



## MECHANISMS OF INTERNALIZED INADEQUACY: PARENTING STYLES, SELF-ESTEEM DEFICITS, AND ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE IN NETFLIX'S *ADOLESCENCE*

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### ABSTRACT :

*This article examines the tragic arc of 13-year-old Jamie Miller—who commits the horrific murder of his classmate Katie Leonard—this study explores how subtle variations in parental authority, emotional responsiveness, and communication dynamics shape adolescent self-evaluations. By interrogating the parenting paradigms exhibited by Eddie Miller (authoritarian control, conditional expectations, and emotional stoicism) and Manda Miller (permissive warmth lacking structural containment), we examine the relational mechanisms through which Jamie's profound self-esteem deficit develops. The analysis demonstrates how an under-the-radar erosion of personal worth, compounded by radicalizing online incel subcultures and peer rejection, culminates in externalized, fatal aggression. Ultimately, this paper positions *Adolescence* as a vital diagnostic text for contemporary developmental psychology and media studies, highlighting the critical gap between intended parental care and perceived emotional rejection.*



**KEYWORDS:** Parenting style, adolescent self-esteem, *Adolescence*, authoritative parenting, authoritarianism, incel radicalization, self-esteem deficit, perceived parenting.

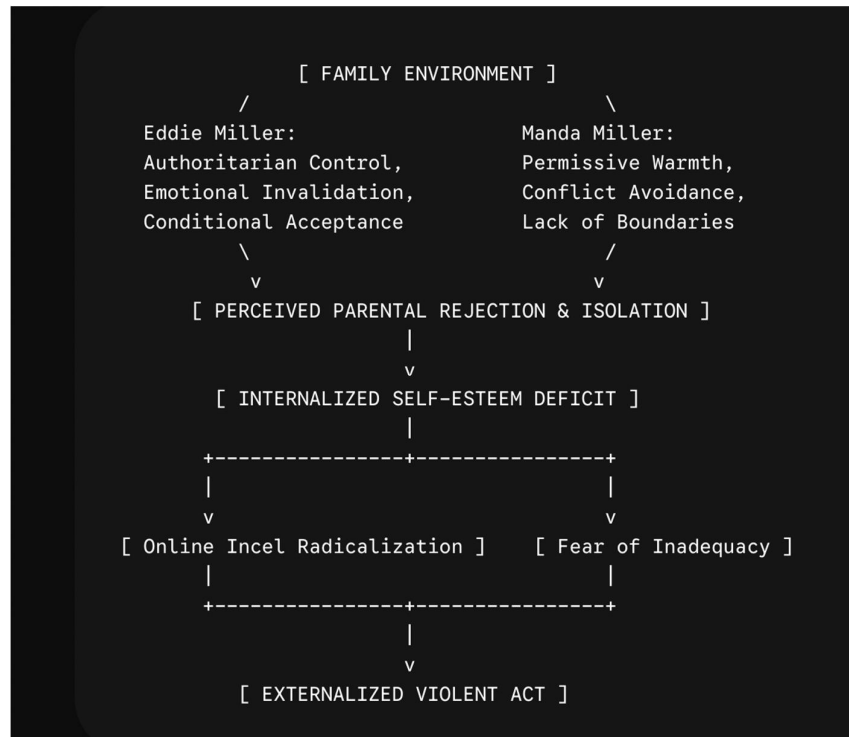
### 1. INTRODUCTION & THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Adolescence represents an inherently volatile developmental window characterized by rapid identity consolidation, heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, and the formation of global self-worth. As Rosenberg (1965) established, self-esteem—defined as an individual's overall positive or negative evaluation of personal value—serves as a primary psychological buffer during this transitional period. While self-concept and self-efficacy delineate cognitive self-beliefs and functional competence, self-esteem reflects the deeply internalized affective judgment of one's fundamental worthiness.

The primary nursery for these self-evaluations remains the family system. Building on the landmark typologies of Baumrind (1966, 1967) and the relational models of Buri (1989, 1991), developmental literature establishes that parenting styles—classified along axes of demandingness and responsiveness—construct the pervasive emotional climate through which adolescents interpret their value.

- **Authoritative Parenting:** High warmth combined with firm, reasoned boundaries fosters self-efficacy, emotional security, and healthy autonomy.
- **Authoritarian Parenting:** High demandingness coupled with low emotional responsiveness, unyielding control, or persistent criticism frequently breeds internalized shame, self-doubt, and low self-esteem.
- **Permissive Parenting:** High warmth paired with an absence of clear behavioral boundaries can leave adolescents without adequate emotional self-regulation or psychological containment.

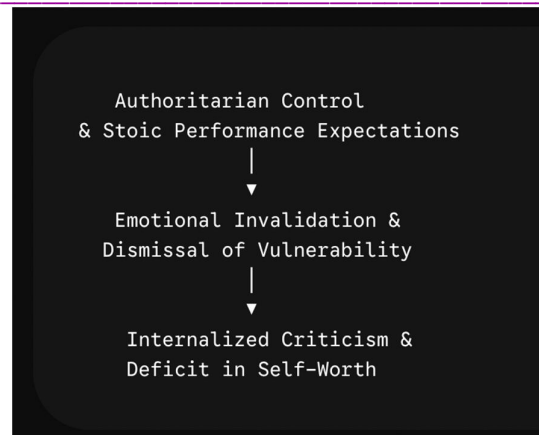
The article seeks to highlight the fact that parenting dynamics do not operate mechanically; rather, psychological outcomes are governed by *perceived parenting*—how an adolescent subjectively processes parental warmth or discipline.



The 2025 Netflix four-part single-shot limited series *Adolescence* offers a stark visual and narrative exploration of these theoretical constructs. Created by Stephen Graham and Jack Thorne, the series eschews a conventional "whodunit" structure in favor of a devastating "whydunit". Opening with the violent arrest of 13-year-old Jamie Miller (Owen Cooper) for the fatal stabbing of classmate Katie Leonard, *Adolescence* forces viewers to confront a harrowing question: How does an apparently ordinary boy from a seemingly "normal," loving working-class home develop the profound self-esteem deficit that fuels catastrophic, misogynistic violence?

## 2. Authoritarian Surveillance, Performance Expectations, and Eddie's Legacy of Shame

Eddie Miller (Stephen Graham) is not depicted as a monster or an overtly abusive father. He is a hard-working, deeply devoted man who desperately loves his family. However, Eddie's operational parenting model is anchored in a traditional, authoritarian paradigm that conflates fatherhood with breadwinning performance, emotional stoicism, and rigid behavioral compliance.



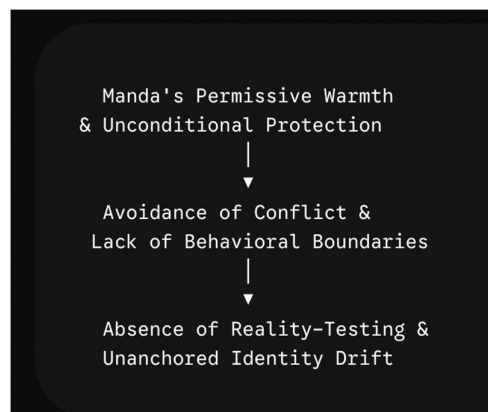
Authoritarian parenting characterized by persistent conditional approval or invalidation encourages adolescents to internalize negative self-evaluations. Throughout the four long-take episodes, Eddie repeatedly demonstrates an inability to sit with emotional vulnerability. When Jamie displays anxiety, fragility, or social distress, Eddie's instinct is to manage, correct, or minimize the emotion—commanding his son to "suck it up" or perform toughness.

In the series' quiet, agonizing moments, the camera captures the micro-expressions of a young boy constantly monitoring his father for cues of approval, only to receive signals that his authentic self is inadequate. Eddie's flaring temper and insistence on male stoicism teach Jamie that emotional distress cannot be voiced; it can only be converted into anger or hidden in shame. Because Jamie cannot meet Eddie's implicit standards of masculine competence, he internalizes a persistent sense of failure.

**Episode 3 Analysis:** During the forensic psychological evaluation in Episode 3, Jamie's defensive posture breaks down as he talks about his father. He passionately defends Eddie, insisting that his father's short fuse does not make him a bad man. Yet, this defense reveals a tragic psychological defense mechanism: Jamie has completely absorbed Eddie's volatile outbursts as his own personal failing. The forensic psychologist uncovers that Jamie's internal voice, Eddie's critical voice clearly indicates that repeated parental criticism forms the bedrock of an adolescent's negative internal dialogue.

### The Paradox of Permissiveness, Appeasement, and Manda's Boundary Vacuum

If Eddie represents the authoritarian pole of demandingness without emotional fluency, Manda Miller (Christine Tremarco) exemplifies a permissive, protective warmth that lacks structured containment and emotional confrontation.



While permissive parenting provides affection, its failure to enforce firm behavioral expectations or constructive feedback can deprive adolescents of opportunities to develop emotional self-regulation, realistic self-appraisal, and psychological resilience.

Manda’s maternal approach is defined by protective management and conflict avoidance. When tension arises in the household, Manda instinctively appeases Eddie and shields Jamie from discomfort. While intended as unconditional love, this pattern creates a boundary vacuum. Manda fails to monitor Jamie’s interior life, his digital habits, or his retreating withdrawal into his bedroom.

In Episode 4, when the Miller family attempts to navigate the aftermath of Jamie’s guilt, the narrative highlights the domestic rhythm of appeasement. Manda and older sister Lisa (Amélie Pease) continuously manage Eddie’s fragile ego, demonstrating to Jamie that emotional truth must be suppressed to maintain domestic harmony. Manda’s inability to challenge Jamie or set firm boundaries around his digital isolation leaves him without an anchor. Her warmth, divorced from active guidance or accountability, fails to provide Jamie with a grounded sense of competence or genuine self-esteem.

Perceived Authority vs. Intended Care: The Tragic Misalignment

A core insight of the framework used in this article is the distinction between *intended* and *perceived* parenting. Parents may intend for their control or strictness to express protective concern; however, if the adolescent experiences it as rejection or conditional acceptance, the psychological impact on self-esteem is damaging.

| THE MISALIGNMENT OF PERCEIVED CARE                            |                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| INTENDED PARENTAL CARE                                        | PERCEIVED ADOLESCENT REALITY                                        |
| • Eddie: Structural discipline to build masculine resilience. | • Jamie: Conditional love and rejection for failing to be "enough." |
| • Manda: Protective shielding to preserve domestic peace.     | • Jamie: Emotional detachment and abandonment to his digital world. |

This tragic misalignment is the dramatic spine of *Adolescence*. Eddie genuinely believes he is protecting his son, working long hours and trying to instill toughness to prepare Jamie for a harsh world. Yet Jamie perceives Eddie’s stoicism and occasional sharp temper as fundamental rejection—proof that he is inherently flawed and disappointing.

This disconnect culminates in the devastating finale. Returning to Jamie’s bedroom after he decides to plead guilty, Eddie sits amidst the silent remnants of his son’s childhood and weeps bitterly. The scene visually underscores the tragic gulf between Eddie’s intended love and Jamie’s perceived isolation. Eddie realized too late that in demanding strength, he had failed to build the warm, responsive bridge required for Jamie to feel secure in his own worth.

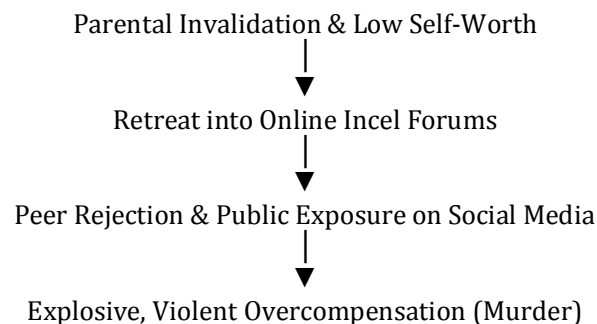
Cultural Dynamics, Digital Subcultures, and the Self-Esteem Deficit

The self-esteem deficit generated within the Miller household does not exist in a vacuum. *Adolescence* illustrates how contemporary digital culture exploits and amplifies an adolescent’s underlying vulnerability.

| Developmental & Cultural Drivers    | Manifestation in Jamie's Life (Adolescence)                                  | Psychological Impact on Self-Esteem                                              |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parental Emotional Invalidation     | Eddie's rejection of vulnerability and requirement of male stoicism.         | Internalized shame; belief that authentic feelings are weak/defective.           |
| Digital/Manosphere Radicalization   | Secret consumption of incel forums and red-pill misogynistic content online. | Externalization of self-hatred onto women; temporary illusion of power/agency.   |
| Peer Rejection & Public Humiliation | Katie Leonard exposes his views on Instagram, calling him an "incel".        | Complete collapse of fragile self-worth; catastrophic narcissistic injury.       |
| Lethal Compensatory Aggression      | Stabbing Katie Leonard seven times in a public parking lot.                  | Desperate, violent attempt to reclaim control and eradicate the source of shame. |

Modern adolescents must constantly negotiate traditional family dynamics alongside digital environments that offer competing definitions of identity, status, and worth. Lacking a secure foundation of self-esteem built on parental warmth and autonomy support, Jamie turns to his smartphone for validation.

In the dark corners of the internet, he encounters manosphere and incel subcultures that offer a toxic salve for his low self-worth. These online spaces provide Jamie with a narrative that explains his social anxieties and feelings of inadequacy, replacing his internal shame with externalized, misogynistic grievance.



The tragedy reaches its breaking point when Katie Leonard publicly exposes Jamie's radicalized beliefs on Instagram, labeling him an incel. To a boy whose self-esteem is already dangerously depleted, this public rejection acts as a catastrophic narcissistic injury.

Jamie's decision to ambush and murder Katie is not an act of unprompted, calculating malice; it is a desperate overcompensation for a profound self-esteem deficit. Incapable of processing rejection or managing his shame through emotional regulation, Jamie uses ultimate, lethal control over another person to assert the agency and power he lacks inside.

## DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

The analysis undertaken in this study of *Adolescence* offers several crucial insights for developmental psychologists and educators:

**1. The Diagnostic Power of Dramatic Realism:** Dramatic fiction can serve as a nuanced case study for psychological theory. Where empirical studies often rely on self-report scales like Buri's Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) or Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, *Adolescence* visualizes the lived experience of these metrics—showing how emotional invalidation and unmonitored digital isolation interact in real time.

**2. Bidirectionality and Perceived Parenting:** The series underscores the importance of evaluating *perceived* parenting over objective parental intent. Eddie and Manda do not intend to harm their son, yet the relational climate they construct is experienced by Jamie as a compound of performance pressure and emotional abandonment.

**3. Self-Esteem Deficits as a Public Health Concern:** Jamie's character arc illustrates that low self-esteem in young men is not merely an internal, passive state of sadness or low confidence. When coupled with rigid gender socialisation and radicalizing digital algorithms, a profound self-esteem deficit can turn outward, manifesting as explosive, misogynistic violence.

## CONCLUSION

Netflix's *Adolescence* provides a haunting dramatization of the theoretical principles on parenting styles and adolescent self-esteem. By examining the Miller family, the series demonstrates that severe psychological distress and externalized violence do not require overt domestic abuse or horrific family trauma.

Instead, a devastating self-esteem deficit can quietly germinate in an ordinary home characterized by authoritarian expectations, emotional invalidation, and permissive boundaries around digital life.

Jamie Miller's tragic trajectory reminds us that adolescent self-worth is actively built through daily relational practices—through parental warmth, genuine listening, transparent boundaries, and authentic autonomy support. Without these relational anchors, the fragile adolescent self remains acutely vulnerable to the toxic lures of digital extremism, with catastrophic consequences for the individual, the family, and broader society.

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