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Review

Family Dysfunction and Emotion Regulation in Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Yufei Song ^{1,*}

¹ The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

* Correspondence: Yufei Song, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract: Children diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) frequently experience profound difficulties extending significantly beyond the core symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. In daily family, school, and peer contexts, many children with ADHD also exhibit severe emotion regulation problems. These challenges typically manifest as heightened irritability, impulsive anger, low frustration tolerance, and a markedly slow recovery from negative emotional states. Consequently, these difficulties can severely impair their interpersonal relationships, classroom adjustment, and overall psychological well-being. This paper comprehensively examines how family dysfunction may influence and exacerbate emotion regulation deficits in children with ADHD. Utilizing an in-depth literature analysis and theoretical review, this study discusses family functioning, emotion regulation mechanisms, and ADHD-related developmental characteristics from a holistic family systems perspective. The analysis suggests that family dysfunction adversely affects children's emotion regulation through several distinct pathways. Specifically, frequent family conflict increases baseline emotional arousal; insufficient emotional support weakens emotional recovery capacities; inconsistent parenting disrupts rule expectations; high parental stress leads to maladaptive responses; and negative emotional modeling limits the acquisition of adaptive regulation strategies. These interconnected processes intensify emotional outbursts and parent-child conflict. Therefore, clinical support for children with ADHD should not focus exclusively on individual symptoms. Greater attention must be directed toward family-based support interventions, comprehensive parent training, stable family rules, and positive emotional communication. Ultimately, improving family functioning provides an essential context for promoting adaptive emotion regulation and facilitating better long-term developmental outcomes in children with ADHD.

Keywords: family dysfunction; adhd; emotion regulation; child development; family relations

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental disorder in childhood, typically characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. These symptoms often affect children's learning, behavior, and daily adaptation. In school and clinical contexts, ADHD has often been discussed in relation to classroom performance, behavioral control, and executive functioning [1]. However, beyond attention and behavioral symptoms, many children with ADHD also experience challenges in managing their emotions.

Difficulties in managing emotions may appear as irritability, impulsive anger, low frustration tolerance, intense emotional reactions, or slow recovery from negative emotional states. These challenges can make everyday interactions more demanding. For

example, children with ADHD may become easily upset when corrected by parents, frustrated during demanding tasks, or unable to calm down quickly after disagreements [2]. Such emotional challenges may further affect their relationships with parents, peers, and teachers.

The ability to manage emotions is important for children's social and psychological development [2]. Children need to recognize emotions, express them appropriately, control impulsive reactions, and recover from negative emotional states. When these abilities are weak, children may face greater risks of family strain, peer difficulties, classroom challenges, and psychological distress. Therefore, the emotional challenges of children with ADHD deserve closer attention.

Family environment is closely related to children's emotional development. In daily family interactions, children learn how to understand, express, and manage emotions. A supportive and stable family environment can provide emotional guidance and behavioral structure. In contrast, family difficulties, such as frequent disagreements, poor communication, inconsistent parenting, insufficient emotional support, and high parental stress, may hinder children's emotional development [2]. For children with ADHD, who often need more external support and consistent guidance, such family challenges may further intensify emotional difficulties.

1.2. Research Questions

This paper examines the connection between family dysfunction and the emotional adjustment challenges faced by children diagnosed with ADHD [2]. It specifically explores three key questions.

First, what are the primary characteristics of emotional adjustment difficulties in children with ADHD?

Second, through which mechanisms might family dysfunction impact the emotional adjustment capacities of children with ADHD?

Third, from the perspective of family systems, what strategies can families adopt to better support the emotional development of children with ADHD?

1.3. Research Significance

Theoretically, this paper explores challenges in managing emotions among children with ADHD from a family systems perspective. This approach shifts focus away from solely attributing emotional difficulties to neurodevelopmental traits and emphasizes the influence of family dynamics, emotional environment, and parenting practices [3].

Practically, this paper may offer valuable insights for family-focused strategies, parental guidance programs, school psychological initiatives, and child mental health services. By examining how family dysfunction impacts children's ability to manage emotions, this study provides a foundation for enhancing family support and fostering improved developmental outcomes for children with ADHD [4].

2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Basic Characteristics of Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

ADHD is a common neurodevelopmental disorder in childhood, mainly characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Children with ADHD may have difficulty sustaining attention, following instructions, waiting for their turn, controlling impulses, and completing tasks that require persistence. These difficulties affect not only classroom learning but also family interaction, peer relationships, and emotional responses [5].

For this paper, the most relevant feature is impaired executive functioning, especially weak inhibitory control, working memory, planning, and self-monitoring. These weaknesses may make it difficult for children with ADHD to pause before reacting or adjust their responses in emotionally demanding situations [6]. For example, when criticized or frustrated, they may respond with anger, avoidance, or hesitation before using adaptive coping strategies.

However, ADHD should not be equated with emotional disorder [4]. Not all children with ADHD show the same level of difficulty in managing emotions. Rather, ADHD-related deficits may increase children's challenges in emotional adjustment, especially when family support and guidance are insufficient.

2.2. The Meaning of Emotion Regulation Ability

Emotion regulation refers to children's ability to recognize, express, control, and recover from emotional states in ways appropriate to different situations [7]. For children with ADHD, this ability is closely linked to impulsive behavior, challenges in parent-child interactions, and difficulties with peers.

This paper understands emotion regulation through five dimensions: emotion recognition, emotion expression, emotion control, emotion recovery, and emotion regulation strategies [8]. As shown in Table 1, these dimensions connect the concept of emotion regulation with observable patterns in children with ADHD.

Table 1. Main Dimensions and Manifestations of Emotion Regulation in Children with ADHD

Dimension	General Meaning	Possible Manifestations in Children with ADHD
Emotion recognition	Identifying one's own and others' emotional states	Difficulty noticing anger, anxiety, or frustration in time
Emotion expression	Expressing emotions in appropriate ways	Crying, shouting, aggression, or silent withdrawal
Emotion control	Inhibiting impulsive emotional reactions	Emotional outbursts over minor events; difficulty waiting or tolerating frustration
Emotion recovery	Returning to a stable state after negative emotions	Taking longer to calm down after anger or frustration
Emotion regulation strategies	Using problem solving, help seeking, or self-soothing strategies	Relying more on impulsive reactions and less on adaptive strategies

Table 1 indicates that emotion regulation encompasses more than managing anger. It includes the entire process from identifying emotions to selecting coping strategies [7]. Challenges in any dimension may lead to heightened emotional reactions, interpersonal challenges, and slower emotional recovery after frustration.

2.3. The Meaning of Family Dysfunction

Family dysfunction refers to persistent difficulties in emotional support, communication, rule setting, role organization, and problem solving. It does not mean occasional family disagreements, but repeated interaction patterns that fail to meet children's emotional and developmental needs [9].

In the context of ADHD, family dysfunction may include frequent misunderstandings, poor parent-child communication, insufficient emotional support, inconsistent parenting, unclear rules, high parental stress, and negative emotional expression. These patterns are particularly relevant because children with ADHD often need clear structure, predictable outcomes, and explicit emotional guidance [10].

Therefore, family dysfunction should not be treated as a simple background factor. It may shape both the emotional situations children face and the strategies they develop to manage emotions. It may also interact with ADHD symptoms: child impulsivity increases family stress, while family stress further intensifies emotional instability [11].

2.4. Theoretical Foundations

2.4.1. Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory views children's development as embedded in ongoing family interaction. From this perspective, children's emotional difficulties are connected with parent-child communication, family rules, parental stress, and patterns of tension within the family. For children with ADHD, impulsive and inattentive behaviors may increase parental frustration, while negative family responses may further intensify children's emotional reactions. Thus, family challenges may maintain or amplify difficulties in managing emotions through repeated family interactions [12].

2.4.2. Emotion Socialization Theory

Emotion socialization theory explains how children develop emotional understanding and management through caregiver responses, emotional modeling, and daily communication. Supportive parental responses help children identify feelings, express needs, and achieve emotional balance, whereas criticism, denial, avoidance, or anger may hinder the development of effective emotional strategies. This theory aligns with the focus of this paper because children with ADHD often require more explicit emotional guidance [13]. If the family environment lacks consistent rules, provides negative emotional modeling, or offers insufficient support, their emotional challenges may become more persistent. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical pathway through which family dysfunction may interfere with emotional development and subsequently affect recognition, expression, control, and recovery in children with ADHD.

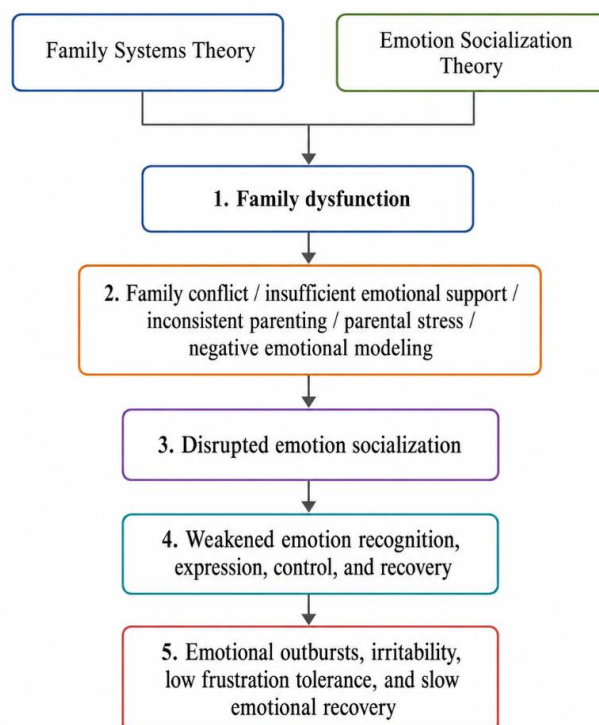


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of Family Dysfunction and Emotion Regulation in Children with ADHD

3. Mechanisms through Which Family Dysfunction Influences Emotion Regulation in Children with ADHD

Family challenges may influence emotional development in children with ADHD through several interconnected mechanisms [5]. Factors such as limited emotional support, inconsistent parenting, parental stress, and negative emotional modeling may interact with ADHD-related vulnerabilities, including weak inhibition, poor attention focus, and limited self-monitoring. Consequently, children may experience heightened emotional sensitivity, slower emotional recovery, unclear behavioral expectations, and fewer effective strategies for managing emotions.

3.1. Family Conflict and Heightened Emotional Arousal

Frequent family tensions are a direct pathway through which family challenges may affect emotional well-being. These may include repeated criticism, strict discipline, strained communication, emotional negativity, and unresolved parent-child interactions. When these patterns occur repeatedly, the family environment becomes unpredictable and emotionally challenging [14].

For children with ADHD, such an environment is especially difficult to navigate. Due to weaker inhibitory control and attention regulation, they may have difficulty delaying reactions, filtering emotional cues, or calming down during tense situations. Over time, frequent exposure to such dynamics may reduce their sense of security and increase emotional sensitivity. They may become highly attuned to parents' tone, facial expressions, or corrective comments. Even ordinary reminders may then be perceived as negative or threatening.

Thus, family tensions are not merely a background factor. They may continuously elevate children's emotional arousal levels, making them more likely to exhibit irritability, frustration, heightened emotional responses, and emotional outbursts [15].

3.2. Insufficient Emotional Support and Weakened Emotional Recovery

Emotion management also includes the ability to recover from negative feelings [11]. Children with ADHD may require additional external assistance after experiencing setbacks, criticism, or interpersonal challenges. They often depend on adults to help them interpret events, identify their emotions, and regain a sense of calm.

When parents provide comfort, clear explanations, and constructive guidance, children are more likely to understand and manage their emotions effectively. For example, a supportive parent might help a child recognize frustration after a task does not go as planned and encourage them to consider alternative approaches [7]. This approach fosters emotional recovery.

Conversely, when parents respond with blame or dismissiveness, such as saying, "Why are you upset again?" or "You are just being difficult," the child's distress may intensify [3]. This can lead to feelings of misunderstanding, rejection, or shame. For children with ADHD, inadequate emotional support may result in slower recovery and a tendency to rely on less constructive responses, such as shouting, avoidance, or refusal.

3.3. Inconsistent Parenting and Disrupted Rule Expectations

Children with ADHD often benefit from clear, stable, and predictable rules. Due to potential challenges with impulse control and self-monitoring, a consistent family structure enables them to better anticipate outcomes and manage behavior [16]. In this context, stable rules also serve as a form of emotional support.

Inconsistent parenting can undermine this support. For instance, one parent may enforce strict rules while the other adopts a more lenient approach, or the same parent may react differently in similar situations. Such inconsistencies make family rules unpredictable. When children are unable to foresee consequences, they may experience confusion, frustration, and emotional insecurity [17].

This dynamic is particularly significant for children with ADHD. Many rely heavily on external cues to guide their behavior [3, 10]. When these cues are inconsistent, opportunities to develop self-control are reduced. As a result, inconsistent parenting may not only lead to discipline challenges but also heighten frustration, impulsive reactions, and emotional outbursts.

3.4. Parental Stress and the Negative Parent-Child Interaction Cycle

Parental stress is a key mechanism linking family challenges and difficulties in managing emotions. ADHD-related inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity may increase the daily burden of parenting. Parents may need to give repeated reminders, address behavioral concerns, respond to school-related issues, and supervise routines closely. Over time, this pressure can lead to fatigue, frustration, and helplessness.

Under high stress, parents may become more impatient, critical, overly strict, or emotionally reactive [10]. Some may adopt controlling behaviors, while others may withdraw from consistent discipline. These responses may temporarily reduce problematic behaviors but usually do not foster emotional management. Instead, they may heighten the child's feelings of anger, shame, avoidance, or insecurity.

This process can develop into a negative cycle. ADHD symptoms increase parental stress; parental stress leads to heightened criticism, stricter discipline, and emotional reactions; these responses exacerbate children's emotional difficulties; children's behavioral challenges then increase parent-child tension and further elevate parental stress.

As shown in Figure 2, the relationship is not purely one-directional. ADHD-related behaviors may increase family stress, while ineffective responses may further intensify children's emotional challenges. This cycle helps explain why difficulties in managing emotions may persist in daily family life.

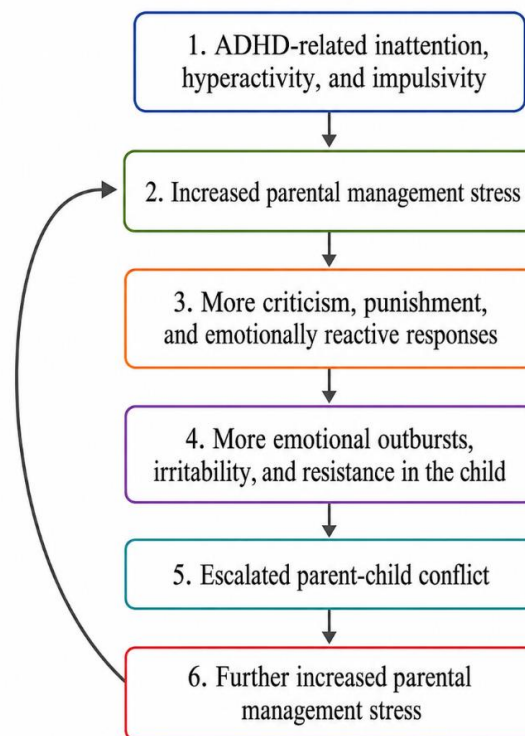


Figure 2. Cyclical Mechanism between Emotion Regulation Difficulties in Children with ADHD and Family Dysfunction

3.5. Negative Parental Emotional Modeling and Children's Regulation Strategies

Children learn emotion regulation partly by observing how parents handle anger, stress, frustration, and challenging situations [8]. If parents often respond to pressure by shouting, blaming, withdrawing, or avoiding communication, children may perceive these behaviors as acceptable ways to manage negative emotions.

For children with ADHD, negative emotional modeling may have stronger effects because they often need clearer examples of emotional self-control. It may influence them in two ways [13]. First, it provides maladaptive strategies, such as aggression, avoidance,

or unproductive reactions. Second, it reduces opportunities to learn adaptive strategies, such as verbal expression, problem solving, help seeking, and self-soothing.

Therefore, parental emotional modeling directly shapes the emotional strategies available to the child. Calm communication, emotional labeling, and problem solving may support better emotional management, whereas blame, avoidance, and heightened emotional reactions may make difficulties in emotional control more persistent [2, 3].

4. Developmental Consequences and Intervention Implications

Family dysfunction may influence children with ADHD not only through immediate emotional responses but also through broader developmental outcomes. Persistent challenges in managing emotions may affect parent-child relationships, peer interactions, classroom adjustment, and overall psychological well-being. This section examines both developmental outcomes and practical strategies for addressing these issues from a family systems perspective.

4.1. Developmental Consequences of Emotion Regulation Difficulties in Children with ADHD

4.1.1. Effects on Parent-Child Relationships

Frequent emotional outbursts may place considerable pressure on parent-child relationships. In daily family life, children with ADHD may become angry when corrected, resist instructions, cry after frustration, or refuse to continue tasks. If these reactions occur repeatedly, parents may gradually interpret them as intentional disobedience rather than difficulty in managing emotions.

This misunderstanding may reduce positive interaction. Parents may become more likely to use criticism, punishment, threats, or emotional withdrawal. In turn, children may feel rejected or treated unfairly, which can intensify feelings of anger and opposition. Over time, the family may spend more time addressing challenges in communication than fostering trust and emotional connection.

For children with ADHD, this pattern is especially harmful because they often need stable emotional support and consistent guidance. When parent-child interaction is dominated by negative dynamics, children have fewer opportunities to learn constructive ways of expressing frustration, seeking help, and calming down [6].

4.1.2. Effects on Peer Relationships

Emotion regulation difficulties may also affect peer relationships. Peer interaction requires children to wait, share, negotiate, accept rules, and manage disagreements [11]. Children with ADHD who face challenges in emotion regulation may interrupt others, react strongly to losing a game, refuse compromise, or respond inappropriately when they feel excluded.

These behaviors can increase the risk of peer rejection. Other children may avoid interacting with them because they appear unpredictable or difficult to cooperate with. Once peer rejection occurs, children with ADHD may lose opportunities to practice social problem solving and emotional adjustment [9].

A negative peer cycle may then emerge [9]. Poor emotion regulation leads to peer difficulties; peer difficulties lead to exclusion; exclusion increases frustration and loneliness; these emotions further increase defensive or impulsive responses. Thus, emotion regulation difficulty is not only an internal problem but also a factor shaping children's social development.

4.1.3. Effects on Mental Health

Long-term difficulties in managing emotions may increase children's susceptibility to psychological challenges. Children who struggle to control anger, recover from frustration, or seek support from others may develop negative self-perceptions, viewing themselves as "bad," "wrong," or "unable to succeed," particularly when adults respond with criticism rather than constructive guidance.

In families with limited emotional support, children may have fewer opportunities to process negative experiences. Accumulated feelings of frustration, shame, anger, and

sadness may lead to emotional distress, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, or reactive behaviors. For children with ADHD, these risks may be amplified by repeated academic challenges, strained family dynamics, and difficulties in peer relationships.

Table 2 outlines the primary pathways through which family dynamics may influence emotional challenges and developmental outcomes in children with ADHD. It highlights how specific family-related factors correspond to particular emotional difficulties and developmental risks.

Table 2. Pathways from Family Dysfunction to Emotion Regulation Difficulties and Developmental Outcomes in Children with ADHD

Form of Family Dysfunction	Direct Influence	Emotion Regulation Manifestation	Possible Developmental Outcome
Frequent family conflict	Increases emotional stress	Irritability and emotional outbursts	Parent-child conflict and aggressive behavior
Insufficient emotional support	Weakens sense of security	Slow emotional recovery	Anxiety, withdrawal, and low self-esteem
Inconsistent parenting	Creates unclear rule expectations	Low frustration tolerance	Behavioral problems and classroom adjustment difficulties
High parental stress	Increases negative responses	Poor emotional control	Deterioration of parent-child relationships
Negative emotional modeling	Provides maladaptive examples	Use of aggression or avoidance	Peer conflict and interpersonal difficulties

As illustrated in Table 2, family dynamics may impact children's emotional well-being, sense of stability, behavioral expectations, coping mechanisms, and social interactions. These pathways underscore the importance of addressing both individual and family contexts to support emotional development.

4.2. Intervention Implications

4.2.1. From Individual Symptom Intervention to Family Systems Intervention

Support for children with ADHD should extend beyond addressing observable behaviors such as impulsivity, disobedience, or emotional outbursts [8]. These actions must be analyzed within the context of family interaction dynamics. For instance, if communication between parents and children is strained, family rules are inconsistent, and parental responses are predominantly punitive, the child may face challenges in developing effective self-management skills.

As a result, family-focused support should aim to enhance communication, establish clear guidelines, minimize negative emotional exchanges, and promote constructive responses. The objective is not to assign fault to parents but to transform the environment in which children acquire emotional self-management abilities.

4.2.2. Strengthening Parental Psychoeducation and Stress Management

Parents need to understand that the behavior of children with ADHD is not simply intentional disobedience. It is often related to difficulties in attention control, impulse inhibition, executive functioning, and emotional self-management. Psychoeducation can help parents reinterpret children's behavior more accurately and reduce excessive blame.

Parental stress management is also essential. Parents under chronic stress are more likely to respond with anger, criticism, or inconsistency. Practical support may include helping parents set realistic expectations, use planned responses, take breaks during challenging situations, and seek help from schools or mental health services.

4.2.3. Establishing Stable and Consistent Family Rules

Children with ADHD benefit from clear, concrete, and predictable rules. Family rules should remain simple, visible, and consistently enforced. Parents must align on fundamental expectations, such as homework routines, screen time, bedtime, and strategies for managing emotional outbursts.

Stable rules help reduce frustration by eliminating the need for children to anticipate parental reactions. They also provide external structure that fosters self-control. For instance, rather than reacting emotionally when a child refuses homework, parents can follow a pre-established routine: allowing a short break, giving a clear reminder, and outlining the next specific step.

4.2.4. Improving the Quality of Family Emotional Support

Family emotional support plays a vital role in assisting children with ADHD in developing skills for managing their emotions. Parents can provide effective support by actively listening, demonstrating empathy, identifying emotions, and guiding appropriate expression. For instance, instead of reacting with, "You are making trouble again," a parent might say, "I understand that you feel angry because this seems unfair. Let us take a moment to calm down and then consider the next steps."

This approach fosters multiple skills simultaneously, such as recognizing anger, connecting emotions to specific situations, delaying impulsive reactions, and working toward solutions. Over time, such consistent responses can help children adopt more constructive strategies. Consequently, enhancing emotional support within the family is an essential focus for fostering emotional management in children with ADHD [10].

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

5.1. Conclusion

This paper argues that family dysfunction is an important contextual factor that may maintain or intensify emotional adjustment difficulties in children with ADHD. The discussion suggests that emotional adjustment is an important issue in the developmental adaptation of children with ADHD. Beyond inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, many children with ADHD may experience difficulties in emotional recognition, emotional expression, impulse control, and recovery from negative emotions. These difficulties can affect their daily functioning in family, peer, and school contexts.

Family dysfunction may influence emotional adjustment in children with ADHD through several pathways. Frequent family tension may increase emotional arousal and make children more sensitive to criticism or correction. Insufficient emotional support may weaken children's ability to recover from frustration or distress. Inconsistent parenting may reduce clarity in rule expectations and increase emotional insecurity. High parental stress may lead to more critical, punitive, or emotionally reactive responses. Negative parental emotional modeling may also limit children's opportunities to learn adaptive emotional management strategies.

Therefore, family dysfunction may not only intensify emotional outbursts and irritability but also affect broader developmental outcomes, including parent-child relationships, peer relationships, classroom adjustment, and mental health. Support for emotional adjustment difficulties in children with ADHD should not be limited to the

individual child. It should also address family communication, parenting consistency, parental stress, emotional support, and the overall family emotional climate.

5.2. Limitations

This paper is a theoretical review and does not include participant-based investigation or empirical data analysis. Therefore, it cannot directly test the causal relationship between family dysfunction and difficulties in children's emotional functioning in ADHD. In addition, children with ADHD may differ in age, gender, symptom severity, comorbid conditions, and family background, but these subgroup differences were not examined in detail. Another limitation is that family dysfunction includes multiple dimensions, and the relative influence of each dimension may vary. This paper discusses these dimensions conceptually but does not compare their specific effects.

5.3. Future Directions

Future research may proceed in three directions. First, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the dynamic relationship between family functioning and emotional adjustment in children with ADHD. Second, future studies may compare the effects of different dimensions of family dysfunction, such as family tension, emotional support, parenting consistency, and parental stress. Third, more integrated support models should be developed by combining family-based support, parent training, school psychological support, and child mental health services. Such models may provide more comprehensive support for children with ADHD and their families.

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