

The Mediating Role of Mental Toughness in The Relationship Between Adolescents Perceived Helicopter Parent Attitudes and Text Anxiety and Self Control

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We aimed to examine the mediating role of mental toughness in the relationship between adolescent perceived helicopter parent attitudes and with two psychological components namely text anxiety and self-control. Participants were 441 Turkish high school students (75.05% females). Perceived Helicopter Parent Attitude Scale was used to measure the helicopter parent attitude perception of adolescents, short form of Mental Toughness Scale for Adolescents was used to measure the self mental toughness perception of adolescents, Ida Test Anxiety Scale was used to measure the test anxiety levels of adolescents and lastly, Brief Self-Control Scale was used to assess self control scores of adolescents. The results of the path analysis showed that perceived helicopter parent attitude is positively predicts test anxiety, which is turn negatively predicts self-control. Mental toughness has a mediating role the relation perceived helicopter parent attitude and test anxiety and also with self-control. The discussion focuses on the findings and implications for the familial and individual determinants of adolescent texty anxiety and self-control mechanisms in the context of the perceived helicopter attiutes and the potential avenues for future research.

Keywords: *adolescent, helicopter parent attitude, mental toughness, test anxiety, self-control*

INTRODUCTION

The development of an individual's personality is a construct encompassing a combination of factors, including genetics, temperament, and parenting styles. From the moment a child is born, parents play a pivotal role in shaping the components of their personality and learning processes. Parental attitudes are reflected in the emotional and cognitive elements that contribute to a child's personality formation (Ersoy & Şahin, 1999; Uykan & Akkaynak, 2019). The entirety of the attitudes and behaviors exhibited by a parent toward their child during the child's development can be referred to as a parenting style. Accordingly, the strategies, attitudes, and behaviors a parent uses while raising their child are called parenting attitudes (Darling and Steinberg, 1993).

Additionally, the child's perception of parental relationships is among these formative elements. Extensive research over the years has highlighted the impact of parenting styles on children's psychological challenges. Studies indicate that parenting attitudes significantly influence various aspects of personality development, affecting behavior patterns, psychological issues, and adult relationships throughout both childhood and adulthood. Different parenting styles are known to produce distinct effects on children. For instance, Uykan and Akkaynak (2019), found that an increase in a mother's democratic parenting style is associated with enhanced self-regulation skills in children, whereas a rise in authoritarian parenting attitudes correlates with a reduction in these self-regulation abilities.

Helicopter Parent Attitude/s

The helicopter parent attitude is a parenting style in which parents tend to overprotection and overly control to their children's lives (Segrin et al., 2012; Schiffrin et al., 2014; Vigdal & Bronnck, 2022). This parenting style communicates to the child a perceived lack of competence, thereby conveying the necessity for excessive protection and control by the parents (Vigdal & Bronnck, 2022). Furthermore, it fosters a belief in children that the world is inherently dangerous and that they are insufficiently equipped to navigate challenges through their own capabilities. The term "helicopter parenting" was first introduced in 1969 by psychotherapist Haim Ginott and originated from a child's description of their mother as "hovering over me like a helicopter." (Cline & Fay, 2020; Ekşi et al., 2020). Helicopter parents are characterized by taking on their children's painful experiences, more likely to solve their problems excessively focusing on their lives, and maintaining high expectations for success from their children (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Odenweller, Booth-Butterfield & Weber, 2014; Cline & Fay, 2020; Ekşi et al., 2020). Although parents' intentions may be positive, this parenting style has been found to be negatively related to children's self-identity, independence, and competence skills (Kwon, Yoo & Bingham, 2016; Ekşi et al., 2020). Research has shown that university students who perceive their mothers as practicing helicopter parenting tend to exhibit higher levels of depressive symptoms, alongside a decline in life satisfaction and basic psychological needs, including autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Schiffrin et al., 2014). This type of parenting can hinder children's development of independence and negatively impact their sense of self-efficacy (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Additionally, adolescents who are exposed to helicopter parent attitudes may have more difficulty coping with test anxiety and other performance concerns. It is suggested that this type of parenting style may also have negative effects on students' mental resilience levels (Darlow, Norvilitis, & Schuetze, 2017). Helicopter Parents' expectations, particularly in the academic domain of their children are often very high. In this style of parenting who experience significant concerns about their child's success, as their anxiety levels increase, continue to take on various responsibilities on behalf of their children. As a result, these parents may engage in behaviors such as completing assignments for their children, managing homework on their behalf, adopting their children's exam preferences as their own, making career decisions for them instead of guiding them, and even intervening in their children's social circles and friendships (Duygulu, 2018; Alpsoy, 2021).

Mental Toughness

Mental toughness is an important concept that includes the adaptation skills of individuals in the face of stressful and challenging life events (Masten, 2001). It allows individuals to develop strategies to cope with stress, cope effectively with the challenges they face, and maintain emotional balance (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Individuals with high mental toughness tend to be more flexible, optimistic, and determined in the face of stressful situations they encounter (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). In the literature, the variable of mental resilience is generally studied with athlete samples from various sports disciplines. For example, in the study conducted by Razvan and colleagues (2021), it was found that as mental toughness increased, stress, anxiety, and depression decreased, and they suggest that this could be an important predictor of athletes' performance.

The relationship between test anxiety and mental toughness plays a critical role in understanding students' capacity to cope with the challenges they face in their academic lives (Gerwing, Rash, Gerwing, Bramble, & Landine, 2015). Students with high mental toughness can cope with test anxiety more effectively, and this can positively affect their academic performance. Research reveals that mental toughness is an important factor in reducing test anxiety and helping students be calmer and more controlled during the exam preparation process (Stoltz, 1997). In this context, it can be considered that developing mental toughness can be considered a key strategy in managing test anxiety and increasing students' academic success (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). The relationship between test anxiety, mental toughness and helicopter parent attitude can provide an important framework for understanding students' academic and psychological development. Because the helicopter parent attitude involves children being overprotected and interfered with, this type of parenting may prevent children from developing independence and acquiring problem-solving skills on their own (Segrin et al., 2012). This may weaken students' capacity to cope with test anxiety and negatively affect their strategies for coping with academic stress (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Peyghami, Chaharnazm, and Ghaffari (2023), in their study with university students examining the mediating role of mental toughness in the relationship between helicopter parenting and personal intelligence, found a negative correlation between helicopter parenting attitude and mental toughness.

However, students with high mental toughness can cope with stressful and challenging situations more effectively, which plays an important role in reducing test anxiety and increasing academic success (Masten, 2001). Therefore, the effect of the helicopter parent attitude on increasing test anxiety may vary depending on the students' mental endurance levels. In this context, strengthening students' mental resilience can be considered an important strategy in terms of both reducing the negative effects of test anxiety and mitigating the potential harms of the helicopter parent attitude (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Darlow, Norvilitis, & Schuetze, 2017). In another research conducted by Hasty et al (2010) shows that mental toughness has a moderator role between the relation of academic anxiety and academic avoidance. They found that students who have both high academic anxiety and high mental toughness invest more in afterschool learning.

Text Anxiety

Test anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon that expresses the intense stress, anxiety and fear that students experience in relation to academic evaluations (Zeidner, 1998; Putwain & Daly, 2014; Von der Embse et al., 2018). That type of anxiety usually involves a worries of failure (Zeidner, 2007) and can manifest itself with cognitive, emotional and physiological symptoms and can negatively affect students' academic performance (Sarason, 1984). Students experiencing test anxiety have difficulty paying attention, have difficulty accessing information during the exam, and this may cause decreases in their academic results (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Therefore, it can be said that test anxiety is an important obstacle that students face in their education process. Von der Embse and colleagues (2018) found that test anxiety was significantly and negatively related to a educational performance (standardized tests, university entrance exams, and grades) outcomes in a 30-year meta-analytic review. Thus, it shows that the increase in test anxiety levels is associated with a decrease in academic performance.

Helicopter parents may appear to ask their children excessive questions about academic matters and seem more concerned about their upcoming exams than the children themselves (Khan and Bhatti, 2021). Consequently, it is suggested that children of parents with a helicopter parenting style may experience higher levels of test anxiety. Although there is limited literature on the relationship between helicopter parenting style and children's test anxiety, Brandmo et al. (2019) found that parental academic expectations is positively associated with test anxiety in Norwegian upper-secondary and postsecondary students. In another research, Pourshahryar et al. (2023) reported that there is an indirectly negative relationship between anxiety and academic adjustment. This means helicopter parents, although they do not directly affect academic performance, may indirectly influence this relationship by creating stress and anxiety in their children. Pautler (2017), found that helicopter parenting style is positively correlated with depression and worry symptoms but not with academic self-efficacy for college students in her/his master thesis.

Self-control

Self-control, one of the concepts that has been emphasized recently in the literature, is one of the critical personality traits that expresses the ability of individuals to regulate and appropriately manage their emotions, thoughts and behaviors (Nebioğlu, Konuk, Akbaba, & Eroğlu, 2012). Individuals who exhibit a high level of self-control are individuals who accept themselves, have high self-esteem, are academically successful, and have a positive attitude in interpersonal relationships (Demirel, 2017; Duyan, Gülden, & Gelbal, 2012). Self-control supports individuals' self-regulation and their ability to cope with various challenges in their lives. Individuals with high self-control are more successful in coping with stressful situations and are more determined to achieve their long-term goals. The positive effects of self-control are observed on a wide range of individual results, from academic success to social relations (Demirel, 2017; Duyan, Gülden and Gelbal, 2012). Self-control helps ensure that individuals are aware of their internal processes and respond appropriately by preventing undesirable actions (Kara, 2016).

Mental toughness refers to individuals' capacity to cope with stressful and challenging situations and is often associated with high levels of self-control. Mental toughness includes the ability of individuals to maintain their motivation, show flexibility, and focus on their goals in the face of challenges they face. (Masten, 2001). In this context, the relationship between mental toughness and self-control is among the important factors that increase individuals' psychological resilience and general life satisfaction (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

In their study on university students, Ekşi, Turgut and Sevim (2019) revealed that there is a significant relationship between the level of self-control and social media addiction. Research has shown that individuals with low levels of self-control tend to develop social media addiction and general procrastination behaviors. These findings highlight the importance of self-control on individuals' mental resilience and ability to cope with stress. Self-control plays an important role in increasing mental resilience by helping individuals regulate not only their behavior but also their emotional reactions (Ekşi, Turgut, & Sevim, 2019).

Strong self-control can play an important role in improving mental endurance. By focusing on increasing individuals' self-control skills, educational programs and intervention strategies can increase their capacity to cope with stressful situations and their overall life satisfaction (Masten & Reed, 2002). Seminars, group studies and awareness-based activities for university students to increase self-control and mental endurance can be considered important interventions in this context (Ekşi, Turgut, & Sevim, 2019).

The Present Study

Therefore, in the current study, we aimed to examine the intervening role of mental toughness in the relationship between adolescent perceived helicopter parent attitude and; self-control and test anxiety levels with a Turkish adolescent sample. We hypothesized that perceived helicopter parent attitude will negatively predict mental toughness (Hypothesis 1). Adolescent mental toughness, in turn, will positively predict self-control (Hypothesis 2a) and negatively predict test anxiety (Hypothesis 2b). Thus, it is expected that mental toughness will play a significant intervening role in relations among perceived helicopter parent attitude, self-control, and test anxiety on adolescents (Hypothesis 3).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 441 high school students (75.05% females and 34.94% males). Among the adolescents, 38.32% of them were in 9th grade, 31.97% were in 10th grade, 21.58% were in 11th grade, and 9.07% were in 12th grade. Considering the average of the most recent academic years there were 82 missing value. ($M = 88.20$, $SD = 9.72$). Moreover, 89.34% of the adolescents perceived income level belong to the middle-income group, 2.94% of them were from the high-income group, and 7.71% of them were from the low-income group. Considering the education levels of the participants' mothers, it was seen that 40.36% were high school graduates, 25.62% were primary school graduates, and 19.05% were primary school graduates. For the fathers of the adolescents 34.46% were high school graduates, 23.58% were primary school graduates, and 21.08% were primary school graduates. All of the adolescents lived in intact families. 88.66% of the adolescents lived in intact families and 8.6% of them are living only for their mother. Additionally, 11.79% of the participants had no sibling, 46.48% of them had one sibling, 20.40% of them had two siblings, and 21.31% of them had three or more siblings.

Procedure

First, the ethical permission was obtained from the ethical committee of the Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir, Türkiye. Then, the online survey which is prepared with Google Forms was sent to high school students from different cities of Turkey via sharing the survey link on social media (i.e., WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook). Before completing the questionnaires, the informed consent form was sent to students of the survey, the login page consisted of the informed consent form that explained to participants the purpose of the study, procedures to be followed, and the communication addresses were given for answers if they have any questions. Besides, they were informed that participation must be within the knowledge of their parents, they have rights to reject participation in the study and also quit any time they want throughout the study. Also, it was stated that the parents had to approve the participation of their child by informed consent. After providing the informed consent form, adolescents were completed the demographic questionnaire (e.g., gender, birth, and grade) and then filled out the self-report inventories (i.e., MTS-A, ITAS, HPAS, CES-D). Survey was ended by thanking them for their participation and the contact e-mails were given again if they had any questions or possible concerns.

Materials

Helicopter Parent Attitude/s

We used the Perceived Helicopter Parent Attitude Scale (HPAS) which is consisted 21-item developed by Yılmaz (2019) used to measure in order to measure democratic, neglectful, authoritarian and tolerant parental approaches under the dimensions of acceptance/interest and supervision. Adolescents answered on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always) (e.g., She wanted to choose the clothes I would wear every day.’’). Adolescents to whom the scale is applied answer 2 different form separately regarding the attitudes of both their each parents. Therefore, 42 items are answered on this scale. The Cronbach’s alpha for the total scale was .91. Additionally, the Cronbach’s alpha was calculated as 0.86 for the mother form and 0.86 for the father form.

Mental Toughness

Adolescents’ perception of self mental toughness was measured with the short form of Mental Toughness Scale for Adolescents (MTS-A; McGeown et al. 2018). The scale was adapted into Turkish by Sağkal & Özdemir et. al. (2018). The original scale consists of six subscales (commitment, challenge, control of life, control of emotions, confidence in abilities, and interpersonal confidence) and a total of 18 items. In their Turkish validation study with 11- to 18-year-old school children, Sağkal and Özdemir (2018b) tested the validity and reliability of a short-form version of the MTS-A, which included the most representative items from the six dimensions. An example item is, "I am happy to try new and challenging tasks." The research findings confirmed the unidimensional structure of the six-item short form of the MTS-A and demonstrated good reliability (Sağkal & Özdemir, 2018b). The scale consists (6 items; e. g. ‘ I am happy to try new and challenging tasks’’) and responses are given on a 4-point Likert type scale (1 for “Strongly Disagree” and 4 for “Strongly Agree”). Cronbach’s alpha of the scale in this study was .69.

Test Anxiety

We used the 15-item Ida Test Anxiety Scale (ITAS Scale; Radloff, 1977), which is developed by Başol (2007), to measure the test anxiety of the adolescents as an index of outcome of this research. The scale's convergent validity was assessed through its correlation with the Westside Test Anxiety Scale and the Spielberger Test Anxiety Scale. A sample item is, “As the exam approaches, I feel excited or worried that I will confuse what I know.” were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (Never True) to 5 (Always True) and Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .91.

Self-control

The adolescent’s self control scores was assessed by the 13-item Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS), (e.g., “I am good at resisting temptation.”, Tangney et al., 2004), and adapted into the Turkish language by Nebioğlu et al. (2012). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale anchored by 1 (Not all like me) to 5 (Very much like me) by the adolescents. Cronbach's alpha was .84 for the present study.

Data Analyses

In the analysis of the data obtained from the research, first the averages and standard deviations of the values obtained from the scales were examined and the relationships between the variables were examined through the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. Secondly, a mediation analysis was conducted with four variables (mental toughness, test anxiety, perceived helicopter parent attitude and subjective control) in order to test the main hypotheses of the study. In the analysis, the mediating role of adolescents' mental toughness in the relationship between the perceived helicopter parent attitude of the parents and test anxiety and subjective control was examined. As an additional analysis, the perceived helicopter parent attitude, which was taken as the dependent variable in this relationship, was also taken as two separate dependent variables: mother and father variables. Accordingly, in additional analyses, the mediating role of adolescents' mental toughness in the relationship between perceived helicopter mother attitude and test anxiety and subjective control and; Two separate hypotheses were tested as the mediator role of adolescents' mental toughness in the relationship between perceived helicopter father attitude and test anxiety and subjective control. SPSS 29 program was preferred to perform the correlation analysis. For the mediating role effect, it was examined on 1000 Bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval using Model 4 in the PROCESS Macro v4.3 plugin developed by Hayes (2013). The fact that there is no zero in this confidence interval indicates that the mediator role model is significant (Hayes, 2013).

RESULT

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations of the measured variables of the study. As a result of the correlation analysis between the variables, it is seen that there are some positive relationships these are between test anxiety and perceived helicopter parent attitude ($r = .28$, $p < .01$); self-control and mental toughness ($r = .51$, $p < .01$). Additionally, there are significant and negative relationships, and these are self-control and test anxiety ($r = -.34$, $p < .01$); self-control and perceived helicopter parent attitude ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$); mental toughness and test anxiety ($r = -.38$, $p < .01$). Nevertheless, the relation between mental toughness and perceived helicopter parent attitude ($r = -.07$, $p = .11$) were not significant as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among study variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. HPAS	89.34	20.19	-			
2. Mental Toughness	16.97	3.43	-.07	-		
3. Self-control	45.71	9.35	-.27**	.51**	-	
4. Test Anxiety	49.02	13.99	.28**	-.38**	-.34**	-

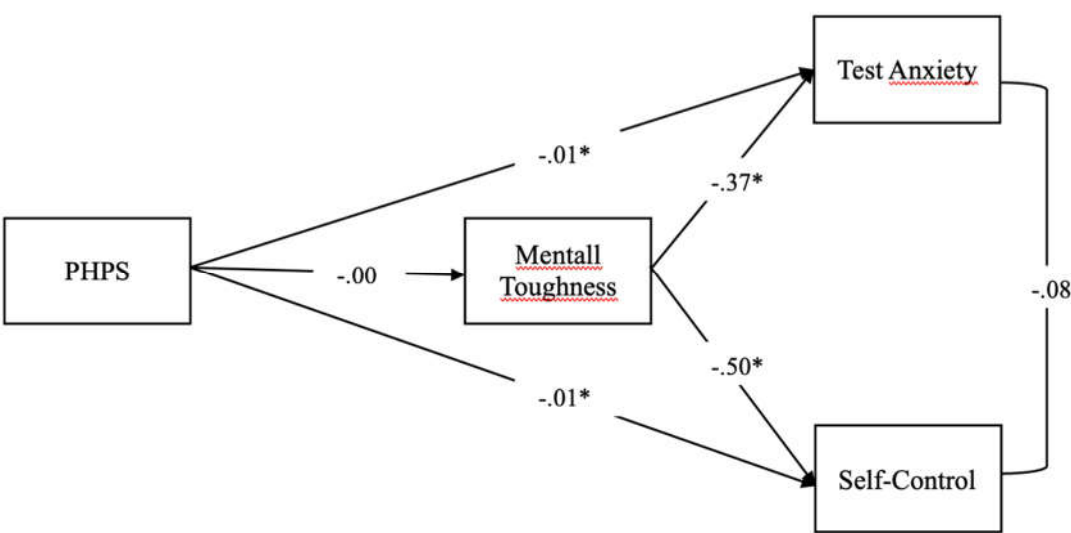
Not. ** $p < .01$.

Main Analysis

Multiple regression was used to the test the mediaiton model. Fig 1 reveals that perceived helicopter parent attitude is positively predicts test anxiety $\beta = .114, SE = .002, (95\%CI: .010, .019), z = 6.281, p < .001$, which is turn negatively predicts self-control $\beta = -.014, SE = .002, (95\%CI: -.019, -.009), z = -5.998, p < .001$. Nevertheless, mental toughness mediate the relation perceived helicopter parent attitude and test anxiety $\beta = .001, SE = 8.798 \times 10^{-4}, (95\%CI: -4.309 \times 10^{-4}, .003), z = 1.547, p < .001$, and also with self-control $\beta = -.002, SE = .001, (95\%CI: -.004, 6.226 \times 10^{-4}), z = -1.561, p < .001$ Additionally, perceived helicopter parent attitude is has a significant positive direct effect on test anxiety $\beta = .113, SE = .002, (95\%CI: .009, .017), z = 6.131, p < .001$, which is has a significant negative direct effect on self-control $\beta = -.012, SE = .002, (95\%CI: -.016, -.008), z = -6.048, p < .001$.

Figure 1.

The path model showing the mediating role of mental toughness in relation among adolescent’s percieeved helicopter parent attitude, test anxiety, and self-control.



Note. *p<001., PHPS: Perceived Helicopter Parent Style

DISCUSSION

In the present study, we examined to what extent mental toughness stands as an intervening mechanism in the relationship between adolescent perceived helicopter parent style with two psychological components namely test anxiety and self control. The results showed that mental toughness has an explanatory role in relation between adolescent perceived helicopter parent style with the relation test anxiety and self control. The discussions of the main findings emerging from the present study focus on three main issues: The association between percieved helicopter parent style and mental toughness; the link between needs mental toughness and adolescents test anxiety level and self-control level; and the indirect relation of adolescents percieved helicopter parent style to these two psychological outcomes.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, we found that adolescent perceived helicopter parent style was negatively related to mental toughness. This finding aligns with existing literature suggesting that overprotective and intrusive parenting styles may hinder the development of autonomy and resilience in adolescents. Helicopter parenting often involves excessive monitoring, decision-making on behalf of the child, and an overall lack of space for independent growth. These behaviors can undermine an adolescent's ability to develop critical psychological skills such as persistence, confidence, and emotional regulation, which are core components of mental toughness.

From a developmental perspective, mental toughness is cultivated through experiences of overcoming challenges and adapting to stress. When adolescents perceive their parents as overly controlling, they may miss opportunities to face difficulties independently, resulting in lower mental toughness. This diminished capacity for resilience can, in turn, make them more vulnerable to negative psychological outcomes such as heightened test anxiety and reduced self-control. The negative association between helicopter parenting and mental toughness has significant implications for adolescents' test anxiety and self-control. Test anxiety is often exacerbated by feelings of helplessness and fear of failure, both of which may stem from an overdependence on parents due to helicopter parenting. Conversely, self-control, which requires self-regulation and discipline, may also be compromised in environments where adolescents are not encouraged to take personal responsibility.

These findings highlight the importance of fostering an appropriate balance in parenting styles. Encouraging adolescents to take on challenges and make independent decisions, even in controlled environments, may contribute to the development of mental toughness. Parental interventions and educational programs could focus on guiding parents toward supportive, yet non-intrusive, behaviors to promote resilience and self-efficacy in adolescents.

CONCLUSION

We have some limitations in this current study. First, because of the correlational nature of the current study, we cannot draw conclusions about causal relations among perceived helicopter parental style, mental toughness, test anxiety, and self-control. Second, we considered only adolescent reports, but future research may also focus on parental report, to bring a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics. Third, we focused only test anxiety and self-control and other psychological components should be considered in further research. Since the data collection was handled online, the responses of the participants who do not have computers, mobile devices, and internet access cannot be taken.

Lastly, further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of helicopter parenting on mental toughness and its subsequent effects on broader psychological outcomes. Longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into the causal mechanisms underlying these relationships. Additionally, investigating cultural differences in perceptions of helicopter parenting and their influence on mental toughness may provide a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics. In conclusion, the negative relationship between helicopter parenting and mental toughness underscores the importance of fostering autonomy and resilience in adolescents. By promoting mental toughness, we can mitigate the adverse effects of intrusive parenting on critical psychological outcomes such as test anxiety and self-control.

Despite the limitations, our study is the first one examining the mediating role of mental toughness in the relationship between perceived helicopter parenting style and adolescents test anxiety and self-control level. In light of the study's findings, the importance of raising awareness among parents about their parenting styles can be emphasized. Additionally, it offers some avenues to guide parents to reflect on their own attitudes while assessing their children's academic performance.

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