

Parental Involvement in the Lives of College Students: Impact on Independence, Self-Direction and Ethical Thinking”

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Abstract

College life is an important phase where students gradually move towards independence while still maintaining a connection with their parents for support and guidance. During this stage, students are expected to manage their academic responsibilities, make personal decisions, and develop values that guide their behaviour. This study examines the impact of parental involvement on college students, particularly focusing on their independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking. The research is based on a descriptive design and follows a quantitative approach, with data collected from 200 undergraduate and postgraduate students in Dakshina Kannada district through a structured questionnaire.

The findings of the study indicate that parental involvement is moderate and largely supportive in nature. Students reported that their parents communicate regularly, provide emotional support, and show trust in their abilities, while also allowing them the freedom to make their own decisions. This balance between guidance and autonomy plays a key role in student development, helping them gain confidence while still having a support system. It shows that parental involvement, when not excessive, encourages students to take responsibility and learn from their own experiences.

In terms of independence, students show a reasonable ability to handle their responsibilities, although some dependence on parents still exists in important situations. Self-direction among students is relatively strong, especially in goal-setting and self-improvement, though areas like time management require improvement. Ethical thinking was found to be the strongest aspect, reflecting the positive influence of parental values such as honesty and responsibility. Overall, the study highlights that balanced parental involvement plays a positive role in shaping confident, responsible, and ethically aware individuals.

Keywords: Parental Involvement; College Students; Independence; Self-Direction; Ethical Thinking; Student Development; Decision-Making; Higher Education.

Introduction

College life marks a major transition from dependence on family to greater personal responsibility. Students begin to manage their academic work, daily activities, and life choices with increasing freedom. At the same time, many still rely on their parents for emotional support, financial assistance, guidance,

and reassurance. Parental involvement, therefore, continues beyond school and remains an important influence during higher education.

Parental involvement includes the ways parents communicate with their children, guide decisions, monitor progress, and provide support at home and outside. For some students, this involvement helps them feel encouraged, motivated, and secure. For others, too much involvement may limit opportunities to take responsibility, make independent choices, and learn from experience. The balance between guidance and autonomy becomes especially important during the college years.

Independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking are key abilities that students are expected to develop at this stage. Independence refers to managing one's own tasks and decisions. Self-direction involves setting goals, planning, and taking initiative without constant supervision. Ethical thinking relates to honesty, responsibility, and making choices based on values rather than pressure. Parents can influence each of these areas through the expectations they set, the support they provide, and the freedom they allow.

In contexts where family ties are strong, parents often stay closely connected to their children's college life. This raises an important question: does parental involvement help students grow, or does it sometimes restrict their independence? Understanding this relationship is important for families, educators, and institutions.

The present study examines how parental involvement relates to college students' independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking. It explores how students perceive their parents' role and whether involvement supports or limits their personal development. The findings aim to provide insights that can guide parents in offering support while still encouraging students to become confident, responsible, and ethically aware adults.

2. Literature review

2.1 Parental Involvement in Higher Education

Parental involvement has gradually evolved from being viewed solely as support for schoolchildren to being recognized as a continuing presence during the college years. As students enter higher education, parents remain important figures who contribute emotional support, financial stability, and decision-making guidance. Although college represents a developmental stage characterized by increasing autonomy, many young adults continue to rely on their parents for reassurance and orientation. Parental involvement in this phase may therefore be understood as a dynamic construct that adapts to changing roles and expectations rather than disappearing entirely.

Researchers describe parental involvement as a set of behaviours through which parents maintain communication, monitor progress, and assist with challenges experienced by their children (Cullaty, 2011). At the same time, involvement must coexist with emerging independence. Parental engagement that is responsive, respectful, and flexible tends to promote positive adjustment, whereas highly directive or intrusive involvement may create tension. Sax and Wartman (2010) emphasize that frequent contact between college students and parents has become characteristic of contemporary academic life, particularly with the growth of digital communication. Yet, involvement that encourages responsibility while avoiding over-control is regarded as most beneficial for student development.

The literature therefore positions parental involvement during higher education as a balancing act. Parents remain influential, but their role shifts from supervision toward guidance. The success of this transition depends largely on how well parents adapt their expectations to their child's developmental stage and capacity for independent functioning.

2.2 Parental Involvement and Student Independence

Independence is widely recognized as a core developmental outcome of the college experience. It refers to the capacity to make choices, manage responsibilities, and assume accountability for one's own actions. Independence does not imply a rejection of parental influence; instead, it involves a gradual re-negotiation of roles as students become capable of governing their own decisions.

Empirical studies indicate that parental involvement can be either supportive or restrictive depending on its form. Lewis et al. (2015) suggests that parents who encourage problem-solving, permit reasonable risk-taking, and allow students to experience the consequences of their actions contribute to the growth of independent functioning. Conversely, excessive monitoring or persistent decision-making on behalf of the student may delay the development of autonomy and foster dependence. Students themselves often describe a desire for parental presence, yet simultaneously recognize the need for space to learn through personal experience (VanFossen, 2005).

Independence therefore emerges as a negotiated outcome rather than an automatic result of attending college. When parents adopt developmental expectations that recognize their children as emerging adults, independence is strengthened. When involvement remains overly directive, students may struggle to internalize responsibility and decision-making confidence.

2.3 Self-Direction as a Developmental Competency

Self-direction represents another key construct associated with successful educational and personal outcomes in higher education. It encompasses behaviours such as goal-setting, time management, self-evaluation, and persistence in tasks. A self-directed learner is one who plans activities intentionally and takes initiative rather than relying on external pressure.

Research emphasizes that parental involvement plays a formative role in shaping these competencies. Wolf et al. (2009) argue that parental encouragement, expectations, and interest in academic progress help foster disciplined habits and internal motivation. However, motivation is strongest when students perceive themselves as owners of their choices. Overly prescriptive parental guidance can undermine intrinsic motivation by shifting responsibility away from the student (Mailhot et al., 2017). In contrast, involvement that communicates support while recognizing student agency contributes to greater confidence in independently managing academic challenges (Niu, 2016).

Thus, the literature suggests that self-direction develops most effectively within environments that combine supportive family relationships with gradually increasing expectations for personal initiative.

2.4 Ethical Thinking and Parental Influence

Ethical thinking refers to the ability to evaluate situations through moral principles such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility. College environments expose students to new dilemmas involving academic integrity, interpersonal relationships, and social conduct. Families continue to provide moral reference points during this process, shaping how students interpret right and wrong.

Parents influence ethical reasoning through modelling behaviour, setting expectations, and discussing consequences of actions. Batool and Raiz (2020) report that students who perceive strong parental guidance demonstrate higher levels of responsibility and social awareness. Likewise, Harper et al. (2009) observe that conversations about integrity, respect, and accountability reinforce students' moral frameworks as they encounter complex choices. At the same time, inconsistent or disengaged parental involvement may weaken moral guidance and create uncertainty about ethical standards. Ethical thinking, therefore, develops through continuous interaction between family values and new experiences

encountered in college. Parental involvement remains an important stabilizing factor, particularly when it emphasizes reflective judgment rather than strict control.

Research Questions

This study aimed to determine the effects of Parental Involvement in the Lives of College Students, Impact on Student Independence, Self-Direction and Ethical Thinking with reference to students of Dakshina Kannada district. Specifically, the researchers sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of the following:

- 1.1 Age
- 1.2 Gender
- 1.3 Course level
- 1.4 Current year of study
- 1.5 Living situation during study

2. Level of parental involvement in college students

- 2.1 If you stay in rental flat or hostel, how often do your parents contact you in a week?
- 2.2 My parents talk to me regularly about my studies.
- 2.3 I tell my parents about my personal problems.
- 2.4 My parents help me when I feel confused.
- 2.5 My parents check on me very often.
- 2.6 My parents have taught me to be honest.

3. Impact on student independence

- 3.1 I ask my parents before making any big decision.
- 3.2 My parents give me the freedom to decide for myself.
- 3.3 I make most of my own decisions.
- 3.4 I don't need help from my parents for small things.
- 3.5 I take care of my studies and personal work on my own.
- 3.6 I feel confident staying away from home.
- 3.7 I take part in college activities by my own choice.
- 3.8 When you have to choose a college activity, what do you do?

4. Impact on self self direction

- 4.1 I feel that my parents trust me to do well.
- 4.2 I set my own goals and try to achieve them.
- 4.3 I do my work without being told again and again.
- 4.4 I try to improve myself by learning new things.

5. Impact on ethical thinking

- 5.1 I plan my time to finish tasks properly.
- 5.2 I do the right thing even if it is difficult.
- 5.3 I tell the truth even if I may get into trouble.
- 5.4 When you make a mistake, what do you do?

Objectives

1. To examine the extent and nature of parental involvement in the academic and personal lives of college students.

2. To analyse how parental involvement affects the level of independence and self-direction among college students.
3. To assess the influence of parental involvement on the ethical thinking and behaviour of college students.

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H₀):

Parental involvement has no significant impact on the student independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking of college students.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁):

Parental involvement has a significant impact on the student independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking of college students.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design. It aims to understand how parental involvement affects the independence, decision-making ability, and ethical values of college students.

Area of Study

The study was conducted among college students of Dakshina Kannada District. It provides access various college going students from various backgrounds, in order to understand the study which influence of parental involvement.

Research Approach

The study followed a quantitative approach. Quantitative data technique means conducting the research or survey by questionnaire in order to collect the data.

Population of the Study

The population of the study includes undergraduate and postgraduate students currently studying in colleges. Due to limitations in time and resources, not all students could be included in the research.

Sampling and Sample Size

Sample Size: The size of the data is 200 samples of in and around the Dakshina Kannada district

Sampling Technique: A convenience sampling technique was used due to the accessibility of respondents and limited timeframe.

Type and Sources of Data

1. **Primary Data:** Primary data was collected directly from the students through structured questionnaires, which included both close-ended and Likert-scale questions.
2. **Secondary Data:** Secondary data was obtained from academic journals, published research papers, and institutional reports related to parental involvement, student behavior, and ethical development in higher education.

Measurement of Variables

Independent Variable: Parental involvement

Dependent Variables: Student independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking

Extraneous variable: Peer influence, cultural background, living situation, personality type, faculty influence.

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students currently enrolled in various colleges in Dakshina Kannada District. They were selected using a convenience sampling technique, based on their availability and willingness to participate.

Instruments

The primary data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers. The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

1. **Demographic Profile:** Included questions related to age, gender, course, and level of study.
2. **Parental Involvement Scale:** Measured the extent of parental involvement in academic, emotional, financial, and moral aspects.
3. **Independence and Self-Direction Scale:** Assessed decision-making ability, goal-setting, responsibility, and self-motivation.
4. **Ethical Thinking Scale:** Evaluated values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, and moral judgment. Most items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire was designed to be simple, clear, and easy to understand for the respondents.

Procedure

Prior permission was obtained from the respondents before administering the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms to ensure ease of access and confidentiality. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would be used strictly for academic purposes. After the collection of responses, the data were carefully screened, coded, and organized for analysis.

Statistical Treatment

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical tools such as percentages, frequencies, and mean scores to summarize respondent characteristics and response patterns. The analysis focused on understanding the extent of parental involvement and its influence on student independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking. The results were interpreted in line with the objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1. Gender of college students

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	64	32%

Female	136	68%
Total	200	100%

The gender distribution of the respondents. Out of 200 participants, 64 (32%) were male and 136 (68%) were female. This indicates that females formed most of the sample. The difference may reflect enrolment patterns in the participating colleges or a greater willingness among female students to respond to the questionnaire. The gender composition is important to note when interpreting the results, as perceptions and experiences may vary across male and female respondents.

Table 2. Age of college students

Class Interval	Frequency	Percent
Below 18	2	1%
18-20	28	14%
21-23	160	80%
24 and above	10	5%
Total	200	100%

The above table shows the age distribution of the respondents. The majority of students (80%) were between 21–23 years old, followed by 14% in the 18–20 age group. A small proportion were below 18 years (1%) and 5% were 24 years and above. This shows that most participants were in the typical college-going age range, particularly early adulthood. The concentration of respondents in the 21–23 category suggests that the findings largely reflect the experiences of students who are nearing the completion of their undergraduate or early postgraduate studies.

Table 3. Mean Level of Parental Involvement Among College Students

Indicators	Mean	SD
My parents talk to me regularly about my studies.	5.04	1.47
I tell my parents about my personal problems.	4.67	1.88
My parents help me when I feel confused.	5.42	1.66
I ask my parents before making any big decision.	5.81	1.58
My parents give me the freedom to decide for myself.	5.21	1.74
My parents check on me very often.	3.79	1.03
I feel that my parents trust me to do well.	5.84	1.51

Table 4. Mean Scores for Independence, Self-Direction, and Ethical Thinking

A. Independence

Indicators	Mean	SD
I make most of my own decisions.	4.73	1.70

I don't need help from my parents for small things.	4.63	1.91
I take care of my studies and personal work on my own.	5.48	1.45
I feel confident staying away from home.	4.42	1.91

B. Self-Direction

Indicators	Mean	SD
I set my own goals and try to achieve them.	5.70	1.46
I do my work without being told again and again.	5.16	1.61
I plan my time to finish tasks properly.	3.56	1.84
I try to improve myself by learning new things.	5.54	1.54
I take part in college activities by my own choice.	3.64	1.88

C. Ethical Thinking

Indicators	Mean	SD
My parents have taught me to be honest.	6.06	1.33
I do the right thing even if it is difficult.	5.62	1.47
I tell the truth even if I may get into trouble.	5.18	1.79

Table 3 shows the mean scores related to parental involvement. The results indicate generally high levels of parental engagement across most indicators. Students strongly agreed that they ask their parents before making major decisions (M = 5.81), feel trusted by their parents (M = 5.84), and receive help when confused (M = 5.42). They also reported frequent communication about studies (M = 5.04) and freedom to decide for themselves (M = 5.21), suggesting that parents provide both guidance and autonomy. However, the mean score for being “checked on very often” was comparatively lower (M = 3.79), indicating that while parents remain involved, they may avoid excessive monitoring. Overall, the results suggest a supportive involvement style characterized by guidance, communication, and trust rather than strict control.

Table 4A presents the level of independence among college students. Respondents reported being largely capable of managing their own tasks and responsibilities. The highest mean score was observed for taking care of studies and personal work independently (M = 5.48), followed by making one’s own decisions (M = 4.73). Students also felt moderately confident staying away from home (M = 4.42). The findings indicate that while students show considerable independence in academic and daily life matters, there remains some reliance on parents, particularly in emotionally challenging or unfamiliar situations.

Table 4B examines self-direction. Students reported strong agreement with setting goals and striving to achieve them (M = 5.70) and engaging in learning to improve themselves (M = 5.54). They also stated that they usually work without repeated reminders (M = 5.16). Lower mean scores were seen for planning time effectively (M = 3.56) and participating in college activities by personal choice (M = 3.64). This suggests that although motivation and initiative are present, students may still struggle with time management and involvement in extracurricular activities. Overall, self-direction appears moderately high but uneven across behaviours.

Table 4C presents students’ ethical thinking. The highest mean score was observed for the statement that parents taught them to be honest (M = 6.06), showing strong moral guidance received at home. Students

also agreed that they try to do the right thing even when difficult ($M = 5.62$) and that they tell the truth even when it may result in trouble ($M = 5.18$). These findings indicate a generally strong ethical orientation among respondents and suggest that parental values continue to influence decision-making during college.

Table 6. Descriptive Summary of Main Study Variables

Domains	Mean (M)	SD
Parental Involvement	3.79	0.81
Student Independence	3.44	0.74
Self-Direction	3.78	0.70
Ethical Thinking	3.82	0.74
Average	3.71	0.75

The table presents the descriptive summary of the main variables examined in the study. Parental involvement recorded a mean score of 3.79, indicating an overall agreeable level of support perceived by students. Student independence showed a mean of 3.44, which falls within the neutral range, suggesting that while students demonstrate some independence, there is still a degree of reliance on parental guidance. Self-direction obtained a mean score of 3.78, reflecting a positive tendency toward goal setting, initiative, and self-management. Ethical thinking recorded the highest mean score of 3.82, indicating strong moral awareness and value-based decision-making among students. The overall composite mean of 3.71 suggests that the combined levels of parental involvement, independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking are generally positive. The standard deviation values indicate moderate variation in responses, showing that students' experiences differ but follow a consistent overall pattern.

Findings

The data collected from 200 college students were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The findings are presented under the following sections: demographic profile of respondents, level of parental involvement, student independence, self-direction, ethical thinking, and academic motivation.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The demographic analysis shows that out of 200 respondents, 136 (68%) were female and 64 (32%) were male students. This indicates a higher participation of female students in the study. With respect to age, the majority of the respondents (80%) belonged to the age group of 21–23 years, followed by 18–20 years (14%). Only a small proportion of students were below 18 years (1%) or above 24 years (5%). This suggests that most participants were in the typical college-going age group.

Level of Parental Involvement

The findings reveal that parental involvement among college students was moderate, with an overall mean score of 3.79, indicating agreement. Students reported that their parents regularly communicated with them, trusted them, and provided emotional support when needed. At the same time, students also felt that they were given reasonable freedom to make their own decisions. However, frequent monitoring by parents received a comparatively lower mean score, suggesting that parents were less controlling and allowed students greater independence. Overall, parental involvement was present but not excessive.

Level of Independence

The level of student independence showed a neutral to moderate level, with a mean score of 3.44. Students indicated that they were capable of handling their studies and personal responsibilities on their own. Many students felt confident in managing tasks independently, though some still relied on parental support for certain decisions. This indicates that while students are developing independence, parental guidance continues to play a supportive role.

Level of Self-Direction

Self-direction among students showed a relatively high level, with a mean score of 3.78, indicating agreement. Students reported that they set personal goals, worked towards improving themselves, and completed tasks responsibly. However, time management and participation in activities by personal choice showed moderate levels.

Overall, the findings suggest that students demonstrate good self-direction skills, supported by both internal motivation and parental encouragement.

Level of Ethical Thinking

Ethical thinking recorded a high mean score of 3.82, indicating agreement. Students strongly agreed that their parents had taught them values such as honesty and doing the right thing even in difficult situations. Truthfulness and moral responsibility were found to be well-developed among the respondents. This highlights the positive influence of parental guidance on the ethical development of college students.

Level of Academic Motivation

The findings related to academic motivation indicate that students were motivated by both career-oriented and intrinsic factors. Higher mean scores were observed for items related to future career opportunities, job security, and personal achievement. Lower mean scores were seen for items reflecting lack of interest or uncertainty about continuing studies.

Overall, the use of motivation-related indicators suggests that students possessed a moderate to high level of academic motivation, driven largely by future goals, self-improvement, and personal satisfaction.

Conclusion

The study concludes that parental involvement plays an important role in shaping the development of college students. The findings indicate that a balanced level of involvement through communication, guidance, and trust positively influences students' independence, self-direction, and ethical thinking. While students are capable of managing their academic and personal responsibilities, parental support continues to provide confidence and direction, especially in decision-making situations.

At the same time, the results highlight the need for maintaining a proper balance between support and autonomy. Excessive involvement may limit independence, whereas supportive and flexible parenting encourages responsibility, goal-setting, and ethical behaviour. Overall, the study emphasizes that appropriate parental involvement helps students become more confident, self-directed, and morally responsible individuals.

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