



The Relationship between Trauma-Related Problems and Family Communication Post-Adoption

Stephanie Villaire; Jana Hunsley, MA; & Casey Call, PhD
Texas Christian University



Abstract

Adopted children often have trauma-related emotional and behavioral problems, such as depression, anger, and anxiety, and these problems can continue to exist after adoption. Post-adoption, the adoptive family's impact on these problems is not well understood. The current study examines the relationship between adopted children's trauma symptoms and family communication – a construct that is associated with child social-emotional adjustment in traditional, biological families. Data was collected from adoptive families who were recruited to participate in a therapeutic family intervention. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between family communication and trauma-related emotional and behavioral problems in adopted children; specifically, the healthier the family communicated, the fewer problems the adopted child exhibited. Further, we wanted to determine if a similar relationship was found between biological children's emotional problems in adoptive families and family communication. The results revealed a similar relationship: the healthier the family communicated, the fewer emotional problems the biological children experienced. The results of this study indicate that family communication may be a significant factor when considering the severity of adopted children's trauma-related emotional and behavioral problems post-adoption.

Method

Participants were recruited from adoptive families before they participated in a therapeutic family intervention. Inclusion criteria were being a member of an adoptive family, with fathers excluded as not all families included a father. Participants were asked to complete a survey including demographic questions and assessments measuring each child's trauma-related or emotional problems and family communication.

The trauma-related problems for adopted children were measured using the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC), and this study focused on anger, anxiety, and depression. The emotional and behavioral problems for biological children were measured using the Parenting Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ). While the PRQ and TSCYC both record other variables, this study was only interested in the adopted children's trauma-related problems and the biological children's emotional and behavioral problems. Family communication was assessed using the mother's reports on the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale IV (FACES-IV) questionnaire.

Participants:

- 96 total participants (26 mothers, 36 adopted children, 34 biological children)
- Age: 4-51 ($M_{\text{mother}} = 41.5$ years; $M_{\text{child}} = 9.3$ years)
- Gender: Female (56%), Male (44%)
- Race: Caucasian (74%), Mixed Race (7%), African (4%), Other (15%)

Results: Biological Children

Table 2. Bivariate correlations of emotional problems and the impact of family communication ($n = 34$)

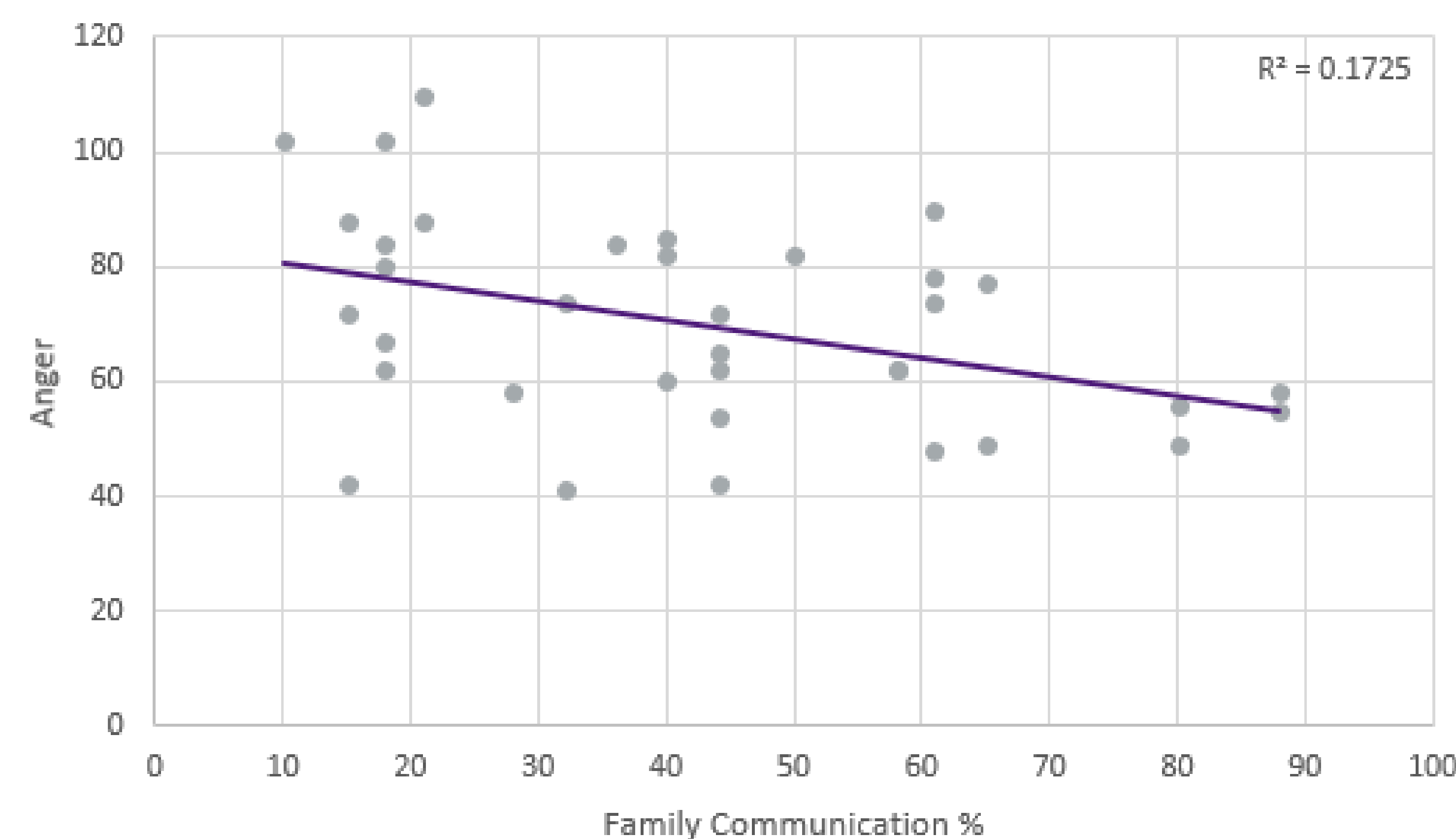
Variables	Family Communication (%)	Emotional Problems
Family Communication (%)	1.000	
Emotional Problems	-0.344*	1.000

Note: Statistical significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The results of this study indicate a significant relationship between family communication and emotional problems in biological children. Specifically, as family communication increases, emotional problems decrease. This relationship could be important in the context of this study as it suggests that family communication is not only related to adopted children's emotional problems, but biological children's emotional problems as well.

Results: Adopted Children

Relationship between Anger and Family Communication



Relationship between Depression and Family Communication

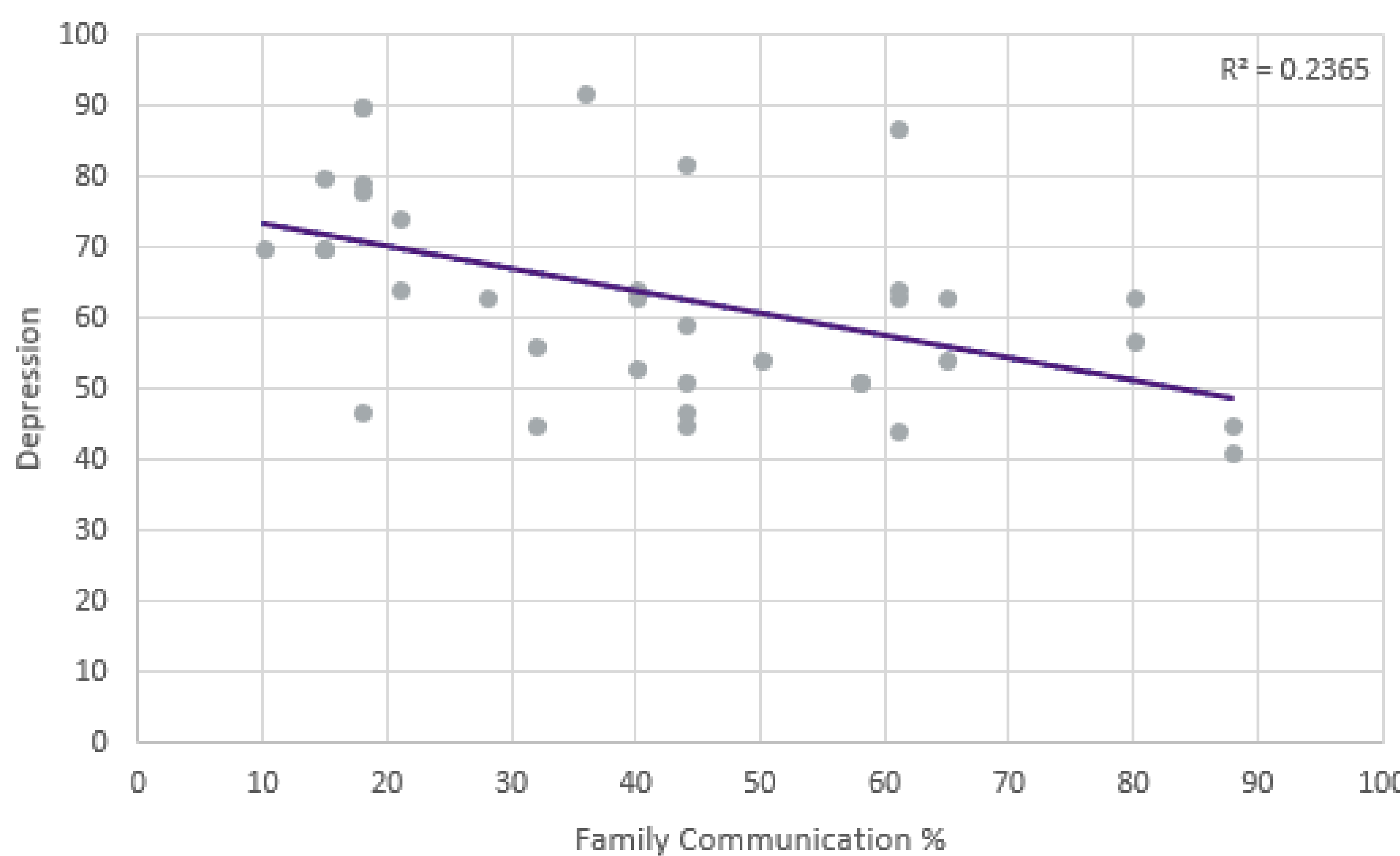


Table 1. Bivariate correlations of trauma-related problems and the impact of family communication ($n = 48$)

Variables	Family Communication (%)	Anxiety	Depression	Anger
Family Communication (%)	1.000			
Anxiety	0.085	1.000		
Depression	-0.483**	0.331*	1.000	
Anger	-0.337*	0.250	0.424**	1.000

Note: Statistical significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

There were significant correlations found between family communication and both depression and anger. Specifically, as family communication increases, depression and anger both decrease. These results are consistent with literature that shows family communication is negatively correlated with trauma-related problems (Rueter & Koerner, 2008).

Discussion

The results of this study reveal three significant correlations regarding family communication. Specifically, family communication is negatively related to depression and anger in adopted children and emotional problems in biological children. Each correlation shows that as family communication increases, the trauma-related or emotional problem decreases.

While this specific population has not been previously studied, family communication has been examined in both psychology and communication literature. Specifically, much emphasis has been put on the Family Communication Patterns Theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006) as one explanatory theory of the importance of family communication. This theory, however, fails to explicitly address adoptive families. This population of adoptive families has also been discussed in the literature in regards to the factors contributing to adoption-related challenges (Soares, Barbosa-Ducharne, & Palacios, 2019). However, such research doesn't describe an observed relationship between family communication and adoption-related challenges. This study and future studies with similar goals can help bridge gaps between communication and psychological literature.

While these results suggest an association between the variables, directionality and causation cannot be determined. Further research can assess family communication and trauma-related and emotional problems at multiple timepoints during adoption to determine whether family communication predicts adopted-related emotional changes. Future directions for this research can also look more in depth at the relationship between trauma-related problems and family communication post-adoption. This can be done in a similar fashion to this study, or in a way that incorporates the Family Communication Patterns Theory.

References

- Galvin, K. A. (2014). Blood, Law, and Discourse: Constructing and Managing Family Identity. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking "Family" Communication* (pp. 17-32). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Horstman, H. K., Colaner, C. W., & Rittenour, C. E. (2016). Contributing Factors of Adult Adoptees' Identity Work and Self-Esteem: Family Communication Patterns and Adoption-Specific Communication. *Journal of Family Communication*, 16(3), 263-276. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2016.1181069>
- Hostman, H. K., Schrodt, P., Warner, B., Koerner, A., Maliski, R., Hays, A., & Colaner, C. W. (2018). Expanding the conceptual and empirical boundaries of family communication patterns: The development and validation of an Expanded Conformity Orientation Scale. *Communication Monographs*, 85(2), 157-180. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637741.2018.1428354>
- Koerner, A. & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2006). Family communication patterns theory: A social cognitive approach. In D. O. Braithwaite & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives* (pp. 50-65). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Koerner, A. F., Schrodt, P., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2018). Family Communication Patterns Theory: A grand Theory of Family Communication. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives* (pp.142-153). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rueter, M. A. & Koerner, A. F. (2008). The Effect of Family Communication Patterns on Adopted Adolescent Adjustment. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 715-727. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00516.x>
- Soares, J., Ralha, S., Barbosa-Ducharne, M., & Palacios, J. (2019). Adoption-Related Gains, Losses and Difficulties: The Adopted Child's Perspective. *Child and Adolescent Social Work*, 36, 259-268. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-018-0582-0>
- Suter, E. A. (2014). The Adopted Family. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking "Family" Communication* (pp. 137-155). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.