



Modeling children's behavioral problems based on attachment styles with parent-child relationship mediation

Mahboobeh. Moradi¹, Abdolhasan. Farhangi*² & Taher. Tizdast³

1. Ph. D student of General Psychology, Department of Psychology, Tonkabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonkabon, Iran.

2. *Corresponding author: Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Tonkabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonkabon, Iran.

3. Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Tonkabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonkabon, Iran.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article type

Original research

Pages: 9-17

Corresponding Author's Info

Email:

abdolhassanfarhangi@yahoo.com

Article history:

Received: 2022/10/07

Revised: 2023/02/26

Accepted: 2023/03/06

Published online: 2023/05/07

Keywords:

parent-child relationship, attachment styles, behavioral problems.

ABSTRACT

Background and Aim: Examining the psychological problems of children and adolescents has always been one of the main concerns of psychologists. The present study was conducted with the aim of modeling children's behavioral problems based on attachment styles with the mediation of parent-child relationship. **Methods:** In a cross-sectional study in the form of a correlational design, all mothers of primary school students with behavioral problems in Karaj city were selected using a simple random sampling method from the list of names of students diagnosed with behavioral problems. After obtaining informed consent, the research data were used with the help of the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) - Achenbach and Rescular (2001), the attachment styles questionnaire (1987) and the Pianta Parent-Child Relationship Questionnaire (2015). In order to check the assumptions of the statistical tests and test the hypotheses of the research, using the SmartPLS software, the identified paths of the research have been investigated according to the conceptual model. Version 3.3 of SmartPLS software was used to compile the confirmatory factor analysis model and structural equations, and SPSS version 26 was used for descriptive statistics. Path analysis has also been used to determine direct and indirect coefficients. **Results:** The results obtained from the bootstrap method and the Sobel test both show that the indirect effect of attachment styles on children's behavioral problems due to the parent-child relationship is -0.142, and the value of the Sobel statistic is at the 95% confidence level. It is significant ($P > 0.001$, Sobel=3.56). As a result, attachment styles have a significant effect on children's behavioral problems due to the mediating role of parent-child relationship. The negative value of beta (-0.142) shows the negativity and oppositeness of this effect. **Conclusion:** It can be concluded that attachment styles are effective in creating behavioral problems in children by mediating parent-child relationship, which can be used in the prevention program while removing clinical implications.



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How to Cite This Article:

Moradi, M., Farhangi, A., & Tizdast, T. (2023). Modeling children's behavioral problems based on attachment styles with parent-child relationship mediation. *jayps*, 4(2): 9-17.

Introduction

Investigating the psychological problems of children and adolescents has always been one of the main concerns of psychologists. Meanwhile, children and adolescents with behavioral problems face more professional challenges (Plazier, Ost, Stasijens, Dreder, & Vanneste, 2015; Sinek & Cowell, 2018). In this regard, Bloomquist (2018) believes that children with behavioral problems and disorders create many challenges for their parents. These children show behaviors that harm the people around them. Common childhood disorders are usually classified into two broad areas: externalizing disorders and internalizing disorders. Externalizing disorders are characterized by behaviors such as aggression, disobedience, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that are more directed outward (Gallenkamp, Lazarido, Francecelli, Napado, & Edwards, 2018). Children's behavioral problems include attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder. Internalizing disorders are characterized by behaviors such as depression, social withdrawal, and anxiety that are more introverted (Kring, Davison, Neal, & Johnson, 2017). Behavioral problems in children appear in the form of different behaviors caused by many factors. The most important are biological, environmental, social, cultural, and family factors (Zoppardo et al., 2021).

Children's behavioral disorders create challenging problems for teachers, families, and children themselves and have caused concern about mental health and its impact on children's growth and performance (Wolfolk, Allen, and Apter, 2017). Accordingly, experts emphasize the importance of timely evaluation and treatment of psychological disorders. Emotional and behavioral patterns are difficult to change in adulthood. Therefore, diagnosing mental health problems as early as possible in childhood is one of the preventive health aspects of behavioral disorders, one of the main challenges for teachers and families in dealing with students, and one of the main reasons for referring children to medical centers. (Villarino, Cizkoska, and Coimbra, 2017). Research shows that the most influential factor in children's behavioral problems is the behavior of parents with children (Katz, Pedro, and Michaud, 2017). In parent-child interactions, parents' failure to use appropriate behavioral

methods to control their children's behavior makes parenting stressful for both parents, and mothers experience this tension more than fathers. More extensive studies in the field of family conflicts have shown that in the families of children with disorders, parental stress, lack of attention, feelings of inadequacy in parents, limitations in relationships, alcohol consumption, divorce, anger, separation, marital conflict, depression and isolation are more. (Sekka et al., 2017).

Parent-child interaction is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. As a result of the interaction of several key factors, the general problems of parent-child relationships and the mother's emotional care of the child are formed, such as: Attitude and level of acceptance of parents, how to manage and control behavior, sense of social competence and self-control, level of parenting knowledge and skills, self-confidence and thoughtfulness of parents in raising children and creating an environment with minimum conflict (Tajrishi et al., 2015). Parents' relationships with other family members, especially their children, have important effects on the development of children's health and psychological health (Wolf-King et al., 2017). The importance of these relationships is because the early experiences formed in this institution will have an important impact on the development of the personality and behavior of family members in the following years of life. Among these experiences is the child's strong emotional relationship with the primary caregiver (often the mother) (Steptoe, Wakeman, Molloy, Messerli-Borgi, & Caskey, 2013). According to Sigelman and Ryder (2019), the strong emotional relationship of a mother with a child causes the child to form a secure attachment. It reduces or prevents many of his behavioral problems. According to his belief, in people with a secure attachment style, the mother is emotionally available to the child, and they have warm, positive, and responsive interactions with their child; they have high self-esteem and feel that others love them and care about them. (DiTella & Castelli, 2016).

Avoidant insecure attachment style occurs when the mother is emotionally dry and nervous and unavailable to the child; it is obvious that they leave inappropriate emotional effects. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate and adjust emotions that lead to secure or insecure attachment

through implementing attachment therapy. Since children's behavioral problems may be affected by several factors rooted in the fields of parenting, attachment, interaction, and the child's own behavioral characteristics, the experience of making changes in each field will have a different effect (Wilk, 2018). According to what was mentioned, the present study intends to model children's behavioral problems based on parenting methods, attachment styles, and emotional regulation strategies of mothers by mediating the parent-child relationship.

Method

The method used in this research was descriptive and cross-sectional correlation designs. In terms of implementation, the research is based on the communication model, and according to the structural equations, it is a part of the correlational descriptive research because its purpose is to determine the mediating role of the parent-child relationship in the relationship between children's behavioral problems based on attachment styles. Also, the current research is based on the method of data collection in the category of descriptive (non-experimental) research, and the data was collected through a questionnaire from the sample group in person and after obtaining informed consent from the participants in the research. Based on the expected results of fundamental research, fundamental research aims to test theories, explain the relationships between phenomena, and add to the body of knowledge in a specific field. This type of research is result-oriented, also, considering the time dimension of this cross-sectional research and the depth of the research, it is extensive. This research's statistical population is comprised of all the mothers of primary school students with behavioral problems in Karaj city. The sample group of this study consisted of 300 mothers of elementary school students with behavioral problems, and simple random sampling was used to select them. Klein (2016) divides structural equation patterns into three types: simple, slightly complex, and complex patterns, stating that the sample size in simple patterns is below 100 people, in slightly complex patterns between 100 and 200 people, and complex patterns above 200 people.

Materials

1. Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) - Parent Version. Achenbach's child behavior inventory was first designed by Achenbach and Rascular in (2001). It was translated and standardized for the first time in Iran by Tehrani Dost et al. Achenbach's child behavior inventory is a collection of parallel forms of Achenbach ASEBA and evaluates the problems of children and adolescents in 8 factors of anxiety/depression, isolation/depression, physical complaints, social problems, thinking problems,

attention problems, ignoring rules and aggressive behavior. The two factors of ignoring rules and aggressive behavior form the second-order factor of externalizing problems. Achenbach's child behavior list assesses the emotional-behavioral problems and academic and social capabilities and competencies of children aged 6-18 from the parents' point of view and is usually completed in 20-25 minutes (Minai, 2017). The overall reliability coefficients of CBCL forms (Achenbach Child Behavior Inventory) were reported using Cronbach's alpha of 0.97 and using test-retest reliability of 0.94. The content validity, criterion validity (using a psychiatric interview with the child and correlation with the CSI-4 scale) and construct validity (internal relations of the scales and group differentiation) of these forms have been reported as favorable (Achenbach & Rescorella, 2017). In Minai's research (2017), the range of internal consistency coefficients of scales using Cronbach's alpha formula was reported from 0.63 to 0.95. The time stability of the scales was checked using the test-retest method with a time interval of 5-8 weeks, and the range of time stability coefficients was obtained from 0.32 to 0.67. The agreement between the respondents has also been examined, and the range of these coefficients has fluctuated from 0.09 to 0.67.

2. Hazen and Shaver adult attachment styles questionnaire. This scale, which was standardized using Hazen and Shaver's (1987) attachment test materials and for Tehran University students, is a two-part questionnaire. In the first part, three secure, avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles are distinguished according to 21 questions on a 5-point Likert scale (none, little, medium, high, very high). In the second part, the subject chooses one of the three options that describe the three types of attachment, and determines his attachment style. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questions of each of the safe, avoidant and ambivalent subscales for a student sample ($n = 240$; Besharat, 2000) for all subjects were 0.74, 0.72, 0.72, respectively; Was. The correlation coefficient between the scores of the male and female subjects was 0.85 and 0.87, respectively. The retest reliability coefficient of the adult attachment scale for a sample of 30 people on two occasions with an interval of two weeks for all subjects was 0.92.

3. Parent-Child Relationship Scale (CPRS). This scale was created by Pianta for the first time in 2014 and includes 33 items that measure parents' perception of their relationship with their child. This questionnaire was translated by Tahmasian and Khorramabadi (2007) and its validity was evaluated by experts (Abarashi, 2009). This scale includes areas of conflict (17 items), intimacy (10 items), dependence (6 items), and overall positive relationship (total of all areas) (Abdishapourabadi et al., 2012). Conflict includes the negative aspects of the relationship such as fighting with each other, getting angry with each other, disobedience and not

accepting restraint and unpredictability (Khodapanahi et al., 2012). Intimacy refers to the extent to which parents perceive their relationship with their child to be warm, emotional, and comfortable (Discroll & Pianta, 2011). Dependence evaluates the degree of abnormal dependence of mother and child (Khodapanahi et al., 2012). Overall positive relationship also emphasizes close and intimate parent-child relationships. The parent-child relationship scale is a self-reporting questionnaire, and its scoring is based on a 5-point Likert scale (a score of 5 is definitely applicable and a score of 0 is definitely not applicable). In order to obtain the score of the overall positive relationship in this scale, the scores of the questions in the areas of conflict and dependence should be reversed (Abarashi, 2009). A high score in each of the subscales indicates the presence of most of the mentioned components. The grading method is based on the comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores and the significance of this difference. This scale has been used to measure the parent-child relationship at all ages (Abadi Shapoorabadi et al., 2012). Which of the fields of conflict, intimacy, dependence and overall positive

relationship were identified with Cronbach's alpha of 0.84, 0.69, 0.46, and 0.80, respectively (Abarashi, 2009). In a research, Driscoll and Pianta (2011) reported Cronbach's alpha of this questionnaire in each of the components of conflict, closeness, dependence and overall positive relationship as 0.75, 0.74, 0.69, and 0.80 respectively.

Implementation

Version 3.3 of SmartPLS software was used to compile a confirmatory factor analysis model and structural equations, and SPSS version 26 was used for descriptive statistics. Path analysis has also been used to determine direct and indirect coefficients.

Results

The frequency distribution and percentage of the sample group is reported in Table 1 according to: Age, number of births (the highest number should be the second, first and third respectively), number of children, subject's occupation, married or not, spouse's age, spouse's occupation, subject's level of education and spouse's income level.

Table 1. Frequency distribution and percentage of the sample group according to demographic characteristics

Variable	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Boy	137	51/6
	Girl	129	48/4
	Total	266	100
Mother's age	30 or lower	58	21/9
	30-40	121	45/4
	40 or higher	87	32/8
	Total	266	100
Mother's education	Diplome or lower	44	16/7
	Bachelor's or associate degree	132	49/5
	Master's or higher	90	33/9
	Total	266	100

The results of Table 1 indicate that the demographic variables and have no significant differences. participants are in the same situation in terms of

Table 2. Descriptive indices for all research variables and results of normality of data distribution

Variable	Component	Mean	Standard deviation	Normality		Range		K-S		
				Kurtosis	Skewness	Min.	Max	Z	Sig	Results
Attachment Styles	Secure	20/26	4/65	-0/41	-0/26	7	29	0/077	0/001	Approved
	Avoidance	20/70	4/82	-0/37	-0/51	8	29	0/078	0/001	Approved
	Anxious	22/51	4/32	-0/62	-0/059	10	30	0/099	0/001	Approved
Child-parent relationship	Non-conflict	64/00	11/34	-0/31	0/080	27	88	0/062	0/026	Rejected
	Proximity	29/95	7/20	-0/098	-0/78	13	45	0/050	0/200	Approved
	independency	22/56	4/62	-0/537	-0/201	8	30	0/073	0/003	Rejected
Children's behavioral problems	Violation of attention	18/23	5/70	-0/60	0/10	0	27	0/092	0/001	Rejected
	ADHD	19/00	5/69	-0/81	0/40	1	27	0/093	0/001	Rejected
	Obstinacy of disobedience	20/30	3/32	-0/71	-0/27	10	24	0/10	0/001	Rejected

Diffuse anxiety	13/42	3/93	-0/88	0/69	1	18	0/155	0/001	Rejected
major depression	47/84	11/99	-0/89	0/60	3	66	0/122	0/001	Rejected
separation anxiety	21/64	6/03	-0/76	0/17	3	30	0/094	0/001	Rejected

The description of the variables is important because the test results of research hypotheses are extracted based on the data and indicators of these variables. Research data have an interval scale. To describe the variables of the research, centrality and dispersion indices have been used, which are discussed below. Table 2 shows the descriptive status of the research variables. Three hundred twenty questionnaires were distributed among mothers of primary school students. 13

questionnaires were not returned and 41 questionnaires were distorted or unhealthy, and finally 266 healthy and analyzable questionnaires were collected. Considering the heavy questionnaire had many questions, this response rate (89%) is completely reasonable and acceptable. The values of descriptive statistics and central indicators, including mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis for each component, are reported in Table 2.

Table 3. Structural equation results and structural equation quality indicators

Path	Structural equation			The quality of structural equations				Collinearity		Result
	Beta	t	Sig	R ²	Effect size		VIF	Condition	Direction	
				R ²	R ² _{adj}	F ²				
Emotional regulation strategies of mothers -> parent-child relationship	0/026	0/95	0/33	0/83	0/83	0/001	0/15	2/66	Rejected	
Attachment styles -> parent-child relationship	0/31	7/79	0/001			0/31	0/64	2/75	Approved	+
Parenting methods -> child-parent relationship	0/66	19/51	0/001			0/66		2/79	Approved	+
Child-parent relationship -> children's behavioral problems	-0/44	-5/43	0/001	0/20	0/19	-	0/11	-	Approved	-

In the internal model section, the relationship between the variables of the research is analyzed. The first criterion for checking the internal model is checking the non-collinearity of the variables, for this purpose tolerance index and variance inflation factor (VIF) are used. Tolerance level less than 0.2 (VIF higher than 5) indicates collinearity between the variables, which can be seen according to Table 3, the condition of non-collinearity has been met for all three independent variables. One of the internal evaluation criteria of the model is the coefficient of determination (R²) and the adjusted coefficient of determination (R²_{adj}). The coefficient of determination (R²) measures the explanatory variance of an endogenous variable relative to its total variance by exogenous variables. For this index, values greater than 0.67

are considered strong, greater than 0.33 are considered moderate, and less than 0.19 are considered weak. In fact, this coefficient shows how many percent of the independent variable or variables explain the changes of the dependent variable. Based on this, it can be said that parent-child relationship alone has explained 20.1% of the changes in children's behavioral problems. The three variables of parenting methods, attachment styles and emotional regulation strategies of mothers have together explained 83.7% of the child-parent relationship. Another internal model evaluation criterion is the effect size (f²), which indicates the change in the value (R²) after removing a certain exogenous hidden variable from the model. Hensler et al. (2003) introduced values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 for small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

Based on the results of Table 3, it can be seen that among the three variables of parenting styles, attachment styles and emotional regulation strategies of mothers, the intensity of the effect of parenting styles (66.6%) was greater than that

of attachment styles (31.8%). The variable of emotional regulation strategies had the lowest effect intensity with an effect intensity of less than 1%.

Table 4. Sobel and bootstrap test results for the effect of the mediator variable					
Path	Bootstrap		Sobel test		Condition
	Beta	T	Sobel's statistics	Sig.	
Emotional regulation strategies of mothers -> child-parent relationship -> children's behavioral problems	-0/012	-0/344	0/322	0/661	Rejected
Attachment styles -> parent-child relationship -> children's behavioral problems	-0/142	-3/665	3/556	0/001	Approved
Parenting methods -> parent-child relationship -> children's behavioral problems	-0/298	-5/288	5/102	0/001	Approved

According to Table 4, because of the significance level of all variables and subscales except parenting methods, the behavioral problems of research children is less than 0.05. As a result, the value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic is outside the critical range. The null hypothesis is rejected, and the claim of the normality of the distribution of the variables is not accepted, except for the two variables of closeness and attachment styles.

The results obtained from the bootstrap method and the Sobel test both show that the indirect

effect of attachment styles on children's behavioral problems due to the parent-child relationship is -0.142. The value of the Sobel statistic is significant at the 95% confidence level (P<0.001, Sobel=3.56). As a result, attachment styles significantly affect children's behavioral problems due to the mediating role of the parent-child relationship, and the research hypothesis is confirmed. The negative value of beta (-0.142) shows the negativity and oppositeness of this effect.

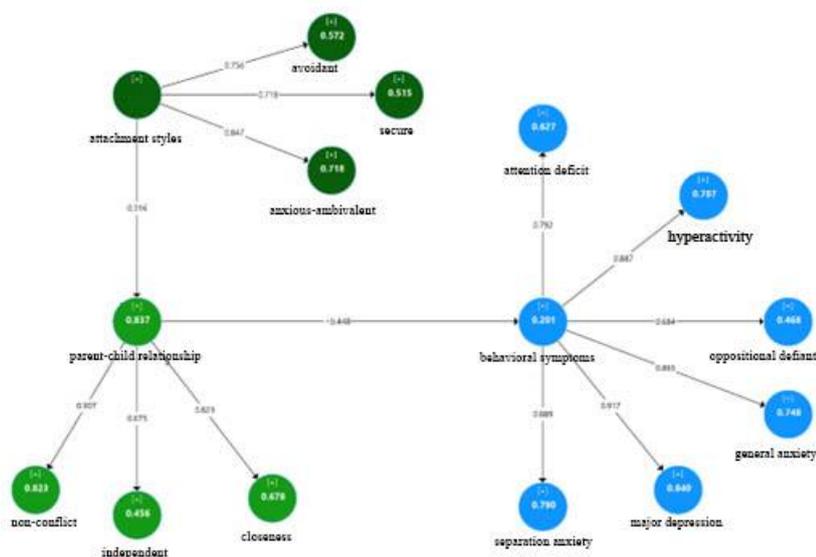


Figure 1. Model with standard coefficient estimation

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of modeling children's behavioral problems based on attachment styles with the mediation of parent-child relationship. The results showed that

attachment styles have a significant effect on children's behavioral problems due to the mediating role of parent-child relationship. The results obtained from the bootstrap method and the Sobel test both show that the indirect effect

of attachment styles on children's behavioral problems due to the parent-child relationship is -0.142, and the value of the Sobel statistic is significant at the 95% confidence level. As a result, attachment styles have a significant effect on children's behavioral problems due to the mediating role of parent-child relationship.

The findings of the present study showed that attachment styles have a significant effect on children's behavioral problems due to the mediating role of parent-child relationship. This result, which agrees with the findings of previous researches on the relationship between attachment styles and children's behavioral problems, is explained by several possibilities. In the explanation of the current research, it can be said that the innate behavioral system, by maintaining the closeness of children to the caregiver, acts to increase safety and survival and regulates the attachment behaviors of infants. When the child experiences anxiety, illness, being with a stranger, the attachment system will be activated and therefore he will seek protection and comfort from the attachment figure. This bond of attachment is created in the early stages of children's emotional development, and if the established attachment style is not correct, it can play a role in causing children's behavioral problems.

Also, in another explanation of the findings of the current research, it can be said that according to attachment theory, early experiences with caregivers turn into mental representations of attachment during childhood and adolescence, which can play a role in creating children's behavioral problems (Van Eijssendron, 2017). It is assumed that internal models of attachment consist of beliefs about self and others that drive roles and are used to guide behavior. In addition, attachment representations influence behavior by influencing the intensity of emotional experience and subsequent efforts to regulate emotion. The internal working patterns of attachment are formed through repeated interactions with caregivers and arise from caregivers' responsiveness during periods of helplessness. The results of the present research on the role of attachment styles on children's behavioral problems are consistent with the results of Ladasser et al. (2021), Ladasser et al. Also, Van Eijssendron's study (2017) determined the role of attachment representations in moral evolution, authoritarianism, and delinquent behavior in adolescence and adulthood. Children who

experience sensitive and responsive care over time develop an internalized sense of the attachment figure as responsive and available, and perceive themselves as valuable and lovable, these children develop a secure internal working model. They grow from themselves and others. In contrast, children who have experienced insensitive parenting develop an insecure model and a secure base for exploration (Ladasser et al., 2018). The result is often excessive fear of abandonment, negative self-evaluation, internalizing symptoms (in the case of anxious attachment) or avoidance of intimacy, negative evaluation of others' behavior, which are often stable over time. Suppose the lasting effect of oneself on the perception, recognition and behavior of people in social relations. They have important implications for social and emotional functioning across the lifespan and may lead people to seek a relationship that meets their expectations. to guide how people will behave towards them (Pervan Cher et al., 2016). Children who internalize these mostly interactive experiences develop an internal working model of attachment as they age, which henceforth serves to generalize expectations (Ladasser et al., 2021).

In this research, cultural and social factors such as mothers' parenting methods, attachment styles, and emotional regulation strategies were not used, and psychological variables were used as predictors, which may have explained less of the children's behavioral problems. Non-cooperation of some participants made the research time-consuming and also changed some sample people. Since the patients answered the sometimes long questionnaires, it is possible that the mothers participating in the research were tired and, as a result, had a bad effect on the results. It is suggested that children and teenagers undergo different psychological evaluations at the beginning of each school year. Parenting methods, attachment styles, and emotional regulation strategies of mothers by mediating the parent-child relationship may increase or create children's behavioral problems in children and adolescents and, as a result, create many problems for children and adolescents in the family and the school environment. Therefore, this research's results should be considered in treatment plans. Based on the current research results, parenting methods, attachment styles, and emotional regulation strategies of mothers with the mediation of the parent-child

relationship may increase or create children's behavioral problems in children and adolescents. Therefore, they need training in cognitive techniques and psychological interventions to improve parenting methods, attachment styles, emotional regulation strategies of mothers, and parent-child relationships. Based on the present research results, the representation of mothers' emotional regulation strategies by mediating the parent-child relationship affects children's behavioral problems. Therefore, investigating the emotional regulation strategies of mothers and the parent-child relationship and correcting its problematic aspects can affect children's behavioral problems and the treatment process. Considering the good background of group therapy in reducing children's behavioral problems, it is suggested that children and teenagers participate in group therapy implemented by psychologists with the diagnosis of behavioral problems. This issue can have the greatest effect on reducing children's behavioral problems since there has not been much research on path analysis in this field. This research is a new topic; still, a lot of research can be done in this field. On the other hand, considering the limitations of the research, researchers can respond to these inadequacies by presenting plans that cover issues that this research should have paid more attention to. It is suggested that the research on the present research model be conducted in different cultures and children with different social and family conditions so that it is possible to compare the research results and the impact of social conditions on children's behavioral problems. In the present study, the variables of parenting methods, attachment styles and emotional regulation strategies of mothers were investigated as antecedents of children's behavioral problems in the majority of path analyses. It is suggested that other variables related to children's behavioral problems (especially the role of genetics) be investigated in children and adolescents in order to provide a broader view of this field. In order to find the causes and influential factors related to children's behavioral problems, it is necessary to carry out in-depth qualitative research. It is especially important to research to understand how children's behavioral problems are formed and the impact of parenting methods, attachment styles, and emotional regulation strategies on mothers. The results of this research can be used

at two theoretical and practical levels. On the one hand, it can expand psychology's knowledge in identifying effective factors regarding children's behavioral problems and their psychological explanations. Also, it can help child and adolescent psychologists in management, psychological interventions, and treatment protocols. In order to reduce any errors, it is suggested to use clinical interview tools in future studies along with paper and pen tools. In order to stabilize research variables over time, longitudinal research is recommended.

Conflict of Interest

According to the authors, this article has no financial sponsor or conflict of interest.

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