KMAN PUBLISHING INSTITUTE
Journal Website

Article history:
Received 20 July 2024
Revised 26 September 2024
Accepted 10 Octobers 2024
Published online 01 January 2025

Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling

Volume 7, Issue 1, pp 37-44

E-ISSN: 3041-8518

The Effectiveness of a Family-Centered Problem-Solving Program on Parent-Child Interaction During the Coronavirus Period

Samira. Ganjipour[1], Keivan. Kakabraee[2*], Seyeda. Al-Sadat Hosseini[3], Mokhtar. Arefi[4]

[1] PhD Student in Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran
[2] Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran
[3] Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran
[4] Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran

*** Corresponding author email address**: kakabraee@gmail.com

A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:
Ganjipour, S., Kakabraee, K., Hosseini, S. A., & Arefi, M. (2025). The Effectiveness of a Family-Centered Problem-Solving Program on Parent-Child Interaction During the Coronavirus Period. *Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling.7* (1), 37-44.
http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jarac.7.1.5

A B S T R A C T

Objective: The aim of this study is to investigate problem-solving skills as a comprehensive program that plays a significant role in communication and guiding individuals' lives towards achieving specific goals. The program is designed to modify behavior, select, and replace appropriate behaviors in challenging conditions faced by individuals.

Methods and Materials: The research design is quasi-experimental, utilizing a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up method with a control group. A total of 100 students were selected through random sampling and were randomly assigned to two groups: an experimental group (50 participants) and a control group (50 participants). Parents and students then participated in 10 two-hour sessions of the family-centered problem-solving program over three months. Data were collected based on parents' reports using the short form of the Social Problem-Solving Inventory (D'Zurilla et al., 2004) and the Pianta Parent-Child Interaction Questionnaire (1994).

Findings: The findings, according to the participating mothers' reports, indicated a significant difference in the experimental group between pre-test and post-test scores (three-month interval) and follow-up (one-month interval) in the subscales of the Pianta Parent-Child Interaction, including conflict resolution ($P < 0.04$) and intimacy ($P < 0.03$). However, no significant difference was found in the dependency subscale.

Conclusion: The practical application of the family-centered problem-solving training resulted in changes in mothers' parenting styles, improving interactive communication between mother and child, increasing emotional connection and intimacy with the child, and reducing emotional conflicts among children, thereby playing an important role in family communication patterns.

Keywords: *family-centered problem-solving, parent-child interaction, social problem-solving, coronavirus*

1. Introduction

Childhood is recognized as one of the most fundamental periods of life, with experiences during this time serving as the foundation for an individual's lifelong health (Guinn et al., 2019). During this age, children examine and resist the limitations imposed by their parents (Graziano et al., 2010). From the moment of birth, children experience the process of socialization, during which they gradually learn and organize their norms, skills, motivations, attitudes, and individual behaviors. These behaviors indicate the child's social, emotional, and moral development, contributing to the formation of their personality (Abarashi et al., 2014). Parent-child interaction is a crucial and vital relationship for creating security and love, consisting of a combination of behaviors, emotions, and expectations unique to each parent-child pair. This interaction serves as the child's first introduction to the world of communication, where feelings of love, security, and intimacy are deeply rooted (Bireda & Pillay, 2018). Family relationships, in addition to their importance in children's psychosocial development, play a positive role in preventing children's behavioral problems. Children achieve cognitive growth by modeling their parents and interacting with peers and adults (Kakabaraee, 2019; Kakabaraei & Moradi, 2017; Kakabraee, 2020).

Healthy and effective parent-child relationships during early childhood can predict the psychological status and effective communication and relationship formation with peers and adults in various cognitive and academic aspects. Numerous studies have shown that negative parent-child interaction patterns predict externalizing problems in children (Shirzadi et al., 2020). Establishing healthy functioning, modeling, and identifying with parents play a critical role in a child's life. Many developmental psychology researchers emphasize that the most significant relationships throughout a person's life are the parent-child relationships. Therefore, effective parent-child communication is vital for the normative psychosocial development of children and adolescents throughout their lives (Kakabaraee, 2019; Kakabaraei & Moradi, 2017). Studies also show that children's behavioral problems can be influenced by maternal stress, the quality of the mother-child relationship, and maternal mental health. Mothers experiencing psychological stress may be unable to interact with their children in a broad and developmentally appropriate manner. Therefore, mother-child relationship types, such as rejection, over-control, and modeling anxious behaviors, significantly contribute to childhood behavioral problems (Kakabraee, 2020). Observations link behavioral problems like delinquency, aggression, and oppositional defiant disorder to parent-child attachment and relationships during childhood. Many of these children have histories of parental mistreatment, neglect, and lack of attention in early childhood (Chae et al., 2018; Sadri et al., 2016).

With the emergence of a new respiratory disease known as the coronavirus (COVID-19) since 2019, which has become a major health crisis, many countries have employed various methods such as quarantine to prevent its spread (Shirzadi et al., 2020). While quarantine has advantages in preventing the spread of the coronavirus and reducing infection rates and mortality, it has led to mental health issues, psychological distress, and some psychological disorders. Studies indicate a negative relationship between maternal coronavirus anxiety and the overall positive parent-child interaction (Shirzadi et al., 2020). School closures, reduced physical activity, and decreased social interactions have made children and families more susceptible to psychological disorders (Shahyad & Mohammadi, 2020). Utilizing a problem-solving approach in parent-child relationships fosters self-confidence and self-esteem in children; problem-solving skills are a type of cognitive-behavioral process used by individuals to address daily challenges and problems, serving as an effective strategy for adaptive coping (Shokoohi-Yekta, Akbari Zardkhaneh, et al., 2016; Shokoohi-Yekta, Parand, & Dargahi, 2016; Shokoohi Yekta et al., 2015).

Numerous studies have established the connection between communication problems and family interaction patterns, indicating that problem-solving training enhances individuals' technical, social, cognitive, managerial, research, and educational skills, with the social domain being the strongest (Farid Marandi et al., 2020; Kakabaraee, 2019). One of the most comprehensive social problem-solving models is the social problem-solving model by D'Zurilla and Goldfried (1986). This model posits that problem-solving is primarily determined by two general processes: problem orientation and problem-solving skills or styles. Ineffective problem-solving is characterized by a negative orientation towards the problem, impulsivity, or severe procrastination and avoidance. Social problem-solving, as an indicator of individual competence, can be considered a marker of quality of life in interpersonal interactions. It is a cognitive-behavioral process for identifying effective solutions to specific problems that arise in daily life, offering various potential effective responses to address problematic situations, thereby increasing the

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E-ISSN: 3041-8518

likelihood of selecting the most effective response among these alternatives. According to the D'Zurilla model, real-world problem-solving outcomes are mainly determined by two relatively independent major processes: problem orientation and problem-solving. Various studies indicate that social organization is influenced by social problem-solving thinking; in other words, enriching the social environment with social skills can facilitate the formation of social adaptation (Farid Marandi et al., 2020; Kakabaraee, 2019; Siu & Shek, 2005).

In examining the extent to which a family-centered problem-solving program has impacted parent-child relationships through an educational approach, research indicates that such programs can aid in problem-solving, reduce avoidant and impulsive problem-solving, and improve parent-child relationships (Kakabaraei & Moradi, 2017; Kakabraee, 2020). They also enhance social skills such as cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, and self-regulation, and improve constructive communication in interpersonal relationships (Farid Marandi et al., 2020), while reducing externalizing problems in children with Down syndrome (Vadoudi et al., 2018). Future research findings indicate that problem-solving training significantly improves parental parenting styles. Thus, this educational program can help parents establish beneficial relationships with their children and use effective methods other than punishment (Shokoohi-Yekta, Akbari Zardkhaneh, et al., 2016; Shokoohi-Yekta, Parand, & Dargahi, 2016). Therefore, this study examines the effectiveness of a family-centered problem-solving program on parent-child interaction during the coronavirus period.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This applied research employs a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages, including a control group. The study population consisted of all mothers of fifth and sixth-grade elementary students in the city of Eslamabad-e-Gharb in 2020. The sample group included 100 mothers of 11-12-year-old boys and girls, selected through convenience sampling and then randomly assigned to two groups: control (50 participants) and experimental (50 participants). According to Conning (2006), the minimum sample size ratio for each estimated parameter is five participants; a 10:1 ratio is more appropriate, and a 20:1 ratio is ideal. The inclusion criteria were: 1. Mothers with children aged 11 to 12 years enrolled in the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school; 2. Commitment and cooperation of mothers in attending workshop sessions. The exclusion criteria included unwillingness or lack of consent from parents or students to actively participate in the workshop.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Parent-Child Relationship

This scale was developed by Pianta in 1994 and consists of 33 questions that assess parents' perceptions of their relationship with their child. It includes three components: closeness (10 items), dependency (6 items), and conflict (17 items), as well as the overall positive mother-child relationship. The scale uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely does not apply) to 5 (definitely applies). To obtain the overall positive relationship score on this scale, the scores for the conflict and dependency domains must be reversed. Scoring is based on comparing pre-test and post-test scores and the significance of this difference. This scale is used to assess the parent-child relationship at all ages. The content validity and reliability of this questionnaire were obtained by Abarashi et al. (2017), with components of conflict, closeness, dependency, and overall relationship showing Cronbach's alphas of 0.83, 0.69, 0.46, and 0.84, respectively. Reliability for these domains in Abarshi's study was reported as 0.84, 0.70, 0.61, and 0.86, respectively (Abarashi et al., 2014).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Thoughtful Child/Teenager Parenting Workshop

The "Thoughtful Child/Teenager Parenting Workshop" was conducted for parents and their children, aged 11 and 12 years, who were in elementary school. The workshop aimed to empower children in dealing with issues in different environments and improve challenging behaviors in various situations. Parents learned skills such as critical thinking, appropriate problem-solving methods, and increasing communication, affection, and empathy between mothers and children. The workshop focused on parenting interaction skills, engaging children in problem-solving, and enhancing children's abilities and creativity in applying different solutions to problems. Through exercises presented in the sessions, parents helped children explore various ways of communicating with children, acceptance, empathy, satisfying children's curiosity, and problem-solving methods. Summaries of the topics covered in the educational

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workshop were provided to parents. One limitation of this educational program is that problem-solving requires identifying and evaluating problems, which takes time to address effectively. The educational intervention, conducted over three months, included 10 two-hour group sessions for parents (mothers). Regarding the reliability and validity of this educational package, research on family-centered problem-solving training (Kakabaraee, 2019; Kakabaraei & Moradi, 2017; Kakabraee, 2020; Shokohi Yekta & Zamani, 2012; Shokoohi-Yekta, Akbari Zardkhaneh, et al., 2016; Shokoohi Yekta et al., 2015), which demonstrate sufficient reliability and validity.

Session 1: Introduction and Session Overview, Familiarizing Parents with Childhood Characteristics

In this introductory session, the goals and importance of the workshop are explained. Parents are introduced to the characteristics of childhood and various child-rearing methods. The session includes the distribution of a video clip titled "The Little Bird That Finds a Way to Cope with the Waves of the Sea," illustrating behavioral characteristics of children and methods to navigate challenges. Parents are tasked with describing the behavioral traits of children they observe.

Session 2: Understanding Problem-Solving

This session focuses on identifying and precisely defining problems and goal setting using a step-by-step problem-solving approach. Parents learn to prioritize issues, distinguish important matters, and use active listening skills. They practice finding solutions to problems and testing these solutions in real-life scenarios. Assignments include identifying priorities and practicing active listening to distinguish significant problems.

Session 3: Problem-Solving Skills and Proper Parenting Methods

Parents are taught listening, speaking, self-disclosure, clarity, respect, and attention skills. The session covers planning, goal formation, decision-making, analytical thinking, modeling, and implementation. Parents are encouraged to engage physically with their children, foster empathetic understanding, identify the root causes of problems, and avoid defensive postures or pre-judgments of their children's behavior.

Session 4: Teaching Positive Parenting

Parents are introduced to communication and interaction patterns, types of communication barriers, and ways to overcome these barriers. They are assigned group tasks at home, such as listening to their children's opinions, considering their children's solutions, and encouraging creative problem-solving.

Session 5: Reinforcing Positive Parenting Behaviors

This session emphasizes strengthening relationships, minimizing negative traits, considering new solutions, and enhancing children's positive traits. Parents are encouraged to maintain physical presence with their children, soften their tone when expressing views and emotions, and develop skills such as asking questions about topics of interest and actively listening without filtering their children's speech.

Session 6: Improving Parent-Child Relationship and Assertiveness

A review of previous sessions and evaluation of acquired skills is conducted. The principles of enhancing interactive communication between parents and children are discussed, focusing on establishing emotional connections based on assertiveness and logic. Parents practice assertiveness in encouraging and disciplining their children's behaviors while avoiding undesirable behaviors and excessive commands, managing emotions effectively.

Session 7: Understanding and Recognizing Children's Emotions

Parents learn proper communication methods, recognizing children's emotions, empathy, follow-through, and appropriate ways to express and communicate with children. Behavioral skills in dealing with children are strengthened. Assignments include identifying emotions (such as anger, joy, sadness), confronting children with problem-solving, using emotion expression sheets, respecting children's opinions, practicing question and answer techniques, and exploring puzzles.

Session 8: Teaching Listening Skills

Communication skills, such as effective seeing, listening, and thinking, are taught. Parents learn to reflect on others' statements and establish correct communication with their children. Assignments include understanding the expression of desires, discussing expectations, enhancing intimacy and empathetic understanding, maintaining eye contact, and providing useful verbal feedback, like smiling and encouraging.

Session 9: Solutions and Parents' Views

Past sessions' problem-solving skills are reviewed, and strategies for practicing active listening, modeling, behavior modification, and awareness of personal beliefs and values are created. Parents provide an environment for problem-solving, controlling thoughts and emotions, replacing logical and realistic thoughts, preventing negative self-talk, and increasing self-confidence and awareness of personal goals.

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Assignments focus on behavior modeling based on behavioral pattern correction.

Session 10: Review of Learned Information and Final Evaluation

The final session reviews previously covered material, solutions, and relapse prevention methods. A video on problem-solving is shown, and a post-test is conducted to evaluate the program's effectiveness and the participants' progress.

2.4. Data analysis

Data collected at the end of each treatment stage were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and covariance analysis tests via SPSS version 23.

3. Findings and Results

The mean age of the participants was 37.33 years for mothers and 11.52 years for their children. Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of the parent-child interaction components at pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages based on mothers' reports.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Parent-Child Interaction Variables

Variable	Stage	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up
		M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Conflict	Experimental	20.30 (1.83776)	16.74 (2.23200)	15.28 (2.78237)
	Control	20.61 (1.74521)	20.54 (2.04798)	20.87 (2.31221)
	Total	20.45 (1.78950)	18.64 (2.86227)	18.08 (2.86227)
Intimacy	Experimental	21.97 (2.80509)	25.98 (3.64362)	23.95 (2.06784)
	Control	20.96 (2.19191)	21.33 (2.81333)	21.19 (3.72370)
	Total	21.46 (2.55583)	23.47 (4.10647)	22.57 (4.11949)
Dependency	Experimental	15.84 (2.01338)	13.86 (2.26321)	13.29 (2.63863)
	Control	15.79 (2.45786)	15.67 (2.55454)	16.52 (3.50711)
	Total	15.81 (2.23538)	14.76 (2.56843)	14.91 (3.48901)

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of parent-child conflict in three stages (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up). The findings indicate that there was no significant difference in the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the pre-test stage across the components of conflict, intimacy, and dependency. In the post-test stage, the mean scores of conflict and dependency in the experimental group decreased compared to the control group, while the intimacy scores in the experimental group increased significantly compared to the control group. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check the assumption of normality of the score distribution in the population. The results for conflict ($Z = 0.085$, $p = 0.070$), intimacy ($Z = 0.074$, $p = 0.200$), and dependency ($Z = 0.080$, $p = 0.121$) confirmed the null hypothesis of normal distribution of the research variables' scores.

The results of Levene's test, which determines the equality of variances between two or more populations, indicated significant differences in the parent-child components of conflict ($F(1, 98) = 24.652$, $p < 0.05$), intimacy ($F(1, 98) = 11.339$, $p < 0.05$), and dependency ($F(1, 98) = 7.793$, $p < 0.05$). Given the significance level being less than 0.05, it shows the inequality of variances in the two independent populations. Therefore, Wilks' Lambda was evaluated for its effect. Wilks' Lambda for effect size ($\lambda = 0.850$, $F(2.544) = 0.025$, $p \leq 0.001$) indicated at least one significant difference in parent-child interaction components between the control and experimental groups. The statistical power of 0.82 at a significance level of 0.01 indicated an adequate sample size. The results of the between-group comparison of variables are shown in Table 2.

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Table 2

Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANOVA) Results for the Effectiveness of Family-Centered Social Problem-Solving Training on Parent-Child Interaction

Source	Dependent Variable	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Group	Post-test Conflict	1	12.217	4.096	0.046	0.043
	Follow-up Conflict	1	44.011	9.070	0.003	0.090
Pre-test	Post-test Conflict	1	10.714	3.588	0.061	0.038
	Follow-up Conflict	1	5.629	1.160	0.284	0.012
Group	Post-test Intimacy	1	44.058	4.695	0.033	0.049
	Follow-up Intimacy	1	50.517	4.110	0.046	0.043
Pre-test	Post-test Intimacy	1	6.659	0.710	0.402	0.008
	Follow-up Intimacy	1	46.343	3.771	0.055	0.039
Group	Post-test Dependency	1	0.332	0.100	0.753	0.001
	Follow-up Dependency	1	0.966	0.140	0.709	0.002
Pre-test	Post-test Dependency	1	11.019	3.312	0.072	0.035
	Follow-up Dependency	1	5.823	0.843	0.361	0.009

As seen in Table 2, according to parents' reports regarding parent-child interaction, the F-statistic values indicate significant differences between the experimental and control groups in the post-test stage for conflict ($F = 4.096$, $p < 0.046$) and intimacy ($F = 4.695$, $p < 0.033$). In the follow-up stage, significant differences were also found in the conflict ($F = 9.070$, $p < 0.003$) and intimacy ($F = 5.517$, $p < 0.046$) subscales between the two groups. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was also confirmed.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the effect of a family-centered problem-solving program on parent-child interaction during the coronavirus period. According to the reports from parents of students, the results indicated that the family-centered problem-solving program positively impacted parent-child relationships, altering the conflict and intimacy components in these relationships. The high prevalence of coronavirus and the anxiety mothers felt about their and their children's health led to strict behavior regarding hygiene and staying home, which could result in oppositional and stubborn behaviors in children, causing conflicts in the mother-child relationship (Shirzadi et al., 2020). Parents who do not choose appropriate parenting styles and fail to teach their children critical thinking and problem-solving skills increase the behavioral problems in their children (Shokohi Yekta & Zamani, 2012). Consistent with this research, other studies have shown that family-centered problem-solving skills training improves positive parent-child communication, social skills, self-esteem, self-efficacy, peer relationships, and a positive attitude (Abarashi et al., 2014; Shokoohi-Yekta, Akbari Zardkhaneh, et al., 2016; Shokoohi-Yekta, Parand, & Dargahi, 2016). Based on the findings of the present study and other empirical evidence, family-centered problem-solving skills training can effectively address life's challenges and issues, facilitating appropriate decision-making and problem-solving in various situations and having significant implications for interpersonal relationships (Beelmann, 2004; Kakabaraee, 2019; Neitzel & Stright, 2004; Shokoohi Yekta et al., 2015). Numerous studies indicate that negative parent-child interaction patterns predict externalizing problems in children (Shiralinia et al., 2019). Given that each parent plays an essential role in their children's behavior, with a stronger modeling influence from mothers due to their bond with the child, it has been shown that children's behavioral problems can be influenced by maternal stress, the quality of mother-child relationships, and maternal mental health. Additionally, studies have shown that maternal psychological stress reduces physical and emotional health, hindering effective interaction with the child (Kakabraee, 2020). Teaching problem-solving methods to mothers can change parenting styles, promote proper child-rearing practices, enhance problem-solving skills, and replace inappropriate behavioral patterns in children. This method significantly reduces family conflicts and tensions, improving parent-child interactions and overall family functioning. Problem-solving training, whether through parental or teacher instruction, positively impacts children's social behaviors (Hodges et al., 2003). Furthermore, Shokoohi-Yekta and Parand's findings (2003) show that parents participating in parenting workshops become more sensitive to their parenting styles, evaluating

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E-ISSN: 3041-8518

and adjusting them accordingly (Shokoohi Yekta et al., 2015). Studies on problem-solving have shown that individuals with poor problem-solving skills are more likely to experience behavioral and emotional issues. Problem-solving plays a crucial role in social relationships, individual adaptability, marital conflicts, and parent-child interactions within families. A significant issue is the lack of proper communication and interaction with children in the family environment. Miller believes that cognitive-behavioral therapies, such as family-centered problem-solving training, have extensive applications in various family domains, including interpersonal relationships and individual well-being (Kakabraee, 2020). Research by Kakabaraei and Moradi (2017) shows that problem-solving training positively impacts preschool children's social skills, increasing cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, and self-regulation (Kakabaraei & Moradi, 2017), thus enhancing social skills, interpersonal relationships, and constructive and effective communication with their surroundings.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study aimed to examine the impact of family-centered problem-solving training on parent-child interaction, providing valuable information for families, counselors, and specialists working in family and child domains to improve children's mental health. Researchers in family-centered problem-solving approaches believe that this method has practical applications across various levels, particularly in the family, offering significant benefits for resolving numerous issues individuals face. Based on the conducted studies, problem-solving training helps mothers seek logical and as tension-free as possible solutions for issues related to their children. A limitation of this study was the short-term follow-up period for long-term effectiveness. It is suggested that more attention be given to problem-solving training through school counselors for addressing student issues and that researchers and therapists integrate problem-solving training with parent-child interaction-based therapy. Families can utilize this practical method for addressing issues and interpersonal relationships through parenting workshops. Most parents use various methods to align their children with their demands; problem-solving training helps them teach children proper problem-solving methods. This study's results can provide solutions for establishing reciprocal relationships between parents and children, promoting a friendly and intimate relationship. Problem-solving training can help educators, therapists, and families adopt appropriate behaviors with elementary school children, adolescents, and even adults. Therefore, this study's results can be used by families, particularly parents, for adopting proper behavioral approaches with their children, as well as advisory groups working in family counseling to provide appropriate training for dealing with children and employing alternative solutions.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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JARAC Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling
E-ISSN: 3041-8518