

## Article

# Authoritative Parenting Style and Proactive Behaviors: Evidence from China?

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**Abstract:** Parenting style plays an important role in children's development. This study examines the influence mechanism of authoritative parenting style on individuals' proactive behavior. We propose a chain mediation model for the linkage between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior through self-esteem and growth mindset. Based on a survey of 388 undergraduate students in coastal areas of China, we find a significant positive impact of authoritative parenting style on college students' proactive behavior. In addition, our study provides evidence of a chain mediation effect on the relation among authoritative parenting style, self-esteem, growth mindset, and proactive behavior. Our results suggest that under authoritative parenting, individuals can stimulate more proactive behaviors by improving their self-esteem and developing their growth mindset.

**Keywords:** authoritative parenting style; self-esteem; growth mindset; proactive behavior; college students



**Citation:** Nie, T.; Yan, Q.; Chen, Y. Authoritative Parenting Style and Proactive Behaviors: Evidence from China? *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 3435. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14063435>

Academic Editor: Manuel Castro Sanchez, Amador Jesús Lara Sánchez and Ramón Chacón Cuberos

Received: 15 January 2022

Accepted: 10 March 2022

Published: 15 March 2022

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## 1. Introduction

Parenting styles have long-term effects on a child's development. Parents' attitudes and behaviors toward children in their childhood help establish their personality characteristics and personal development as adults [1]. The consequences of this impact will first be reflected in their higher education stage [2]. In China, for most people, college is the first step toward breaking away from their original family and starting their independent life. Their abilities to adapt to a new environment, develop themselves, and achieve academic success are closely related to their parenting styles in childhood [3,4]. In the field of parenting style, potential moderating mechanisms and their long-term effects have become the focus of intense research in recent years [5]. In this study, we aim to answer the following research question: can the widely recognized authoritative parenting style enhance college students' individual self-esteem, cultivate their growth mindset, and help them adapt to college life more proactively?

## 2. Theoretical Background

Baumrind et al. [6] believed that parenting styles should focus on the requirements of behaviors that parents put forward in the process of educating children. These include the number and the type of requests and subsequent parental feedback on the child's behavior. Parents' thoughts and behaviors about parenting and their effects on children's development reflect the most important relationship between parents and children [7]. Parenting styles can be divided into multiple types according to the degree of parental control over their children's behavior. Heymann [8] found in a survey that positive parenting styles help children develop a good self-concept and cognition, while negative parenting styles reduce children's degree self-identity. The authoritative parenting method has always been regarded as the one most conducive to the healthy growth of children [9]. Under authoritative parenting, parents typically have clear and reasonable goals for their children, pay careful attention to their states, actively communicate with them, and give appropriate feedback to their needs [10]. Compared with other parenting styles, the authoritative parenting

style emphasizes not only warm parent–child interaction, but also restraint, control, and discipline of children [11]. The existing study [12] also shows that children growing up under authoritative parenting styles show less psychological distress and fewer behavioral problems. They are more self-disciplined and independent, and they have a stronger sense of morality [13].

Parker et al. [14] proposed that individual proactive behavior is a series of behaviors that individuals actively take to change themselves and improve the environment with a view to the future. Proactive behavior is characterized by pre-action, which is manifested as an active concern for the future [15]. Proactive behavior foresees, deliberates, plans, calculates, and acts before future events have occurred [16]. The goal of proactive behavior is to change [17]. By taking proactive actions, individuals obviously want to exert a discernible influence on themselves and the environment, and are committed to making meaningful changes to themselves, others, or the environment [18]. For most college students, college life means facing new challenges, leaving the shelter of their native family, living independently, facing increased learning requirements, and managing complicated interpersonal communication. Therefore, whether college students could actively adapt to the new environment and show proactive behavior is crucial to their socialization process [19]. The study of Kwan and Leung [20] found that certain factors such as parenting styles, attachment relations, and family intimacy are good predictors of college students' performance. A large number of studies have shown that children raised by authoritative parents generally have a greater sense of security, stronger adaptability, and are more likely to have a confident personality and good social skills [21]. Moreover, they are more actively involved in university life. The parenting style will affect the individual's adjustment [22]. Therefore, we propose research Hypothesis 1 as follows.

**Hypothesis 1.** *The authoritative parenting style has a significant positive impact on college students' proactive behavior.*

Self-esteem refers to our positive or negative attitude towards self-worth [23]. It is defined as the individual's emotional evaluation of the self. Specifically, it is the degree to which the individual appreciates, values, recognizes, or likes themselves [24]. Self-esteem is important for everyone because it reflects the degree to which an individual is accepted and valued by others in the social environment. Additionally, it is an indicator of the interpersonal value a person perceives with others [25]. Individuals growing up under positive parenting styles and with good peer support tend to have high levels of self-esteem [26,27]. Self-esteem enables individuals to respond more actively to difficult situations, prevent negative circular patterns, and maintain support systems and interpersonal relationships successfully [28]. Therefore, people with high self-esteem generally have high self-confidence. They regard themselves as excellent, capable, and competent. As a result, they usually have high self-efficacy and good performance, and therefore, they are more likely to be able to realize themselves. People with high self-esteem respond more positively to social acceptance and rejection [29]. A warm and strict parenting style makes it easier for individuals to develop a great sense of self-identity and self-control, thereby better adapting to the environment [30,31]. Therefore, based on the analysis above, we propose research Hypothesis 2 as follows.

**Hypothesis 2.** *Self-esteem plays a mediating role in the relation between authoritative parenting style and college students' proactive behavior.*

Individuals with a growth mindset believe that people's abilities can be continuously improved through learning and training. They are able to make positive attributions, face difficulties and challenges actively, and maintain the concept of lifelong growth [32]. They emphasize personal effort. Furthermore, they are not afraid of failure. Instead, they regard difficulties and challenges as opportunities for self-learning and improvement. Thus, they are able to maintain positive emotions in the face of setbacks. In short, they tend to

have an optimistic interpretation style. Even when they fail, they do not experience too much psychological pressure. Extant literature [33] demonstrates that a growth mindset is significantly positively correlated with individuals' psychological well-being, school participation, and resilience. College students with a growth mindset and a sense of learning self-efficacy invest more energy in their studies and achieve a better academic performance [34]. Positive parent–child attachment is closely related to family members' mental health and well-being [35]. Parents' effective communication with children and active participation in children's growth help children develop a growth mindset and self-esteem [36,37]. The establishment of a growth mindset impels college students to proactively adapt to their university life and better meet their academic requirements [38]. Therefore, we propose research Hypotheses 3 and 4 as follows.

**Hypothesis 3.** *The growth mindset plays a mediating role in the relation between authoritative parenting style and college students' proactive behavior.*

**Hypothesis 4.** *There is a chain mediation effect on the relation among authoritative parenting style, self-esteem, growth mindset, and college students' proactive behavior.*

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data Collection

The participants in this survey are undergraduates from colleges and universities in the southeastern coastal areas of China. In particular, the participants are mainly from Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hong Kong, Macau, and Hainan. A total of 500 paper questionnaires and online questionnaires were distributed according to convenience sampling. We stated the purpose of this research on the first page of the questionnaire, while reassuring respondents that all data were collected for academic research purposes only. All respondents answered anonymously on a voluntary basis. Respondents entered the formal answering session after confirming that they understood the research purpose and relevant requirements. Respondents could stop answering at any time, and any questionnaire that contained incomplete information would be considered invalid.

In China's current education system, in the primary and secondary education stages, students are mainly day students. Students return home after school. Students can only choose the school where their residence is registered. Therefore, at this stage, students and their original families are closely linked. At the higher education stage, students can apply to any university in China without regional restrictions, but all students must live on campus, even local students. University is the beginning of students' independent life, but the influence of the family of origin is still relatively obvious. Therefore, this study features undergraduate students as the survey objects. All the respondents are college students who live on campus from their original families. 420 questionnaires were recovered with a recovery rate of 84%. Additionally, 388 of those were valid questionnaires with an effective recovery rate of 77.6%. In the valid sample, 214 respondents are male (accounting for 55.2% of the total sample), and 174 respondents are female (accounting for 44.8% of the total sample). We conclude that the gender distribution of the sample is reasonable. There are 203 respondents under the age of 20 (accounting for 52.3% of the total sample), 162 respondents aged 21–25 (accounting for 41.8% of the total sample), and only 23 respondents over the age of 25 (accounting for 6.9% of the total sample). Overall, the age distribution of the sample is consistent with the age distribution of Chinese college students. In addition, 208 respondents are at research universities (accounting for 53.6% of the total sample), and 180 students are at vocational and technical colleges (accounting for 46.4% of the total sample).

### 3.2. Measures

A five-point Likert scale was employed to measure relevant variables (from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree'). The main feature of authoritative parenting style is that parents help children set clear and reasonable goals, communicate with children actively, and give appropriate feedback to children's needs [10]. The measurement of authoritative parenting style draws on the study of Jackson et al. [39]. Additionally, its internal consistency coefficient is reported to be 0.891. Self-esteem refers to the degree to which individuals appreciate, value, recognize, or like themselves [24]. The measurement of self-esteem is based on the study of Rosenberg [23] and its internal consistency coefficient is 0.896. The growth mindset emphasizes that individuals can continuously improve through hard work and training and they dare to face difficulties and challenges actively and maintain the concept of lifelong growth [32]. The measurement of a growth mindset is based on the study of Dweck [40] and its internal consistency coefficient is 0.892. Proactive behavior is a series of future-focused behaviors that individuals engage in to change themselves and improve the environment [14]. The measurement of proactive behavior is based on the study of Frese et al. [41] and its internal consistency coefficient is 0.899.

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS24, Amos 24 and Process V3.4 statistical software. Descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, correlation analysis, hierarchical regression analysis, and bootstrap analysis are exploited to analyze the data and validate research hypotheses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Validity Analysis

Table 1 shows the model fit and suggests that the four-factor model is the best ( $\chi^2/df = 1.672$ , NFI = 0.965, GFI = 0.920, CFI = 0.973, RMSEA = 0.042, RMR = 0.036). It reaches an acceptable level of statistical significance and is significantly better than other alternative models. It indicates that the four-factor model in this study has good discrimination validity. The model fit of the single-factor model indicates that it is far from acceptable ( $\chi^2/df = 7.920$ , NFI = 0.642, GFI = 0.674, CFI = 0.708, RMSEA = 0.134, RMR = 0.099). Therefore, the common method bias is not a serious concern in this study.

**Table 1.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	NFI	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	RMR
Four-factor model	463.093	277	1.672	0.965	0.920	0.973	0.042	0.036
Three-factor model	720.414	276	2.610	0.917	0.868	0.936	0.065	0.044
Three-factor model	902.646	275	3.282	0.882	0.841	0.908	0.077	0.089
Two-factor model	1139.099	278	4.097	0.840	0.800	0.873	0.089	0.095
One-factor model	2265.139	286	7.920	0.642	0.674	0.708	0.134	0.099

### 4.2. Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was used to examine the association between all variables in this study. After controlling for gender, age, and college, all variables are significantly correlated, as shown in Table 2. First, the authoritative parenting style is significantly positively correlated with self-esteem ( $r = 0.373$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), growth mindset ( $r = 0.301$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and proactive behavior ( $r = 0.352$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The authoritative parenting style is conducive to cultivating children's self-esteem and growth mindset, leading to more proactive behaviors later in college. Second, self-esteem is significantly positively correlated with the growth mindset ( $r = 0.558$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and proactive behavior ( $r = 0.553$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Self-esteem in individuals is typically accompanied by a growth mindset, which enhances their proactive behaviors. Finally, the growth mindset is significantly positively correlated with proactive behaviors ( $r = 0.511$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to show proactive behaviors at school. The preliminary results of the correlation analysis above verify the research Hypothesis 1 of this study.

**Table 2.** Correlation Statistics (N = 388).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	1.45	0.498						
Age	1.55	0.663	0.302 **					
College	1.46	0.499	0.107 *	0.244 **				
APS	3.740	0.701	−0.023	0.058	0.005			
SE	3.445	0.702	−0.035	0.136 **	−0.038	0.373 **		
GM	3.543	0.629	−0.075	0.083	−0.084	0.301 **	0.558 **	
PB	3.450	0.608	0.031	0.123 *	−0.027	0.352 **	0.553 **	0.511 **

Note: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ ; APS: Authoritative Parenting Style; SE: Self-Esteem; GM: Growth Mindset; PA: Proactive Behavior.

#### 4.3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Hierarchical regression was used to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. The testing results are listed in Table 3. After controlling for gender, age, and colleges, Model 6 shows that the authoritative parenting style has a significant positive effect on proactive behaviors ( $\beta = 0.333$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, research Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Model 6, Model 2, and Model 7 examine the mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior. After controlling for gender, age, and college, the authoritative parenting style has a significant relationship with proactive behavior ( $\beta = 0.333$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.346$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). When self-esteem enters the regression equation as a mediating variable, the role of the mediating variable is still significant ( $\beta = 0.476$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Although the relationship between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior is still significant, the effect becomes weaker ( $\beta = 0.168$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that self-esteem has a partial mediating effect on authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior. Research Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Model 6, Model 4, and Model 8 examine the mediating effect of growth mindset between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior. After controlling for gender, age, and college, the authoritative parenting style has a significant relationship with proactive behavior ( $\beta = 0.333$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and growth mindset ( $\beta = 0.279$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). When growth mindset enters the regression equation as a mediating variable, the role of the mediating variable is still significant ( $\beta = 0.432$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Although the relationship between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior is still significant, the effect becomes weaker ( $\beta = 0.213$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). It indicates that growth mindset has a partial mediating effect between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior. Research Hypothesis 3 is supported.

**Table 3.** Results of hierarchical regression analysis (N = 388).

	SE Model 1	GM Model 2	GM Model 3	PB Model 4	PB Model 5	PB Model 6	PB Model 7	PB Model 8
Gender	−0.132 *	−0.106 *	−0.146 **	−0.126 *	−0.073	−0.083	−0.032	−0.028
Age	0.052	0.051	0.044	0.043	0.017	0.076	0.052	0.058
College	−0.040	−0.143	−0.082	−0.085	−0.063	−0.039	−0.019	−0.003
APS		0.346 ***		0.279 ***		0.333 ***	0.168 ***	0.213 ***
SE							0.476 ***	
SE								0.432 ***
$\Delta R^2$	0.069 ***	0.186 ***	0.052 ***	0.129 ***	0.040 ***	0.149 ***	0.334 ***	0.312 ***
F	7.100	17.500	5.530	11.300	4.039	13.423	31.852	28.770

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ ; APS: Authoritative Parenting Style; SE: Self-Esteem; GM: Growth Mindset; PA: Proactive Behavior.

#### 4.4. Analysis of Chain Mediation Effect

The testing results of the chain mediation effect are shown in Table 4. After controlling for gender, age, and college, we calculated the direct and indirect effects of authoritative

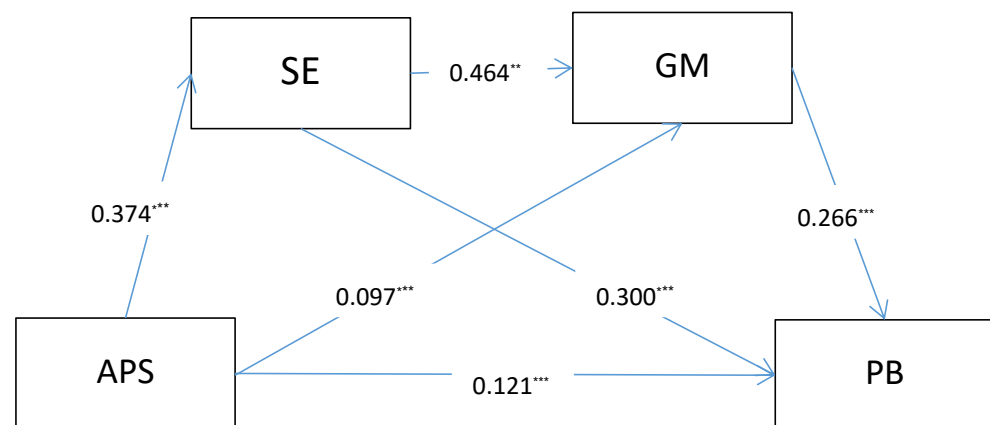
parenting style on proactive behavior. We observe the following direct effect: the path “authoritative parenting style→proactive behavior”, the 95% confidence interval is [0.047, 0.196] with the estimated value as 0.121. The confidence interval does not contain 0, indicating that the direct effect is significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

The estimated value of total indirect effect is 0.184 and the 95% confidence interval is [0.115, 0.260]. The confidence interval does not contain 0, indicating that the indirect effect is significant. There exist three paths for indirect effects. In path 1: “authoritative parenting style→self-esteem→proactive behavior”, the estimated value is 0.113 and the 95% confidence interval is [0.064, 0.167]. The confidence interval does not contain 0, indicating that the mediating effect is significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is further supported. In path 2: “authoritative parenting style→growth mindset→proactive behavior”, the estimated value is 0.026 and the 95% confidence interval is [0.003, 0.056]. The confidence interval does not contain 0, indicating that the mediating effect is significant. Hypothesis 3 is further supported. In path 3: “authoritative parenting style→self-esteem→growth mindset→proactive behavior”, which is a chain mediation path, the estimated value is 0.046 and the 95% confidence interval is [0.025, 0.073]. The confidence interval does not contain 0, indicating that the chain mediation effect is significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is further supported. The detailed path coefficients are shown in Figure 1.

**Table 4.** Chain Mediation Analysis (N = 388).

Path	Effect	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
			LLCI	ULCI
Total direct effect	0.1214	0.0378	0.0471	0.1958
Total Indirect effect	0.1844	0.0371	0.1145	0.2602
Indirect effect				
Ind1 APS → SE → PB	0.1125	0.0261	0.0644	0.1672
Ind1 APS → GM → PB	0.0257	0.0134	0.0026	0.0556
Ind3 APS → SE → GM →PB	0.0462	0.0123	0.0245	0.0726

Note: APS: Authoritative Parenting Style; SE: Self-Esteem; GM: Growth Mindset; PA: Proactive Behavior.



**Figure 1.** Chain Mediating Effect Diagram. Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; APS: Authoritative Parenting Style; SE: Self-Esteem; GM: Growth Mindset; PA: Proactive Behavior.

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

There is no doubt that parenting styles have a fundamental effect on individual perception and behavior. This study seeks to reveal the causes of college students’ proactive behavior from the perspective of parenting styles. All research hypotheses were validated by our data and statistical analysis. Our findings suggest that the authoritative parenting style has a significant positive impact on the proactive behavior of college students. The authoritative parenting style not only respects and understands the child’s wishes, interests, and needs, but also actively responds to the child’s actual needs. Moreover, it also

emphasizes both discipline and rules. The child who is not only fully understood, but also appropriately constrained, has a strong willingness to actively adapt to the environment and complete the task. This finding implicates that individuals growing up in a family environment with an authoritative parenting style are more likely to engage in proactive behaviors. Our analysis also suggests that self-esteem has a mediating effect on the relationship between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior. Authoritative parenting styles help improve children's self-esteem, which stimulates proactive behavior at college. In addition, growth mindset plays a mediating role between authoritative parenting style and proactive behavior. Authoritative parenting style can help children form a growth mindset and adapt to college life more proactively. Therefore, there exists a chain mediation effect on the relationships among authoritative parenting style, self-esteem, growth mindset, and proactive behavior. Under the authoritative parenting style, parents actively participate in the setting and realization of their children's goals, establish a good interactive relationship with their children, and give their children a great sense of psychological trust and security. All these factors contribute to the more positive mental state of their children. The authoritative parenting style helps children improve their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, making them more confident to devote themselves to follow-up actions. Therefore, individuals can increase self-esteem in the interaction of authoritative parenting styles, establish a growth mindset, and stimulate more proactive behaviors in a more confident state.

There are certain limitations to this study. The sample included students from colleges and universities in the southeastern coastal areas of China. There will be regional differences in economic development status and cultural traditions, which may affect the generalizability of the research results [42]. In China's history, southeastern coastal areas were the main channels for China's foreign exchanges. Now, this area is the most economically developed area in China, and it is also the earliest area of China's reform and opening up. It is also a relatively open-minded area. Both history and status quo have endowed this area with some unique cultural characteristics, such as a relatively open-minded concept of family education, which are somewhat different to those in inland China [43]. Compared with other regions, there are more interactions between parents and children, and the relationship is more harmonious [44,45]. Therefore, the authoritative parenting style is relatively more common in this region. This may not be completely consistent with the family situation in China's inland cities. Whether there are significant differences in parenting styles in different regions in China and whether such differences lead to the variety in children's proactive behaviors is not discussed in depth in this study. In addition, this study uses the self-evaluation method to measure the proactive behavior of college students, followed by subsequent statistical analysis to verify that the homology bias is not a serious concern. Paired surveys may be employed to obtain more objective data and to better control for homology bias. Finally, due to the status quo of the research conditions, the sample size of the study is small and does not reach the ideal sample size. We consider to further verify the relevant research conclusions through interviews and case analysis methods.

For college students, leaving the protection of the family and starting to face the new environment independently is the only way to grow. This is a very critical step in their entire life course. Their ability to be truly independent, actively adapt to a new lifestyle, complete their studies well, and start building their own social network is of great value to their personal growth. College students start to take charge of their lives and prepare for future careers. As for parents, they hope that their children can learn to face unknown situations independently and start planning their own future. Everyone needs the company and guidance of their parents at the beginning of their life journey. How to help children start their own life journey is the most important responsibility of parents. Children need more than food and clothing. They also need to learn from their parents' words and actions how to face adversity, how to plan for the future, and how to deal with crises. The authoritative parenting style is an interactive parenting style in which parents help their

children set goals and provide adequate support in the process of achieving goals. Yet, at the same time, parents give their children enough freedom. Children have the right to choose and act independently. Under the authoritative parenting style, children know that they will get help from their parents when they encounter difficulties. They receive encouragement and constant feedback from their parents on their actions, so that they have a full sense of security and self-confidence. As a result, their self-esteem keeps growing. What is more valuable is that children's thinking paradigms also benefit from this parenting style. They believe that they can change the status quo through hard work. Therefore, when they encounter any problems in the future, they will not back down, but bravely face challenges. They will take initiative to strive for the best results. This is the best gift parents can give to their children—to let them become a person with high self-esteem and growth mindset, and let them become a person who actively responds to everything. Of course, the influence of parenting style on children's behavior is very complex. In particular, the internal mechanism has many possible explanations. Moreover, it may be interfered by factors such as personality, community environment, social network, regional culture, and mainstream thoughts, which are all worthy of further discussion in future research.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, T.N. and Y.C.; methodology, T.N. and Y.C.; software, T.N. and Y.C.; validation, T.N., Y.C., and Q.Y.; formal analysis, T.N.; investigation, Q.Y.; resources, T.N. and Q.Y.; data curation, Y.C.; writing—original draft preparation, T.N.; writing—review and editing, Y.C.; visualization, Y.C.; supervision, T.N.; project administration, Y.C.; funding acquisition, T.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Higher Education Fund of Macau, grant number: HSS-MUST-2020-08. The APC was funded by Higher Education Fund of Macau.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study as no identifiable private information was involved.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funder had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

APS	Authoritative Parenting Style
SE	Self-Esteem
GM	Growth Mindset
PB	Proactive Behavior

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