

College Students' Mental Health and Family of Origin: A Literature Review

Du Jinju

Mental Health Education Center, Hunan University of Science and Technology (Xiangtan 411201, P.R. China)

*Corresponding Author: Du Jinju

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>The mental health of college students has attracted widespread societal attention, with the influence of the family of origin on their psychological well-being emerging as a focal point of domestic research. Scholars have investigated this issue from multiple perspectives and accumulated a substantial body of findings. Although previous studies have produced abundant results and employed diverse perspectives to examine how the family of origin affects college students' mental health, they remain insufficient in addressing the complexity of this influence as it manifests in contemporary contexts. Future research should therefore optimize and further explore aspects such as research methods, research content, theoretical perspectives, and intervention strategies that are closely aligned with psychological counseling practice.</i> Keywords: family of origin, college students, mental health, influence mechanism, intervention strategies.
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Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited. Citation: Du, J. (2026). College students' mental health and family of origin: A literature review. <i>UKR Journal of Education and Literature</i>, 2(4), 40-49.	

I. Introduction

In recent years, mental health problems among college students have shown an upward trend in parallel with rapid socioeconomic development. The *Report on National Mental Health Development in China (2019–2020)* indicates that the detection rate of depression among adolescents was 24.6% (Zhao & Liu, 2023), while the *2022 Survey Report on the Mental Health Status of College Students* reveals that 45.28% of college students may be at risk of anxiety (Ding, 2025). As a population that has just transitioned out of adolescence, college students do not experience immediate changes in their pre-existing psychological states or problems simply because of a shift in environment. Instead, these states tend to be carried into the university setting, where they may be activated by specific stressors or setbacks.

The mental health issues of college students can be traced back to their family of origin. As the primary environment in which an individual is born and raised, the family of origin directly shapes personality formation, emotional development, and cognitive patterns (Wang, 2025). Freud's psychoanalytic theory emphasizes that early childhood experiences exert a decisive influence on an individual's lifelong psychological development (He, 2013). As the key context where such early experiences are

acquired, the family of origin has drawn increasing scholarly attention in recent years. In particular, research on its impact on college students' mental health has accumulated a rich body of findings. By searching, reviewing, and synthesizing this existing body of work, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the current state of research in this field, thereby laying a foundation for future studies on the relationship between college students' mental health and their family of origin.

II. Materials and Methods

This study is a systematic academic review focusing on the association between family of origin and college students' mental health in China. Both the selection of research materials and the application of research methods serve the core objective of comprehensively mapping the current state of the field, synthesizing existing findings, and identifying future directions.

A. Research Materials

As a non-empirical review, this study draws primarily on existing academic outputs and authoritative data, encompassing four major categories of resources that span theoretical, empirical, and practical dimensions.

Specialized academic literature constitutes the most fundamental research base. Dozens of relevant domestic studies were included, primarily in the form of journal articles and theses/dissertations. The journal articles cover core psychology outlets such as *Psychological Science*, *China Journal of Health Psychology*, and *Chinese Journal of School Health*, as well as comprehensive education journals like *University* and *The Science Education Article Collects*, with a time span from 2008 to 2025. These works encompass empirical investigations, mechanism analyses, and intervention practices, and they comprehensively address core research dimensions—family structure, parenting styles, family atmosphere, and parent–child relationships—thereby underpinning the main body of the review. In terms of theses, master’s degree dissertations from universities such as Beijing Institute of Technology, Hebei Normal University, and Northeast Normal University were also incorporated. These studies, which focus on specific topics such as self-differentiation in single-parent families, parent–child triangulation, and value deviation, provide deeper empirical data and analytical conclusions for the current review.

Two authoritative survey reports were introduced to establish the real-world context: the adolescent depression detection rate from the *Report on National Mental Health Development in China (2019–2020)* and the anxiety risk data for college students from the *2022 Survey Report on the Mental Health Status of College Students*. These two sets of macro-level statistics offer a quantitative basis for the practical significance of the study and underscore both the severity of college students’ mental health problems and the necessity of research in this area.

Classical psychological and family therapy theories serve as the analytical framework, principally Freud’s psychoanalytic theory (highlighting the decisive role of early childhood experiences in psychological development), Bowen’s family systems theory (centering on core concepts such as self-differentiation and triangulation), and Satir’s family therapy model (the association between self-esteem and family functioning). These theoretical foundations provide essential support for delineating the influence pathways of the family of origin and for explaining the underlying mechanisms, thereby transforming scattered empirical findings into a coherent logical system.

In the section on intervention strategies, the review incorporates findings from practical research on mental health education in Chinese higher education institutions. These include practice cases and effectiveness studies on the “dormitory–class–department–university” four-tier early warning mechanism, the integration of Satir model-based courses, horticultural therapy and music therapy

applications, and home–school collaborative interventions. Such practice-oriented materials provide actionable real-world references for constructing an intervention framework and bridge theoretical inquiry with practical application.

B. Research Methods

As an academic review, this study adopts the systematic literature review method as its core approach, complemented by comparative analysis and logical induction and deduction, to achieve a systematic integration and critical appraisal of the research field.

The systematic literature review is the principal research method. Relevant domestic studies on family of origin and college students’ mental health were retrieved and screened, and subsequently classified, organized, and synthesized according to a logical framework that progresses from “impact dimensions” and “group differences” to “mechanisms of action” and “intervention strategies.” The application of this method is reflected at two levels: first, the findings concerning multiple impact dimensions—family structure, parenting styles, family atmosphere, and parent–child relationships—are summarized to reveal the multifaceted nature of family-of-origin influence; second, in-depth research on mediating mechanisms and group differences is systematically reviewed to uncover the intrinsic logic of the field.

Comparative analysis was extensively employed when consolidating research findings to highlight the complexity and heterogeneity of family-of-origin effects. This involved three types of comparison. At the family dimension level, the differential effects of intact families versus non-intact families (e.g., single-parent, left-behind) on college students’ mental health were contrasted, along with the divergent outcomes of positive versus negative parenting. At the group dimension level, mental health differences associated with the family of origin were analyzed across gender, educational level, place of origin, and family economic status. At the mechanism dimension level, the distinct logics of three mediating pathways—psychological, cognitive, and social mediation—were differentiated. Through such multidimensional comparisons, the differentiated conclusions of the field were clearly presented, thereby avoiding one-sided generalizations.

Inductive and deductive methods were also applied. Induction was used to distill common conclusions from a large number of scattered empirical studies, integrating fragmented findings into a systematic cognitive framework. Deduction, grounded in the limitations of existing research (e.g., the predominance of cross-sectional designs, ambiguous causal relationships, and insufficient

investigation of positive factors), allowed the derivation of directions for future inquiry, such as strengthening longitudinal tracking, adopting mixed-methods research designs, applying advanced statistical techniques, and exploring positive mechanisms. This provides logical guidance for subsequent studies.

III. Results: The Family of Origin Influences College Students' Mental Health Across Multiple Dimensions

A review of existing studies reveals that research on the impact of the family of origin on college students' mental health does not concentrate on a single factor; rather, it unfolds across multiple dimensions of the family of origin, including family structure, parenting styles, family atmosphere, and parent-child relationships (Long, 2025). Findings indicate that these dimensions form an interrelated and complex system that exerts a direct influence on college students' mental health.

Family structure, as the foundational framework of the family of origin, is primarily categorized into intact families and non-intact families (e.g., single-parent families, divorced families, and left-behind families), with different structures producing distinct effects on college students' mental health. Wang Zhuhua et al. screened the mental health of 1,309 freshmen at a university and found that students from only-child families exhibited better psychological development than those from multi-child families, and that students without left-behind experiences had significantly better mental health than their peers with such experiences (Wang & Lu, 2020). The single-parent family, a common form of non-intact family structure, has a particularly pronounced negative impact (Wu, 2019). Dai Yanqing's research indicates that college students from single-parent families are disadvantaged in terms of self-differentiation, interpersonal relationships, and the establishment of intimate relationships, manifesting characteristics such as extreme emotional reactions, interpersonal alienation, and a lack of security (Dai, 2015). The left-behind family, a distinctive family structure emerging during China's social transition, also warrants serious attention regarding its effects on college students' mental health. Zhan Liyu et al., in a mental health assessment of 1,200 junior students at an agriculture and forestry university, found that students with left-behind experiences scored significantly lower than their non-left-behind peers on dimensions such as family cohesion, intellectual-cultural orientation, and active-recreational orientation (Zhan, Lian & Wang, 2017). Although the positive screening rates on various mental health factors among these students showed a declining trend, they still faced problems such as low self-efficacy and difficulties in interpersonal adjustment. In addition, birth order can also affect college students' mental health: middle-born children

tend to have relatively poorer interpersonal functioning, which may be associated with differential allocation of family resources and parental attention.

Parenting, as the relatively stable behavioral pattern exhibited by parents in the process of raising their children, serves as a core mediating variable in the influence of the family of origin on college students' mental health (Li, 2019). Parents differ in their child-rearing approaches. Those with stable occupations or higher levels of education are more likely to adopt scientific parenting practices—such as encouraging autonomous decision-making and emphasizing communication—thereby cultivating their children's self-esteem and psychological resilience (Jiang, 2023). However, some parents resort to punitive measures, overprotection, neglect, indifference, or permissive indulgence, all of which are negative parenting practices that elevate the risk of psychological problems in children. Research has found that children raised in families characterized by punitive and overly intrusive parenting styles exhibit aggressive behavioral tendencies. It is thus evident that negative parenting practices in the family of origin not only impede the development of self-esteem but also give rise to psychological problems such as social anxiety in college students (Li & Yuan, 2021).

Family atmosphere refers to the emotional environment and climate among family members. A harmonious family atmosphere promotes smooth communication and a positive mood in children's social interactions. Relevant studies have found that college students from families with more members show significantly lower prevalence rates of psychological symptoms such as depression, phobic anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity, as a harmonious atmosphere cultivates a sense of security and trust (Yang, Wu, You, et al., 2021). In contrast, a conflict-ridden family atmosphere imposes persistent psychological stress on children, with parental marital discord and frequent quarrels exerting the greatest impact. Research indicates that college students who grow up in family environments characterized by parental emotional disharmony or domestic violence display elevated tendencies toward anxiety and depression in mental health assessments (Xue & Shu, 2019). Furthermore, college students raised in high-conflict family atmospheres tend to adopt relatively negative coping strategies when facing difficulties, which in turn exacerbates their psychological distress.

The parent-child relationship, as the most central family relationship within the family of origin, is a critical factor directly influencing college students' mental health. College students raised in harmonious parent-child relationships develop positive psychological qualities such as understanding, trust, respect, and communication; such relationships also enhance their sense of security and stress

resilience while reducing interpersonal behavior problems and cognitive biases. Those who grow up in disharmonious parent–child relationships tend to exhibit emotional detachment and communication difficulties. Studies have found that college students who had poor childhood relationships with their parents show a higher incidence of interpersonal relationship disorders (Shen & Zheng, 2018). Disharmonious parent–child relationships can elevate codependency levels among college students, which in turn impairs the quality of their intimate relationships and triggers psychological adjustment problems (Wu, Deng, Liu, et al., 2019). Moreover, parent–child triangulation, as a specific form of negative parent–child relationship, leads to lower levels of self-differentiation in college students raised in such environments, making them prone to emotional distress and other mental health issues (Man, 2016).

IV. Discussion: Group-Based Differences and Mechanisms Underlying the Influence of the Family of Origin on College Students' Mental Health

The influence of the family of origin on college students' mental health is not uniform; rather, it varies across groups defined by gender, place of origin, family economic status, and other factors, thereby exhibiting marked complexity and diversity. Moreover, this influence operates through a complex system of mediating and moderating variables that form its underlying mechanisms (Qin, 2025).

A. Group-Based Differences in the Impact of the Family of Origin on College Students' Mental Health

A substantial body of research has confirmed significant gender differences in how the family of origin affects college students' mental health. Some studies suggest that among contemporary college students, males demonstrate better overall mental health than females. This disparity may be related to differential parental expectations and parenting styles for sons and daughters within the family of origin (Wang & Lu, 2020). Female students tend to have a higher need for family emotional support; consequently, a disharmonious family atmosphere causes greater psychological damage to female students than to their male counterparts. Gender differences are equally evident when specific psychological problems are examined. For instance, male college students score significantly higher than females on the “physical aggression” factor of aggressive behavior tendencies, whereas female students score higher on the “verbal aggression” factor (Guo, Wei & Zhang, 2010). Research also indicates that because female students possess greater emotional sensitivity and are more attuned to family relationships, the family of origin exerts a more pronounced influence on their mental health in domains such as depression, anxiety, and

interpersonal sensitivity compared with male students (Li & Qu, 2019).

The level of education also moderates the degree to which the family of origin impacts college students' mental health. Students in higher vocational colleges exhibit particularly prominent mental health problems, and the influence of the family of origin on this group is more salient. Studies show that for these students, academic pressure, employment pressure, and psychological distress stemming from the family of origin accumulate interactively, leading to rebelliousness, resistance to guidance, and poor interpersonal adjustment, which contribute to a high prevalence of mental health issues (Wang, 2025). In terms of disciplinary differences, irrespective of whether students are in three-year or four-year programs, those majoring in the humanities score significantly higher than science majors on the “emotional cutoff” dimension of self-differentiation, a finding that may be associated with different disciplinary training modes and the influence of the family of origin on academic major choices (Chai, 2010). Furthermore, nursing students in higher vocational programs, as a specialized group, experience an even more pronounced impact from the family of origin on their mental health, with place of origin, parental education level, and the parent–child relationship identified as major influencing factors.

Place of origin—specifically the urban–rural divide and the family's economic circumstances—constitutes another critical consideration. The economic environment of the family of origin profoundly shapes students' speech, conduct, and coping styles. Studies have found that college students raised in families with high economic status and social standing report higher personal evaluation scores than those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Zheng, 2022). Students from financially strained families often display behaviors such as low self-esteem, hypersensitivity, and social withdrawal when confronted with life, academic, and employment pressures, which further compromises their psychological well-being (Xu, 2025). Additionally, urban–rural differences contribute to variations in behavior and interpersonal interaction patterns, with students raised in urban environments generally enjoying comparatively better interpersonal functioning.

B. Mechanisms Underlying the Influence of the Family of Origin on College Students' Mental Health

A review of the literature reveals that, in examining the mediating and moderating variables through which the family of origin affects college students' mental health, existing studies primarily uncover the complex underlying mechanisms and intrinsic pathways from three levels: psychological mediation, cognitive mediation, and social mediation.

The psychological mediation mechanism primarily encompasses psychological traits such as resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of security, which serve as bridges linking the family of origin to college students' mental health. Psychological resilience—the capacity for adaptive coping in the face of stress—mediates the relationship between parent–child triangulation and self-differentiation, thereby buffering the negative impact of the family of origin (Man, 2016). Negative family influences lower college students' self-esteem while simultaneously increasing their risk of depression; however, robust psychological resilience can attenuate the strength of this mediating pathway (Liang, 2023). Self-esteem, defined as an individual's perception and evaluation of self-worth, functions as a mediating variable between the family of origin and mental health; college students' self-esteem can subsequently affect their shyness. Students who grow up in families with sound functioning tend to develop high self-esteem, conducting themselves with confidence rather than shyness. Research on the Satir model indicates that the family of origin shapes an individual's level of self-esteem, which in turn influences self-acceptance and interpersonal interaction patterns, thereby exerting a sustained impact on mental health. Similarly, a healthy family of origin provides individuals with a sense of security, which also plays a significant mediating role. Relevant studies demonstrate that family functioning in the family of origin influences cognitive biases through the independent mediating effect of security and the chain mediating effect of security and interpersonal relationships (Dai, 2021). A lack of security originating from the family of origin can lead to anxiety and fear when students navigate campus life (Chen & Yang, 2025).

The cognitive mediation mechanism refers to the cognitive attributes shaped by the family of origin during the child's development, which indirectly affect college students' mental health in areas such as self-differentiation, cognitive styles, and value systems. According to Bowen's family systems theory, self-differentiation is the capacity to distinguish between intellectual and emotional processes and to maintain a balance between autonomy and intimacy in relationships; it represents a crucial cognitive mediator in the family-of-origin–mental health link (Ai, 2014). The level of self-differentiation can predict college students' mental health status: those with high self-differentiation score significantly lower on factors such as anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms than those with low self-differentiation (Wu, 2008). Healthy family functioning enhances children's self-differentiation, thereby reducing social anxiety in adulthood (Chai, 2010). Cognitive bias—the irrational beliefs formed during cognitive processing—is directly related to the influence of the family of origin. The more functional the family, the

fewer cognitive biases children develop; as a contributing factor to mental health, its role should not be overlooked. Values, which serve as the guiding principles of individual behavior, are also profoundly shaped by the family of origin and indirectly affect mental health. The transmission of values within the family of origin influences college students' value systems; improper value guidance can lead to problems such as nihilistic or utilitarian life goals, which in turn trigger psychological conflicts (Lang, 2022).

The social mediation mechanism indirectly affects college students' mental health, with the family of origin serving as a key link influencing socially relevant mediating factors. Research has found that perceived social support significantly affects college students' mental health literacy through the chain mediating effect of psychological resilience and positive coping styles. Specifically, the family of origin enhances individuals' level of perceived social support, strengthens resilience, and promotes positive coping, thereby improving mental health literacy and augmenting social competence and psychological adjustment (Fu, Wei & He, 2025). Interpersonal relationships are an important indicator of college students' social functioning, and interpersonal difficulties are closely tied to the family of origin. Childhood relationships with parents and family parenting styles influence subsequent interpersonal interaction patterns, and the communication patterns and intimate relationships modeled in the family of origin shape students' communication competence, relational capacities, and mental health (Shen & Heng, 2018).

C. Developing Intervention Strategies for College Students' Mental Health Informed by the Family-of-Origin Perspective

Drawing on both academic research and practical insights, existing studies have proposed a range of intervention strategies addressing the impact of the family of origin on college students' mental health, thereby forming a multidimensional and integrated intervention system.

At the institutional level, efforts have centered on constructing a specialized and systematic mental health education framework. As institutions of higher learning, universities not only provide disciplinary education but also increasingly prioritize students' psychological well-being. Frontline psychological counselors assess the triggers of students' mental health problems holistically, with particular attention to the role of the family of origin, and design targeted intervention systems accordingly. These measures include establishing mental health records and family background databases, optimizing the design of mental health curricula and activities, strengthening faculty capacity and four-tier collaborative mechanisms, and promoting diverse psychological intervention methods.

Through a combination of regular and ad hoc screenings, high-risk students can be identified and supported in a timely manner. In this vein, Ye Xueqin proposed a “dormitory–class–department–university” four-tier early warning mechanism that dynamically monitors academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and family emergencies, thereby enabling early crisis identification and graded response (Ye, 2025). Research has confirmed that general education courses on family education offered by universities can effectively enhance students’ mental health literacy and family adaptation (Guo, 2023). Accordingly, some scholars have integrated the Satir model into university mental health curricula, improving instructional formats and enriching course content to strengthen program effectiveness (Zhang, 2025). To enhance student counselors’ efficacy in mental health work and their ability to identify family-of-origin-related problems, scholars have recommended building a four-tier collaborative team comprising peers, class supervisors/counselors, course instructors, and professional psychological counselors, thus creating an institution-wide educative environment. Furthermore, for students already exhibiting psychological difficulties, diversified intervention approaches have been advanced. Beyond traditional individual counseling and group guidance, horticultural therapy has been shown to help students alleviate stress and improve psychological adjustment, while music therapy yields positive intervention effects by relieving tension and anxiety and facilitating emotional catharsis (Song, 2025).

At the family level, scholars have examined the optimization of parenting styles and family functioning. As the source of many psychological problems, the family of origin must itself be improved to cut off difficulties at their root. This requires parents to adopt scientifically informed child-rearing beliefs, employ positive parenting practices, and reduce negative behaviors such as punishment and overprotection. A harmonious family atmosphere and a sound parent–child relationship profoundly affect children’s psychological development. Jing Shiqi has pointed out that parents should emphasize communication, build parent–child relationships characterized by mutual respect, trust, and understanding, and minimize family conflict (Jing, Yu & Yang, 2021); they should also model healthy interactions, as parental relational patterns are transmitted intergenerationally and influence college students’ attitudes toward marriage and interpersonal styles (Chen, 2016). Some researchers argue that universities should establish regular communication mechanisms with students’ families regarding mental health, providing timely feedback on students’ psychological status and guiding parents to cooperate with school-based psychological interventions (Lu, 2025). Indeed, home–

school collaborative intervention mechanisms can effectively contain psychological crises triggered by family-of-origin issues (Shi, Zhao & Wei, 2025). However, such containment tends to be short-lived; continuous follow-up is necessary until graduation, and students from single-parent or left-behind families with psychological problems require even more sustained psychological support and care.

At the individual student level, it is essential to enhance self-regulation capacity, develop an accurate understanding of the family of origin’s influence, and actively participate in campus-based aesthetic and recreational activities that promote psychological well-being. Research on individual-level coping strategies indicates that college students should exercise personal agency and initiative, break free from the negative constraints imposed by the family of origin, and pursue self-growth (Liao, Li, 2024), while also addressing emotional and cognitive biases through self-reflection and psychological counseling. As adults, college students are expected to proactively strengthen their psychological adjustment abilities, learn to manage emotions and stress responses, and adopt appropriate lifestyles to resolve psychological distress. Activities such as physical exercise and personal hobbies can effectively relieve psychological pressure and regulate mood. Moreover, positive interpersonal relationships can substantially buffer the adverse effects of the family of origin, as social interaction constitutes a key mechanism through which expectations of social mobility influence mental health (i.e., upward mobility expectations can enhance psychological well-being; Hu, 2024). Therefore, students should actively engage in campus activities to improve interpersonal communication and adaptive capacities.

V. Conclusion

In summary, to enable all college students to graduate in a healthy state and become capable contributors to socialist construction, it remains imperative that a substantial number of professionals and colleagues in the field actively engage in both mental health education practice and theoretical exploration, while continuing to attach sustained importance to the influence of the family of origin on college students’ mental health. Future research should diversify its methods: longitudinal tracking studies should be strengthened to reveal the causal relationships and dynamic developmental processes linking family of origin to mental health through long-term follow-up; quantitative and qualitative methods should be combined to examine influence mechanisms in greater depth; and advanced statistical techniques such as cross-lagged panel models and latent profile analysis should be introduced to enhance scientific rigor and precision. Research content should also

be expanded, with greater emphasis on the positive influences of the family of origin to elucidate the mechanisms by which healthy family backgrounds promote mental health; deeper exploration of implicit factors such as family culture and values; and systematic investigation of the psychological protective mechanisms—such as resilience and coping styles—that students develop under the influence of the family of origin. Intervention research should focus on designing highly targeted and feasible protocols grounded in psychological counseling practice, conducting randomized controlled trials to test and optimize intervention strategies, integrating individual intervention, group counseling, and family therapy to build multifaceted and personalized intervention systems, and refining outcome evaluation frameworks that address both symptom reduction and the cultivation of positive psychological qualities, with long-term follow-up assessments to evaluate the durability of intervention effects. Finally, research on specific populations must be differentiated, paying particular attention to the unique ways the family of origin affects the mental health of students in higher vocational colleges, technical schools, and those from remote or rural areas. Studies should also investigate variations across gender, academic major, and year of study, and devote attention to the mental health issues emerging in the context of changing family structures under the universal two-child policy.

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About the Author

Du Jinju, born in 1973, female, holder of a master's degree, Lecturer, and National Certified Second-Class Psychological Counselor. She is affiliated with the Mental Health Center of Hunan University of Science and Technology, and focuses on mental health education and psychological counseling for college students.

Contact Information

Address: Mental Health Center, Hunan University of Science and Technology, Taoyuan Road, Yuhu District, Xiangtan City, Hunan Province, P.R. China