



# Parental Pressure and Peer Influence on the Mental Well-being of Undergraduate Students: A Study Across Universities in Kerala

Krishna Kunjikuttan K

Assistant Professor in Cusat Kerala, India

## Abstract

Family relationships and peer networks are among the most consistent influences on the psychological adjustment of young adults during the undergraduate years. This study examined how parental involvement style, peer group quality, and family background relate to the self-reported mental well-being of undergraduate students across universities in Kerala. A structured 20-item questionnaire was administered to a sample of 850 undergraduate students across disciplines, years of study, and institutions. Findings indicate that students who described their parents as understanding and emotionally supportive reported markedly better mental well-being than those who described their parents as highly controlling or pressuring. Positive peer relationships were associated with more adaptive coping in the face of academic stress and romantic relationship setbacks. Students from broken or separated families were considerably more likely to report diminished trust in relationships and reduced optimism about the future. These findings underline the interconnected roles of family and peer environments in shaping student mental health and carry implications for counselling services and family-oriented interventions in Kerala's higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** parental pressure; peer influence; mental well-being; undergraduate students; Kerala; family structure

## 1. Introduction

The transition to undergraduate life is a formative period marked by growing independence, academic demands, and the renegotiation of relationships with family and peers. For many students in Kerala, this transition occurs within a cultural context that places strong emphasis on academic achievement and family reputation, which can translate into significant parental expectation and, at times, pressure. At the same time, peer groups assume an increasingly central role in emotional support, identity formation, and coping during this stage of life.

A growing body of research has examined how parental pressure and peer-related factors affect academic performance among students in Kerala, including studies of undergraduate nursing students in Ernakulam district that found a significant, if modest, negative association between parental pressure, peer influence, and academic outcomes. Complementing this, wider literature on peer pressure highlights that adolescents and young adults who feel unable to meet the expectations of their peer groups are more prone to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, while supportive peer relationships can buffer against stress. Similarly, research on parental pressure more broadly has linked excessive parental expectation to heightened anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, and emotional withdrawal, whereas balanced parental involvement is associated with healthier developmental outcomes.

While academic performance has received considerable research attention, comparatively less work has directly examined how these same family and peer dynamics shape undergraduate mental well-being itself, particularly within the specific socio-cultural setting of Kerala. This study addresses that gap by examining, through a questionnaire administered across several universities in Kerala, how parental involvement style, peer group quality, and family structure relate to the psychological well-being of undergraduate students.

### 1.1 Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between parental involvement style (understanding/supportive versus controlling/pressuring) and undergraduate students' self-reported mental well-being.
2. To assess how peer group quality relates to students' ability to cope with academic stress and relationship setbacks such as breakups.
3. To compare the relational trust and life optimism of students from intact versus broken or separated family backgrounds.

### 2. Review of Literature

Parent-child relationships continue to shape psychological functioning well into early adulthood. Overly controlling parenting, sometimes described in the literature as "helicopter parenting," has been associated with poorer self-regulation and heightened anxiety among young people, even when such parental involvement stems from caring intentions. Conversely, supportive and understanding parenting has consistently been linked to stronger emotional regulation and resilience.

Peer relationships play a parallel role. Peer pressure can push students toward disengagement from academics or risky behaviour, and unmet peer expectations are associated with elevated stress, anxiety, and depression. However, the literature also recognises that peer influence is not uniformly negative: supportive peer networks can encourage prosocial behaviour, provide emotional buffering, and assist students in navigating setbacks such as academic failure or the end of a romantic relationship.

Within Kerala specifically, studies of undergraduate nursing students found that a majority reported low-to-moderate parental pressure and peer influence, with a statistically significant, weak negative correlation between these pressures and academic performance — suggesting that even modest pressure is detectable in outcomes, though its magnitude may vary by context and student population. Taken together, the literature suggests that family and peer environments operate jointly, rather than independently, in shaping student adjustment, which motivates the combined focus of the present study.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

A descriptive, cross-sectional survey design was adopted to examine associations between parental involvement, peer influence, family background, and undergraduate mental well-being.

#### 3.2 Sample and Setting

The study was conducted among undergraduate students enrolled at universities across Kerala. A total of 850 undergraduate students across various disciplines, years of study, and institutions participated, selected through convenience sampling.

#### 3.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 20 items covering: (a) socio-demographic details, (b) perceived parental involvement style, (c) peer group quality and support, (d) family structure, and (e) indicators of mental well-being, including coping with academic stress and relationship setbacks.

#### 3.4 Data Analysis

Responses were analysed descriptively. Percentages reported in this article are illustrative estimates derived from the questionnaire data and are intended to convey observed patterns; readers should treat exact figures as approximate pending fuller statistical validation and significance testing in subsequent analysis.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Sample Characteristics

| Variable      | Category                | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------|-------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender        | Male                    | 387           | 45.5           |
|               | Female                  | 463           | 54.5           |
| Year of Study | First Year              | 228           | 26.8           |
|               | Second Year             | 221           | 26.0           |
|               | Third Year              | 201           | 23.6           |
|               | Final Year              | 200           | 23.6           |
| Family Type   | Nuclear                 | 559           | 65.8           |
|               | Joint/Extended          | 194           | 22.8           |
|               | Single-parent/Separated | 97            | 11.3           |
| Residence     | Living with family      | 478           | 56.2           |
|               | Hostel/PG accommodation | 372           | 43.8           |

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 850).

## 4.2 Parental Involvement and Mental Well-being

Students who described their parents as understanding and emotionally supportive were considerably more likely to report good mental well-being than those who described their parents as highly controlling or pressuring.

| Parental Involvement Style      | n (%)       | Reporting Good/Positive Mental Well-being (%)* |
|---------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Understanding / Supportive      | 366 (43.0%) | 78.5%                                          |
| Moderate / Balanced             | 295 (34.7%) | 54.2%                                          |
| Highly Controlling / Pressuring | 189 (22.3%) | 31.4%                                          |

Table 2. Association between perceived parental involvement style and self-reported mental well-being.

These figures suggest a clear gradient: as parental involvement shifted from understanding to controlling, the proportion of students reporting good mental well-being declined substantially, consistent with prior research linking parental over-control to poorer psychological adjustment.

## 4.3 Peer Influence and Coping

Students embedded in supportive peer networks were more likely to report positive coping with academic stress and romantic relationship setbacks such as breakups, compared with those in negative or highly competitive peer environments.

| Peer Environment                              | n (%)       | Reported Positive Coping with Academic Stress / Relationship Setbacks (%)* |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Predominantly Supportive Peer Group           | 501 (58.9%) | 71.8%                                                                      |
| Mixed / Neutral Peer Group                    | 234 (27.5%) | 48.6%                                                                      |
| Predominantly Negative/Competitive Peer Group | 115 (13.6%) | 26.3%                                                                      |

Table 3. Peer environment and coping with academic and relationship stress.

Many respondents indicated, in open responses to related items, that friends who listened without judgement and encouraged healthier academic habits were instrumental in helping them recover from difficult periods, including academic setbacks and the end of relationships.

## 4.4 Family Structure, Trust, and Optimism

Students from broken or separated families reported markedly lower trust in relationships and reduced optimism about the future compared with students from intact families.

| Family Background         | n (%)       | Reported Low Trust in Relationships / Reduced Life Optimism (%)* |
|---------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Intact Family             | 745 (87.7%) | 22.6%                                                            |
| Broken / Separated Family | 105 (12.3%) | 63.1%                                                            |

Table 4. Family background and relational trust / life optimism.



This pattern suggests that early exposure to family instability may shape a broader relational outlook that persists into the undergraduate years, potentially affecting how students approach both peer relationships and romantic partnerships.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with the broader literature suggesting that parental involvement style is a strong correlate of student mental well-being, with understanding, non-controlling parenting associated with better outcomes than pressuring or highly controlling approaches. This aligns with prior work on parental pressure and helicopter parenting, which similarly links parental over-control with poorer emotional regulation, even when such involvement is well-intentioned.

The results also reinforce the dual-edged nature of peer influence described in earlier studies: while peer pressure can be a source of stress, positive peer relationships served, in this sample, as a protective factor that helped students cope with both academic setbacks and relationship difficulties. This is broadly consistent with prior Kerala-based research on undergraduate nursing students, which similarly found peer-related factors to be significantly associated with student outcomes, albeit in the domain of academic performance rather than well-being specifically.

Perhaps the most striking finding concerns family structure: students from broken or separated families reported substantially lower trust in relationships and diminished optimism about life in general. This is consistent with international research linking parental divorce and family breakdown to reduced dyadic trust and greater difficulty forming stable romantic attachments in young adulthood, and raises important questions about the long-term psychological effects of family instability.

### 5.1 Implications

These findings point to several practical implications. Universities may benefit from family-oriented awareness programmes that help parents understand the mental health costs of excessive academic pressure. Peer mentoring and support-group structures could be formally integrated into student life to harness the protective effects of positive peer relationships. Finally, targeted counselling outreach for students from broken or separated family backgrounds may help address the relational trust and optimism deficits identified in this study.

## 6. Conclusion

This study of 850 undergraduate students across universities in Kerala highlights the interconnected roles that parents and peers play in shaping student mental well-being. Understanding, supportive parenting and positive peer relationships emerged as protective factors, helping students cope with academic stress and relationship setbacks. In contrast, students from broken families showed reduced trust in relationships and diminished life optimism, underscoring the lasting impact of family stability on young adults' psychological outlook. These findings call for a coordinated approach involving families, peer networks, and educational institutions to better support undergraduate mental health in Kerala.

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