

Predicting Tendency Toward Risky Behaviors Based on Emotion Regulation Difficulties and Mentalization in Children of Divorce: The Mediating Role of Post Traumatic Growth and the Moderating Role of Family Communication Patterns

Syedeh Nafiseh. Mohseni Mansour¹, Nasrin. Kadkhoda^{1*}, Bita. Khelghati¹, Seyedeh Mahsan. Miri¹, Mehrnoosh. Ranjbar²

1. Department of Clinical Psychology, Sr.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

2. Department of Positive Psychology, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: nasrin_kadkhoda@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to predict tendencies toward risky behaviors based on difficulties in emotion regulation and mentalization in children of divorce, with the mediating role of post traumatic growth and the moderating role of family communication patterns.

Methods and Materials: This descriptive–correlational study using path analysis was conducted in 2025. The statistical population consisted of children of divorce aged 15–18 years in Babol, from whom 300 participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using the Iranian Adolescents Risk Taking Scale (2011), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (2004), Mentalization Questionnaire (2018), Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (1996), and Family Communication Patterns Questionnaire (1990). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients, path analysis, moderation analysis, and bootstrap procedures in SPSS and AMOS.

Findings: The results indicated that difficulties in emotion regulation had a significant positive direct effect on risky behavior tendencies ($\beta = 0.41, p < .001$), whereas mentalization ($\beta = -0.36, p < .001$), post traumatic growth ($\beta = -0.29, p < .001$), and family communication patterns ($\beta = -0.31, p < .001$) had significant negative direct effects. Furthermore, family communication patterns significantly moderated the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.18, p < .001$), as well as the relationship between mentalization and risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.15, p < .01$). Bootstrap results also confirmed the mediating role of post traumatic growth in the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and risky behaviors ($\beta = 0.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.06, 0.19]$) and between mentalization and risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.18, -0.05]$). The proposed model demonstrated good fit to the data (CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.054).

Conclusion: The findings suggest that children of divorce with greater difficulties in emotion regulation are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, whereas higher levels of mentalization, post traumatic growth, and constructive family communication patterns serve as protective factors.

Keywords: risky behaviors, emotion regulation difficulties, mentalization, post traumatic growth, family communication patterns, children of divorce

1. Introduction

Divorce is widely recognized as one of the most stressful and disruptive events within the family system, often producing enduring psychological, emotional, and social consequences for both parents and children. Although divorce may at times reduce marital conflict and create opportunities for healthier family functioning, the process of family dissolution frequently exposes children and adolescents to emotional instability, insecurity, and chronic stress (Buyukkececi & Leopold, 2024; Lin et al., 2024). Adolescence, in particular, represents a developmental period characterized by rapid emotional, cognitive, and social changes, during which family cohesion and parental support play central roles in psychological adjustment. Consequently, adolescents who experience parental divorce may become especially vulnerable to emotional distress, maladaptive coping strategies, and behavioral problems (Golvani et al., 2024; Hatami Varzaneh & Imani, 2025). Studies examining the lived experiences of divorced families have shown that parental separation often generates confusion, emotional insecurity, social withdrawal, and disruptions in identity formation among adolescents, effects that may persist into adulthood if left unaddressed (Farahani et al., 2023; Rizwan & Gafoordeen, 2021). Furthermore, qualitative investigations have indicated that children of divorced mothers frequently experience emotional ambiguity and psychological tension regarding future family relationships, particularly in cultural contexts where divorce is accompanied by social stigma or instability (Hatami Varzaneh & Imani, 2025).

One of the most concerning consequences associated with these experiences is the increased tendency toward risky behaviors among adolescents from divorced families. Risky behaviors refer to actions that threaten physical, psychological, or social well-being and increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes such as injury, addiction, delinquency, emotional disorders, or even mortality (Tariq & Gupta, 2023). Examples include cigarette smoking, alcohol and substance use, unsafe sexual behaviors, aggression, violence, reckless driving, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Astolfi et al., 2021; Daytalab Esmaceli et al., 2025). These behaviors are considered major public health concerns because they not only endanger adolescents' immediate well-being but also increase the likelihood of chronic psychological, medical, and social difficulties later in life (World Health, 2023). Evidence indicates that adolescents experiencing family instability and reduced

parental supervision are at greater risk of engaging in such behaviors due to emotional distress, diminished support systems, and impaired coping resources (Majnounpour & Javadi, 2024; Ramzanzadeh & Ghazanfari, 2024).

The prevalence of risky behaviors among adolescents has become increasingly alarming worldwide. International health reports emphasize that health-risk behaviors constitute one of the leading causes of preventable morbidity and mortality during adolescence and early adulthood (World Health, 2023). In Iran, recent evidence suggests substantial increases in behaviors such as smoking, alcohol use, substance abuse, and unsafe interpersonal relationships among adolescents (Davoodi et al., 2024; Vakili et al., 2023). Research has further demonstrated that the onset age for many risky behaviors has decreased considerably, indicating that adolescents are being exposed to psychological and social vulnerabilities at increasingly younger ages (Ramzanzadeh & Ghazanfari, 2024). In addition, studies on adolescents referred to social emergency centers have revealed significant associations between sensation-seeking tendencies and engagement in high-risk behaviors (Nasiri Nasab et al., 2024). Among female adolescents, risky behaviors are often accompanied by additional emotional burdens and social pressures, which may intensify vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Davoodi et al., 2024).

Family-related variables have repeatedly been identified as major contributors to adolescents' behavioral adjustment and vulnerability to risky behaviors. Among these factors, family communication patterns appear particularly important. Family communication patterns refer to the ways in which family members exchange ideas, express emotions, negotiate conflicts, and construct interpersonal relationships within the family environment. According to family communication patterns theory, families differ primarily in terms of conversation orientation and conformity orientation, both of which shape adolescents' emotional and behavioral functioning (Garces-Prettel et al., 2026). Conversation-oriented families encourage emotional expression, dialogue, and independent thinking, whereas conformity-oriented families emphasize obedience, uniformity, and restriction of emotional expression. Research suggests that supportive communication environments may strengthen emotional adjustment and reduce adolescents' vulnerability to maladaptive behaviors, while rigid and conflictual communication patterns may increase emotional suppression, distress, and risky behaviors (Abbasi-Rad et al., 2024; Abebayehu, 2025). Studies

examining adolescents' perceptions of family interactions in digital and social environments have also demonstrated that ineffective communication styles contribute to emotional dysregulation and risky online behaviors (Abebayehu, 2025).

The relationship between parental divorce and risky behaviors may also be explained through adolescents' difficulties in emotion regulation. Emotion regulation refers to the processes through which individuals identify, monitor, interpret, and manage emotional experiences in adaptive ways. Effective emotion regulation enables adolescents to tolerate distress, maintain behavioral control, and respond constructively to stressful situations. In contrast, difficulties in emotion regulation involve deficits in emotional awareness, emotional acceptance, impulse control, and adaptive coping strategies (Larsson et al., 2025). Adolescents with impaired emotion regulation abilities often struggle to manage psychological stress and may use maladaptive strategies such as aggression, substance use, or impulsive behaviors to temporarily reduce emotional distress (Singh & Singh, 2023). Research has consistently linked difficulties in emotion regulation to high-risk behaviors, emotional instability, rumination, and addictive tendencies among adolescents and young adults (Noroozi & Janjani, 2023; Piri et al., 2019).

Children of divorce may be particularly vulnerable to emotional dysregulation because parental separation often disrupts emotional security and weakens adolescents' access to supportive interpersonal relationships. Emotional instability associated with divorce may intensify anger, anxiety, loneliness, and hopelessness, all of which increase vulnerability to maladaptive coping behaviors (Ramazanzadeh et al., 2023). Research conducted among Iranian adolescents has shown that emotional repression, interpersonal difficulties, and unresolved anger significantly predict engagement in risky behaviors (Heshmati et al., 2020). Similarly, investigations of adolescents' health-risk behaviors have indicated that impaired emotional functioning plays a central role in substance use tendencies, impulsive actions, and behavioral dysregulation (Singh & Singh, 2023). Therefore, difficulties in emotion regulation may represent one of the most important mechanisms linking parental divorce to risky behaviors among adolescents.

Another psychological construct that may explain adolescents' vulnerability to risky behaviors is mentalization. Mentalization refers to the ability to understand one's own and others' behaviors in terms of underlying mental states such as thoughts, emotions, desires,

intentions, and beliefs (Dimitrijevic et al., 2018). This ability contributes substantially to emotional awareness, interpersonal functioning, empathy, and self-regulation. Adolescents with strong mentalization capacities are generally more capable of understanding emotional experiences, interpreting social interactions accurately, and regulating impulsive reactions (Karagiannopoulou et al., 2025). In contrast, deficits in mentalization may lead to misunderstandings of interpersonal situations, emotional confusion, and maladaptive behavioral responses.

Recent evidence has emphasized the central role of mentalization in psychological health and behavioral adjustment. Studies have demonstrated significant relationships between mentalization deficits and self-harm, emotional instability, and maladaptive interpersonal functioning (Bazzi et al., 2024). Research further indicates that mentalization abilities are closely associated with attachment security, affect regulation, and epistemic trust among adolescents and young adults (Karagiannopoulou et al., 2025). Moreover, investigations examining mentalization and defense mechanisms have shown that impaired mentalization predicts greater vulnerability to maladaptive coping and risky behaviors (Shafahirad et al., 2024). Adolescents exposed to chronic family conflict and emotional instability may experience disruptions in the development of reflective functioning, thereby reducing their ability to process emotions adaptively and increasing impulsive behavioral tendencies.

Studies examining the interaction between emotion regulation and mentalization further support the importance of these constructs in adolescent mental health. Research has shown that poor maternal emotion regulation and impaired mentalizing capacities are associated with suicidal risk and emotional dysregulation among adolescents (Doba et al., 2025). In addition, therapeutic interventions focusing on mentalization have demonstrated effectiveness in improving emotional functioning and reducing emotion regulation difficulties (Maleki et al., 2025). Findings regarding women's emotional functioning and interpersonal adjustment have also highlighted significant associations between mentalization abilities and psychological well-being (Haji Abolzadeh et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings suggest that mentalization may function as an important protective factor against risky behaviors by enhancing emotional understanding, self-control, and adaptive coping.

Although parental divorce is generally considered a stressful and potentially traumatic experience, not all

adolescents respond negatively to this experience. Some individuals may experience positive psychological transformation and growth following adversity, a phenomenon known as post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth refers to positive changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, appreciation of life, spirituality, and personal strength that emerge following efforts to cope with highly stressful events (Tedeschi & Moore, 2021). Rather than merely recovering from adversity, individuals experiencing post-traumatic growth may develop enhanced resilience, deeper emotional understanding, and greater psychological maturity.

Research has increasingly emphasized the adaptive role of post-traumatic growth following stressful family experiences. Studies among divorced women and individuals experiencing family disruption have shown that post-traumatic growth is associated with increased resilience, improved psychological adjustment, and higher subjective well-being (Bahrani et al., 2019; Kaleta & Mroz, 2023). Phenomenological investigations have also demonstrated that individuals confronting traumatic life experiences often report positive psychological changes, including enhanced self-awareness and stronger interpersonal relationships (Jahangir et al., 2023). Research following traumatic events among adolescents further indicates that resilience and self-efficacy significantly contribute to post-traumatic growth and adaptive psychological outcomes (Yu et al., 2020). Consequently, post-traumatic growth may function as a protective mechanism that reduces adolescents' vulnerability to risky behaviors following parental divorce.

Theoretical perspectives further suggest that post-traumatic growth may mediate the relationship between psychological vulnerabilities and behavioral outcomes. Adolescents with strong emotional regulation abilities and higher mentalization capacities may be more likely to reinterpret stressful experiences constructively, derive meaning from adversity, and develop adaptive coping mechanisms. Conversely, adolescents experiencing emotional dysregulation and impaired mentalization may struggle to process traumatic experiences effectively, thereby increasing vulnerability to maladaptive behaviors. This perspective aligns with integrative therapeutic approaches emphasizing post-traumatic growth as a process through which adversity may foster resilience and psychological transformation (Tedeschi & Moore, 2021).

Despite growing research concerning divorce, emotion regulation, mentalization, and risky behaviors, several

important gaps remain in the literature. First, although studies have separately examined emotional dysregulation, mentalization deficits, and family communication patterns, relatively few investigations have simultaneously explored these variables within an integrated conceptual framework among children of divorce (Enayati et al., 2025; Shafahrad et al., 2024). Second, while risky behaviors among adolescents have received substantial attention, less emphasis has been placed on positive adaptive processes such as post-traumatic growth that may reduce vulnerability to maladaptive outcomes (Kaleta & Mroz, 2023). Third, although family communication patterns have been linked to adolescents' psychological adjustment, limited evidence exists regarding their potential moderating role in the relationships between emotional functioning, mentalization, and risky behaviors (Abbasi-Rad et al., 2024). Finally, considering the increasing prevalence of divorce and adolescent risky behaviors in Iran, further culturally grounded research is needed to clarify the psychological mechanisms underlying these phenomena (Maleki et al., 2025; Saboohi Golkar & Afrasiabi, 2024).

Therefore, given the psychological and social consequences of risky behaviors among adolescents and the growing prevalence of parental divorce, the present study aimed to predict tendencies toward risky behaviors based on difficulties in emotion regulation and mentalization in children of divorce, with the mediating role of post-traumatic growth and the moderating role of family communication patterns.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was applied in terms of purpose and quantitative in nature. With regard to the research design, a descriptive–correlational approach was employed, and path analysis was used to examine the structural relationships among the study variables. Furthermore, to investigate the moderating role of family communication patterns, the interaction effects of the moderating variable were tested within the proposed model. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Accordingly, individuals who met the inclusion criteria were recruited, whereas those meeting the exclusion criteria were omitted from the study. The sample size was determined based on Cohen's (1988) recommended criteria. Considering a medium effect size (0.15), a statistical power of 0.80, and a significance level of 0.05, the minimum required sample size was estimated (Cohen, 1988).

However, to increase the precision of the estimates and compensate for potential attrition, a larger number of participants were initially screened. During the preliminary screening phase, 314 individuals participated in the study. After excluding cases that did not meet the inclusion criteria and questionnaires with incomplete responses, data from 300 participants were included in the final analysis.

The inclusion criteria consisted of adolescents aged 15 to 18 years with experience of parental divorce, residing in the city of Babol in 2025, willingness and informed consent to participate in the study, and complete completion of the questionnaires. The exclusion criteria included severe psychiatric disorders or disabling physical illnesses, simultaneous participation in specialized psychological interventions, and incomplete questionnaire responses. The research questionnaire was distributed through active social media networks in Babol. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the objectives of the study, the nature of the questions, principles of data confidentiality, and the informed consent form were explained to the participants. Given the sensitivity of certain questions related to risky behaviors, the contact information of the Psychological Counseling Unit of the Babol Department of Education, along with links to accredited counseling centers, was provided so that participants could access professional support services if they experienced emotional distress or psychological concerns. Participation in the study was permitted only after informed consent had been obtained, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any stage. All data were collected anonymously and analyzed and reported without any identifying information.

2.2. Measures

Iranian Adolescents Risk-Taking Scale (Zadeh Mohammadi et al., 2011): The Iranian Adolescents Risk-Taking Scale was developed by Zadeh Mohammadi and colleagues (2011). The questionnaire consists of 38 items designed to assess adolescents' risk-taking behaviors across seven components: tendency toward drug use (8 items), alcohol use (6 items), cigarette smoking (5 items), violence (5 items), sexual behaviors and relationships (4 items), relationships with the opposite sex (4 items), and dangerous driving (6 items). All items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Total scores range from 38 to 190, with higher scores indicating greater engagement in risky behaviors among adolescents. The questionnaire was standardized by Zadeh

Mohammadi and Ahmadabadi (2011). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported as 0.74 for dangerous driving, 0.93 for cigarette smoking, 0.90 for psychotropic substance and drug use, 0.90 for alcohol use, 0.78 for violence, 0.83 for relationships with the opposite sex, and 0.87 for sexual behaviors, indicating satisfactory reliability (Zadeh Mohammadi et al., 2011).

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004): The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) was developed by Gratz and Roemer (2004). This instrument contains 36 items assessing individuals' difficulties in emotion regulation across six dimensions: nonacceptance of emotional responses (6 items), difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors under emotional distress (5 items), impulse control difficulties (5 items), lack of emotional awareness (6 items), limited access to emotion regulation strategies (6 items), and lack of emotional clarity (4 items). Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "almost never" to "almost always." Total scores range from 36 to 180, with higher scores indicating greater difficulties in emotion regulation. Scores between 36 and 108 indicate low levels of emotion regulation difficulties, whereas higher scores reflect elevated difficulties. Construct validity of the scale was supported through positive correlations with Zuckerman's sensation-seeking scale and its ability to discriminate between clinical and non-clinical groups. Gratz and Roemer (2004) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93 for the total scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were reported as follows: nonacceptance (0.90), goals (0.86), impulse (0.80), awareness (0.79), strategies (0.85), and clarity (0.84). In Iran, Azizi et al. (2010) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 for the Persian version of the questionnaire (Shams et al., 2010). Furthermore, Naghd Bishi and Abolmaali Alhosseini (2016) reported satisfactory internal consistency, with a total alpha coefficient of 0.90 and subscale coefficients of 0.82, 0.78, 0.76, 0.74, 0.77, and 0.73, respectively.

Mentalization Questionnaire (MZQ; Dimitrijević et al., 2018): The Mentalization Questionnaire (MZQ) was developed by Dimitrijević and colleagues (2018) to assess individuals' ability to understand and interpret their own and others' mental states. The questionnaire consists of 28 items and includes three dimensions: awareness of mind (9 items), understanding others' minds (10 items), and stability of mental representations (9 items). All items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "completely incorrect" to "completely correct." Total scores range from 28 to 140,

with higher scores indicating higher levels of mentalization. Dimitrijević et al. (2018) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.74 to 0.79, indicating acceptable reliability. To evaluate validity, mentalization scores were correlated with emotional intelligence, empathy, and personality traits. The findings demonstrated positive and significant relationships between mentalization and cognitive-personality constructs, while negative associations were observed with avoidant and anxious attachment styles as well as neuroticism (Dimitrijević et al., 2018). In Iran, Safari Mousavi, Sadeghi, and Sepahvandi (2020) standardized the Persian version of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the total score and subscales ranged from 0.73 to 0.86, demonstrating satisfactory reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis supported acceptable model fit indices and appropriate factor loadings within the Iranian population. Criterion validity findings also indicated positive associations between mentalization and mindfulness, secure attachment, and social cognition, while negative relationships were observed with avoidant and anxious attachment styles.

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996): The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) was developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) to assess positive psychological growth following exposure to stressful or traumatic events. The inventory consists of 21 items measuring five dimensions: new possibilities (5 items), relating to others (7 items), personal strength (4 items), appreciation of life (3 items), and spiritual change (2 items). All items are rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from "I did not experience this change" to "I experienced this change to a very great degree." Total scores range from 0 to 105, with higher scores reflecting greater posttraumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) confirmed the five-factor structure of the inventory using confirmatory factor analysis, supporting its construct validity. They also reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90 and a two-month test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.71 (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In Iran, Seyed Mahmoudi et al. (2013) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91 and confirmed the face and content validity of the Persian version.

Family Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990): The Family Communication Patterns Questionnaire was developed by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) to assess communication patterns and interaction styles within families. The questionnaire consists of 26 items and measures two dimensions: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Conversation orientation assesses

the degree to which family members are encouraged to openly express thoughts and feelings and participate in family decision-making processes. Conformity orientation evaluates the extent to which families emphasize agreement, harmony, and adherence to shared beliefs and values. All items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Total scores range from 26 to 130, with higher scores indicating stronger family communication patterns in the assessed dimensions. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.87 for conversation orientation and 0.79 for conformity orientation, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Factor analytic findings also supported the two-dimensional structure of the questionnaire and confirmed its construct validity (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Subsequent studies further supported the reliability and validity of the instrument and demonstrated significant associations between family communication patterns and psychological adjustment, family relationship quality, and conflict resolution styles (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). In Iran, Sanaei and colleagues (2009) standardized the Persian version of the questionnaire and reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.85 for conversation orientation and 0.81 for conformity orientation, indicating satisfactory reliability in the Iranian population (Sanaei et al., 2009).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients, path analysis, moderation analysis, and bootstrap procedures in SPSS and AMOS.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 300 adolescents aged 15 to 18 years with experience of parental divorce participated in this study. Regarding age distribution, 68 participants (22.7%) were 15 years old, 82 (27.3%) were 16 years old, 79 (26.3%) were 17 years old, and 71 (23.7%) were 18 years old. In terms of gender, 158 participants (52.7%) were female and 142 (47.3%) were male. Regarding educational level, 96 participants (32%) were in the 10th grade, 104 (34.7%) in the 11th grade, and 100 (33.3%) in the 12th grade. Concerning living arrangements after parental divorce, 172 participants (57.3%) lived with their mother, 78 (26%) with their father, and 50 (16.7%) with relatives. In addition, regarding the time elapsed since parental divorce, 64 participants (21.3%) had experienced divorce less than one year earlier, 128 (42.7%) between one and three years

earlier, and 108 (36%) more than three years earlier. To describe the study variables, descriptive statistics including

mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were calculated. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive and Normality Indices (Mean, Standard Deviation, Skewness, and Kurtosis) of the Study Variables in Children of Divorce

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Tendency toward risky behaviors	26.48	7.91	0.54	0.31
Difficulties in emotion regulation	89.72	14.63	0.37	-0.28
Mentalization	63.15	10.47	-0.42	-0.19
Posttraumatic growth	58.36	11.28	-0.25	-0.34
Family communication patterns	81.57	12.16	-0.18	-0.27

Before testing the hypotheses, the main assumptions of path analysis were examined. Initial screening indicated that missing data were minimal and were corrected using mean substitution for the relevant variables. To identify outliers, standardized Z-scores were calculated. The findings showed that all scores fell within the ± 3 standard deviation range, and no significant outliers were detected. To assess the normality of the study variables (tendency toward risky behaviors, difficulties in emotion regulation, mentalization, posttraumatic growth, and family communication patterns), skewness and kurtosis indices were calculated. The results indicated that all skewness and kurtosis values were below ± 2 and within the acceptable range. In addition, the

Kolmogorov–Smirnov test yielded non-significant results ($p > 0.05$) for all variables, confirming the normal distribution of the data. Furthermore, the independence of errors was examined using the Durbin–Watson test. The obtained value was 1.89, indicating the absence of autocorrelation among residuals. Multicollinearity was also assessed, and the tolerance values for all predictor variables were above 0.62, while all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 1.61, suggesting that no multicollinearity problem existed in the model. Given that all assumptions were satisfied, the data were considered appropriate for inferential analyses and path analysis.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Matrix among the Study Variables (N = 300)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Difficulties in emotion regulation	1				
Mentalization	-0.46**	1			
Posttraumatic growth	-0.39**	0.42**	1		
Family communication patterns	-0.41**	0.45**	0.38**	1	
Tendency toward risky behaviors	0.53**	-0.48**	-0.44**	-0.49**	1

The results of the Pearson correlation matrix indicated a positive and significant relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and tendency toward risky behaviors ($r = 0.53, p < 0.01$). Mentalization showed a significant negative relationship with tendency toward risky behaviors ($r = -0.48, p < 0.01$). A significant negative relationship was also found between posttraumatic growth and tendency toward risky behaviors ($r = -0.44, p < 0.01$). Moreover, mentalization was positively and significantly associated with posttraumatic growth ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$), while difficulties in emotion regulation demonstrated significant negative relationships with both mentalization ($r = -0.46, p < 0.01$) and posttraumatic growth ($r = -0.39, p < 0.01$). In addition,

family communication patterns showed significant positive relationships with mentalization ($r = 0.45, p < 0.01$) and posttraumatic growth ($r = 0.38, p < 0.01$), whereas significant negative relationships were observed with difficulties in emotion regulation ($r = -0.41, p < 0.01$) and tendency toward risky behaviors ($r = -0.49, p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that higher levels of difficulties in emotion regulation are associated with increased tendency toward risky behaviors, whereas higher levels of mentalization, posttraumatic growth, and positive family communication patterns are associated with lower tendency toward risky behaviors. The significance of the correlation coefficients also indicates that the study variables possessed sufficient

interrelationships to justify inclusion in the path analysis model.

Table 3

Direct Effects of Predictor Variables on Tendency toward Risky Behaviors

Predictor Variables	B	β	S.E.	T	P
Difficulties in emotion regulation → Tendency toward risky behaviors	0.37	0.41	0.06	6.05	<0.001
Mentalization → Tendency toward risky behaviors	-0.33	-0.36	0.07	-4.71	<0.001
Posttraumatic growth → Tendency toward risky behaviors	-0.27	-0.29	0.05	-5.40	<0.001
Family communication patterns → Tendency toward risky behaviors	-0.30	-0.31	0.05	-5.76	<0.001

The results of the path analysis indicated that difficulties in emotion regulation had a positive and significant direct effect on adolescents' tendency toward risky behaviors ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that higher levels of difficulties in emotion regulation are associated with greater engagement in risky behaviors among adolescents with experience of parental divorce. In contrast, mentalization showed a significant negative direct effect on tendency toward risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.36, p < 0.001$), indicating that adolescents with higher levels of mentalization reported lower levels of risky behaviors. Similarly, posttraumatic growth had a significant negative direct effect on tendency toward risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.29, p < 0.001$), suggesting that

higher posttraumatic growth is associated with reduced risky behaviors. Furthermore, family communication patterns demonstrated a significant negative direct effect on tendency toward risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that more positive and effective family communication patterns are associated with lower tendency toward risky behaviors among adolescents. Overall, the results support the proposed model and highlight the important roles of emotional regulation difficulties, mentalization, posttraumatic growth, and family communication patterns in predicting adolescents' risky behaviors.

Table 4

Interaction Effects of the Study Variables on Tendency toward Risky Behaviors

Interaction Effects	β	S.E.	T	P
Difficulties in emotion regulation × Family communication patterns	-0.18	0.04	-3.42	<0.001
Mentalization × Family communication patterns	-0.15	0.03	-2.97	<0.01

The results of the interaction effects analysis demonstrated that family communication patterns significantly moderated the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and tendency toward risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.18, p < 0.001$). The negative interaction coefficient indicates that positive family communication patterns weaken the positive relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and risky behaviors. In other words, adolescents with higher levels of emotional regulation difficulties reported lower risky behaviors when they experienced more constructive and supportive family communication patterns. In addition, family communication patterns significantly moderated the relationship between

mentalization and tendency toward risky behaviors ($\beta = -0.15, p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that the protective effect of mentalization against risky behaviors becomes stronger in the presence of more positive family communication patterns. Therefore, supportive and effective family communication appears to enhance the beneficial role of mentalization in reducing adolescents' tendency toward risky behaviors. Overall, these findings highlight the moderating role of family communication patterns in the relationships between psychological variables and risky behaviors among adolescents with experience of parental divorce.

Table 5

Estimation of Indirect Paths in the Model Using Bootstrap Analysis

Path	Estimate	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Significance
Difficulties in emotion regulation → Posttraumatic growth → Tendency toward risky behaviors	0.12	0.06	0.19	Significant
Mentalization → Posttraumatic growth → Tendency toward risky behaviors	-0.12	-0.18	-0.05	Significant

The bootstrap results indicated that the indirect effect of difficulties in emotion regulation on tendency toward risky behaviors through posttraumatic growth was significant, as the confidence interval did not include zero. Additionally, the indirect effect of mentalization on tendency toward risky behaviors through posttraumatic growth was also significant. These findings suggest that posttraumatic growth mediates the relationships between difficulties in

emotion regulation, mentalization, and adolescents' tendency toward risky behaviors. Specifically, greater difficulties in emotion regulation were associated with lower levels of posttraumatic growth, which in turn were related to higher levels of risky behaviors. In contrast, higher levels of mentalization were associated with greater posttraumatic growth, which subsequently predicted lower tendency toward risky behaviors.

Table 6

Model Fit Indices

χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	NFI	RMSEA
2.14	0.93	0.91	0.95	0.94	0.92	0.054

The results of the model fit indices indicated that the proposed model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data. The RMSEA value was below 0.08, and the comparative and incremental fit indices (CFI, GFI, NFI, and TLI) were all above 0.90. In addition, the χ^2/df ratio was within the acceptable range. Therefore, the proposed conceptual model showed a good fit to the collected data and supported the hypothesized relationships among the study variables.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study demonstrated that difficulties in emotion regulation had a significant positive direct effect on tendencies toward risky behaviors among children of divorce. This finding indicates that adolescents who experience greater problems in identifying, accepting, and managing emotional experiences are more likely to engage in maladaptive and high-risk behaviors. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that emotional dysregulation is strongly associated with impulsive behaviors, substance use, aggression, and psychological maladjustment among adolescents (Noroozi & Janjani, 2023; Singh & Singh, 2023). Emotional dysregulation may reduce adolescents' capacity to tolerate distress and control behavioral impulses during emotionally charged situations. Consequently, risky behaviors may function as temporary

strategies for emotional escape, emotional discharge, or avoidance of psychological pain. Similar findings have been reported regarding the relationship between emotional repression, anger, interpersonal problems, and risky behaviors among Iranian adolescents and university students (Heshmati et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies examining internet addiction and maladaptive coping strategies have shown that difficulties in emotion regulation increase adolescents' vulnerability to maladaptive compensatory behaviors (Piri et al., 2019).

The present finding may be explained by the emotional environment often experienced by children of divorce. Parental separation is frequently accompanied by chronic conflict, emotional insecurity, inconsistent parenting, and reduced emotional support, all of which can interfere with adolescents' emotional development and coping abilities (Farahani et al., 2023; Hatami Varzaneh & Imani, 2025). Under such circumstances, adolescents may experience intense emotions such as anger, loneliness, rejection, and hopelessness but may lack effective strategies for managing these emotions. Consequently, behaviors such as smoking, aggression, substance use, or unsafe relationships may emerge as maladaptive methods of emotion regulation. Research examining intervention programs for children of divorce has similarly shown that unresolved emotional distress significantly contributes to maladaptive behavioral

outcomes among adolescents exposed to parental separation (Ramazanzadeh et al., 2023).

Another important finding of the study was that mentalization had a significant negative direct effect on tendencies toward risky behaviors. This result suggests that adolescents with stronger abilities to understand their own and others' thoughts, feelings, and intentions are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the protective role of mentalization in emotional and behavioral adjustment (Karagiannopoulou et al., 2025; Shafahirad et al., 2024). Mentalization enables individuals to interpret interpersonal situations more accurately, regulate emotional responses more effectively, and evaluate the potential consequences of their actions before engaging in behavior. Adolescents with higher reflective functioning are therefore more capable of responding thoughtfully rather than impulsively during stressful interactions or emotional crises.

The present result is also supported by studies linking mentalization deficits with self-harm, emotional instability, insecure attachment, and maladaptive coping strategies (Bazzi et al., 2024). Research has demonstrated that adolescents with poor mentalization capacities often misinterpret social interactions, experience heightened emotional reactivity, and show greater impulsivity and behavioral dysregulation (Doba et al., 2025). Children of divorce may be especially vulnerable to impairments in mentalization because exposure to parental conflict and emotional inconsistency may disrupt the development of secure attachment relationships and reflective functioning. In contrast, adolescents who maintain stronger mentalization capacities despite parental separation may possess greater emotional awareness, empathy, and interpersonal understanding, which reduce vulnerability to risky behaviors. The findings of studies examining attachment, epistemic trust, and mentalizing abilities among adolescents further support this interpretation (Karagiannopoulou et al., 2025).

The findings additionally revealed that post-traumatic growth had a significant negative direct effect on tendencies toward risky behaviors among children of divorce. This result suggests that adolescents who experience greater positive psychological growth following parental separation demonstrate lower levels of maladaptive and risky behaviors. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that post-traumatic growth is associated with resilience, adaptive coping, psychological well-being, and healthier behavioral functioning following stressful life

experiences (Kaleta & Mroz, 2023; Tedeschi & Moore, 2021). Adolescents who are able to derive meaning from adversity and develop stronger personal competence, emotional maturity, and appreciation of life may become less likely to engage in self-destructive or impulsive behaviors.

This finding may also be interpreted in light of evidence suggesting that traumatic experiences do not always result exclusively in psychopathology or maladjustment. Under certain psychological and interpersonal conditions, adversity may facilitate positive cognitive reconstruction and psychological transformation (Jahangir et al., 2023). Children of divorce who receive emotional support, maintain hope for the future, and develop adaptive coping strategies may reinterpret parental separation as an opportunity for personal growth rather than solely as a source of distress. Previous research among divorced women similarly demonstrated that post-traumatic growth contributes significantly to psychological adjustment and emotional resilience following family disruption (Bahrani et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies conducted among adolescents exposed to traumatic events have shown that resilience and self-efficacy promote post-traumatic growth and reduce emotional maladjustment (Yu et al., 2020). Therefore, post-traumatic growth appears to function as an important protective factor that weakens adolescents' vulnerability to risky behaviors following parental divorce.

The present study further demonstrated that family communication patterns had a significant negative direct effect on tendencies toward risky behaviors. This finding indicates that adolescents who experience healthier, more supportive, and more constructive family communication patterns report lower levels of risky behaviors. This result is consistent with prior studies emphasizing the importance of family communication quality in adolescents' emotional adjustment and behavioral functioning (Abbasi-Rad et al., 2024; Garces-Pretzel et al., 2026). Open and supportive communication environments allow adolescents to express emotions, discuss concerns, receive emotional validation, and develop adaptive interpersonal skills. Such family environments may increase emotional security and strengthen parental monitoring, thereby reducing vulnerability to maladaptive behaviors.

Conversely, ineffective communication patterns characterized by emotional restriction, conflict avoidance, criticism, or excessive conformity may intensify adolescents' emotional distress and behavioral dysregulation (Abebayehu, 2025). Adolescents who feel misunderstood,

emotionally neglected, or unable to express their emotions within the family environment may seek alternative and often maladaptive ways to regulate emotional tension. Research examining family communication patterns and adolescents' risky behaviors similarly found that weak emotional communication within the family contributes significantly to maladaptive behavioral outcomes (Abbasi-Rad et al., 2024). In the context of divorce, constructive family communication may become even more important because it can buffer the negative emotional consequences of parental separation and help adolescents maintain a sense of emotional stability and support.

Another important finding of the present study was that post-traumatic growth significantly mediated the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and tendencies toward risky behaviors. This finding suggests that adolescents with greater emotional regulation difficulties may be less likely to develop post-traumatic growth, which subsequently increases vulnerability to risky behaviors. This result supports theoretical perspectives proposing that adaptive psychological growth following adversity depends partly on individuals' emotional processing capacities (Tedeschi & Moore, 2021). Adolescents who are unable to regulate distress effectively may struggle to reinterpret stressful experiences constructively or derive positive meaning from adversity. Consequently, emotional dysregulation may prevent the emergence of resilience and positive adaptation following parental divorce, thereby increasing the likelihood of maladaptive coping behaviors.

This finding is consistent with studies indicating that adaptive coping and resilience processes can reduce the adverse effects of emotional difficulties on psychological and behavioral outcomes (Yu et al., 2020). Emotional regulation abilities may facilitate reflective processing of stressful experiences and support constructive adaptation following trauma. In contrast, persistent emotional dysregulation may trap adolescents in cycles of distress, impulsivity, and maladaptive coping. Therefore, post-traumatic growth appears to partially explain the pathway through which emotional dysregulation contributes to risky behaviors among children of divorce.

The results also demonstrated that post-traumatic growth mediated the relationship between mentalization and tendencies toward risky behaviors. This finding suggests that adolescents with stronger mentalization capacities are more likely to experience positive psychological growth following parental divorce, which subsequently decreases

their vulnerability to risky behaviors. This finding aligns with previous literature emphasizing the role of reflective functioning and emotional understanding in facilitating adaptive responses to trauma and adversity (Karagiannopoulou et al., 2025). Adolescents who can understand and interpret their own emotional experiences more accurately may be better able to process painful family experiences constructively and derive meaning from adversity. Such reflective processing may facilitate psychological growth, resilience, and adaptive coping, thereby reducing maladaptive behavioral outcomes.

Research examining mentalization-based interventions has shown that strengthening reflective functioning contributes substantially to emotional adjustment and interpersonal stability (Maleki et al., 2025). Furthermore, evidence indicates that mentalization is associated with improved emotional awareness, empathy, and cognitive flexibility, all of which may support post-traumatic growth and psychological adaptation (Haji Abolzadeh et al., 2025). Consequently, mentalization may indirectly protect adolescents against risky behaviors through promoting positive psychological transformation following parental divorce.

The findings additionally revealed that family communication patterns significantly moderated the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and tendencies toward risky behaviors. Specifically, constructive family communication patterns weakened the positive relationship between emotional dysregulation and risky behaviors. This finding suggests that supportive communication environments may buffer the harmful effects of emotional difficulties on adolescents' behavioral functioning. Even adolescents experiencing substantial emotional dysregulation may show lower tendencies toward risky behaviors when they are embedded within emotionally supportive and communicative family systems.

This finding is theoretically meaningful because emotional regulation develops primarily within interpersonal and family contexts. Families characterized by empathy, open communication, and emotional responsiveness provide adolescents with opportunities to learn adaptive emotional coping strategies and receive psychological support during stressful experiences (Garces-Prettel et al., 2026). In contrast, dysfunctional communication patterns may intensify emotional confusion, isolation, and impulsive behaviors. Research examining adolescents' perceptions of family communication has similarly shown that supportive communication

environments reduce emotional distress and risky behavioral tendencies (Abebayehu, 2025). Therefore, family communication patterns appear to function as important contextual protective factors that reduce the behavioral consequences of emotional dysregulation among children of divorce.

5. Conclusion

Finally, the study found that family communication patterns moderated the relationship between mentalization and tendencies toward risky behaviors. This finding suggests that the protective effect of mentalization becomes stronger when adolescents experience healthier family communication patterns. Mentalization abilities are more likely to develop effectively in environments characterized by emotional safety, reflective dialogue, and mutual understanding. Consequently, adolescents with strong mentalization capacities may benefit even more from supportive family interactions because such environments reinforce reflective thinking and emotional understanding. Conversely, dysfunctional communication environments may undermine the benefits of mentalization by increasing emotional tension, invalidation, and interpersonal misunderstanding. Research examining family communication and adolescent psychological adjustment has consistently highlighted the importance of emotionally responsive family interactions in promoting adaptive social cognition and emotional functioning (Abbasi-Rad et al., 2024). Therefore, family communication patterns may strengthen or weaken the extent to which mentalization protects adolescents against risky behaviors. Collectively, the findings of the present study highlight the complex interplay between emotional regulation, mentalization, post-traumatic growth, and family communication processes in understanding risky behaviors among children of divorce.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

One of the limitations of the present study was the use of a cross-sectional correlational design, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships among the variables. In addition, the study relied exclusively on self-report instruments, making the findings potentially vulnerable to social desirability bias and subjective response distortions. Another limitation concerns the geographical restriction of the sample to adolescents from Babol, which may reduce the generalizability of the findings to adolescents from different cultural, socioeconomic, and regional backgrounds.

Furthermore, several potentially influential variables such as socioeconomic status, severity of parental conflict, custody arrangements, and the quality of post-divorce parenting relationships were not controlled in the present study.

Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs in order to examine the developmental trajectories of risky behaviors among children of divorce more comprehensively. Researchers are also encouraged to investigate additional mediating and moderating variables such as resilience, attachment security, self-esteem, peer relationships, and parental psychological adjustment. Comparative studies involving adolescents from intact and divorced families may further clarify the unique psychological mechanisms associated with parental separation. In addition, future studies should include more diverse samples from different cultural and social contexts to improve the generalizability of findings.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that school counselors, psychologists, and family therapists should develop intervention programs focused on improving emotion regulation abilities among children of divorce. Mentalization-based interventions may also help adolescents strengthen reflective functioning, emotional awareness, and interpersonal understanding, thereby reducing vulnerability to risky behaviors. Family counseling programs designed to improve communication patterns, emotional dialogue, and conflict-resolution skills among divorced parents may further buffer adolescents against maladaptive behavioral outcomes. Finally, preventive mental health programs emphasizing resilience, adaptive coping, and post-traumatic growth may help adolescents reinterpret parental divorce more constructively and enhance long-term psychological adjustment.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors have equally contributed to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

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