

# Parental Conflict Styles Experienced by Adolescents in Selected Public Secondary Schools in Kiambu Township, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

Conflicts between parents contribute to emotional disruptions in adolescents and their preoccupation with the psychological climate at home. The purpose of this study was to explore parental conflict styles experienced by adolescents in selected public secondary schools in Kiambu Township, Kenya. The study was anchored Using Gottman Theory as a theoretical lens. Descriptive research design was used. The study focused on five selected public secondary schools situated in Kiambu Township Constituency of Kiambu County. The target population was 5,400 students. A sample size of 373 students was used. The study utilized stratified sampling to proportionally distribute students across schools and levels. The Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire was used. Descriptive statistical technique was used to analyse data, which was then organized and presented in a structured format, making use of figures. Results showed that validating parenting style was the most dominant (73%), followed by avoiding conflict style (50%), and volatile parenting style (49%) while the least common parenting style was hostile parenting style (35%). From the findings, it can be concluded that validating parental conflict styles are relatively common among parents in Kiambu Township, and this serves as a protective factor for adolescents. However, the existence of a significant minority who do experience hostile conflict highlights that some adolescents remain at risk of negative psychological and behavioural outcomes, thus underscoring the need for targeted family interventions to reduce hostility in conflict situations. It is recommended that parents be sensitized and trained on the benefits of adopting validating conflict styles, as these promote healthy social development in adolescents.

**Key words:** Parental Conflict Styles, Adolescents, Gottman Theory

## INTRODUCTION

Marriages frequently begin with honeymoon stage, as people are attracted to partners whose differences complement their own strengths and weaknesses. (Agyemang et al., 2020). However, as the honeymoon phase fades, the unique personalities, varying opinions, habits, and preferences influenced by their family upbringings can evolve into sources of conflict (Afandi & Ardiansyah, 2018). Parental conflict are disagreements or disharmony between individuals who are married or in a cohabiting relationship (He et al., 2021). Consequently, it is important to recognize that disagreements in relationships are a common facet of human interaction. Therefore, parental conflict has enduring consequences in the lives of adolescents, with certain behaviours persisting into adulthood (Poudel et al., 2020).

Parental conflict can manifest as various forms of mistreatment, verbal disputes, and displays of anger, physical altercations, and similar behaviours (Zhao, 2021). Kretschmer (2023) and Lange et al. (2021) indicate that these conflicts often involve persistent negative interpersonal dynamics, including accusations, anger, hostility, and unfavourable perceptions of one another. This conflict can sometimes range from highly damaging to highly constructive behaviours (Barthassat, 2019). As a result, the way parents handle conflicts influences children's emotions and actions, ranging from favourable to unfavourable (Barthassat, 2019). The validating style, characterized by open and respectful communication, along with healthy repair attempts, is considered the most beneficial for adolescent social development. Conversely, hostile, volatile, or avoiding conflict styles can be counterproductive (He et al., 2021).

The contention is that conflicts between parents contribute to emotional disruptions in adolescents and their preoccupation with the psychological climate at home (Sturge-Apple et al., 2012). These conflicts tend to have negative implications for the adolescents' social development (Hess, 2022). As a result, adolescents' awareness of conflict between their parents diminishes their emotional well-being and triggers psychological disturbances, which in turn hinder their social development (Gao et al., 2022; Ribe et al., 2018). Furthermore, parental conflicts not only impact adolescents' self-esteem but can also make the environment conducive for antisocial behaviour to manifest (Cao et al., 2022; Luk et al., 2022). Therefore, exposure to ongoing parental conflicts can increase the likelihood of developing antisocial behaviour. Adolescents might exhibit aggression, defiance, or other conduct problems as a way to cope with or express their distress.

On a global scale, 20% of the world's population consists of adolescents, amounting to approximately 1.2 billion individuals. It has been reported that a significant majority of them (85%) reside in developing countries (WHO, 2021). Regrettably, many of these adolescents find themselves exposed to parental conflicts (Barthassat, 2019). For instance, in Netherlands, an estimated 86 thousand children become entangled in parental conflicts each year, and a troubling 4% to 25% of these situations escalate to extreme violence or result in divorce, placing the social development of these children at risk (Tierolf et al., 2021). Research evidence in Netherlands suggest that parental conflict, particularly when it culminated in divorce, was associated with severe psychosocial issues (Van Dijk et al., 2020)

In China, a notable 20% to 40% of cohabiting parents report experiencing notable clinical degrees of distress within their relationships, affecting anywhere from 3.3 million to 10 million teenagers who bear witness to some form of parental conflict (Liu, 2020). Additionally, Chung et al. (2023) have established that in Singapore, 19% of victims of parental conflict are unlikely to support their children's development during their teenage years. Consequently, all of these studies argue that this phenomenon is linked to heightened stress and disruptive parental conflict, which adversely impacts the social advancement of teenagers (Chung et al., 2023; Liu, 2020; Tierolf et al., 2021; WHO, 2020). Thus, these studies from the Asian region show that parental conflict negatively impacts adolescents' mental health, social development, and academic performance, potentially extending long-term effects into adulthood and incurring societal costs. Interventions targeting family support and resources for adolescents are crucial for mitigating these implications and fostering healthier development.

Similar trends have been observed in Africa where estimates indicate that more than 10 million children in Nigeria experience incidents of domestic violence involving their parents annually (Zaki et al., 2022). In support of this finding, a report from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021) estimated that over 15 million children aged 5-14 discontinued their education due to parental conflicts in Nigeria. A current study conducted by Agusiobo and Agukwe-Oluoma (2023) suggested that dysfunctional or disrupted families can have adverse consequences on the upbringing of adolescents in Nigeria. Other research studies have shown that parental conflicts can negatively impact the academic performance of children throughout their schooling in Nigeria, with potential spill over effects on their social development. In severe cases, these conflicts can lead to students dropping out of school as a result (Lukman, 2021).

In Zimbabwe, the repercussions of parental conflict are evident in children's academic outcomes. Marenyenya (2023) conducted a comprehensive study on this phenomenon among school-going children in Zimbabwe. The research aimed to discern the influence of pathogenic households and parental conflict on students' achievements. Marenyenya (2023) used a phenomenological qualitative approach by collecting data from students, their parents, and their teachers. The findings illuminated a potential correlation between households characterized by violence and patterns of dysfunctional family dynamics. Marenyenya (2023) identified a connection that not only influences students' involvement in delinquent behaviours but also negatively impacts their academic performance in secondary schools. It is noteworthy that while the study encompassed elements of parental conflict, it also encompassed dysfunctional households, thereby broadening the scope of the research.

As in many other regions worldwide, parental conflicts are on the rise in Kenya (Kipchilat, 2023). For example, the incidence of parental conflict increased from 10.5% in 2015 to 17.7% in 2023 (Mwangi, 2020). Additionally, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) reported separation and divorce rates of 1.52% and 1.48%, respectively, in 2021. These statistics amount to more than 600,000 cases of parental conflict that impact the psychosocial development of many adolescents (KNBS, 2021). Additionally, a study conducted by Wambua

(2021) found that the high incidence of parental conflicts in Kenya leads to adverse effects on children, regardless of parents' efforts to shield them from the turmoil. Consequently, a significant number of adolescents who experience parental conflicts end up behaving disruptively (Wambua, 2021).

In Kenya, the long-term impact of parental conflict, especially when it results in marital separation and divorce, can be detrimental to adolescent children (KNBS, 2021). Research by Wanjao et al. (2023) in Kiambu County investigated the connection between parental alienation, parental conflict, and the social well-being of secondary school adolescents, revealing a positive link between parental disputes, strained relationships, and the marginalization of teenagers. Importantly, the findings highlighted how affected adolescents often expressed their distress toward peers, teachers, and others in their social environment. Similar to the current study, Wanjao et al. (2023) focused on a specific region, namely Kiambu. However, their research primarily concentrated on the effects of parental alienation while this study was on parental conflict style social development of adolescents.

The purpose of this study is parental conflict styles experienced by adolescents in selected public secondary schools in Kiambu Township, Kenya. It is essential to explore the nuances of parental conflict styles that adolescents experience. Examining the various styles of parental conflict styles is crucial for designing effective interventions and nurturing healthier family dynamics. Exploring these nuances enhances sense-making the various conflict styles that affect adolescents, allowing family therapists to develop targeted and effective interventions to safeguard their social development

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Gottman theory, developed by John Gottman in the 1970s (Tarkeshdooz, 2021), outlines distinct conflict styles that explain how couples navigate marital conflict, and its implications for spouses and their children. The theory identifies four distinct conflict styles: hostile, volatile, avoidant, and validating. The ultimate goal of Gottman Theory is to help couples strengthen their relationships, manage conflicts effectively, and deepen their overall emotional connection (Mansuori et al., 2022). The theory identifies four conflict styles: validating, hostile, volatile and avoidance.

According to Pezeshki et al. (2020), the validating conflict styles outlined in Gottman's theory are characterized by elements such as respectful communication, active listening, and a willingness to consider the other person's perspective, even in the midst of disagreements. As suggested by Kosterelioglu (2018), when parents actively engage in validating each other's opinions and emotions, they establish a positive model for constructive communication and effective problem-solving within the family dynamic. This, in turn, cultivates a secure and supportive family environment. The validating conflict style is widely regarded as being generally healthier for children, contributing positively to their overall well-being. This positive influence extends to their emotional development and interpersonal skills. Importantly, this constructive conflict style is not limited to its impact within the family unit. Its benefits ripple into the academic realm, as indicated by Jeon et al. (2021). The positive and validating conflict style, when consistently demonstrated by parents, has a reinforcing effect on students' outcomes, potentially influencing their academic success and overall performance.

A hostile parental conflict style is characterized by intense and adverse interactions, involving elements such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Mansuori et al. 2022). When applied to the context of parenting, this style can have detrimental effects on children, as noted by Jespersen et al. (2021). The persistently hostile atmosphere within the family dynamic may lead to a stressful environment, potentially impeding a child's emotional well-being and hindering their developmental progress (Jespersen et al., 2021). Kosterelioglu (2018) highlights that the negative repercussions of hostile parenting extend beyond the immediate family setting to impact student outcomes. This suggests that the consequences of hostile parenting can have an enduring effect on offspring's educational and personal achievements. The utilization of Gottman's theory, therefore, serves as a valuable framework for comprehending the far-reaching influence of hostile parenting on student outcomes, as emphasized by Jeon et al. (2021). This insight contributes to the broader sense-making of the intricate connection between family dynamics, parenting styles, and associated implications for the academic and personal growth of children.

Volatile conflict styles are characterized by passionate and open disagreements, marked by a degree of mutual respect. This style not only acknowledges the existence of differences but also emphasizes the acceptance of these distinctions, as articulated by Pezeshki et al. (2020). When navigated constructively within the realm of parenting, this conflict style holds the potential to serve as a demonstration to children that disagreements are a natural and acceptable facet of relationships. This approach is posited to significantly contribute to the honing of skills for solving problems and developing emotional resilience in children, as indicated by the findings of Behmani and Vijeta Singh (2018). However, it is paramount to underscore a crucial consideration highlighted in the literature. This parenting style, if not carefully managed, carries the inherent risk of escalating into a hostile parenting style. The potential transition from a constructive to a less favourable conflict dynamic necessitates a heightened awareness of boundaries. Therefore, a central recommendation arising from this understanding is the importance of conscientious management to prevent the inadvertent progression into a less constructive conflict style. This nuanced insight contributes to the broader discourse on effective parenting strategies and conflict resolution within families.

According to Babbar and Dhankar (2021), the avoiding conflict style within Gottman's theory involve a reluctance to participate in open disagreements, often characterized by a tendency to withdraw or sidestep issues. Although avoiding conflict may temporarily create a more peaceful atmosphere, consistently sidestepping conflicts can result in unresolved issues. This pattern might deprive children of the opportunity to witness healthy conflict resolution within the family, potentially impeding their ability to navigate conflicts in their own relationships later in life. Persistent avoidance of conflict can lead to the accumulation of unresolved issues within the family unit. This unresolved tension may have implications for various aspects of child development, including their socio-emotional well-being and interpersonal skills.

Despite its relevance for explaining couple conflicts, Gottman's theory has not been without its critics. Some scholars like Mardani et al. (2023) argue that Gottman's focus on specific behaviours and conflict styles may oversimplify the complex dynamics of relationships. That is, relationship satisfaction and stability are influenced by a wide range of factors, including individual attitudes, cultural differences, and external stressors. Moreover, while much of Gottman's research has been conducted with primarily with white couples - raising concerns about the generalizability of its findings across diverse couples from different cultural and socioeconomic groups - studies have also highlighted the varying impacts of different conflict resolution styles. These nuanced differences, however, are often overlooked in Gottman's research (Mardani et al., 2023).

Gottman's theory of couple conflict styles was applied in this study to explain the connection of parental conflict styles to adolescent social development. This was based on the premise that children growing up in an environment where conflict is habitually sidestepped may lack exposure to healthy conflict resolution mechanisms. The absence of positive role modelling in this regard could potentially hinder their ability to navigate conflicts in their own relationships as they transition to adulthood. When parents adopt volatile conflict style, adolescents might learn that conflicts are resolved through emotional intensity rather than constructive communication, potentially impacting their own conflict resolution skills in social interactions. Adolescents growing up in hostile environments may internalize negative communication patterns, impacting their self-esteem and their ability to form positive connections with peers. Adolescents experiencing avoidance parental conflict style may struggle with expressing their own needs and concerns. This can hinder their ability to navigate conflicts with peers and form healthy relationships since they may not have learned effective communication and problem-solving skills. Adolescents raised in validating environments develop healthy communication patterns, empathy, and the ability to understand diverse perspectives. This fosters strong interpersonal skills and equips them to build meaningful positive relationships beyond the family.

## METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design was used. This facilitated accurate portrayal of patterns, frequencies, and variations of conflict styles (Asenahabi, 2019). The study focused on five selected public secondary schools situated in Kiambu Township Constituency of Kiambu County. The names of these schools and their respective student populations are provided in figure 1. The research encompassed five schools situated in Kiambu County. The selected schools consisted of three girls' schools, namely Starehe Girls with 800 students, Loreto Kiambu with



1200 students, and Ndumberi Girls with 500 students. Additionally, two boys' schools were included, Kiambu Boys with 1500 students and Kanunga Boys with 1400 students.

Table 1 Target Population

No	Name of School	Population
1	Starehe Girls	800
2	Kiambu Boys	1,500
3	Kanunga Boys	1,400
4	Loreto Kiambu	1,200
5	Ndumberi Girls	500
		5,400

The selection of the schools was informed by the need to ensure gender representation, population diversity, and contextual relevance to the study (Geng & He, 2022). The inclusion of both girls' and boys' schools allows for the exploration of gender differences in resilience, sexual behavior, and psychosocial well-being. With a combined student population of 5,400, these schools offer a broad and varied sample, enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The schools also differ in their socio-economic contexts and academic profiles, for example, Starehe Girls attracts students from diverse backgrounds across the country, while Ndumberi Girls primarily serves a local population (Gitari et al., 2024). This diversity ensures that the study captures a wide range of adolescent experiences within the county. Additionally, Kiambu County presents a relevant context due to its rapid urbanization and the associated social dynamics influencing adolescents today, such as exposure to technology, evolving family structures, and peer influence (Evans et al., 2021).

A sample size of 373 students was used. The study utilized a three-step sampling strategy, beginning with stratified sampling to proportionally distribute students across schools. Following this, a class-based stratified sampling technique was applied to ensure an equal representation of students across all classes, accounting for different age groups. In the final step, individual students were selected through simple random sampling. The use of stratified sampling was chosen for its ability to systematically allocate students based on their population sizes, ensuring a representative and scientifically accurate sample (Mulisa, 2022). Additionally, simple random sampling was preferred for its capacity to offer all students an equal chance of being selected for the study (Mulisa, 2022).

The study used a standardised tool to collect data from the respondents. A questionnaire is a standardized tool that consists of a set of questions paired with specific response options (Taherdoost, 2022). The Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire (CRBQ), developed by Da Fonseca et al. (2021) was used. This is a tool validated for measuring parental conflict styles (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020; Mo et al., 2023). Studies have consistently demonstrated the CRBQ's robust convergent and discriminant validity, supported by findings from Adibkia et al. (2022) and Shute and Charlton (2006), indicating its efficacy in accurately assessing various dimensions of conflict resolution behaviours (Fonseca et al., 2021). Reliability of a research instrument ensured consistency and stability in the measurements it provided, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of study outcomes (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020; Mo et al., 2023). The CRBQ, with reported coefficients between 0.57 and 0.93 (Adibkia et al., 2022) exemplified an instrument that produced stable and reproducible results across different studies and samples.

Descriptive statistical technique was used to analyse data, which was then organized and presented in a structured format, making use of figures. This approach ensured that the data was visually accessible and comprehensible, enabling readers to grasp the key findings and insights derived from the quantitative analysis. By presenting the

data in this manner, the research enhanced the clarity and impact of the study's results, facilitating a more robust appreciation of the quantitative aspects of the research.

The study placed significant emphasis on ensuring the protection of children's rights, as mandated by the law. In line with this commitment, research permit was obtained from the National Commissions of Science, Technology and Innovation. Research Authorization was also obtained from the County Director of Education. The researcher furnished the school principals with consent letters. These consent letters included information on the rights of the students to abstain from participating in the study, the pledge of non-disclosure of their information to any external party, and the assurance of anonymity by concealing the participants' names in the final report. This proactive approach ensured that ethical standards were observed all through the stages of the study. Following the data collection phase, the researcher also conducted a debriefing session with the participants. This step provided an opportunity for participants to discuss their experiences, ask questions, and receive any necessary clarification, ensuring that their emotional well-being and understanding of the study were both prioritized. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the reporting of data to ensure the protection of respondents and participants. No personally identifiable information, such as names or locations, or specific identifiers, was disclosed. The research was undertaken without any conflict of interest.

## FINDINGS

The composite score for Validating Parental Conflict Style at  $M = 3.38$  ( $SD = 1.342$ ) suggests a moderate level of perceived parental validation during conflicts. These results are in line with Matejević and Đorđević (2019), who emphasized the positive influence of validating styles on adolescents' outcomes, and Fihn (2018), who linked validating conflict styles to long-term benefits such as marital stability. The implication is that the prevalence of validating parental conflict styles may foster emotional resilience and social competence in adolescents. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on their ratings of validating parental conflict style. The figure indicates that majority (73%) of respondents rated their parents as having high validating parental conflict style, while 27% rated their parents' conflict style low. The results suggest that most parents used validating styles during moments of conflict.

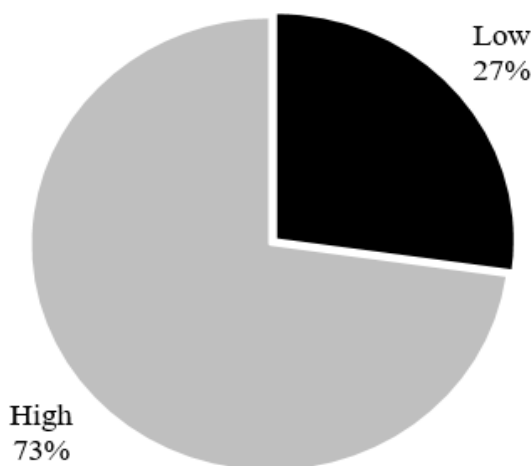


Figure 1 Parents' Level of Validating Conflict Style

The composite score for hostile parental conflict style was 2.35 ( $SD = 1.484$ ), all of which fall below the cut-off point of 3 on a 5-point scale, suggesting a relatively low prevalence of hostile conflict behaviours within the respondents' parents. These findings are consistent with the study by Selçuk et al. (2020), who found that the specific ways parents interact during conflict significantly affect children's behaviour. This suggests that, although hostile behaviours are less frequent in the current study, their presence may still have an impact on adolescents.

The distribution of hostile parental conflict styles among adolescents in public secondary schools in Kiambu Township, Kenya, is summarized in Figure 2. The results reveal that the majority of adolescents (64.8%) reported low levels of hostile parental conflict, while 35.2% indicated high levels of such conflict. These findings suggest

that most adolescents in the sample experience relatively low levels of hostility in parental conflict. This aligns with findings from Kusekwa (2017), which found that while destructive parental conflict exists, its prevalence varies across households. The relatively low levels of reported hostility in this study also resonate with the conclusions by Noviandari et al. (2021), where not all households with conflict demonstrated significant dysfunction. The findings imply that low reported hostility may foster a more stable environment conducive to healthier adolescent development.

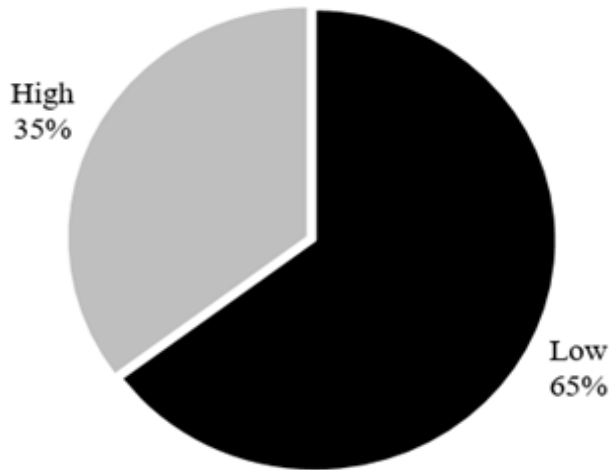


Figure 2 Parents' Level of Hostile Conflict Style

The composite score for volatile parental conflict style was 2.74 (SD = 1.531), suggesting moderate levels of volatility, with some individual behaviours exceeding the cut-off point of 3 on a 5-point scale. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on their rating of parental conflict style. The results show that 51% of adolescents reported low levels of volatile parental conflict, while 49% indicated high levels. These findings suggest a relatively balanced distribution of volatile parental conflict behaviours within the sample. The findings are consistent with the literature by Kuppens and Ceulemans (2018) and Yan et al. (2019), which identified volatile parental behaviours, such as expressions of anger and hostility, as detrimental to children. The alignment underscores that heightened parental anger is a critical indicator of volatility in conflict styles. This suggests that monitoring the intensity and duration of parental anger is essential in mitigating the negative impacts on adolescents.

The distribution of volatile parental conflict style is summarized in Figure 3. The results show that 51% of adolescents reported low levels of volatile parental conflict, while 49% indicated high levels. These findings suggest that volatile parental conflict behaviours are relatively balanced within the sample. This observation aligns with the findings of Kuppens and Ceulemans (2018), who noted that volatile parenting behaviours, while not always dominant, have significant effects on children.

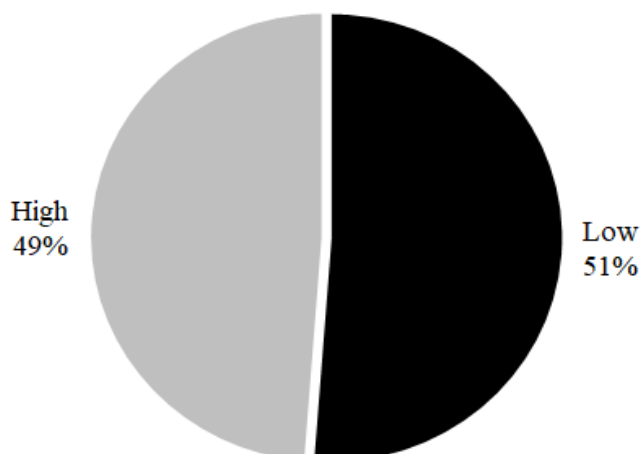


Figure 3 Level of Volatile Parental Conflict Style

The composite score for avoiding parental conflict style was 2.57 (SD = 1.450), indicating a moderate tendency toward avoidance in conflict resolution strategies. These findings are consistent with Chigbu et al. (2022), who highlighted the weak connection between parental conflict styles and tangible behavioural outcomes in adolescents. The distribution of avoiding parental conflict style among adolescents in public secondary schools in Kiambu Township, Kenya, is summarized in Figure 4.

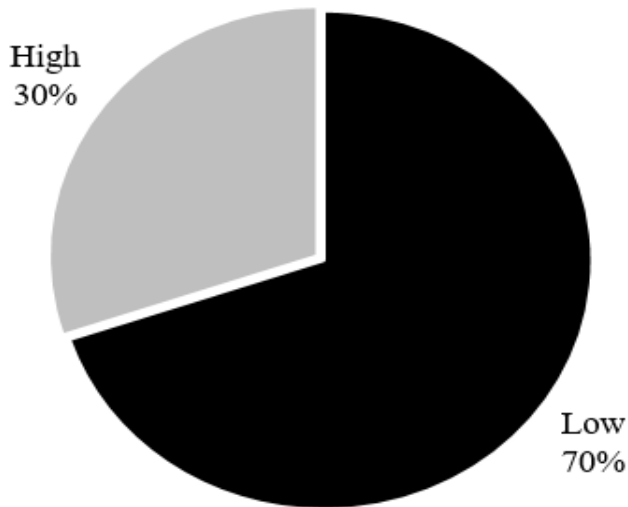


Figure 4 Level of Avoiding Parental Conflict Style

The results show that 69.9% of adolescents reported low levels of avoiding parental conflict, while 30.1% indicated high levels. These findings suggest that most adolescents in the sample perceive their parents as exhibiting lower tendencies toward avoidance in conflict resolution, aligning with Weldon *et al.* (2019), who observed that children's perception of parental conflict varied depending on the communication approach employed by parents.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings, it can be concluded that validating parental conflict styles are relatively common among parents in Kiambu Township, and this serves as a protective factor for adolescents. The predominance of validating behaviours suggests that many parents model constructive communication and conflict resolution, which in turn enhances adolescents' emotional wellbeing, resilience, and social competence. This outcome affirms that supportive parental interaction during conflict can positively shape adolescents' adjustment and development. While hostile parental conflict styles are experienced by some students, their prevalence is relatively low. However, the existence of a significant minority who do experience hostile conflict highlights that some adolescents remain at risk of negative psychological and behavioural outcomes, thus underscoring the need for targeted family interventions to reduce hostility in conflict situations. The moderate levels of both volatile and avoiding parental conflict styles reflect that parents. While the overall conflict resolution climate in families appears more constructive than destructive, deliberate efforts to promote validating conflict styles and minimize volatility and hostility would further strengthen adolescent outcomes. Therefore, it is recommended that parents be sensitized and trained on the benefits of adopting validating conflict styles, as these promote healthy emotional and social development in adolescents. School-based workshops, and church or community forums could be used to equip parents with constructive communication and conflict resolution skills, emphasizing active listening, respect, and empathy during disagreements.

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