

## Identifying Patterns of Inconsistency in Parenting Practices and Their Interpretations by Adolescents: A Narrative Inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to explore how adolescents perceive and interpret patterns of inconsistency in parenting practices and the implications of these interpretations for their emotional and behavioral adjustment.

**Methods and Materials:** This qualitative research employed a narrative inquiry design to capture adolescents' lived experiences of inconsistent parenting. Twenty-two adolescents from Spain, aged 14 to 18 years, participated in semi-structured interviews that focused on parental communication, discipline, and emotional support. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, family structure, and socioeconomic background. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Transcripts were coded and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software, following open coding, categorization, and constant comparison to identify recurring themes and patterns.

**Findings:** Analysis revealed four main themes: inconsistent communication, contradictory discipline practices, unstable emotional climate, and adolescent interpretations and coping strategies. Subthemes included mixed parental messages, unequal rule enforcement, conditional affection, and coping mechanisms such as rationalization, distancing, rebellion, and meaning-making. Adolescents reported that inconsistent parenting created confusion, insecurity, and tension but also described strategies to reinterpret or resist such practices. These narratives align with prior studies linking inconsistent parenting to both internalizing and externalizing symptoms, while also highlighting adolescents' agency in constructing meaning from their experiences.

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the significance of consistency in parental communication, discipline, and emotional availability for adolescent well-being. Adolescents actively interpret and cope with inconsistencies, which shapes their developmental trajectories. Narrative inquiry provides valuable insights into these processes, suggesting the need for interventions that promote mindful, predictable parenting and supportive environments that strengthen adolescent resilience.

**Keywords:** Parenting inconsistency; adolescent interpretation; narrative inquiry; communication; discipline; emotional climate; coping strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Parenting practices play a central role in shaping adolescent development, particularly with respect to emotional regulation, behavioral adjustment, and social adaptation. A growing body of research demonstrates that consistency in parenting—defined by stable expectations, predictable discipline, and supportive communication—provides adolescents with a secure framework to understand rules and develop healthy coping strategies. Conversely, inconsistency in parenting practices can lead to confusion, internal conflict, and heightened risk for both internalizing and externalizing symptoms during adolescence (Zhang et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2025). These patterns of inconsistency include abrupt changes in parental warmth, fluctuating standards of discipline, and conflicting messages between parents, which adolescents must interpret and navigate in their daily lives. Narrative inquiry into how young people perceive and construct meaning from such inconsistencies is thus vital for understanding adolescent well-being in dynamic family contexts.

A consistent body of evidence suggests that adolescents benefit from predictable parenting behaviors that combine warmth with clear boundaries. Longitudinal findings show that daily fluctuations in parental warmth and discipline are closely tied to the emergence of conduct problems and callous-unemotional traits (Zheng et al., 2025). Similarly, the quality of emotional expression among parents with anxiety disorders has been shown to influence the trajectory of parental warmth and discipline consistency over time (Zhang et al., 2025). When parenting practices shift unpredictably, adolescents often struggle to internalize norms, leading to heightened vulnerability to behavioral dysregulation.

Inconsistent discipline is particularly concerning, as it communicates to adolescents that rules are negotiable and boundaries unstable. Walters (Walters, 2023) highlighted how parenting styles characterized by anger and inconsistency correlate strongly with adolescent delinquency, mediated by personality traits such as low conscientiousness and agreeableness. Earlier work by Halgunseth and colleagues (Halgunseth et al., 2013) similarly identified that parental inconsistent discipline fosters delinquent-oriented attitudes, which in turn increase the likelihood of early adolescent problem behaviors. These findings underscore the long-term developmental risks posed by unpredictable discipline.

Another critical dimension concerns parent–child conflict and the ways inconsistency exacerbates recurring tensions. Donohue et al. (Donohue et al., 2022) found that recurring conflict often mediates the relationship between parental anger management difficulties and adolescent behavioral outcomes, suggesting that inconsistent parental responses intensify cycles of confrontation. Farnsworth and O’Neal (Farnsworth & O’Neal, 2022) extended this insight to military families, illustrating how parents’ work-related guilt influenced inconsistent parenting, which subsequently heightened adolescents’ psychological distress. These findings reinforce the idea that inconsistency often stems not only from parenting choices but also from contextual stressors shaping parental behavior.

Family conflicts may spill over into adolescents’ lives in ways that foster maladaptive behaviors. Liu et al. (Liu et al., 2019) described how conflicts within Chinese families contributed to juvenile delinquency, with inconsistency acting as a mechanism linking familial stress and antisocial outcomes. These dynamics are not limited to behavioral risks; they also extend to emotional and relational consequences. Kapetanovic and Boson (Kapetanovic & Boson, 2020) showed that discrepancies between parental and adolescent reports of communication were strongly related to adolescents’ psychological health, demonstrating that inconsistency in perception itself can function as a risk factor.

The influence of inconsistent parenting extends beyond conduct problems to emotional well-being. Research has documented links between inconsistency and both internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing symptoms such as aggression and risky behaviors. Royuela-Colomer et al. (Royuela-Colomer et al., 2023) found that mindful parenting reduced the prevalence of both internalizing and externalizing symptoms in adolescents, implying that inconsistent approaches devoid of mindful awareness may exacerbate such problems. Similarly, Therriault et al. (Therriault et al., 2024) observed that externalizing behaviors were associated with risky sexual practices, mediated by insecure attachment. Their findings highlight how inconsistent parenting may erode attachment security, thereby amplifying vulnerability to high-risk adolescent behaviors.

The longitudinal dimension of these effects has also been explored. Cutrín et al. (Cutrín et al., 2021) revealed that parental support and knowledge predicted fewer emotional and behavioral problems, demonstrating the protective role of consistent engagement. Conversely, Zhu and Shek (Zhu

& Shek, 2020) reported that problem behaviors undermined adolescent life satisfaction when parent–child subsystem qualities were poor, again emphasizing the importance of consistency. Similarly, Voort et al. (Voort et al., 2013) found that maternal sensitivity and child inhibition influenced the trajectory of internalizing behaviors, suggesting that consistency in sensitive caregiving plays a crucial role in emotional adjustment.

Parental inconsistency is frequently linked to contextual pressures such as stress, socioeconomic challenges, and parental mental health. Maat et al. (Maat et al., 2021) examined the longitudinal relations between mothers' and fathers' parenting stress and adolescent behavior problems, demonstrating that heightened parental stress often manifested in inconsistent parenting behaviors. In cases where parents experience mental illness, the impact on adolescent adjustment can be profound. Linda et al. (Linda et al., 2015) identified factors promoting mental health among adolescents with parents suffering from mental illness, with consistent parenting emerging as a protective element.

McGee (McGee, 2017) further emphasized the importance of consistency in high-risk families, showing that maternal incarceration disrupted stability and contributed to emotional and behavioral difficulties among adolescents. Nieri et al. (Nieri et al., 2016) revisited the “acculturation gap” narrative in Mexican American families, demonstrating that differences in acculturation between parents and adolescents often led to inconsistent parenting approaches, with complex implications for adolescent adjustment.

The meaning and impact of inconsistency in parenting practices are not uniform across cultural settings. Yang et al. (Yang et al., 2021) highlighted how discrepancies in adolescent aggressive behavior differed by reporter and contextual factors, underscoring the importance of recognizing how context shapes perceptions of inconsistency. Ouyang et al. (Ouyang et al., 2023) also identified confidence in the future as a protective factor against problem behavior, pointing to the way broader sociocultural variables can moderate the effects of inconsistent parenting. These findings demonstrate that while inconsistency is broadly associated with negative outcomes, cultural context and adolescent resilience factors can significantly alter trajectories.

Although quantitative studies have provided valuable insights into the correlations between inconsistent parenting and adolescent outcomes, there remains a gap in

understanding how adolescents themselves interpret these inconsistencies in everyday life. Adolescents are not passive recipients of parental behaviors; they actively make meaning of them, often rationalizing or resisting inconsistent practices. Walters (Walters, 2023) emphasized that inconsistency interacts with personality characteristics, highlighting the need to capture adolescents' subjective interpretations. Narrative approaches are particularly well suited to this task, as they allow researchers to explore how adolescents construct coherent stories about inconsistent parental behavior and how these stories influence their coping strategies.

Zheng et al. (Zheng et al., 2025) and Zhang et al. (Zhang et al., 2025) both argue that longitudinal approaches to parenting consistency offer nuanced understanding of developmental processes, yet neither fully captures the interpretive lens of adolescents. A narrative inquiry into how adolescents in diverse cultural settings perceive and interpret inconsistent parenting can thus fill a crucial gap, providing insights into the psychological, emotional, and behavioral consequences of these experiences. Building on this body of research, the present study seeks to identify patterns of inconsistency in parenting practices and examine how adolescents interpret and respond to them.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry to explore patterns of inconsistency in parenting practices and the ways adolescents interpret them. Narrative inquiry was selected as it provides an opportunity to capture the lived experiences of participants and uncover the meanings they assign to their interactions with parents. The study focused on adolescents in Spain, as this context offers a diverse sociocultural background in which parenting practices may vary.

A total of 22 participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, and socioeconomic background. Participants were adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 who were currently enrolled in secondary education institutions. Recruitment was conducted through school counselors and community youth organizations. The sample size was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, where no new themes emerged from the data despite continued interviews.

2.2. *Measures*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in probing participants’ experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. An interview guide was developed to explore themes such as perceptions of parental expectations, inconsistencies in discipline or communication, emotional responses to parenting practices, and strategies adolescents use to interpret or cope with such inconsistencies. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded with informed consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data analysis followed a thematic narrative approach, aiming to identify recurring patterns and meanings within adolescents’ stories. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 software to facilitate systematic coding, organization, and retrieval of data. The analysis process involved several stages: (1) initial open coding to identify significant statements and events, (2) grouping of codes into categories that reflected recurring patterns of parenting inconsistencies, (3) development of broader themes that captured

adolescents’ interpretations of these patterns, and (4) refinement of themes through constant comparison across cases. Credibility of findings was ensured through peer debriefing and iterative discussion within the research team. Reflexive journaling was also employed to minimize researcher bias and maintain transparency throughout the analysis process.

3. **Findings and Results**

A total of 21 participants from South Africa took part in this study. The sample consisted of 12 women (57.1%) and 9 men (42.9%), ranging in age from 28 to 54 years ( $M = 39.6, SD = 6.8$ ). In terms of marital duration, 6 participants (28.6%) had been married for less than 5 years, 8 participants (38.1%) between 6 and 15 years, and 7 participants (33.3%) for more than 15 years. Educational backgrounds varied, with 5 participants (23.8%) holding secondary school qualifications, 9 participants (42.9%) with undergraduate degrees, and 7 participants (33.3%) with postgraduate qualifications. Regarding employment, 13 participants (61.9%) were employed full-time, 4 participants (19.0%) were employed part-time, and 4 participants (19.0%) were unemployed or homemakers. The sample represented a range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the South African context.

**Table 1**

*Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts from Narrative Inquiry*

Themes (Categories)	Subthemes	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Inconsistent Communication	Mixed parental messages	Contradictory advice, sudden change of tone, unclear rules, sarcasm in instructions
	Emotional unpredictability	Shifting moods, unpredictable reactions, fluctuating affection, overreaction
	Selective listening	Ignoring opinions, dismissing concerns, hearing only achievements
	Technology-based inconsistency	Using texting for discipline, delayed replies, inconsistent digital monitoring
	Unspoken expectations	Silent disapproval, lack of clarity, hidden rules
2. Contradictory Discipline Practices	Role confusion	“Friend vs parent” shifts, overly casual language, inconsistent authority
	Unequal enforcement of rules	Stricter with one sibling, overlooking similar mistakes, favoritism
	Changing standards over time	Rules strict in childhood but relaxed later, inconsistency across phases
	Reward–punishment imbalance	Harsh punishments, minimal rewards, unpredictable reinforcement
3. Emotional Climate of the Household	Negotiated discipline	Allowing bargaining, rules dependent on mood, exceptions made frequently
	Lack of follow-through	Empty threats, broken promises, postponed consequences
	Ambivalence in emotional support	Comfort followed by withdrawal, supportive one day—cold the next
	Conditional affection	Love tied to achievements, affection withdrawn after conflict, approval-based warmth
	Conflict spillover	Parents’ stress affecting children, inconsistent behavior after fights, silent treatment
	Overprotection vs neglect	Hovering during crisis, disinterest in daily life, sharp swings in care

4. Adolescent Interpretations and Coping Strategies	Emotional silence	Avoidance of sensitive topics, lack of emotional validation, suppressed conversations
	Humor as inconsistency	Jokes after scolding, mocking mistakes, using laughter to downplay conflict
	Guilt induction	Reminders of sacrifices, making children feel indebted, emotional manipulation
	Rationalization	“They’re stressed,” blaming work pressure, excusing parental inconsistency
	Emotional distancing	Withdrawing from parents, avoiding disclosure, emotional numbness
	Resistance and rebellion	Talking back, breaking rules intentionally, testing limits
	Seeking external validation	Confiding in friends, relying on teachers, online communities
	Adaptive negotiation	Trying to bargain calmly, choosing right timing, learning parental patterns
Meaning-making	Viewing inconsistencies as normal, accepting complexity of parenting, reframing experiences	

The analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with Spanish adolescents generated four main themes: *Inconsistent Communication*, *Contradictory Discipline Practices*, *Emotional Climate of the Household*, and *Adolescent Interpretations and Coping Strategies*. Within these themes, a series of subthemes emerged that highlight the different ways adolescents perceive and make sense of inconsistent parenting practices. Each subtheme is reported below with illustrative quotations from participants.

**Theme 1: Inconsistent Communication**

**Mixed parental messages.** Many adolescents described receiving contradictory instructions from their parents, which created confusion in everyday situations. For instance, one participant shared: *“My mom tells me to be independent, but when I make decisions, she says I should have asked first. I never know which version she wants.”* Such contradictions left participants uncertain about expectations and eroded their trust in guidance.

**Emotional unpredictability.** Participants often noted rapid shifts in their parents’ emotional expressions. One adolescent remarked: *“When I come home, I don’t know if my dad will hug me or yell at me for something small. It changes so quickly.”* This instability made participants feel anxious about family interactions.

**Selective listening.** Several adolescents indicated that parents selectively acknowledged only their successes while ignoring broader aspects of their lives. As one noted: *“If I get a good grade, they listen to me. But if I talk about feeling stressed, they just change the subject.”* This pattern led to feelings of invisibility.

**Technology-based inconsistency.** In the digital era, participants identified mixed approaches to communication via technology. For example, one participant said: *“My mom scolds me by text but then sends heart emojis. I don’t know if she’s serious or joking.”* Such inconsistencies blurred the line between discipline and affection.

**Unspoken expectations.** Adolescents also struggled with implicit rules never clearly communicated. One shared: *“I can’t know what will upset them until they’re already upset. It’s like I have to guess the hidden rules.”* This lack of clarity heightened their sense of insecurity.

**Role confusion.** Some participants reported that parents alternated between acting as friends and asserting authority. As one adolescent put it: *“Sometimes my mom talks like a buddy, joking about everything, but then suddenly she says ‘I’m your mother, respect me.’ It feels confusing.”* These shifts challenged adolescents’ understanding of parental roles.

**Theme 2: Contradictory Discipline Practices**

**Unequal enforcement of rules.** A recurring experience was parents applying rules differently among siblings. One participant explained: *“If my brother comes home late, nothing happens. If I do the same, I lose my phone for a week.”* This inconsistency fostered resentment and perceptions of unfairness.

**Changing standards over time.** Adolescents noted that rules were applied more strictly in early adolescence but became relaxed without explanation later. One participant stated: *“When I was younger, I had to be in bed by 10. Now they don’t care, but they still say I should sleep early. It’s confusing.”* Such changes led to uncertainty about expectations.

**Reward–punishment imbalance.** Several adolescents felt that punishments were harsh while positive behavior was rarely recognized. One shared: *“When I make a mistake, I get punished immediately. But if I help around the house, they don’t even notice.”* This imbalance undermined their motivation to follow rules.

**Negotiated discipline.** In some households, rules were inconsistently enforced through bargaining. A participant explained: *“If I argue long enough, my dad gives in. Sometimes rules just depend on how tired he is.”*



Adolescents described this as creating opportunities but also confusion about limits.

**Lack of follow-through.** Some parents threatened consequences but did not enforce them consistently. As one adolescent described: *“They say I’ll be grounded if I don’t clean my room, but nothing happens. Then the next time, they explode over something small.”* Such unpredictability weakened respect for rules.

### Theme 3: Emotional Climate of the Household

**Ambivalence in emotional support.** Adolescents often perceived their parents as warm one day and distant the next. One participant reflected: *“When I’m sad, sometimes they hug me, sometimes they just say ‘get over it.’ I never know which parent I’ll get.”* This ambivalence left them emotionally unsettled.

**Conditional affection.** Participants described love and attention tied to achievements. For example: *“When I got into the school team, they hugged me all day. But when I failed math, they barely talked to me.”* Adolescents interpreted this as affection being earned rather than unconditional.

**Conflict spillover.** Several adolescents observed how parental conflicts influenced their treatment. One explained: *“When my parents argue, later my mom takes it out on me. If they are happy, everything is easier.”* This spillover made their emotional climate unstable.

**Overprotection vs neglect.** Adolescents reported alternating extremes, where parents were overly protective during crises but uninvolved at other times. One participant shared: *“When I was sick, they didn’t leave me alone. But on normal days, they don’t even ask how I am.”* This inconsistency was experienced as confusing.

**Emotional silence.** Many participants reported parents avoiding sensitive topics altogether. One said: *“I wanted to talk about relationships, but they just changed the subject. It’s like some emotions don’t exist in my family.”* This silence limited opportunities for connection.

**Humor as inconsistency.** Some adolescents noted that parents used jokes to diffuse tension, even after harsh criticism. For example: *“My dad shouts at me, then ten minutes later he makes a joke like nothing happened.”* This left them uncertain about the seriousness of discipline.

**Guilt induction.** A notable strategy described was the use of guilt to control behavior. One adolescent explained: *“My mom always reminds me of how much she sacrificed, so I feel bad if I don’t do what she says.”* This manipulation created inner conflict and stress.

### Theme 4: Adolescent Interpretations and Coping Strategies

**Rationalization.** Adolescents often tried to justify inconsistencies by attributing them to external factors. One participant noted: *“I think my dad is just stressed from work. That’s why he changes his mind so much.”* Rationalization helped reduce emotional strain.

**Emotional distancing.** Some participants responded by withdrawing emotionally. One adolescent explained: *“I just stop telling them things. It’s easier not to feel disappointed.”* This distancing served as a protective mechanism.

**Resistance and rebellion.** Others responded with defiance. For example: *“If they keep changing the rules, why should I follow them? Sometimes I break them on purpose.”* This resistance allowed adolescents to reclaim agency.

**Seeking external validation.** Many participants turned to peers or mentors for support. As one explained: *“I tell my best friend everything because she actually listens. My parents don’t.”* This reliance on external sources compensated for gaps at home.

**Adaptive negotiation.** Some adolescents developed strategies to navigate inconsistencies more effectively. For instance: *“I know when my mom is in a good mood, so I ask for things then. It works better.”* Such negotiation reflected growing maturity.

**Meaning-making.** Finally, adolescents sought to reframe their experiences, interpreting parental inconsistencies as part of the human condition. One participant reflected: *“I realized parents are not perfect. They’re figuring it out too, like us.”* This meaning-making helped adolescents integrate contradictions into a broader life perspective.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to explore how adolescents perceive and interpret patterns of inconsistency in parenting practices, using narrative inquiry to capture lived experiences. Four major themes emerged from the narratives: inconsistent communication, contradictory discipline practices, an unstable emotional climate of the household, and adolescents’ coping strategies. These findings highlight both the complexity of parental inconsistency and the active ways in which adolescents interpret and respond to it. The discussion situates these results in the broader literature, emphasizing consistencies and divergences with previous research.

One of the most prominent themes was inconsistent communication, including contradictory messages,

emotional unpredictability, and unspoken expectations. Adolescents described receiving conflicting signals about independence and obedience, which undermined their confidence in parental guidance. These accounts align with findings by Kapetanovic and Boson (Kapetanovic & Boson, 2020), who showed that discrepancies between parental and adolescent reports of communication are linked to psychological health outcomes. When adolescents perceive communication as unclear or inconsistent, they are more likely to experience distress and uncertainty in social contexts.

Emotional unpredictability in communication—where warmth alternates with anger—was also a central theme. Walters (Walters, 2023) emphasized that parental inconsistency, especially when combined with anger, predicts delinquency through personality pathways such as low agreeableness. The present narratives echo this dynamic, as adolescents reported that unpredictable emotional climates made them anxious and less trusting. Similarly, Zheng et al. (Zheng et al., 2025) found that daily fluctuations in parental warmth predicted conduct problems, supporting the idea that inconsistency in emotional signals is destabilizing. Zhang et al. (Zhang et al., 2025) also highlighted the long-term developmental consequences of parental expressed emotion and inconsistency, underscoring the persistence of these patterns across time.

The accounts of unspoken expectations and role confusion further illuminate the hidden dimensions of communication. Adolescents described feeling they had to “guess the rules,” resonating with Halgunseth et al. (Halgunseth et al., 2013), who showed that inconsistent discipline fosters delinquent-oriented attitudes. In both cases, unpredictability fosters a lack of clarity, eroding the capacity of adolescents to internalize norms. These findings collectively highlight the importance of communication consistency as a foundation for healthy development.

Adolescents also emphasized inconsistencies in discipline, such as unequal enforcement of rules, negotiated discipline, and lack of follow-through. These patterns are consistent with research demonstrating that inconsistent discipline contributes to both externalizing and internalizing symptoms. Walters (Walters, 2023) noted that inconsistent parenting predicts delinquency through personality pathways, while Cutrín et al. (Cutrín et al., 2021) found that parental knowledge and support predicted fewer emotional and behavioral problems. Together, these studies suggest that consistent and predictable discipline serves a protective role, while inconsistency erodes it.

The narratives of unequal enforcement across siblings resonate with findings from Maat et al. (Maat et al., 2021), who linked parental stress with differential parenting behaviors. Adolescents often interpreted inconsistent rule enforcement as favoritism, which intensified conflict and diminished trust. Liu et al. (Liu et al., 2019) similarly described how family conflict mechanisms spill over into delinquent behaviors, suggesting that inconsistency in rule enforcement is a concrete manifestation of such spillover.

The accounts of negotiated discipline, where rules shifted depending on parental mood, echo Donohue et al. (Donohue et al., 2022), who highlighted the role of recurring conflict as a mediator between parental anger and adolescent outcomes. Adolescents in the current study confirmed that inconsistency invited bargaining, which often escalated into cycles of confrontation. This dynamic also reflects Farnsworth and O’Neal (Farnsworth & O’Neal, 2022), who showed that contextual stress, such as work-related guilt in military families, contributes to unpredictable parental behavior. In both quantitative and qualitative accounts, inconsistency emerges as a pattern closely tied to stress and conflict.

The theme of household emotional climate captured the broader affective environment in which inconsistencies unfolded. Adolescents described conditional affection, ambivalence in support, and guilt induction, all of which shaped their interpretations of parental care. Royuela-Colomer et al. (Royuela-Colomer et al., 2023) demonstrated that mindful parenting reduces both internalizing and externalizing symptoms, implying that inconsistent or conditional emotional climates increase vulnerability. The narratives in this study confirm this, as adolescents described affection as contingent on achievement or withdrawn in moments of failure.

Conflict spillover was also evident, with adolescents observing how parental disagreements influenced their treatment. This finding resonates with Voort et al. (Voort et al., 2013), who showed that maternal sensitivity significantly shapes adolescents’ internalizing trajectories. Inconsistent warmth during periods of conflict, as reported by our participants, undermines this sensitivity and contributes to psychological vulnerability. McGee (McGee, 2017) also emphasized how disruptions in parental presence—such as maternal incarceration—destabilize the emotional climate, reinforcing the idea that consistency of emotional availability is crucial.

The use of humor to diffuse tension after harsh criticism was also notable. While adolescents interpreted this as

confusing, it may be seen as an attempt by parents to restore equilibrium. However, research suggests that such strategies may obscure rather than resolve conflict. Zhu and Shek (Zhu & Shek, 2020) demonstrated that poor parent–child subsystem qualities mediate the relationship between problem behaviors and life satisfaction, suggesting that inconsistent emotional repair strategies may undermine adolescents' well-being.

A key contribution of this study is the exploration of how adolescents interpret and respond to inconsistencies. Rather than passively experiencing inconsistency, participants engaged in rationalization, distancing, rebellion, and meaning-making. These narratives highlight adolescent agency and resilience. For instance, rationalization of parental inconsistency as stress-related echoes Ouyang et al. (Ouyang et al., 2023), who showed that confidence in the future buffered adolescents from problem behaviors. By reframing inconsistency, adolescents may mitigate its negative effects.

Other coping strategies, such as emotional distancing and rebellion, mirror findings from Wang et al. (Wang et al., 2016), who described the role of response inhibition and gene–environment interplay in externalizing pathways. Adolescents who withdraw emotionally or resist parental authority may be engaging in behaviors that are both protective and maladaptive. Yang et al. (Yang et al., 2021) also highlighted discrepancies in aggressive behaviors depending on reporter and context, reinforcing the importance of capturing adolescents' voices in understanding coping.

The turn to external validation—seeking support from peers and teachers—resonates with Linda et al. (Linda et al., 2015), who identified protective factors promoting adolescent mental health in the context of parental mental illness. Even in families with inconsistency, adolescents can mobilize external resources to maintain resilience. Similarly, Nieri et al. (Nieri et al., 2016) emphasized how acculturation differences shaped adolescent adjustment, illustrating that adolescents actively interpret and negotiate inconsistencies across cultural domains.

Finally, the meaning-making strategies reported by adolescents in this study—such as reframing parental inconsistency as part of human imperfection—reflect a developmental process of perspective-taking. Therriault et al. (Therriault et al., 2024) showed that attachment mediates risky behaviors, suggesting that interpretations of parental inconsistency are closely tied to attachment security. The narrative accounts of acceptance and re-framing highlight

pathways through which adolescents maintain psychological stability in the face of inconsistency.

Taken together, the findings of this study contribute to the growing literature emphasizing the importance of consistency in parenting for adolescent well-being. By examining adolescents' narratives, this study highlights the ways in which inconsistent communication, discipline, and emotional climates are actively interpreted and negotiated by adolescents. These interpretations, in turn, shape coping strategies and developmental trajectories. Prior studies have largely focused on parental behaviors and quantitative outcomes (Royuela-Colomer et al., 2023; Walters, 2023; Zheng et al., 2025), whereas this study foregrounds the subjective experiences of adolescents. The findings underscore the need for holistic approaches that account for both parental behavior and adolescent meaning-making in understanding developmental outcomes.

## 5. Suggestions and Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 22 adolescents from Spain, which restricts the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts. While the narratives provide rich insight, they may not fully capture the experiences of adolescents in diverse sociocultural environments. Second, the reliance on self-reported interviews introduces potential biases such as selective memory or social desirability effects. Adolescents may have underreported certain experiences or overemphasized others based on their emotional state at the time of the interview. Third, although narrative inquiry allows for deep exploration, it does not establish causal relationships between inconsistent parenting and adolescent outcomes. Finally, while NVivo facilitated systematic coding, the interpretation of themes remains influenced by researcher subjectivity, despite efforts to ensure reflexivity and credibility.

Future studies should expand the sample to include adolescents from varied cultural and socioeconomic contexts, enabling cross-cultural comparisons of how parenting inconsistency is perceived and managed. Longitudinal qualitative research would also provide valuable insights into how interpretations evolve over time, particularly across the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Mixed-methods designs that integrate narrative accounts with quantitative measures of psychological adjustment could further enrich understanding, allowing researchers to connect subjective



experiences with behavioral outcomes. Additionally, comparative studies involving both adolescents and their parents could illuminate discrepancies in perception and reveal how these differences contribute to family dynamics. Exploring digital communication patterns, given adolescents' emphasis on technology in this study, would also be a fruitful direction.

The findings hold important implications for practitioners working with families and adolescents. Parenting programs should emphasize the importance of consistency in communication, discipline, and emotional availability. Interventions can help parents recognize how their stress, conflict, or mental health challenges influence parenting patterns and provide strategies to foster predictability. Schools and counselors should also be attentive to adolescents' coping strategies, particularly distancing and rebellion, which may signal underlying struggles with parental inconsistency. Providing adolescents with supportive external relationships, such as mentoring and peer support programs, can buffer the negative effects of inconsistent parenting. By fostering open dialogue and promoting mindful parenting, practitioners can help strengthen parent-adolescent relationships and support adolescent resilience.

### Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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