




Effectiveness of the Successful Parenting Training Program on Parental Stress, Children's Anxiety, and Family Functioning

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Successful parenting is a novel and universal program about parenting that fosters positive relationships between parents and their children. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to determine the effect of successful parenting training on family functioning, children's anxiety, and parental stress.

Methods and Materials: The research method was quasi-experimental with a pre-test-post-test design and a control group. The statistical population included all parents (with diversity in variance and not merely successful parents) and all elementary school students studying in elementary schools in the city of Isfahan in the 2021-2022 academic year. From this population, 32 individuals (16 couples) were sampled and assigned to two groups of 16 individuals (8 couples) each for the experimental and control groups. Participants completed the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (2003), the Abidin Parental Stress Index (1995), and the Family Assessment Device by Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop (1950) in the pre-test and post-test phases. The experimental group underwent a 15-session intervention protocol based on the successful parenting model derived from the final model of this research.

Findings: Results of the univariate covariance analysis showed that the experimental group, receiving the intervention based on successful parenting training, exhibited significantly higher family functioning and lower children's anxiety and parental stress compared to the control group ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Given the results of this study, it is recommended to employ successful parenting training to enhance family functioning and reduce children's anxiety and stress.

Keywords: Successful Parenting, Parental Stress, Children's Anxiety, Family Functioning.

1. Introduction

In every family system, parents play the most crucial role as the first educators of the child in their upbringing and behavior management. Neglect and negligence in this regard can have severe consequences in their lives. Having parents who consistently provide emotional support to the child can resolve many psychological and social problems and lead them towards growth and flourishing (Golparvar, 2017; Kodjebacheva et al., 2016). This is attributed to the fundamental importance of mother-child relationships in creating the necessary conditions for children's physical, psychological, and social balance. Additionally, research has shown that mother-child relationships are associated with various psychological issues in children, including depression (Kim et al., 2016), anxiety (Hamblin et al., 2016), and adaptive problems (Hiller et al., 2016).

Parenting styles are fundamental components in the growth and upbringing of children and are often related to their most important achievements, such as cognitive and social skills, and play a significant role in shaping many aspects of personality, feedback, emotions, and habits (Desjardins et al., 2008). Family functioning patterns, which refer to the functional dimensions of the family, are reflected in parenting styles (Matejevic et al., 2015). Parenting styles are proposed based on two features: demand, which includes control, supervision, and expectations of mature behavior from the child, and responsiveness, which includes support, love, and acceptance of the child. Authoritative parents have high demands but are also responsive. Authoritarian parents set strict rules for their children, while permissive parents have few expectations (Smetana, 2017).

Extensive evidence on the vital role of family interactions and parenting in adolescents' vulnerability and protection against anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal tendencies is clear and unambiguous. Many studies have shown a significant relationship between various types of adolescent psychopathology and parenting styles (Smokowski et al., 2015). Research by Rouhani, Jalali, and Mousavi (2019) indicated that personality traits, attachment styles, and parenting styles of parents directly and indirectly significantly affect the physical health of preschool children.

Another important factor in the family is family functioning. Family functioning is an important aspect of the family environment that affects the physical, social, and emotional health of all family members, especially children. Family functioning is considered a process in which family members interact to meet basic needs, make decisions,

establish rules, and define goals while simultaneously contributing to individual and family growth (Lanigan, 2009). In fact, what happens within the family and how it functions can be a key factor in creating resilience and reducing current and future risks associated with adverse events and unfavorable conditions.

Parenting is a very important component that influences individual growth during childhood and adolescence, which are periods of biological, cognitive, emotional, and social regulation and adaptation. One of the issues that has received attention today is the stress resulting from becoming a parent. Parental stress is a psychological disturbance that arises from parents' efforts to cope with the duties and demands of being a parent. This type of stress needs to be distinguished from other stressful situations (Golfenshtein et al., 2016). Abidin (1995) first presented a conceptual model of parental stress. In his theory, parental stressors can be categorized into several areas related to parents, children, and life events. Child-related stressors are linked to the child's temperament and behavioral factors such as adaptability and rule compliance. Parents' expectations and perceptions of the child and themselves as parents, their personality types, performance, and levels of guilt, attachment, and psychological distress are among the parental stressors. Environmental stressors are mostly summarized in spousal relationships, educational conflicts, health, and social isolation (Golfenshtein et al., 2016). High levels of parental stress disrupt parent-child interactions and damage parenting skills. Moreover, high parental stress impairs individuals' psychological functioning, leading to disorders such as anxiety, depression, and aggression, increases negative attributions, and ultimately results in negative interpretations of the child's behavior, increased punishment, and problems in family interactions (Hamblin et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2016). Cognitive factors of parents play a significant role in this regard. It is believed that parents' cognitive factors are strongly associated with their stress, which in turn leads to increased use of maladaptive behaviors towards children. Ultimately, such behaviors increase children's psychopathology (Kennedy, 2012). Therefore, parental disorders and cognitive status play an important role in children's anxiety.

One of the common problems in childhood influenced by parenting styles is anxiety. Anxiety is a diffuse, unpleasant, and vague feeling of apprehension and worry with an unknown origin that the individual experiences, including uncertainty, helplessness, and physiological arousal (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2017). Studies indicate that childhood anxiety

has become a serious mental health problem often affecting children and adolescents (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2017). The prevalence of anxiety disorders in children and adolescents is reported to be around 10 percent (Muris et al., 2017). Children's behavioral problems are associated with negative maternal behavior and interactions. Theories related to childhood anxiety suggest that parental characteristics, especially maternal ones such as over-involvement, over-protection, rejection, and criticism, are related to children's anxiety traits (Manassis et al., 2014). Research shows that parenting characteristics are directly related to preparing children to face emotional and social challenges (Burlaka, 2016).

Given the above points and since the introduced models, provided in the form of theoretical reviews and research findings, have been conducted in different socio-cultural contexts outside the Iranian Islamic culture, their effects may not be the same in every context. In other words, most research related to parenting in Iran has simply imitated these models, and most studies have used parenting assessment indices and tools derived from these models, neglecting the contextual variables resulting from Iranian culture. Iranian culture is significantly influenced by Islamic teachings, and this issue is heavily emphasized in parenting education. However, this matter has not been considered in theoretical and research texts related to parenting. For effective parenting, resulting in happy, healthy, and productive children, it is necessary to design an effective indigenous model based on Iranian culture. Designing this model and assessing the effectiveness of the training protocol derived from it can, while providing a clearer understanding of successful parenting and identifying its related indicators and factors, serve as a starting point for domestic researchers to consider contextual and cultural factors in assessing and presenting a successful parenting model.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research was quasi-experimental with a pre-test-post-test design and a control group. The statistical population included all parents (with diversity in variance and not merely successful parents) and all elementary school students studying in elementary schools in the city of Isfahan in the 2021-2022 academic year. From this population, 32 individuals (16 couples) were sampled and assigned to two

groups of 16 individuals (8 couples) each for the experimental and control groups.

To this end, 15 training and group discussion sessions were considered. Pre-tests were conducted before the sessions, and post-tests were conducted after the sessions for the three mentioned variables. At this stage, 8 couples (16 men and women) participated in the experimental group, and 8 couples (16 men and women) in the control group. The reason for including couples instead of selecting one parent is as follows: If one parent was used instead of a couple, despite the effectiveness of the model components on the participating parent, the variables of children's anxiety and family functioning might not have been significantly affected due to the unchanged other parent. Since parenting and family are influenced by both parents, both parents were included in this part of the research. In this study, training or intervention sessions were conducted in groups, with the experimental group attending 15 training sessions. Importantly, in 14 out of the 15 sessions, 4 successful parents (2 men and 2 women) also participated as guests and assistant trainers. This measure was taken to ensure that if the group intervention and the received training were not practically applicable, the successful parents present in the intervention sessions would act as facilitators and guides, complementing the intervention sessions. Successful parents were selected from among 30 successful parents in the above stages (stage of selecting successful parents for the qualitative research phase) and ranked from the most successful parent based on aligning the scoring method (so that a higher score on these three scales indicated a better status) and aggregating three scores from the three scales of children's attachment, parent-child relationship, and marital conflict, converting these scores to the standard z-score for comparability between individuals.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Anxiety

Spence Children's Anxiety Scale: This 28-item scale asks parents to rate the frequency of their child's behavior on a 5-point Likert scale. Of these 28 items, 6 items are related to generalized anxiety disorder, 6 items to social phobia, 5 items to obsessive-compulsive disorder, 7 items to fear of physical injury (as a specific phobia), and 5 items to separation anxiety disorder. The overall anxiety score is the sum of the scores obtained in these 6 subscales. Additionally, there is an open-ended question regarding the child's experience of traumatic events that is not scored, but

if such an event is reported, 5 additional items indicating post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms are asked, and these 5 items are not included in the overall score but are considered for clinical attention to this disorder. The reliability of this scale for general anxiety is reported to be 0.92, and for the subscales, it ranges from 0.60 to 0.82 (Spence et al., 2003). In Mousavi's (2007) research, the reliability of this questionnaire was reported to be between 0.62 and 0.89 using Cronbach's alpha method (Mousavi et al., 2007). In this study, the internal consistency of the tool based on Cronbach's alpha was 0.752.

2.2.2. Parental Stress

This 36-item short version of the original parental stress index, developed by Abidin (1995), includes three subscales: parental distress, parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and difficult child characteristics. Scoring is done on a Likert scale based on responses from 1 to 5 (strongly agree to strongly disagree). It is important to note that the arrangement of questions for the subscales is systematic throughout the entire scale, and the scoring method for all questions is not uniform. This scale was standardized in Iran by Fadaei, Dehghani, Tahmasian, and Farhadi (2014), with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported as 0.90 for the whole scale and 0.80, 0.84, and 0.80 for the subscales, respectively (Pourebrahim & Doniamaly, 2021). In this study, the internal consistency for the whole tool based on Cronbach's alpha was 0.726.

2.2.3. Family Functioning

This 60-item tool is designed to assess family functioning based on the McMaster Family Assessment Model for individuals aged 12 and older. Developed by Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop (1950), it aims to describe the organizational and structural characteristics of the family, assessing the family's ability to adapt to family tasks using a self-report scale. This model identifies structural, occupational, and interactive family characteristics and assesses seven dimensions of family functioning: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective involvement, affective responsiveness, and behavioral control. The family assessment device includes subscales for these dimensions plus an overall family functioning subscale. The reliability of this tool through Cronbach's alpha calculation for its subscales ranges from 0.72 to 0.92, indicating relatively good internal consistency (Firoozeh et al., 2021). In this

study, the internal consistency of the tool based on Cronbach's alpha was 0.852.

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Successful Parenting Training Program

The Successful Parenting Training Program consists of 15 sessions designed to improve family functioning, reduce children's anxiety, and decrease parental stress by enhancing parenting skills. Each session targets specific aspects of parenting and family dynamics, employing various techniques and activities to ensure practical application. The intervention protocol includes pre-tests and post-tests to assess the impact of the training (Kodjebacheva et al., 2016; Manassis et al., 2014; Smokowski et al., 2015).

Session 1: Introduction to Parenting Styles

The first session introduces the program, conducts the pre-test, and covers authoritarian and permissive parenting styles. Participants engage in discussions about historical parenting styles and reflect on their own behaviors, focusing on levels of affection and control.

Session 2: Understanding Parenting Styles

This session continues the exploration of parenting styles, focusing on neglectful and authoritative styles. Participants share personal examples where authoritative behavior was effective and are encouraged to expand their authoritative behaviors.

Session 3: Attachment Styles

Participants learn about different attachment styles, how they form, and how they can be changed. The session includes watching a film on attachment styles and emphasizes the importance of being available and responsive as parents throughout the week.

Session 4: Understanding and Controlling Emotions

The session focuses on identifying and expressing emotions. Participants are introduced to the characteristics of emotions and methods of expressing them through open-ended storytelling. They engage in Q&A about emotions and rate their feelings.

Session 5: Healthy Parenting Practices

This session discusses the importance of consistency in words and actions, setting reasonable expectations, and choosing appropriate caregiving methods. Discussions focus on aligning promises with actions, especially in reinforcing and disciplining children.

Session 6: Improving Marital Relationships

Participants learn about different aspects of intimacy, finding opportunities for interaction, and the importance of

appreciation and fulfilling sexual needs. They practice gratitude exercises and discuss ways to enhance intimacy in their relationships.

Session 7: Enhancing Intimate Relationships with Children

This session highlights the importance of considering children's interests and differences and expressing emotions effectively. Techniques such as nurturing, empathy, and intimate conversations are practiced.

Session 8: Assertiveness Training

Participants explore the impact of new experiences and delegating responsibilities. Discussions on the importance of entrusting children with decisions and responsibilities are held, with practical exercises to implement these strategies.

Session 9: Collaborative Problem Solving and Decision Making

Participants learn problem-solving and decision-making techniques. Through open-ended storytelling, they identify methods to solve problems and make decisions, applying these steps to their children's issues.

Session 10: Effective Supervision Techniques

The session addresses potential societal issues and how to supervise children's use of digital spaces. Participants learn respectful supervision methods through discussions, emphasizing respecting children's privacy.

Session 11: Importance of Shared Recreational Activities

This session discusses the importance of participating in family events, spending quality time together, and playing as a family. Group games are conducted to enhance mood, and participants are encouraged to engage in family outings.

Session 12: Establishing Family Rules

Participants learn how to set effective family rules and the importance of mutual respect for these rules. Discussions cover effective rule-setting and clarifying expectations, with

family members participating in creating and respecting these rules.

Session 13: Familiarizing Children with Social Conditions

The session addresses current social issues and setting boundaries in family relationships. Q&A sessions about contemporary social problems are held, with discussions on age-appropriate social awareness for children.

Session 14: Cultural Awareness in Parenting

Participants explore significant cultural issues, including the importance of secrecy, honesty, and setting religious standards within the family. Discussions focus on the role of religion in child-rearing, with exercises on applying previous session learnings.

Session 15: Review and Feedback

The final session reviews and summarizes the content of the previous sessions, gathers feedback from participants, and conducts the post-test. This session ensures that participants have understood and are able to apply the training effectively.

2.4. Data analysis

Data collected from the research questionnaires were gathered from the control and experimental groups in pre-test and post-test phases. This data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (including mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (including multivariate and univariate covariance analysis).

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations of the research variables in the pre-test and post-test stages.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Family Functioning, Children's Anxiety, and Parental Stress Variables

Variable	Group	Test Stage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Family Functioning	Control	Pre-test	175.42	8.46
		Post-test	175.73	9.64
	Experimental	Pre-test	176.26	9.09
		Post-test	196.42	6.56
Children's Anxiety	Control	Pre-test	20.68	3.77
		Post-test	22.05	4.14
	Experimental	Pre-test	20.89	4.71
		Post-test	15.52	3.80
Parental Stress	Control	Pre-test	98.42	11.91
		Post-test	98.94	9.31
	Experimental	Pre-test	97.10	8.17
		Post-test	80.57	8.63

The results of Levene's test indicate that the statistical value for family functioning ($F = 0.314$, $df_1 = 1$, $df_2 = 36$), children's anxiety ($F = 4.98$, $df_1 = 1$, $df_2 = 36$), and parental stress ($F = 0.148$, $df_1 = 1$, $df_2 = 36$) was not significant ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variance

is accepted. The results of the MBox test for the research variables ($F = 1.04$, $df_1 = 6$, $df_2 = 9389.88$) were not significant ($p > 0.05$), thus accepting the assumption of homogeneity of variance in the covariance matrix.

Table 2

Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) Test Indicators

Indicator	Value	F Value	Hypothesis df	Error df	Significance Level
Pillai's Trace	0.833	51.68	3	31	0.001
Wilks' Lambda	0.167	51.68	3	31	0.001
Hotelling's Trace	5.00	51.68	3	31	0.001
Roy's Largest Root	5.00	51.68	3	31	0.001

Table 2 shows the indicators of the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) test. All four indicators

demonstrate a significant difference between the two groups in the research variables ($p < 0.01$).

Table 3

Univariate Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) Test Indicators

Indicator	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F Value	Significance Level
Family Functioning	3829.09	1	3829.09	67.02	0.001
Children's Anxiety	413.41	1	413.41	50.53	0.001
Parental Stress	3170.08	1	3170.08	38.38	0.001

Table 3 shows the univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) test indicators. The findings, with the pre-test values controlled, indicate that the experimental group, which received the successful parenting intervention, showed significantly higher family functioning and lower children's anxiety and parental stress compared to the control group ($p < 0.01$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the study show that the control and experimental groups had almost similar values for family functioning, children's anxiety, and parental stress in the pre-test. However, after the successful parenting intervention for the experimental group, this group showed a higher score in family functioning in the post-test compared to their pre-test and the control group. Additionally, the experimental group, which received the intervention, showed a decrease in parental stress and children's anxiety in the post-test compared to their pre-test and the control group.

As the findings indicate, successful parenting has a significant impact on family functioning, parental stress, and children's anxiety. These findings have been confirmed in other studies as well. The importance of parenting and its relationship with other variables is undeniable. Studies have

emphasized the role of parenting in various social issues among adolescents, rooted in childhood and their parenting styles. Anxiety disorders, depression, suicidal tendencies, stress, and other problems are significantly related to parenting styles. All these studies highlight the importance of successful parenting and correct child-rearing in the early years of a child's life. Because it is through such parenting that children's destiny and future are shaped (Millings et al., 2013; Mirsadeghi et al., 2018; Morshedzadeh et al., 2020; Rostami & Saadati, 2018; Salimi Souderjani & Yousefi, 2017; Stern et al., 2018; Tussey et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2003; Xu et al., 2017).

As previously mentioned, various studies indicate the relationship between parenting styles and child development. Sanders and McFarland showed that the successful parenting program affects parental stress and children's anxiety, and factors such as depression, anger, anxiety, and high levels of stress can be reduced through planned improvements in parenting skills. Some researchers also believe that parental depression and mental health issues, rooted in incompetence and severe stress and low self-esteem, can lead to a loss of ability in child-rearing, resulting in inconsistent and non-authoritative parenting

styles, which lead to poor child performance (Kim et al., 2016; Matejevic et al., 2015; Smokowski et al., 2015).

It is clear that successful parenting combines some features of the authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian styles: independence and freedom of action (opportunities for experience for children) from the authoritative style, warmth and friendliness with children (love and intimacy in relationships) from the permissive style. Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1975) emphasized two dimensions of parental behavior: "acceptance vs. rejection" and "strictness vs. leniency." Acceptance refers to the level of attention and affection parents show to their children, where accepting parents enjoy being with their children and express warmth, approval, and affection, teaching rules through encouragement rather than punishment. Rejecting parents do not enjoy being with their children and are cold and unresponsive to their needs. Strictness refers to the level of autonomy and freedom parents allow their children (Rowhany et al., 2019; Simona et al., 2018).

Duncan et al. (2007) hypothesized seven roles for parents, with the roles of being an emotional and economic source aligning with factors of love and intimacy in relationships and family economy. The key point is that designing an indigenous successful parenting model based on cultural needs, norms, behaviors, and family dynamics has been considered in this study (Duncan et al., 2007).

As mentioned, family functioning is an important aspect of the family environment that can impact the physical, social, and emotional health of all family members, especially children. Family functioning is seen as a process in which family members interact to meet basic needs, make decisions, establish rules, and define goals, simultaneously contributing to individual and family growth. What happens within the family and how it functions can be a key factor in creating resilience and reducing current and future risks associated with adverse events and unfavorable conditions. Successful parenting can enhance family functioning by providing children with opportunities for experience, expressing warmth and affection, proper supervision, spending time together, consulting in matters, ensuring economic stability, and respecting family rights. This requires continuous education and targeted planning to address children's behavioral issues and improve parent-child relationships.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

By training successful parenting through tangible reinforcers, verbal encouragement, and engaging activities, children's anxiety can be reduced, and the existing tension in parent-child relationships and parental stress can be improved. In recent years, research has emphasized children's behavioral problems, but there are still many deficiencies and issues, highlighting the importance of research in parent-child relationships and parenting methods to address these disorders.

This study has limitations, including using a convenience sampling method and being conducted among parents and students in Isfahan. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to other populations. Another limitation was the use of self-report tools. Based on the results, it is suggested that educational courses and workshops be held by relevant institutions to modify parenting styles.

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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 equally contributed in this article.

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