



Research Article

Interpersonal Communication Cues in Mother-Daughter Interactions and the Upbringing of the Girl-Child in South-South Nigeria

Ogochukwu Celestina Osafire, PhD, Venatus Nosike Agbanu, PhD & Gideon Uchechukwu Nwafor, PhD

About Article

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About the Authors

Ogochukwu Celestina Osafire, PhD

Department of Mass Communication
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-
Ukwu

Email: osafilecelestina3@gmail.com

Venatus Nosike Agbanu, PhD

Department of Mass Communication
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu
University, Igbaram

Email: vn.agbanu@coou.edu.ng

&

Gideon Uchechukwu Nwafor, PhD

Department of Mass Communication
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu
University

Email: gu.nwafor@coou.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication cues, verbal and non-verbal, are central to how mothers socialise their daughters, yet the extent to which specific cue types statistically predict developmental outcomes for the girl-child remains under-examined in the South-South Nigerian context. This study surveyed senior secondary school girls in Delta, Edo, and Bayelsa States to examine the relationship between maternal interpersonal communication cues and the girl-child's behavioural development, emotional well-being, moral value transmission, and willingness to discuss sensitive topics. Anchored on Symbolic Interactionism, Gender Schema Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory, the study adopted the quantitative-survey component of a broader design, drawing a sample of 379 respondents using Taro Yamane's formula, of whom 373 questionnaires were retrieved and analysed (a 98.42% return rate). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's Chi-square test of association at the 0.05 level of significance. Descriptively, most respondents reported frequent maternal verbal communication (56.3% daily) and consistent non-verbal engagement (40.2% always), with strong perceived influence on obedience (83.4%) and respect (79.9%). However, none of the four Chi-square tests reached statistical significance (all $p > 0.05$), and all four null hypotheses were retained, indicating that, within this sample, specific communication-cue categories did not statistically predict the outcome variables even though they were descriptively prominent. The study concludes that maternal interpersonal communication is descriptively salient in the girl-child's upbringing in South-South Nigeria, but that its statistical relationship with specific developmental outcomes is more complex than a simple bivariate association, implicating additional moderating factors such as culture, peer influence, and schooling. Recommendations for both maternal communication practice and future confirmatory research are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication cues, encompassing verbal and non-verbal signals, are fundamental in shaping mother-child interactions. These cues, ranging from spoken language to facial expressions, gestures, and even silence, serve as foundational elements through which children interpret their environment and learn social norms (Ijeoma & Adewale, 2021). In Nigerian families, traditional communication patterns often emphasise hierarchical structures, yet mothers, as primary caregivers, remain the most consistent interlocutors during a daughter's formative years (Olufemi, 2021). In South-South Nigeria, where cultural traditions and communal living remain prevalent, the subtleties of maternal communication play a crucial role in transmitting values, beliefs, and expectations to the girl-child, and can either reinforce or challenge prevailing societal expectations placed upon her (Salami, 2022).

Despite the wide acknowledgement of mothers' communicative influence, empirical scholarship on precisely which verbal and non-verbal cues statistically predict specific developmental outcomes for girls in South-South Nigeria remains comparatively limited. Much existing literature addresses parent-child communication in general or focuses on other Nigerian regions (Bamidele et al., 2021; Obinna et al., 2020), leaving a gap regarding the region's distinctive cultural and religious dynamics. This study addresses that gap through a structured, quantitative survey of senior secondary school girls across three South-South states, examining how verbal communication, non-verbal cues, empathetic listening, and culturally informed communication practices relate to behavioural development, emotional well-

being, moral value transmission, and willingness to discuss sensitive topics.

Statement of the Problem

Mother-child interactions play a crucial role in shaping children's psychological, emotional, and social development, with interpersonal communication cues serving as key channels for transmitting values, knowledge, and behavioural expectations. In South-South Nigeria, cultural norms, economic conditions, and societal changes influence maternal communication, especially in the upbringing of the girl-child, yet limited attention has been given to how specific verbal and non-verbal cues statistically relate to girls' developmental outcomes in this region. This gap is worrisome given persistent challenges such as gender-based discrimination, restricted dialogue on sensitive topics, and evolving societal expectations driven by digital technology and economic hardship. Without rigorous survey evidence testing these relationships, both scholarship and practical maternal-communication interventions risk resting on untested assumptions about which specific cues matter most.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this survey-based study was to examine how interpersonal communication cues in mother-daughter interactions relate to aspects of girl-child upbringing in South-South Nigeria. The specific objectives were to:

1. Identify the types of interpersonal communication cues (verbal and non-verbal) commonly employed by mothers in interactions with their daughters.
2. Determine how verbal communication from mothers relates to the behavioural

development of the girl-child.

3. Assess the influence of non-verbal cues on the emotional well-being of the girl-child.
4. Evaluate how perceived empathetic listening by mothers predicts levels of trust in the girl-child.
5. Investigate how culturally informed communication practices relate to the transmission of moral values to the girl-child.
6. Analyse the relationship between empathetic listening by mothers and the girl-child's reported willingness to discuss sensitive topics.

Research Hypotheses

H0₁: Verbal communication cues from mothers have no significant influence on the behavioural development of the girl-child.

H0₂: Non-verbal communication cues from mothers do not significantly affect the emotional well-being of the girl-child.

H0₃: Culturally informed communication practices have no significant influence on the transmission of moral and social values to the girl-child.

H0₄: There is no significant relationship between empathetic listening by mothers and the girl-child's willingness to discuss sensitive topics.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes survey-based, quantifiable evidence to a literature that has often relied on qualitative or purely descriptive accounts of mother-daughter communication in Nigeria. For educators, counsellors, and family-life practitioners, the findings clarify which communication cues

are most prominent in South-South households and whether specific cue categories are statistically associated with developmental outcomes, information that can sharpen the design of parenting-skills interventions. Academically, the study extends the application of Symbolic Interactionism, Gender Schema Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory to a survey design capable of testing, rather than only describing, the hypothesised relationships between maternal communication and girl-child development.

Literature Review

Interpersonal Communication in Family Contexts

Interpersonal communication cues include spoken words, tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and physical touch used by mothers in interactions with their daughters (Ijeoma & Adewale, 2021). Non-verbal communication, including gestures, facial expressions, and body language, is integral to mother-child interactions in Nigeria, often conveying emotions and intentions more powerfully than words (Adekunle & Adebayo, 2020). The quality of mother-child communication significantly impacts multiple domains of a child's development, including academic motivation, self-esteem, and health-related decision-making (Akinyemi, 2021; Adebayo & Johnson, 2021).

Religious beliefs and practices also shape the nature of interpersonal communication between mothers and daughters in South-South Nigeria. Many families adhere to Christian or traditional religious teachings that emphasise obedience, modesty, and moral integrity, transmitted through storytelling, parables, and prayer sessions

(Okafor & Ibekwe, 2020). Such religious framing can add moral weight to maternal guidance while sometimes reinforcing silence around controversial topics such as sexuality (Uche & Otaigbe, 2021).

Empirical Review of Mother-Daughter Communication Studies

A study in Ogun State examined the influence of mother-daughter interpersonal communication on the sexual behaviour of teenage girls and found that quality communication between mothers and daughters could reduce risky sexual behaviours among adolescents (Bamidele et al., 2021). A broader review of parent-child communication on sexuality and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa similarly emphasised the importance of open communication between parents and children in promoting healthy sexual behaviours (Obinna et al., 2020). In Kenya, Akinyi and Ochieng (2022) found that maternal communication about menstruation and puberty carried direct implications for girls' educational continuity, underscoring the cross-national relevance of the communication-development link examined in the present study.

Within Nigeria specifically, Chukwu (2021) examined gender socialisation in South-South Nigeria, finding that mother-daughter communication plays a central role in reinforcing or challenging traditional gender roles. Eze and Okafor (2022) demonstrated that maternal literacy and communication skill are associated with better child health outcomes, as literate mothers more effectively navigate health information and communicate with healthcare providers. Salami (2022) similarly emphasised the role of communication cues in Nigerian family

relationships more broadly, while Olufemi (2021) highlighted the significance of both speech and silence in conveying meaning within Nigerian parent-child dyads.

Collectively, this literature converges on the view that maternal communication — both verbal and non-verbal — is descriptively central to girls' upbringing across diverse Nigerian and African settings. However, few of these studies test the statistical strength of the relationship between specific communication-cue categories and developmental outcomes using inferential techniques, a gap the present survey directly addresses through Chi-square hypothesis testing.

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Barriers to Open Communication on Sensitive Topics

A recurring theme across the reviewed literature is the tension between culturally sanctioned indirectness and the need for open dialogue on sensitive subjects such as menstruation, reproductive health, and emotional distress. Okafor and Ibekwe (2020) found that religiously grounded parenting in Nigerian families often channels moral guidance through storytelling and scripture rather than direct discussion, which can

inadvertently limit explicit conversation on topics perceived as taboo. Uche and Otaigbe (2021) similarly documented that religious framing of maternal communication on adolescent sexuality in Southern Nigeria tends to emphasise caution and modesty over open, question-driven dialogue. These findings anticipate this study's own descriptive result that personal struggles were the least frequently discussed topic between mothers and daughters (11.5%), and that a substantial minority of girls (39.2%) rarely or never discussed sensitive matters with their mothers despite otherwise frequent general communication.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theories. Symbolic Interactionism, associated with Mead (1934) and elaborated by Blumer (1969), holds that meaning is created and

negotiated through symbols exchanged in social interaction; applied here, a mother's words, tone, and gestures generate shared meanings that her daughter interprets and internalises into her sense of self and social expectation. Gender Schema Theory, developed by Bem (1981), explains how children construct cognitive schemas that organise gendered information and guide behaviour; maternal communication that praises caregiving tasks or discourages assertiveness, for instance, can reinforce particular gender schemas in the girl-child. Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), situates mother-daughter communication (the microsystem) within a nested set of broader environmental influences — school, peers, religion, media, and culture — that interact to shape developmental outcomes.

Table 1

Theoretical Framework and Application to the Study

Theory	Core Proposition	Application in This Study
Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934)	Meaning is created and negotiated through symbols exchanged in social interaction	Mothers' words, tone, and gestures generate shared meanings that daughters interpret and internalise as self-concept and social expectation
Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981)	Children construct cognitive schemas that organise gendered information and guide behaviour	Maternal communication cues (e.g., praise for caregiving tasks) reinforce or challenge daughters' gender schemas
Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)	Development is shaped by nested environmental systems from the immediate family to broader culture and policy	Mother-daughter communication (microsystem) interacts with school, media, religion, and cultural norms (meso-, exo-, macro-, chronosystem) to shape outcomes

Research Methodology

Research Design

This survey design was adopted for the study because it allowed for the systematic collection of data from a large sample of senior secondary school girls across selected schools in Delta, Edo, and Bayelsa States, making it possible to identify patterns, distributions, and statistical relationships regarding interpersonal communication cues used in mother-daughter interactions and their relationship to the girl-child's upbringing.

Population and Sample Size

The population comprised senior secondary school girls (SS1–SS3) in selected all-girls government and private secondary schools across Delta, Edo, and Bayelsa States, drawn from Federal Government Girls College, Ibusa; Akashiede Girls College, Obiaruku; Marymount College, Agbor (Delta State); Federal Government Girls College, Benin; Itohan Grammar School; Presentation National High School (Edo State); and Federal Government Girls College, Imiringi; Community Girls Secondary School, Otuoque; and Saint Jude's Girls Secondary School, Yenagoa (Bayelsa State). From a grand population of 7,246, a sample size of 379 was derived using Taro Yamane's formula:

$$S = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

where S is the sample size, N is the given population (7,246), e is the margin of error (0.05), and 1 is a constant. This yielded a sample size of 379.07, rounded to 379. A multi-stage sampling procedure — comprising school selection, class-level stratification, and stratified random sampling of participants — was used to

ensure proportional representation across states, school types, and class levels. Of the 379 questionnaires administered, 373 were successfully retrieved and usable for analysis, a return rate of 98.42%.

Research Instrument, Validity, and Reliability

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering demographic information and thematic sections aligned with the study's six research questions and four hypotheses. Content validity was assessed by expert judges, yielding a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.90, exceeding the 0.80 threshold considered acceptable. Reliability was established through a pilot study of 50 senior secondary school girls in a socio-culturally similar but geographically distinct area, yielding an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.88, indicating high internal consistency, and a test-retest correlation coefficient of $r = 0.81$, indicating strong stability over time.

Results and Data Presentation Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 2 presents the demographic distribution of the 373 valid respondents. Most respondents (57.6%) were aged 15–17 years, reflecting a predominantly mid-adolescent sample, with 20.9% aged 12–14 and 21.5% aged 18 and above. Respondents were fairly balanced across class levels (SS1: 30.0%; SS2: 38.1%; SS3: 31.9%) and across the three states (Delta: 34.3%; Edo: 32.4%; Bayelsa: 33.3%), with 60.3% drawn from government-owned schools and 39.7% from private schools.

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 373)*

Variable / Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
12 - 14 years	78	20.9
15 - 17 years	215	57.6
18 years and above	80	21.5
Class		
SS1	112	30.0
SS2	142	38.1
SS3	119	31.9
State		
Delta	128	34.3
Edo	121	32.4
Bayelsa	124	33.3
School Type		
Government-owned	225	60.3
Private	148	39.7
Total	373	100.0

Types of Interpersonal Communication Cues Used by Mothers

Regarding the frequency of verbal communication, a majority of respondents (56.3%) reported that their mothers spoke to them every day, while 28.2% indicated communication occurred a few times a week,

11.5% occasionally, and 4.0% rarely (Figure 1). Discussions were most concentrated on school matters (25.5%) and future goals (18.8%), with personal struggles the least frequently discussed topic (11.5%), as shown in Table 3.

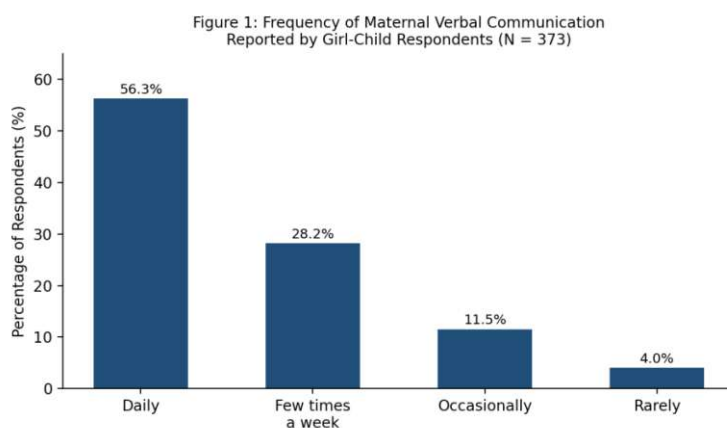


Figure 1. Frequency of maternal verbal communication reported by girl-child respondents (N = 373).

Table 3*Topics Most Frequently Discussed Between Mothers and Daughters (N = 373)*

Topic Most Frequently Discussed	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
School matters	95	25.5
Future goals	70	18.8
Religion	65	17.4
Friends	55	14.7
Hygiene	45	12.1
Personal struggles	43	11.5

With respect to correction style and non-verbal engagement, Table 4 shows that 42.9% of respondents perceived their mothers' words as calm and supportive when correcting them, while

40.2% reported that their mothers always used non-verbal cues such as smiling, hugging, or frowning.

Table 4*Verbal Correction Style and Frequency of Non-Verbal Cue Use (N = 373)*

Communication Cue Indicator	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Verbal correction style: calm/supportive	160	42.9
Verbal correction style: encouraging	120	32.2
Verbal correction style: harsh/judgmental	65	17.4
Verbal correction style: dismissive	28	7.5
Non-verbal cues used: always	150	40.2
Non-verbal cues used: often	130	34.9
Non-verbal cues used: sometimes	70	18.8
Non-verbal cues used: never	23	6.1

5.3 Verbal Communication and Behavioural Development

More than half of respondents (51.5%) reported that their mother's verbal advice had greatly influenced how they behave at home and in school,

while 29.0% said it had shaped them 'a little.' Among specific behavioural traits attributed to maternal verbal cues, obedience (83.4%) and respect for others (79.9%) were most common, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5*Behavioural Traits Attributed to Maternal Verbal Communication (N = 373)*

Behavioural Trait Attributed to Maternal Verbal Cues	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Obedience	311	83.4
Respect for others	298	79.9
Speaking politely	267	71.6
Maintaining good hygiene	242	64.9
Time management	215	57.6

Empathetic Listening and Trust

A significant proportion of respondents (44.0%) reported that their mothers always listened to them when they had a problem, while 38.3% said they were listened to sometimes, and 17.7% rarely or never. Trust

followed a related pattern: 40.8% of respondents indicated they completely trusted their mothers with secrets or emotional struggles, 37.3% trusted them to some extent, and 21.9% expressed little or no trust (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Girl-Child Trust in Mothers as a Function of Perceived Empathetic Listening (N = 373)

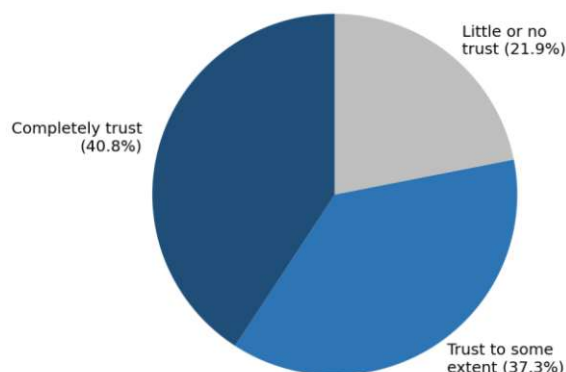


Figure 2. Girl-child trust in mothers as a function of perceived empathetic listening (N = 373).

5.5 Culturally Informed Communication and Moral Value Transmission

Regarding the frequency of culturally informed communication, 38.1% of respondents said their mothers often spoke to them about cultural or traditional values, 34.3% said this happened sometimes, 17.7% rarely, and 9.9% never. Honesty (24.7%) and

respect for elders (21.8%) emerged as the most emphasised moral values. Two-thirds of respondents (66.8%) acknowledged that these values influenced their decisions and lifestyles, while 18.5% reported no such influence and 14.7% were unsure, as summarised in Table 6.

Table 6

Frequency and Perceived Influence of Culturally Informed Communication (N = 373)

Indicator	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Cultural/traditional values discussed often	142	38.1
Cultural/traditional values discussed sometimes	128	34.3
Cultural/traditional values discussed rarely	66	17.7
Cultural/traditional values discussed never	37	9.9
Values influenced respondent's decisions/lifestyle	249	66.8
Values did not influence respondent	69	18.5
Unsure of influence	55	14.7

5.6 Willingness to Discuss Sensitive Topics

A combined 60.8% of respondents reported talking to their mothers often (25.7%) or sometimes (35.1%) about sensitive matters such as menstruation or emotional stress, while 39.2% reported rarely or never doing so. Among those who avoided such conversations, the most common reasons were shyness (23.6%), fear of the mother's reaction (21.2%), and a preference for talking to friends or sisters (22.3%).

5.7 Hypothesis Testing

Table 7 summarises the results of the four Chi-square tests conducted to examine the hypothesised relationships. In each case, the calculated χ^2 value fell below the threshold required for significance at the relevant degrees of freedom, yielding p-values well above 0.05. Consequently, all four null hypotheses were retained: within this sample, none of verbal communication, non-verbal communication, culturally informed communication, or empathetic listening showed a statistically significant bivariate association with its corresponding outcome variable, despite each being descriptively prominent in the preceding sections.

Table 7

Summary of Chi-Square Hypothesis Testing (0.05 significance level)

Hypothesis	χ^2 calc.	df	p	Decision
H0 ₁ : Verbal cues x behavioural development	7.77	9	0.558	Retained
H0 ₂ : Non-verbal cues x emotional well-being	0.91	4	0.920	Retained
H0 ₃ : Cultural communication x moral/social values	0.65	4	0.960	Retained
H0 ₄ : Empathetic listening x willingness to disclose	0.88	4	0.930	Retained

Discussion of Findings

The descriptive findings affirm the extensive literature establishing that Nigerian mothers rely heavily on both verbal and non-verbal interpersonal communication cues in raising daughters (Ijeoma & Adewale, 2021; Adekunle & Adebayo, 2020), with high reported frequencies of daily verbal engagement and consistent non-verbal reinforcement, and strong perceived links to obedience, respect, and moral discipline. From a Symbolic Interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), these patterns are consistent with the idea that daughters

continuously interpret maternal words and gestures as symbols carrying socially constructed meaning about expected conduct. Notably, however, the inferential results complicate a straightforward reading of these descriptive patterns. None of the four Chi-square tests reached statistical significance, meaning that, within this sample, the specific categorical variation in verbal style, non-verbal frequency, cultural communication frequency, and empathetic listening did not statistically predict the corresponding outcome category distributions. This does not contradict the substantial qualitative and

descriptive evidence that maternal communication matters; rather, it suggests that the relationship between specific cue categories and outcomes, as measured through a categorical Chi-square design, may be masked by the coarseness of category boundaries, by genuine multi-causal determination of outcomes (in line with Ecological Systems Theory's emphasis on the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem as co-determinants alongside the maternal microsystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), or by ceiling effects in a sample where the overwhelming majority of respondents already reported positive maternal communication.

This pattern is broadly consistent with the qualitative strand of the broader study from which this survey is drawn, which found that while mothers themselves perceived their verbal and non-verbal communication as directly shaping their daughters' behaviour, several also acknowledged that sensitive topics remained difficult to discuss regardless of communication style, pointing to cultural taboo and adolescent shyness as forces operating independently of any single communication-cue category. From a Gender Schema Theory perspective (Bem, 1981), the prominence of obedience and respect as the most frequently cited behavioural outcomes (83.4% and 79.9% respectively) is also consistent with the reinforcement of culturally sanctioned feminine schemas through repeated maternal messaging, even where this reinforcement does not register as a statistically distinguishing factor across categorical response groups.

The non-significant relationship between empathetic listening and willingness to discuss sensitive topics is particularly

noteworthy in light of the descriptive finding that shyness, fear of reaction, and preference for peer confidants were the leading reasons girls avoided sensitive conversations even where mothers were perceived as attentive listeners. This suggests that empathetic listening, while necessary, may not be statistically sufficient on its own to overcome deeply rooted cultural taboos around topics such as menstruation and sexuality, a pattern consistent with religiously inflected communication norms documented by Okafor and Ibekwe (2020) and Uche and Otaigbe (2021) in comparable Nigerian settings.

Conclusion

This survey-based study examined interpersonal communication cues in mother-daughter interactions and their relationship to girl-child upbringing among 373 senior secondary school girls in Delta, Edo, and Bayelsa States. Descriptively, maternal verbal and non-verbal communication was found to be frequent, predominantly supportive, and strongly perceived as shaping obedience, respect, and moral conduct. However, none of the four hypothesised bivariate relationships between specific communication-cue categories and developmental outcomes reached statistical significance, and all four null hypotheses were retained. The study concludes that maternal interpersonal communication remains descriptively central to girl-child upbringing in South-South Nigeria, but that its statistical relationship to specific outcomes is more complex than a single-variable model can capture, implicating the layered ecological, cultural, and peer-level influences that operate alongside maternal communication.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Mothers should engage in frequent, meaningful conversations with their daughters that go beyond instruction and correction, deliberately creating time for open dialogue about academic, personal, and social issues.
2. Non-verbal communication — smiling, hugging, eye contact, and supportive tone — should be consciously and consistently cultivated, as these cues reinforce verbal advice and provide emotional security.
3. Given that empathetic listening alone did not statistically predict willingness to disclose sensitive topics, mothers should combine active listening with proactive, non-judgmental initiation of conversations on sensitive matters rather than waiting for daughters to raise them.
4. Schools should provide platforms for parental involvement, such as periodic family-communication seminars, to help mothers develop practical, evidence-informed communication strategies.
5. Future confirmatory research should employ multivariate and longitudinal designs capable of accounting for the multiple ecological levels — school, peer, religious, and media influence — that this study's Chi-square results suggest are likely co-determinants of girl-child developmental outcomes alongside maternal communication.

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