



## FAMILY COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES OF GEN Z WITH NEGATIVE INNER CHILD IN RELATION TO THE QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS PHASE

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### ABSTRACT

Family communication serves as the fundamental basis for character development and emotional well-being. Unhealthy family communication—such as being closed-off, overly critical, or lacking in validation—poses a risk of forming a negative inner child. A negative inner child refers to adverse childhood experiences that impact an individual's emotional life in adulthood. Gen Z, a generation raised during the digital era and under intense social pressures, often carries negative inner child experiences from childhood, which influence their adult lives. These emotional wounds may lead to difficulties in emotional regulation, establishing healthy relationships, and coping with life challenges—especially during the quarter-life crisis phase, a period of identity crisis typically occurring between the ages of 20 and 30, marked by anxiety due to social pressure and confusion in determining life direction and purpose. This study aims to analyze and understand the subjective experiences of Gen Z individuals with negative inner child in the context of the quarter-life crisis, particularly how emotional wounds from unhealthy family communication during childhood contribute to patterns of thinking, communication, and decision-making in adulthood. This research employs a phenomenological approach, involving in-depth interviews with three Gen Z participants aged 20–30 who have experienced a negative inner child. The findings indicate that Gen Z individuals with negative inner child experiences and authoritarian, affectionless, or pressure-filled family communication tend to suffer from identity confusion and a lack of direction in determining life goals. This study emphasizes the importance of healthy family communication in fostering emotional resilience and adaptive capacity among Gen Z as they face their future lives.

**Keywords:** Gen Z, Family Communication, Negative Inner Child, Quarter-Life Crisis, Emotional Well-being

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Communication within the family serves as the primary foundation in shaping an individual's character and emotional well-being (Rofiq & Nihayah, 2018). Family communication represents the initial communicative environment a person experiences, where interactions formed during childhood significantly influence how one understands oneself, builds relationships, and copes with life's pressures in the future (Indriani & Hendriani, 2022). When family communication is open, supportive, and empathetic, individuals are more likely to develop self-confidence, a sense of security, and healthy emotional regulation abilities (Humam Ramadhan et al., 2023; Dalimunthe, 2022). Conversely, closed-off communication patterns, constant criticism, lack of validation, or even verbal abuse, pose a risk of creating emotional wounds that persist into adulthood (Juwita et al., 2022). These wounds are often embedded within the deepest parts of the self, commonly referred to as the inner child—an emotional aspect formed from early childhood experiences (Sumiyati, 2016).

The inner child is the emotional part within an individual that is shaped by childhood experiences, both positive and negative (Surianti, 2022). A negative inner child may develop through the communication one experiences within the family during childhood. It is typically formed as a result of traumatic experiences such as neglect, abuse, lack of affection, or dysfunctional parenting patterns. These emotional wounds lead to difficulties in managing emotions, establishing healthy relationships, and coping with life's challenges (Aini & Wulan, 2023; Kholil et al., 2024). The impact is often reflected in behaviors such as low self-confidence, heightened anxiety, fear of rejection, and difficulty in expressing opinions or needs. Individuals with wounded inner children often feel unworthy, remain passive in group settings, and tend to stay silent rather than share ideas due to a fear of being unappreciated (Surianti, 2022).

In Islam, the importance of healthy communication within the family is emphasized in the words of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

"Every child is born upon fitrah. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian."

(Narrated by Bukhari No. 1358; Muslim No. 2658)

This hadith underscores that the family environment—particularly the role of parents—plays a crucial part in shaping a child's personality and emotional development. When family communication is negative and filled with pressure, it can lead to emotional wounds that persist into adulthood.

A similar message is reflected in the words of Allah SWT:

"O you who have believed, protect yourselves and your families from a Fire..."  
(Surah At-Tahrim: 6)

This verse highlights the critical role of the family in safeguarding not only the spiritual and material aspects of a child's life, but also their emotional well-being.

Neglecting this aspect may result in children growing up with emotional wounds that have long-term effects on their future lives. This becomes increasingly complex as individuals enter the quarter-life crisis phase—a period marked by identity and career confusion, characterized by anxiety, depression, a sense of being lost when trying to determine life goals, and delayed decision-making. During this phase, individuals often feel they have made wrong life choices and struggle to find a way out of such feelings (Žukauskienė, 2015). Other studies affirm that social pressure, difficulty in obtaining employment, and societal expectations for life achievements are major triggers of the quarter-life crisis (Asrar & Taufani, 2022; Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

The phenomenon of the quarter-life crisis is increasingly gaining attention in the life dynamics of Generation Z, particularly those who are entering adulthood (Aprichella, 2022). Generation Z (also referred to as iGeneration, Net Generation, or the Internet Generation) comprises individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who have grown up in the era of digital technology and globalization (Widyananda, 2020). Gen Z is highly relevant as the focus of research on the relationship between family communication, negative inner child experiences, and the quarter-life crisis phenomenon, as they represent the age group currently undergoing the transition from completing education to entering the workforce and establishing life independence.

Gen Z has grown up amidst rapid social, economic, and technological changes, making them subject to far more complex pressures and expectations compared to previous generations (Widyananda, 2020). Early exposure to social media has made Gen Z more vulnerable to social comparison, unrealistic standards of success, and pressure to maintain a perfect image in the digital public sphere (Dalimunthe & Ananda, 2024; Ritonga et al., 2023). Moreover, while Gen Z tends to be more open to mental health issues, they are also more prone to anxiety and stress due to dynamic social environments, making them particularly susceptible to emotional wounds stemming from unhealthy family communication during childhood.

Studies show that Gen Z exhibits high levels of anxiety, depression, and identity confusion, especially when confronted with the quarter-life crisis—marked by uncertainty in career paths, relationships, and the future (Sulaiman & Bahtiar, 2021). Therefore, studying the experiences of Gen Z individuals with a negative inner child is crucial in understanding how childhood emotional wounds resulting from poor family communication affect their mindset, communication style, and decision-making in adulthood. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze and understand the subjective experiences of Gen Z with a negative inner child in the context of the quarter-life crisis phase, particularly how emotional wounds from unhealthy family communication in childhood contribute to patterns of thinking, decision-making, and future life direction.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach, aimed at understanding the meaning and direct experiences of individuals from their own perspectives (Nasir et al., 2023). The research focuses on the meaning constructed by Gen Z individuals regarding their emotional wounds from childhood, and how these experiences contribute to their emotional state when facing pressure, identity confusion, lack of life direction, and life demands during the ages of 20–30. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with three participants aged 20–30 years who had experienced and become aware of the presence of a negative inner child within themselves, such as childhood experiences involving emotional neglect, excessive criticism, or verbal abuse in the family. The participants include N.A (22 years old), L.A (21 years old), and A.R (23 years old).

## 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Family communication serves as a critical foundation in shaping personality and emotional development among Gen Z. When family communication is open, warm, and supportive, children are more likely to grow up feeling secure, confident, and capable of self-understanding. Conversely, closed, authoritarian, or pressure-filled communication within the family can result in deep emotional wounds that persist into adulthood. These emotional wounds often manifest as a negative inner child, which ultimately impacts individuals during the quarter-life crisis—a period in which Gen Z struggles to understand their identity and life direction.

N.A, a 22-year-old woman, is the child of divorced parents. After the separation, she lived with her mother, who became her sole caregiver and authority figure. As a single parent, her mother enforced a highly structured and authoritarian parenting style. She regulated nearly every aspect of N.A's life, including her schooling, extracurricular activities, and future plans. From an early age, N.A was conditioned to be "perfect" in academics. This resulted in a demanding schedule filled with tutoring sessions, courses, and a tight daily routine starting from elementary school.

However, beneath the busyness and achievements, emotional communication within the family was nearly nonexistent. N.A was never given space to express her feelings or opinions. Important decisions were made for her, and whenever she attempted to voice her thoughts or emotions, they were often dismissed or deemed unimportant. As a result, she learned to remain silent and simply follow orders without question. This situation created deep emotional wounds and cultivated a negative inner child within her. She grew up unable to recognize her own desires because her life had always been dictated by her mother's expectations and

instructions. Even when she attempted to listen to her inner voice, it was drowned out by the dominating voice of her mother. Her inner child failed to develop in a healthy manner due to the lack of freedom to be her authentic self.

The impact became evident when N.A entered the quarter-life crisis phase. She experienced an identity crisis and felt that the life she was living was not of her own choosing. Her choice of university major, plans for graduate studies, and even her academic achievements were largely shaped by her mother's decisions and expectations rather than her own desires. Outwardly, her life appeared successful and well-structured, but internally, N.A felt empty and exhausted. She described herself as a "robot following orders," not someone genuinely living her own life. In situations requiring significant decision-making, N.A tended to feel confused and hesitant. She lacked confidence in her own judgment and often relied on others' opinions rather than trusting her inner voice. This illustrates how controlling family communication had stripped her of the ability to direct her own life. Criticism from others also affected her deeply; she admitted that even the slightest criticism could reopen old wounds, as she had grown up receiving harsh critiques from her mother without accompanying emotional support.

N.A's experience illustrates how parental divorce, authoritarian communication from a single mother, and academic perfectionism can inflict deep emotional wounds and contribute to the formation of a negative inner child. When these emotional wounds remain unrecognized and unhealed, their effects persist into adulthood, particularly manifesting as identity confusion and dissatisfaction with life, despite numerous achievements. This case serves as compelling evidence that healthy and open family communication plays a significant role in fostering emotional resilience and an individual's ability to navigate adulthood, particularly during the quarter-life crisis phase.

R.B, a 25-year-old male, experienced a major loss at an early age. He lost his father while still in elementary school. Since then, he lived with his mother, who had to work hard as the sole breadwinner for the family. Her busy schedule resulted in a form of communication that was largely functional—limited to daily needs—and lacked emotional closeness. R.B did not feel that he had anyone to lean on, especially during times of grief and loss. He felt emotionally unsupported and became accustomed to suppressing his feelings from a young age. The loss of a father figure and the emotional unavailability of his mother left a deep emotional scar in R.B's psyche. He grew up feeling lonely, neglected, and isolated. Consequently, his inner child developed in the form of low self-esteem, fear of rejection, and a belief that he was not good enough. He admitted that his internal dialogue was more often critical than supportive. Phrases like "you can't do it" or "you're weak" constantly haunted his thoughts, diminishing his motivation even before he attempted anything.

In navigating adult life, particularly during the quarter-life crisis phase, R.B's emotional wounds became increasingly evident. He experienced confusion when

faced with major life decisions. He admitted that many of the choices he made were not based on his personal desires, but rather on a sense of obligation—what he felt he "should" do. This included his choice of career, which he pursued simply by going with the flow, despite feeling internally unfulfilled and unhappy. When he eventually decided to resign from his job, he found himself sinking deeper into uncertainty, feeling lost and directionless. This crisis phase highlighted how the impact of a negative inner child can severely undermine a person's sense of control over their own life.

R.B felt powerless in the face of external pressures. He hesitated to move forward for fear of repeating past failures. Any criticism from others felt like a deeply personal rejection, often leading him to blame himself. This condition was further exacerbated by a lack of motivation, as he felt he had no clear purpose. Behind accomplishments that might appear impressive to others, R.B actually felt emotionally hollow. He realized that what is perceived as success does not always reflect inner satisfaction. The lack of emotional support in his childhood had left him unable to recognize and care for his own needs. He deeply longed for someone who could truly listen and understand his feelings, yet he continued to struggle with expressing what he genuinely felt.

R.B's experience illustrates how the absence of an emotional figure during childhood—whether due to loss or parental preoccupation—can result in deep-seated emotional wounds. These wounds affect not only emotional stability but also an individual's ability to build life direction, believe in themselves, and manage pressure during early adulthood. Therefore, emotionally responsive, warm, and open family communication is essential in supporting a child's psychological development and in preventing the formation of a negative inner child that can lead to identity crises in adulthood.

Childhood experiences in households marked by verbal conflict and emotional tension have a significant impact on psychological development and emotional well-being. A child raised in an unsafe and verbally abusive environment is more likely to develop emotional wounds (a negative inner child) that later affect interpersonal relationships and self-perception. A.R., a 23-year-old woman, grew up in a family with frequent verbal conflict. Her father was known for his temper and often verbally abused her mother in front of the children. The tense and fearful atmosphere at home made her feel unsafe. The lack of emotional protection from her passive mother, who failed to provide support, further reinforced A.R.'s sense of loneliness and alienation.

The impact of this parenting style and family environment was the emergence of intense anxiety, distrust of others, and a tendency to withdraw from social relationships. A.R. often experiences overthinking and struggles with trust issues, leading her to sabotage relationships and opportunities due to a deep-seated belief that she is unworthy of love or success. She feels disconnected from herself and finds it difficult to form emotionally healthy bonds with others.

When asked about her relationship and communication with her parents during childhood, A.R described her home as a “battlefield” filled with arguments and tension. She did not have a safe space to express her feelings or opinions, fearing it would provoke anger. As a result, she chose to remain silent and internalize her emotional burdens. This pattern continued into adulthood, where A.R often feels hesitant when making major life decisions. She believes she is not worthy of making choices and fears making mistakes, so many decisions are made based on what seems to be the safest option rather than on self-confidence. When facing pressure and fear, A.R tends to overthink and even avoids decision-making altogether. Any criticism she receives brings her back to a childhood marked by feelings of inadequacy and blame, causing her to become extremely self-critical. Emotional pressure often makes her feel like a helpless and confused child once again. A.R also admits to frequently feeling “empty” and lacking a clear purpose in life. The most unfulfilled emotional need throughout her upbringing was the feeling of emotional safety.

In addition, A.R has been unemployed for nearly a year since graduating from university. Her fear of making decisions and overwhelming anxiety make it difficult for her to take the next steps. She experiences intense nervousness during job interviews, driven by fear and apprehension toward new challenges. This condition is closely linked to her early family communication experiences, where she became accustomed to emotional suppression and struggled to interact with others. During her university years, A.R rarely participated in extracurricular activities and only attended mandatory classes—reflecting a long-standing tendency toward social withdrawal and difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships.

All three participants are members of Generation Z currently navigating early adulthood. Findings such as overthinking and social anxiety reflect common characteristics of Gen Z, with several consistent patterns emerging:

1. Childhood wounds such as emotional neglect, excessive criticism, or lack of affection were present.
2. Negative inner child manifestations included feelings of unworthiness, fear of failure, difficulty making decisions, and a tendency to seek external validation.
3. Quarter-life crisis appeared in the form of identity confusion, anxiety about the future, and difficulty in establishing healthy relationships or determining life direction.

These findings align closely with George Herbert Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, which posits that identity and self-concept are formed through social interaction and communication (Derung, 2017). The negative inner child experienced by the participants stemmed from early communication patterns marked by neglect, criticism, and lack of emotional support. This shaped a fragile

sense of “Me,” filled with self-doubt. Consequently, when facing adult challenges, participants tended to interpret social symbols (criticism, rejection, societal demands) negatively. Poor family communication in childhood carried over into adulthood, making it difficult for them to build healthy relationships or interpret social interactions in a positive light. This lack of a solid social support system exacerbates the quarter-life crisis, as it hinders their ability to cope constructively with transitional life phases.

The findings are also consistent with inner child theories presented by Diamond (2008) and Bradshaw (1992), which emphasize that unresolved childhood emotional wounds contribute to defensive communication patterns, perfectionism, and tendencies toward self-sabotage in adulthood. As seen in all participants, these patterns hinder the development of self-confidence and cause a tendency to avoid new challenges.

From the cases of all three participants, it is evident that the quarter-life crisis is not solely triggered by external pressures such as social and economic demands, but also by unresolved inner wounds. This reinforces the importance of healthy and supportive family communication. When a person grows up with emotional validation, space for self-expression, and support in making decisions, they are more likely to develop into a confident and emotionally resilient adult.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that negative inner child experiences—shaped by authoritarian family communication, emotional neglect, family conflict, and the loss of significant figures during childhood—have long-term psychological impacts on members of Generation Z, particularly during the quarter-life crisis phase. These emotional wounds render Gen Z individuals more vulnerable to anxiety, identity confusion, and feelings of helplessness. Among the participants, the quarter-life crisis was marked by indecisiveness, overthinking, fear of failure, and a tendency to live according to others’ expectations.

There is a need for greater awareness—among Gen Z individuals themselves, their families, and especially parents—regarding the long-term impact of childhood trauma on adulthood. For those experiencing a quarter-life crisis due to unresolved childhood trauma, the first step is to acknowledge and understand the emotional wounds they carry. It is important to begin by reconnecting with oneself, talking to trusted individuals, and not hesitating to seek help from psychologists or counselors.

Small, practical steps can be taken, such as practicing positive thinking, learning emotional regulation, gradually building self-confidence, and most importantly, embracing and forgiving oneself—because only we truly know what brings us happiness. Past failures should not be feared, as failure is a natural part of life that everyone encounters (Adelia et al., 2023).



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