



# Too Much of a Good Thing: Perceived Overparenting and Wellbeing of Chinese Adolescents in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

Overparenting refers to a developmentally inappropriate parenting style that parents over-involve into the lives of their children and overprotect them from challenges and obstacles. Based on a sample of 1735 secondary school students in Hong Kong, the relationship between perceived overparenting and adolescent wellbeing (indexed by life satisfaction, anxiety and depression) was examined. The moderating effects of adolescent gender, family structure and parent-child conflict were also assessed. The results indicated that while paternal overparenting was positively linked to adolescents' life satisfaction, maternal overparenting was positively associated with anxiety and depression of adolescents. Furthermore, it was found that father-child conflict moderated the associations of paternal overparenting with adolescent anxiety and depression respectively. At lower levels of father-child conflict, paternal overparenting was negatively associated with both adolescent anxiety and depression, but the relationship was non-significant at higher levels of father-child conflict. Moreover, maternal overparenting was positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively related to depression for adolescents growing up in non-intact families (i.e., divorced, separated and widowed families, and those families with second marriage). In intact families, maternal overparenting did not relate to adolescent life satisfaction, but was positively associated with adolescent depression. The findings provide empirical evidence on the relationships between overparenting and wellbeing of Chinese adolescents, and suggest how family structure and dynamics alter the relationships, which offer important insights on how such emergent parenting style may have impacts on adolescent psychological wellbeing.

**Keywords** Overparenting · Adolescent wellbeing · Parent-child conflict · Chinese · Life satisfaction

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## 1 Introduction

In recent decades, overparenting has become an emerging parenting style that catches the attention of the mass media and the public. We are not astonished to hear that parents constantly track the whereabouts of their adolescent children, fill out the timetables of their children with tutorial classes and educational activities, and ask for privileges from teachers for their children (Leung et al. 2018; Yip 2011). Parents actively build up a “greenhouse” to ensure the happiness and success of their children (Leung and Busiol 2016; Segrin et al. 2012). Overparenting has blossomed across different ages, races and nations (Gibbs 2009). Although there is a growing concern on the effects of overparenting on developmental outcomes and wellbeing among emerging adults, research pertinent to overparenting is still at its infancy. Particularly, few studies were conducted in early adolescents as well as in non-Western contexts. Moreover, the familial conditions that alter the influences of overparenting on adolescent wellbeing are seldom explored. As such, the current study attempted to examine the relationships between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing (indexed by life satisfaction, anxiety and depression) among a sample of Chinese early adolescents. Moreover, the moderating effects of parent-child conflict, family intactness and adolescent gender on the relationships were also assessed.

### 1.1 Conception of Overparenting

Overparenting refers to a developmentally inappropriate parenting style of which parents ensure the happiness and success of their children by intruding into their children’s lives and decision-making, protecting their children from challenges and obstacles, and providing extensive assistance for their children (Segrin et al. 2012). Rather than simply defining overparenting as “excessive” demandingness and responsiveness (Locke et al. 2012), Segrin et al. (2012) identified four distinctive features of overparenting, namely anticipatory problem-solving and risk aversion, excessive advice and affective response, domination of children’s self-direction, and provision of excessive tangible assistance.

As culture plays a critical role in shaping the ecological contexts of parenting and child development (Bornstein 2012), it is anticipated that Chinese overparenting may have some features different from that in the U.S. culture. While Chinese socialization emphasizes a collectivistic orientation based on familism and interdependence, Western socialization highlights an individualistic orientation based on autonomy and individual competence (Yeh and Yang 1997). Under this background, Leung et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study to understand the conceptions of overparenting through focus group interviews with parents and adolescents respectively. Eight features were extracted from the interviews, namely close monitoring, intrusion of children’s lives and direction, a strong emphasis on children’s academic performance, frequent comparisons of children’s achievement with peers, overscheduling of children’s activities, anticipatory problem-solving, excessive affective attachment and excessive care (Leung et al. 2018). Some features are similar with those identified in the U.S. culture (Segrin et al. 2012), whereas some are emergent features in the Chinese communities. While close monitoring, intrusion of children’s lives and direction, and overscheduling of children’s activities reflect parental dominance over children’s self-direction, excessive

affective attachment and excessive care resemble the disproportionate affection of parents and their abundant assistance for adolescents (Segrin et al. 2012). Anticipatory problem-solving is commonly identified as a feature of overparenting in both Western and Chinese contexts (Leung et al. 2018; Segrin et al. 2012). Besides, as achievement is important in the Chinese culture for bringing pride to the family (Chao and Sue 1996; Qurban et al. 2019), strong emphasis on children's academic performance and frequent comparisons of children's achievement with peers are unique features identified in Chinese overparenting.

## 1.2 Overparenting and Adolescent Wellbeing

The transition from childhood to adolescence is an important developmental stage in life span that adolescents develop their competencies, self-identity, independence, intimacy, and connections with the outside world (Erikson 1968). But at the same time, they experience stresses that may lead to self-destructive and anti-social behavior (Elliott 2009). According to separation-individuation theory (Daniels 1990; Grotevant and Cooper 1986), adolescents seek for greater autonomy and individuality from their parents. As such, parents may need to modify their parenting strategies and renegotiate relationship boundaries with their children (Longmore et al. 2013). This is a challenge for parents who worry about the potential vulnerabilities and failures that their children may endure. As a consequence, some parents over-protect their children from possible risks by removing any obstacles that may affect their children's lives and intruding into their children's daily routine and life paths. However, the failure of role differentiation may lead to adolescents' psychosocial immaturity and maladjustments (Bowen 1993; Gavazzi and Sabatelli 1990).

Attachment theory (Bowlby 1977) also accounts for the impacts of overparenting on adolescent wellbeing. According to attachment theory, parents need to provide a secure platform for their children and encourage them to explore the outside world. However, parents who exercise overparenting obstruct their children from progressive independence, which create anxious attachment that leads to immaturity, anxiety, overdependence and depression (Marsh et al. 2003; Oshino et al. 2007). There is empirical support showing that higher levels of overparenting are associated with higher levels of attachment insecurity in late adolescents (Munich and Munich 2009; Rousseau and Scharf 2015). Moreover, the high expectations and demand from parents create pressure to their children, which is associated with adolescent anxiety and distress (Duchesne and Ratelle 2010; Vazsonyi and Belliston 2006; Wolfradt et al. 2002). There is evidence showing that overparenting negatively influenced psychological wellbeing (LeMoyné and Buchanan 2011) and life satisfaction (Schiffirin et al. 2014), while positively predicted depression and anxiety (Rousseau and Scharf 2015; Schiffirin et al. 2014; Segrin et al. 2013). In addition, overparenting was linked to adolescents' difficulties in feeling autonomous, feelings of emptiness and confusion about direction (Munich and Munich 2009).

Parent gender makes an impact on the relationship between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing. As fathers are more instrumental and achievement-oriented in child socialization, paternal overparenting may affect adolescents more on their self-appraisal and perceptions of ones' strengths (Hosley and Montemayor 1997). On the contrary, as mothers tend to focus more on affective needs of adolescents, maternal

overparenting may create more attachment for adolescents (Nelson 2010), which is associated with greater emotional responses of adolescents.

### 1.3 The Moderating Effects of Parent-Child Conflict

Parent-child interaction is an important family quality that affects the effectiveness of parenting (Gable et al. 1992). Generally speaking, parent-child conflict represents the disagreements between parents and children, which hampers parent-child relationship and is associated with poorer psychological wellbeing of adolescents (Deković 1999; Shek 1998). Parent-child conflict forms the emotional context that may affect the impacts of parental behavior on adolescent development (Steinberg 2001). When parent-child conflict is intense, adolescents perceive more negatively on parental behavior, which may influence their wellbeing. On the contrary, adolescents are more receptive to parenting when they maintain a good relationship with their parents, which may further enhance their wellbeing. Hence, parent-child conflict weakens the effects of parenting on adolescents' positive wellbeing. Unfortunately, research that examines the moderation effects of parent-child conflict on the relationship between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing was lacking.

### 1.4 Roles of Adolescent Gender and Family Intactness

Based on the psychogenic needs model, girls are more sensitive to relational stimuli, such as parental warmth, cohesion and closeness (Bem 1974; Hosley and Montemayor 1997). From this perspective, parenting behavior is more impactful to girls than boys. Previous studies showed that helicopter parenting was negatively related to wellbeing in girls but not in boys (Kouros et al. 2017), and maternal overprotection was associated with somatic symptoms for girls (Janssens et al. 2009). However, there are also studies showing that the association of overparenting with adolescent wellbeing did not differ between boys and girls (e.g., Darlow et al. 2017; Scharf et al., 2017).

Regarding family intactness, overparenting were seldom explored in non-intact families (including divorced, separated and widowed families, and those families with second marriage). Based on the compensatory hypothesis, the dysfunction of one subsystem may be compensated by another subsystem (Nelson et al. 2009). While a single parent may intensify one's parenting strategies to compensate the loss of a spousal relationship (Gable et al. 1992; Villalobos 2015), an adolescent may also heighten his/her interactions with his/her caregiving parent in the absence of another parent (Nelson et al. 2009). Rather than feeling intrusive, a child may appreciate the sacrifice of the caregiving parent. However, it is noteworthy that previous studies showed that the compensatory process only happened among mothers (e.g., Belsky et al. 1991). Hence, it is proposed that the relationship between maternal overparenting and adolescent positive wellbeing may be stronger in non-intact than intact families. Despite the compensatory hypothesis, a recent study showed that there were no significant differences of overparenting and adjustment of young adults between intact and divorced families (Burke et al. 2018). Thus, it is insightful to examine whether family intactness will alter the relationship between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing.

## 1.5 The Current Study

The present study attempted to examine the relationship between overparenting and wellbeing of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong. The moderating roles of parent-child conflict, adolescent gender and family structure in the relationships were also assessed. There are several research hypotheses:

Hypotheses 1a – 1c: Paternal overparenting would positively predict anxiety (H1a) and depression (H1b), but negatively influence adolescent life satisfaction (H1c) respectively.

Hypotheses 2a – 2c: Maternal overparenting would positively predict anxiety (H2a) and depression (H2b), but negatively influence adolescent life satisfaction (H2c) respectively.

Hypotheses 3a – 3f: Father-child conflict would strengthen the effects of paternal/maternal overparenting on anxiety (H3a – H3b), depression (H3c and H3d) and life satisfaction (H3e and H3f) of Chinese adolescents respectively.

Hypotheses 4a – 4f: Mother-child conflict would strengthen the effects of the effects of paternal/maternal overparenting on anxiety (H4a – H4b), depression (H4c and H4d) and life satisfaction (H4e and H4f) of Chinese adolescents respectively.

Hypotheses 5a – 5c: There would be differences on the associations of paternal overparenting with adolescent anxiety (H5a), depression (H5b) and life satisfaction (H5c) between boys and girls respectively.

Hypotheses 6a – 6c: There would be differences on the associations of maternal overparenting with adolescent anxiety (H6a), depression (H6b) and life satisfaction (H6c) between boys and girls respectively.

Hypotheses 7a – 7c: There would be differences on the associations of maternal overparenting with adolescent anxiety (H7a), depression (H7b) and life satisfaction (H7c) between adolescents growing up in intact families and those from non-intact families respectively.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

The respondents were recruited from multi-stage stratified cluster sampling method (Rubin and Babbie 2017). Secondary schools across Hong Kong were clustered according to geographical locations and school bandings, and targeted schools were randomly selected from the clusters. In case the schools accepted to join the study, three classes were randomly selected from each school. Totally, 1735 Secondary One (Grade 7) students from 19 secondary schools across Hong Kong participated in the study. The response rate was 89.0%.

Among the respondents, 823 (47.4%) were females and 912 (52.7%) were males. The mean age was 12.63 ( $SD = .78$ ). There were 1292 (74.9%) adolescents growing up in intact families, while 144 (8.2%), 129 (7.4%), 58 (3.3%) and 36 (2.1%) were growing up from families with second marriage, and from divorced, separated and widowed families respectively (76 [4.4%] adolescents did not respond). They were grouped as the non-intact families in the analyses. Among

the non-intact families, 228 (62.3%) adolescents lived with their mothers. 526 (30.3%) adolescents came from poor families who either received Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) or Full Textbook Allowance (FTBA) from the Government. Regarding fathers' age, 270 (15.6%) fathers aged 40 or lower, 941 (54.2%) at between 41 and 50, and 415 (23.9%) at 51 or above (109 [6.3%] respondents did not respond). For mothers' age, 619 (35.7%) mothers aged 40 or lower, 940 (54.2%) at between 41 and 50, and 96 (5.5%) at 51 or above (80 [4.6%] respondents did not respond). Regarding educational level of fathers, 24 (1.4%) were illiterate, 141 (8.1%) were at primary educational level, 1109 (63.9%) were at secondary educational level, and 313 (18.0%) were college/university graduates ( $n=45$  [2.6%] did not know;  $n=103$  [5.9%] did not respond). For mothers' educational level, 37 (2.1%) were illiterate, 205 (11.8%) completed primary education, 1113 (64.1%) completed secondary education, and 285 (16.4%) were college/university graduates ( $n=33$  [1.9%] did not know;  $n=62$  [3.6%] did not respond).

## 2.2 Procedures

Before data collection, invitation letters were delivered to parents introducing the objectives and procedure of the study. Written informed consent from parents and adolescents were sought. The data was collected during the class lessons. During data collection, researcher and trained research assistants gave an introduction on the research purpose, data collection procedure in an anonymous manner and the respondents' rights to voluntarily participate and withdraw from the study to the students. The students filled out a questionnaire that contained the measures of perceived paternal and maternal overparenting, father-child and mother-child conflicts, life satisfaction, anxiety, depression, and some demographic characteristics. Those students who did not join the study were allowed to do homework assignments in class. The respondents completed the questionnaire in around 25 min. Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of an internationally recognized university.

## 2.3 Measures

### 2.3.1 Overparenting

*Chinese Overparenting Scale (PCOS/MCOS)*. Based on a qualitative study from Chinese parents and adolescents in Hong Kong (Leung et al. 2018) and a survey of literature (e.g., Segrin et al. 2012), a 42-item Chinese Overparenting Scale was developed by Leung and Shek (2018) with eight dimensions, namely close monitoring, intrusion of children's lives and direction, a strong emphasis on children's academic performance, frequent comparisons of children's achievement with peers, overscheduling of children's activities, anticipatory problem-solving, excessive affective attachment and excessive care (Leung et al. 2018). The respondents are requested to rate on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 6 = "Strongly agree"). A sample item is "My father/mother eliminates all the obstacles that hinder my development". The measurements showed good psychometric properties in previous validation studies using college students (Leung and Shek 2018) and early adolescents

as samples (Leung and Shek 2019), respectively. Higher scores indicate greater perceived paternal and maternal overparenting. Both PCOS and MCOS showed good internal consistency in this study (PCOS:  $\alpha = .95$ ; MCOS:  $\alpha = .96$ ).

### 2.3.2 Parent-Child Conflict

*Father-Adolescent Conflict Scale (FAC) and Mother-Adolescent Conflict Scale (MAC).* Shek et al. (1995) translated the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire (Robin and Foster 1989) into Chinese version. Both FAC and MAC showed good psychometric properties in a Chinese sample (Shek 1998, 2002). A short form of three items was used in this study (Shek 2002). A sample item is “My father/mother and I always criticize or pick on each other”. The respondents are requested to rate FAC/MAC on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 6 = “strongly agree”). Higher mean scores of FAC and MAC indicate higher levels of father-child and mother-child conflicts respectively. Both FAC and MAC showed good internal consistency in the study (FAC:  $\alpha = .89$ ; MAC:  $\alpha = .90$ ).

### 2.3.3 Adolescent Wellbeing

*Anxiety and depression – Chinese Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS-C).* Based on the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) developed by Zigmond and Snaith (1983), a Chinese version of HADS (HADS-C) was translated (Leung et al. 1993). There are two 7-item subscales: Anxiety Subscale and Depression Subscale. The two subscales showed acceptable internal consistency and convergent validity with other measures of depression and anxiety, respectively (Leung et al. 1999). A sample item of Anxiety Subscale is “I feel tense or ‘wound up’”, and that of Depression Subscale is “I have lost interest in my appearance”. Each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale from “0 = not at all” to “3 = most of the time”. Higher mean scores of HADS-C indicate higher levels of anxiety and depression respectively. Both Anxiety Subscale and Depression Subscale showed acceptable reliability of the study (Anxiety Subscale:  $\alpha = .75$ ; Depression Subscale:  $\alpha = .68$ ).

*Life satisfaction - Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS).* Based on the measurement developed by Diener and his colleagues (Diener et al. 1985), Shek (1992) translated the SWLS to assess one’s subjective perception one’s global quality of life. SWLS showed good reliability in previous studies (e.g., Shek and Li 2016). A sample item is “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”. All items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” and 6 = “strongly agree”). Higher mean scores of SWLS indicate higher levels of life satisfaction. The SWLS showed good internal consistency in this study ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

*Demographic characteristics of adolescents –* The demographic characteristics included: *Adolescent gender* (Male = -1; Female = 1); *adolescent’s age*; *family intactness* (non-intact [families with second marriage; divorced; separated; widowed] = -1; intact families = 1); *family economic hardship* (poor [recipients of CSSA or FTBA from the Government] = -1; non-poor = 1); *father’s and mother’s age* (“40 or below” = 1; “41 – 45” = 2; “46 - 50” = 3; “51 - 55” = 4; “56 – 60” = 5; “61 or above” = 6), and *father’s and mother’s educational level* (“illiterate” = 1; “primary education” = 2; “junior

secondary education" = 3; "senior secondary education" = 4; "college graduate" = 5; "university graduate" = 6).

## 2.4 Data Analyses

Bivariate correlations were conducted to analyze the relationships among perceived paternal and maternal overparenting, father-child and mother-child conflicts, life satisfaction, anxiety, depression and the socio-demographic characteristics (adolescent gender and age, family intactness, family economic hardship, fathers' and mothers' age and educational level) of adolescents. To test for Hypotheses 1 to 4, a 4-step hierarchical multiple regression analyses on outcome variables were performed separately. First, covariates (i.e., socio-demographic characteristics) were entered into the multiple regression equation. Second, the predictors (i.e., paternal and maternal overparenting) were entered to the regression equation. Third, the moderators (i.e., father-child and mother-child conflicts) were put into the model. Lastly, all predictors and moderators were mean-centered. Four interactive terms (i.e., "paternal overparenting X father-child conflict", "maternal overparenting X mother-child conflict", "paternal overparenting X mother-child conflict", "maternal overparenting X father-child conflict") were created and put into the regression equation. In case the regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of the interaction term on the outcome variable was significant, the moderating effect was supported. Simple slope analyses and plotted graph were employed to interpret the effects of paternal/maternal overparenting on adolescent wellbeing at high levels (1 *SD* higher than the mean) and low levels (1 *SD* lower than the mean) of father-/mother-child conflict (Cohen et al. 2003).

For Hypotheses 5 and 6, i.e., To examine whether the main effects and interactive effects were different between boys and girls, eight interactive terms, i.e., "paternal overparenting X gender", "maternal overparenting X gender", "father-child conflict X gender", "mother-child conflict X gender", "paternal overparenting X father-child conflict X gender", "maternal overparenting X mother-child conflict X gender", "paternal overparenting X mother-child conflict X gender", "maternal overparenting X father-child conflict X gender", were created and added to the above tested model. A significant interactive term indicates the moderating effect of adolescent gender on the relationship. Identical procedures were conducted for testing Hypotheses 7 (i.e., family intactness as a moderator).

## 3 Results

Correlation analyses showed that while paternal overparenting was positively associated with father-child and mother-child conflicts, life satisfaction and anxiety, maternal overparenting was positively related to father-child and mother-child conflicts, and all wellbeing variables (life satisfaction, anxiety and depression). Regarding demographic characteristics, adolescent gender was negatively associated with paternal overparenting, father-child conflict and depression, with higher levels of paternal overparenting, father-child conflict, and depression for boys than girls. Adolescent age, father's age, father's educational level, mother educational



**Table 1** Correlations of the measuring variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Paternal overparenting	2.60	.82	1.00													
2. Maternal overparenting	3.12	.92	.52***	1.00												
3. Father-child conflict	2.78	1.41	.30***	.19***	1.00											
4. Mother-child conflict	3.03	1.41	.14***	.34***	.35***	1.00										
5. Life satisfaction	3.70	1.18	.14***	.06*	-.20***	-.26***	1.00									
6. Anxiety	2.21	.55	.09***	.15***	.23***	.28***	-.43***	1.00								
7. Depression	2.02	.55	-.00	.05*	.20***	.24***	-.54***	.50***	1.00							
8. Adolescent gender (boys = -1; girls = 1)	N.A.	N.A.	-.09***	-.02	-.05*	.02	-.03	-.01	-.08**	1.00						
9. Adolescent age	12.63	.79	.00	-.03	.02	.04	-.07**	-.01	.04	-.07**	1.00					
10. Father's age	2.69	1.27	-.01	-.01	.05*	.02	-.11***	.03	.06*	.02	.04	1.00				
11. Mother's age	1.92	.91	-.01	.01	.02	-.02	-.04	.03	.04	.00	.02	.51***	1.00			
12. Father's education	3.84	1.17	.10***	-.01	-.01	-.04	.08**	.00	-.05*	-.05*	-.08**	-.06*	.02	1.00		
13. Mother's education	3.69	1.16	.03	.04	-.05*	-.06*	.10***	.00	-.09***	-.09***	-.13***	-.13***	-.01	.52***	1.00	
14. Family intactness (non-intact = -1; intact = 1)	N.A.	N.A.	.06*	-.02	-.00	-.11***	.09***	-.05*	-.12***	-.02	-.14***	-.03	.02	.09***	.12***	1.00
15. Economic hardship (poor = -1; non-poor = 1)	N.A.	N.A.	.04	-.00	.01	-.03	-.03	.05	.05	-.02	.02	.01	-.02	-.02	-.02	.07**

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

level and family intactness are related to the studied variables (see Table 1). Hence, they were considered as the covariates in the study.

Contrary to the Hypotheses 1 that paternal overparenting positively predicted anxiety and depression, and negatively predicted life satisfaction, the results indicated that paternal overparenting positively predicted adolescent life satisfaction but did not predict anxiety and depression (see Table 2). However, maternal overparenting positively predicted adolescent anxiety and depression respectively. Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported.

Moreover, it was found that father-child conflict moderated the relationship between paternal overparenting and adolescent anxiety and depression, respectively (Table 2). Regarding adolescent anxiety, the relationship between paternal overparenting and adolescent anxiety was positive (though non-significant) at higher levels of father-child conflict, but the relationship was significantly negative at lower levels of father-child conflict (Table 3) (see Fig. 1). For adolescent depression, at lower levels of paternal overparenting, adolescent depression was at a high level when adolescents reported higher levels of father-child conflict. The impacts of paternal overparenting on adolescent depression decreased at lower levels of father-child conflict, but the association was non-significant at higher levels of father-child conflicts (Table 3) (see Fig. 2). Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported.

Regarding adolescent gender as a moderator, it was found that adolescent gender neither moderated the main effects of paternal and maternal overparenting on adolescent life satisfaction, anxiety and depression, nor the interactive effect of paternal overparenting and adolescent depression (see Table 2). For family intactness as a moderator, it was found that family intactness moderated the influence of maternal overparenting and adolescent life satisfaction and depression respectively (Table 2). At lower levels of maternal overparenting, adolescents growing up in intact families reported a lower score of depression than those in non-intact families. While there was a marginally significant positive relationship between maternal overparenting and adolescent depression in intact families, the relationship was negative in non-intact families (Table 3) (see Fig. 3). Hypothesis 7b was supported. Furthermore, at low levels of maternal overparenting, adolescent life satisfaction was at the lowest level in non-intact families than intact families. While the relationship between maternal overparenting and adolescent life satisfaction was positive in non-intact families, the relationship was non-significant in intact families (Table 3) (see Fig. 4). The results showed that maternal overparenting was a protective factor on adolescent life satisfaction in non-intact families. Hypothesis 7c was supported.

## 4 Discussion

The study attempted to examine the relationships between overparenting and wellbeing among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong. Contradictory to the previous studies showing a negative relationship between overparenting and adolescent life satisfaction (Schiffirin et al. 2014), the results showed a positive relationship between paternal overparenting and adolescent life satisfaction. One possibility is that paternal overparenting may be perceived as a manifestation of fathers' commitment and concern to their development by adolescents (Lewis and Lamb 2003), even though their

**Table 2** Regression of adolescent wellbeing by overparenting in the context of parent-child conflict, adolescent gender and family intactness

	Life satisfaction			Anxiety			Depression		
	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1		.03			.00			.03	
Gender of adolescents	-.02			-.01			-.08*		
Age of adolescents	-.05			-.02			-.02		
Father's age	-.09***			.04			.04		
Father's education level	.03			.01			-.00		
Mother's education level	.06*			.02			-.06		
Family intactness	.08**			-.07**			-.10***		
Step 2		.04	.01		.03	.03		.03	.00
Paternal overparenting	.12***			.02			-.05		
Maternal overparenting	-.03			.15***			.08*		
Step 3		.15	.11		.10	.07		.10	.06
Father-child conflict	-.18***			.15***			.14***		
Mother-child conflict	-.25***			.19***			.19***		
Step 4		.15	.00		.10	.00		.10	.00
Paternal overparenting X father-child conflict	.02			.07*			.08*		
Maternal overparenting X mother-child conflict	.00			.03			.04		
Paternal overparenting X mother-child conflict	.02			-.03			.01		
Paternal overparenting X father-child conflict	.03			-.03			-.00		
Gender as a moderator:									
Step 5		.15	.00		.11	.00		.10	.00
Paternal overparenting X Gender	-.04			-.02			.00		
Maternal overparenting X Gender	-.02			.05			.03		
Step 6		.15	.00		.11	.00		.10	.00
Father-child conflict X Gender	-.01			.01			.02		
Mother-child conflict X Gender	-.01			-.01			.03		
Step 7		N.A.	N.A.		N.A.	N.A.		.10	.00
Paternal overparenting X Father-child conflict X Gender	N.A.			.05			.06		
Maternal overparenting X Mother-child conflict X Gender	N.A.			N.A.			N.A.		
Paternal overparenting X Mother-child conflict X Gender	N.A.			N.A.			N.A.		
Maternal overparenting X Father-child conflict X Gender	N.A.			N.A.			N.A.		
Intactness as a moderator:									
Step 5		.16	.01		.11	.00		.11	.01
Paternal overparenting X Intactness	-.02			-.00			-.00		
Maternal overparenting X Intactness	-.09**			.05			.08**		
Step 6		.16	.00		.11	.00		.11	.00
Father-child conflict X Intactness	.04			.01			-.00		
Mother-child conflict X Intactness	.04			-.03			-.01		
Step 7		N.A.	N.A.		.11	.00		.11	.00
Paternal overparenting X Father-child conflict X Intactness	N.A.			.00			-.01		
Maternal overparenting X Mother-child conflict X Intactness	N.A.			N.A.			N.A.		
Paternal overparenting X Mother-child conflict X Intactness	N.A.			N.A.			N.A.		
Maternal overparenting X Father-child conflict X Intactness	N.A.			N.A.			N.A.		

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

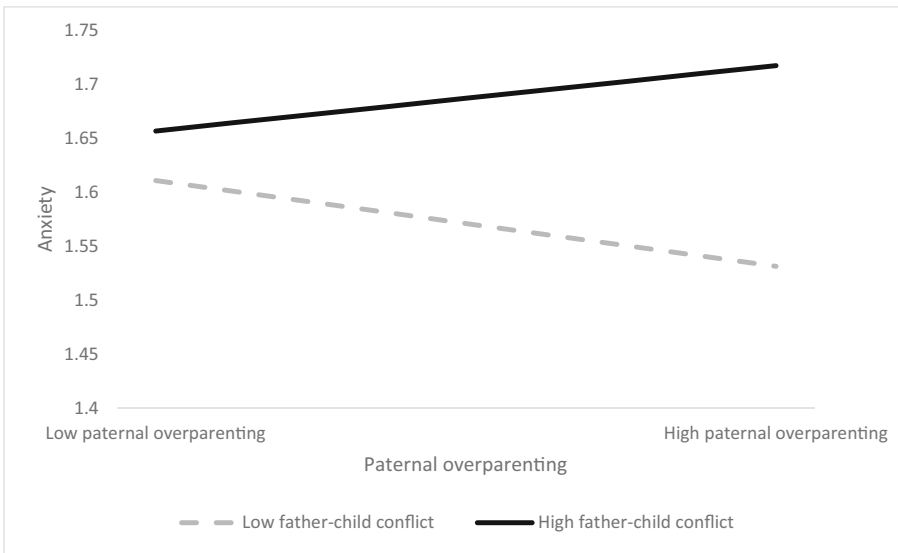
involvement is intrusive. Furthermore, due to the patriarchal hierarchy embedded in the Chinese culture (Chao and Tseng 2002), paternal involvement is more influential to their children as it lays down family standards and expectations to their children, which enhances adolescent life satisfaction (Chen et al. 2000). However, maternal overparenting was found to be associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression, supporting the previous findings (Segrin et al. 2013; Rousseau and Scharf 2015). As mothers spend more time on family management and child rearing (Leung and Shek 2012; Shek 2008), their overparenting strategies (e.g., intruding into their daily life routine, intensive caring, close monitoring and emphasizing their academic performance) are restrictive for adolescents in pursuing their own interests and keeping their own lifestyles, which create pressure and distress to them. Besides, maternal overparenting restricts adolescents from progressive independence, which may lead to anxious attachment (Oshino et al. 2007). It is interesting to discover that role differentiation of parent gender (Hosley and Montemayor 1997; McKinney and Renk 2008) was evident in the study. Fathers adopt a more goal-oriented style of parenting which may affect life satisfaction of adolescents, whereas mothers perform a more affective parenting style that is linked to adolescent anxiety and depression (McKinney and Renk 2008).

The results indicated that paternal overparenting interacted with father-child conflict to influence adolescent anxiety and depression respectively. The relationship between paternal overparenting and adolescent anxiety showed a positive direction (but not significant) at higher levels of father-child conflict. Due to the patriarchal hierarchy in the Chinese culture, the father is a dominant figure in the family (Chao and Tseng 2002). Adolescents are anxious to the demands of the fathers in case they have disagreements with the fathers (Shek 1998). However, as fathers participate less in overparenting due to the gender role differentiation (McKinney and Renk 2008), the relationship between paternal overparenting and adolescent anxiety is not prominent. In contrast, at lower levels of father-child conflict, the emotional environment becomes

**Table 3** Simple slope analyses of the prediction of overparenting on adolescent wellbeing with family intactness and parent-child conflicts as moderators

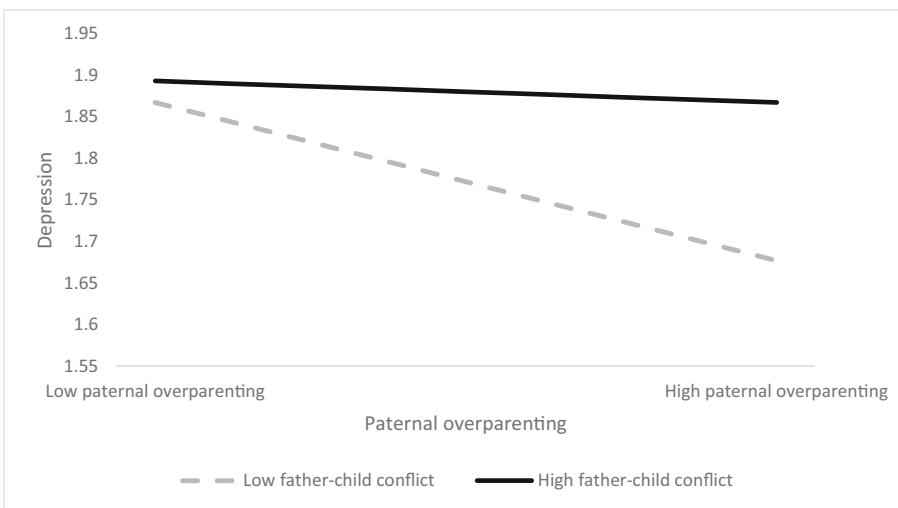
Moderator		Predictor	Regression Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) Life Satisfaction
Family intactness	Intact	Maternal overparenting	-.01
	Non-intact		.18***
Father-child conflict	Higher level (+1 <i>SD</i> )	Anxiety	
		Paternal overparenting	.05
	Lower level (-1 <i>SD</i> )	Depression	
		Paternal overparenting	-.20***
Father-child conflict	Higher level (+1 <i>SD</i> )	Paternal overparenting	-.01
	Lower level (-1 <i>SD</i> )		-.20***
Family intactness	Intact	Maternal overparenting	.08 <sup>†</sup>
	Non-intact		-.09*

<sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

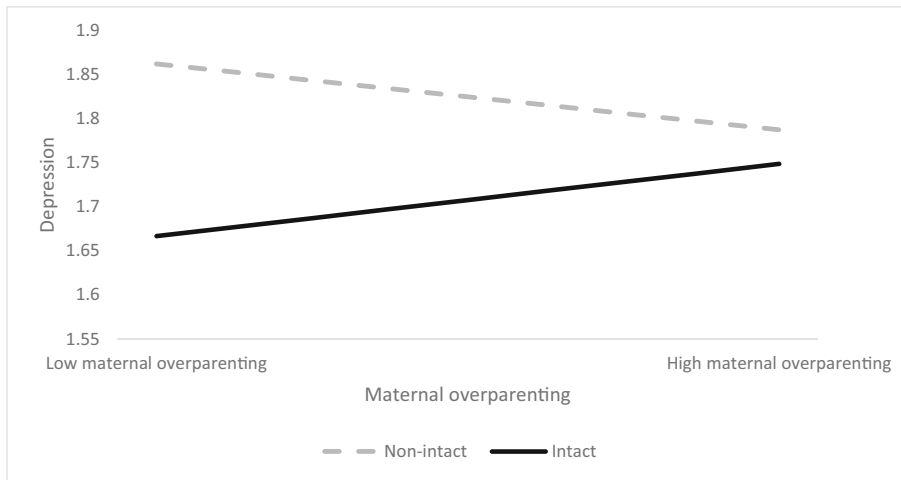


**Fig. 1** Regression of adolescent anxiety by paternal overparenting in high and low levels of father-child conflict

more nurturing (Steinberg 2001). As mentioned, paternal overparenting signifies paternal commitment, concern and care for their children, even if fathers may intrude into the lives of the adolescents. Adolescents make positive meanings on paternal overparenting when father-child relationship is positive, which keeps their anxiety scores at a lower level. Similar findings were showed in adolescent depression. As research on the relationships among paternal overparenting, father-child conflict, adolescent meaning-making process and adolescent wellbeing is lacking, further research in this area is suggested.

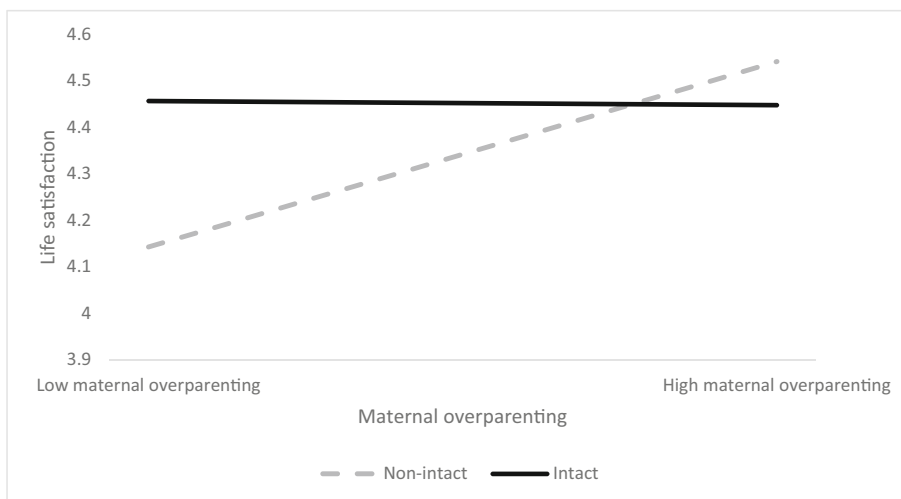


**Fig. 2** Regression of adolescent depression by paternal overparenting in high and low levels of father-child conflict



**Fig. 3** Regression of adolescent depression by maternal overparenting between intact and non-intact families

The results did not show any significant difference on the association of overparenting with adolescent wellbeing between boys and girls, which were consistent with some studies (Darlow et al. 2017; Scharf et al. 2017). Moreover, the findings indicated that family intactness moderated the associations of maternal overparenting with life satisfaction and depression of Chinese adolescents respectively. Maternal overparenting was positive associated with adolescent life satisfaction in non-intact families (i.e., divorced, separated and widowed families, and those families with second marriage), but the association was non-significant in intact families. Furthermore, maternal overparenting was negatively related to adolescent depression in non-intact families, but the relationship was positive in intact families. In this study, majority of the non-intact families were single-mother families. Based on the compensatory



**Fig. 4** Regression of adolescent life satisfaction by maternal overparenting between intact and non-intact families

hypothesis (Gable et al. 1992; Nelson et al. 2009), single mothers attempt to compensate their children for the absence (or reduction) of paternal contributions by paying more attention to their children's development. Adolescents growing up from non-intact families may recognize their mothers' love and sacrifice and feel gratitude to their mothers (Leung and Shek 2016), which enhances their life satisfaction and reduces their levels of depression. In other words, maternal overparenting was perceived as a protective factor of adolescent wellbeing in non-intact families.

#### 4.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, rather than perceiving overparenting as a developmentally inappropriate parenting practice that happens merely on young adults (e.g., Rousseau and Scharf 2015), the study examined the relationship between overparenting and wellbeing in a sample of young adolescents, which is pioneering in the literature. Early adolescence is an important transition that adolescents step out from childhood and search for ones' self-identity (Baumrind 1991). On one hand, overparenting protects adolescents from developmental challenges and social threats (Sirsch 2003) by offering support and protection to them. On the other hand, overparenting places obstacles to adolescents from exploring the outside world and creates stress and distress to them (Leung and Busiol 2016). The present study showed that paternal overparenting was associated with better life satisfaction, but at the same time maternal overparenting was related to higher levels of anxiety and depression among young adolescents. Adolescents appreciated fathers' effort to protect them from risks and prepare a life path for them, but anxiety and depression may arise when they are required to follow the paths meticulously designed by mothers, with a lack of autonomy and space to explore their own life paths. The study brings an important addition to the existing literature.

Second, paternal influence on adolescent wellbeing was always neglected in the previous literature (Leung and Shek 2015). The present study advances from previous studies by examining the differentiated parent gender roles of overparenting in their associations with adolescent wellbeing. The findings showed that paternal overparenting was associated with better life satisfaction of adolescents, and it interacted with father-child conflict to influence adolescent anxiety and depression, which identify the distinctive overparenting roles for fathers. The findings help family researchers and scholars understand paternal influences in the Chinese socialization in recent decades.

Third, the present study examined how family structure and dynamics altered the relationship between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing, which is novel in the literature. The findings suggested that paternal overparenting negatively influenced adolescent anxiety and depression when there were lower levels of father-child conflict, and maternal overparenting positively influenced adolescent life satisfaction and negatively predicted adolescent depression in non-intact families, which provide important insights for the construction of family process model on overparenting. Last but not the least, the present study selected adolescent life satisfaction, anxiety and depression as the outcome variables, which gives a more comprehensive picture on how overparenting affects different aspects of adolescent wellbeing.

Practically, as overparenting has been blossoming across different ages, nations and cultures, the findings alert family practitioners and youth counselors in understanding

the impacts of overparenting on young adolescents, particularly on the emotional aspects of anxiety and depression. Family practitioners may need to be sensitive to the parent gender who exercises overparenting. The results indicated that maternal overparenting was more detrimental to adolescent wellbeing than was paternal overparenting, family practitioners may need to help mothers understand their parenting style and practice, and how these parenting strategies influence their children's wellbeing. We do believe that parents exercise overparenting out of love, protection and their devotion to prepare the best for their children, but they may undermine the impact of overparenting on their children's wellbeing. There is a need to let parents understand the impacts of overparenting on adolescent wellbeing and encourage them to listen to the voice of their children. Furthermore, it seems that maternal overparenting may serve as a protective factor that enhances adolescent wellbeing in non-intact families. However, family practitioners may need to be sensitive to the enmeshing relationship between mother-child dyad (Minuchin 1974), which may affect adolescent development in the long run.

#### 4.2 Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of the study. First, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, which suffers from the limitation of inferring cause-and-effect relationship between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing. A longitudinal study to examine the influence of overparenting and adolescent wellbeing is suggested. Second, the study collected information solely from one data source, i.e., the adolescents. Though adolescents are "recipients" of family socialization (Elstad and Stefansen 2014) and their subjective experiences are deemed important in determining their wellbeing (Leung 2018), a lack of a parent's perspective may limit the validity of the findings. Third, the data was collected from a community sample of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong. Though Hong Kong is a highly competitive metropolitan city that overparenting is salient, it is more advisable to replicate the study in other Chinese communities (such as mainland China, Taiwan, American Chinese). Particularly, due to the One Child Policy previously implemented in mainland China, the relationship between overparenting on adolescent wellbeing is noteworthy to be researched in mainland China to examine the long-term impact of One Child Policy in China.

### 5 Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the study is pioneering in examining the relationship between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing in a sample of early Chinese adolescents. Parents exercising overparenting attempt to assure the happiness and success of their children by overprotecting their children from risks and difficulties (Segrin et al. 2012). Paradoxically, the present study showed that there were positive associations of maternal overparenting with adolescent anxiety and depression, echoing previous studies with emerging adults as the target sample in different cultures (e.g., Rousseau and Scharf 2015; Segrin et al. 2013). In addition, the present study examined the familial contexts (family structure and parent-child conflict) that altered the relationships between overparenting and adolescent wellbeing in early adolescence, which



expand our scope on the study of overparenting. The findings are important for family researchers, social service practitioners and parents to rethink the “what” and “how” of the nurturance should be appropriate for adolescents.

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