or uncertainty (Torre & Lieberman, 2018), which helps with better individual emotion processing.

In addition, differences of opinion also hinder them from communicating with their parents. Acceptance of differences of views is strongly influenced by biases held toward parents. The existence of certain biases when communicating with others can affect the emotional responses that arise (Sillars & Canary, 2013), which drives different interpretations of the same advice in other family contexts. For instance, in the AS case, the parents' advice regarding expected partner criteria is considered a harmful and painful intention since AS assumes that her parents reject her partner. On the other hand, the same advice from NA's parents is perceived as a form of concern. The inferences influence the difference in their perception that participants attribute to their parents (Sillars & Canary, 2013). SA tends to see their parents as demanding and rigid, and they do not try to understand their children, while NA thinks their parents tend to worry and put too much hope for the best for their children.

To reduce the negative bias that arises when communicating with parents, the participants find it very helpful to have perspective-taking. When a dispute with parents occurs, perspective-taking allows participants to deal with the situation more effectively. Perspective-taking allows the individual to not immediately react negatively when their opinion is not accepted but to view the situation from the other's perspective. The capability to assess communication problems from different perspectives is associated with a decrease in blaming other people for disputes so they can solve problems with more integrative strategies (Edwards et al., 2016). In this case, the discussion regarding perspective-taking helps participants to not directly blame or negatively judge parents' views but to accept and understand differences of opinion when conversing with parents to improve their communication.

In addition to obstacles in regulating emotions and understanding parents' opinions, communication style also determines the success of communication. All participants admitted that they tend to use passive or aggressive communication styles when communicating with parents. This is due to two reasons. First, they feel embarrassed since they are not used to communicating openly with their parents. Second, they fear receiving negative evaluations from their parents when expressing opinions and feelings. The emergence of embarrassment and fear of negative evaluation was found as a barrier to assertive communication (Prabha & Babu, 2020). Participants also admitted that it was difficult to express opinions and desires openly due to fears that their parents would judge them as disobedient children when their opinions did not match their parents' expectations. This statement is in line with Gupta and Sukanto's research (2020), which found that Indonesian culture tends not to support assertive communication patterns since children who express opinions openly tend to be viewed as non-compliant.

When conducting discussions and assertive communication exercises, all participants stated that assertive communication is applicable when communicating with parents if they can recognize and manage emotions well, eliminate negative bias towards parents, comprehend differences of opinion arise, and express their views well. The I-message technique also assisted the participants in formulating their thinking.

All participants were predominantly able to integrate all the learning from the group interventions and their implementation in communicating with parents. Learning about emotion regulation and perspective-taking helps participants manage themselves when conflicts arise so they can refrain from reacting negatively or using less adaptive communication styles to their parents. Assertive communication and I-message techniques also assist participants in better formulating messages to convey. The results of the post-test measurement are in line with previous studies (Olson, 2000; Telzer & Fuligni, 2013; Almira et al., 2019) that found intergenerational communication-based communication intervention effectively impacts positive changes in perceptions of communication styles with parents (GPIC), followed by a decrease in stress levels (PSS) and an increase in life satisfaction (SWLS).

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the positive changes related to participants' perceptions of the parents and self-attitude when communicating through the GPIC scores, which then impacted the participants' decreased level of psychological distress (PSS score) and increased life satisfaction (SWLS score), this intervention may represent a valuable tool to improve family communication. Thus, group intervention based on intergenerational communication is found to be conducted effective in developing the communication skills of young adults who experience communication issues with their parents regarding marriage.

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