



Interpersonal Communication Strategies in Single Mother Parenting to Strengthen Emotional Closeness with Children

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/interaction.v3i1.6147>

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Received: 28-05-2026

Accepted: 09-06-2026

Published: 17-07-2026



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Abstract: Families with single mothers face more complex challenges in carrying out parenting functions, particularly in building emotional closeness with their children without the presence of a father figure. Therefore, interpersonal communication is a crucial aspect in creating a harmonious relationship between mother and child. This study aims to analyze the interpersonal communication strategies of single mothers in building emotional closeness with their children in Sidoarjo Regency. The study used a qualitative descriptive approach with in-depth interviews with four single-mother families with children aged 13–18. Data analysis utilized the Miles and Huberman model, which included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The analysis was based on Devito's interpersonal communication theory, which encompasses five indicators: openness, empathy, support, positivity, and equality. The results showed that all informants implemented the five indicators of interpersonal communication at varying levels depending on the characteristics of the mother, the child, their family background, and their work demands. Openness fosters trust, empathy strengthens understanding of the child's emotional state, support is manifested through attention and motivation, positivity is reflected in appreciation, and equality provides space for children to express their opinions and participate in decision-making. This study concludes that the quality of interpersonal communication is a major factor in building a sense of security, comfort, mutual trust, and emotional closeness between single mothers and their children.

Keywords: *Interpersonal Communication, Single Mother, Emotional Closeness, Children.*

Introduction

Single-mother families have become an increasingly important focus of family communication research due to the complex parenting responsibilities carried out without the presence of a father figure. Besides fulfilling economic and caregiving roles, single mothers are expected to establish emotional closeness with their children through effective interpersonal communication. Previous studies suggest that interpersonal communication characterized by openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality plays a crucial role in developing trust, emotional security, and healthy parent–child relationships (Devito, 2017). Likewise, emotional closeness develops through consistent, responsive, and warm interactions between parents and children (Ainsworth et al., 2015). Despite growing attention to single-parent families, limited research has specifically examined how single mothers apply interpersonal communication strategies to foster emotional closeness with

adolescent children in the Indonesian context. This gap is particularly relevant because adolescents require emotional support while single mothers often experience dual responsibilities and social challenges that may influence family communication ([Baumrind, 1999](#)). In addition, attachment theory posits that early relational bonds between caregivers and children form the foundation for emotional security across development ([Bowlby, 1969](#)), and family structure itself has been shown to shape children's psychological and behavioral outcomes ([Hilton et al., 2001](#); [Lansford et al., 2001](#)).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the interpersonal communication strategies employed by single mothers in building emotional closeness with their adolescent children in Sidoarjo Regency. Using Devito's interpersonal communication framework, this study explores five communication dimensions: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. The findings reveal that all five dimensions contribute to strengthening emotional closeness, although their implementation varies according to family background, maternal characteristics, children's personalities, and work demands. These findings highlight that effective interpersonal communication is fundamental to fostering trust, comfort, and emotional bonding between single mothers and their children. These findings align with developmental research indicating that adolescents continue to require sensitive parental communication to meet their emotional needs ([Santrock, 2019](#)), and that supportive parenting practices help buffer the psychological risks associated with single-parent household structures ([Kim & Brody, 2005](#)).

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how single mothers implement interpersonal communication strategies to build emotional closeness with their adolescent children. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences, personal meanings, and social interactions within the context of single-parent families. This approach is particularly appropriate for examining emotional relationships and communication practices that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurement ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). This design also aligns with communication theory perspectives that emphasize the situated, relational nature of meaning-making within families ([Littlejohn & Foss, 2020](#)).

The research was conducted in Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, Indonesia. The research subjects consisted of four single mothers who had more than one child aged 13–18 years and were the primary caregivers following divorce or the death of their spouses. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their ability to provide rich and relevant information regarding interpersonal communication and emotional relationships with their children. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This technique allowed participants to describe their communication experiences, parenting practices, emotional challenges, and strategies in detail. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or through online media when necessary using an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the collected data ([Koerner](#)

[& Fitzpatric, 2006](#)). This interview approach is consistent with methods used to examine the relationship between parenting styles and family communication patterns ([Isaacs & Koerner, 2008](#)).

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, documentation was employed as a supporting data collection technique. Documentation included interview photographs, personal notes, communication records, and other relevant materials illustrating parenting interactions between mothers and their children. These documents were used to complement interview findings, verify data consistency, and provide contextual information regarding family dynamics. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Throughout the analysis, the researcher continuously organized, categorized, and interpreted the data to identify recurring themes related to interpersonal communication strategies adopted by single mothers. The analytical process continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring that no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews ([Miles et al., 2020](#)). The interpretation of the findings was guided by Devito's Interpersonal Communication Theory, focusing on five dimensions of effective interpersonal communication of openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. These dimensions served as the analytical framework for understanding how single mothers establish and maintain emotional closeness with their adolescent children.

The interview guide used in this study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The qualitative dataset generated during this study is not publicly available because it contains personally identifiable information obtained from participants. Data may be shared in anonymized form for academic purposes upon reasonable request and with approval from the researcher. Ethical Statement. Prior to data collection, all participants received an explanation regarding the objectives of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, and participants granted permission for audio recording. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process by removing all identifying information from the research data. Consistent with recommendations for rigorous qualitative inquiry, data credibility was reinforced through source and method triangulation ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2018](#); [Sugiyono, 2019](#)).

Result and Discussion

The findings of this study were obtained through in-depth interviews with eight participants consisting of four single mothers and their adolescent children aged 12–18 years in Sidoarjo Regency. The analysis revealed that emotional closeness between mothers and children was developed through five dimensions of effective interpersonal communication proposed by Devito, namely openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. Although each family experienced different backgrounds and communication patterns, all participants demonstrated continuous efforts to maintain close emotional relationships through everyday interactions. These findings indicate that interpersonal

communication functions as the primary mechanism for fulfilling children's emotional needs while helping single mothers balance their dual responsibilities as caregivers and breadwinners. Overall, the results suggest that effective communication contributes significantly to strengthening trust, comfort, mutual understanding, and emotional attachment between single mothers and their children. This finding parallels research on Indonesian families reporting that interpersonal communication strengthens children's social relationships and emotional resilience ([Amalia & Natsir, 2017](#)).

Among the five dimensions, openness was reflected in the willingness of mothers and children to share personal experiences, emotions, and daily problems. Families demonstrated different levels of openness, with Family 4 showing the highest degree of reciprocal communication, while Family 2 exhibited more limited self-disclosure because the child tended to conceal serious personal issues. Families 1 and 3 displayed moderate openness, as emotional disclosure often depended on encouragement from the mother or the child's personality. Furthermore, empathy was evident through mothers' ability to understand their children's emotional conditions by listening attentively, allowing them time to regulate their emotions, and responding according to their psychological needs. These communication behaviors created a supportive family atmosphere and promoted stronger emotional bonds despite the challenges of single-parent family life. Similar variation in maternal openness and self-disclosure has been reported among single-parent families in other cultural contexts ([Lanz, Iafrate, Rosnati, & Scabini, 1999](#)).

The findings also revealed that supportiveness, positiveness, and equality played complementary roles in strengthening emotional closeness. Mothers consistently provided emotional support through encouragement, motivation, companionship, quality time, and practical assistance whenever children encountered personal difficulties. Positive attitudes were demonstrated by expressing appreciation, trust, and constructive communication, which increased children's confidence and created a comfortable communication climate. Equality was reflected in reciprocal conversations in which both mothers and children respected each other's opinions and feelings, although the level of equality varied across families ([Henretta et.al, 2019](#)). Collectively, these five dimensions formed an integrated interpersonal communication strategy that enabled single mothers to maintain warm, trusting, and harmonious relationships with their children. This integration reflects broader patterns of family resilience through adaptive role negotiation following changes in family structure ([Anglin, Kincaid, Short, & Allen, 2022](#)).

Discussion

The findings confirm that interpersonal communication is a fundamental factor in fostering emotional closeness between single mothers and their adolescent children. Consistent communication allows mothers to maintain emotional involvement even while balancing multiple responsibilities as caregivers and breadwinners. This pattern supports the interpersonal communication theory proposed by Devito, which emphasizes openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality as indicators of effective interpersonal communication. The study demonstrates that these dimensions operate simultaneously throughout everyday interactions rather than appearing as isolated communication skills.

Therefore, emotional closeness develops through continuous communication experiences instead of occurring instantly. This is consistent with studies emphasizing that communication strategies among single mothers evolve dynamically as children develop their own self-concept and communication competence ([Chaidirullah & Abdullah, 2019](#); [Indrayanti et al., 2018](#)).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce Devito's model by illustrating how effective interpersonal communication enhances trust, emotional security, and mutual understanding within single-mother families. Openness encouraged children to express personal concerns, while empathy enabled mothers to understand their children's emotional experiences more accurately. Supportive and positive communication further strengthened children's confidence in discussing personal issues without fear of negative judgment. Equality promoted reciprocal communication in which both mothers and children respected each other's opinions and feelings. Together, these dimensions contributed to healthier interpersonal relationships and stronger emotional attachment between family members. These results also resonate with the view that empathic understanding, the capacity to sense another's private world as if it were one's own, is central to building trust within close relationships ([Rogers, 1975](#)).

Practically, this study highlights the importance of communication quality rather than merely communication frequency in strengthening family relationships. Although all mothers faced time constraints because of their dual roles, they intentionally created opportunities for meaningful conversations through daily interactions or digital communication. The findings suggest that emotional closeness can still be maintained when communication is characterized by warmth, responsiveness, trust, and mutual respect. These results may serve as practical guidance for single mothers, family counselors, and social workers in designing communication-based parenting strategies. Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of family communication research by demonstrating that effective interpersonal communication remains the primary resource for building resilient emotional relationships in single-parent households. Similar communication strategies have been documented among single mothers navigating fatherless family contexts, where a participatory communication style fosters children's social and interpersonal competence ([Delima et al., 2025](#)), and mothers who maintain work-family balance tend to report better emotional well-being, which in turn benefits the quality of parenting they provide ([Olivieri et al., 2024](#)).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that interpersonal communication plays a fundamental role in strengthening the emotional closeness between single mothers and their children. The findings reveal that emotional bonds are developed through consistent communication, openness, empathy, supportive attitudes, positive interactions, and equality in daily relationships. Although each family applies these communication strategies in different ways according to their individual circumstances, all participants showed efforts to maintain warm and meaningful interactions. These interpersonal communication practices

enable children to feel accepted, valued, and emotionally supported despite the absence of a father figure. Overall, the study confirms that effective interpersonal communication is a key factor in fostering secure and harmonious relationships within single-mother families. This finding reinforces developmental perspectives suggesting that emotional closeness in adolescence continues to depend heavily on the quality of parent-child communication despite adolescents' growing autonomy ([Steinberg, 2014](#)).

The study also indicates that the quality of communication is more influential than the quantity of interactions in building emotional closeness. Mutual understanding, active listening, and emotional responsiveness contribute to the development of trust and stronger family relationships. The findings suggest that single mothers who communicate openly and empathetically are more successful in addressing their children's emotional and developmental needs. These results provide practical implications for family communication practices and may serve as a reference for future studies on interpersonal communication within diverse family structures. Future research is encouraged to involve broader participant groups and different family contexts to expand the understanding of interpersonal communication strategies in promoting emotional well-being.

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