




## The Effect of Training Package Informed by Divorcing Mothers' Lived Experiences and on Child Vulnerability

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to evaluate the impact of a training program, informed by the lived experiences of mothers on the brink of separation, on their children's impairment.

**Methods and Materials:** Employing a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test design and a control group, the research encompassed all mothers nearing separation in Isfahan city in 2021, who sought pre-divorce counseling. From this population, 30 participants were chosen via convenience sampling, with 15 assigned to the experimental group and an equal number to the control group. The intervention group engaged in eight 90-minute sessions, while the control group was placed on a waiting list. The Brief Impairment Scale (BIS) served as the research instrument. Data analysis entailed both descriptive and inferential statistics, specifically intragroup and intergroup mixed analysis of variance.

**Findings:** Findings indicate that the training program, rooted in the authentic experiences of mothers facing separation, significantly influences the vulnerability of their children.

**Conclusion:** Given that the program was tailored to this specific cohort, validated by field experts, and addressed the psychological distress of both mothers and children, it was effective. Consequently, the results underscore the importance of psychologists and counselors delving deeper into these lived experiences to devise therapeutic interventions. Such interventions, derived from the study's emergent themes, should aim to ameliorate the emotional well-being and diminish the impairment of the children involved.

**Keywords:** vulnerability, lived experience, divorce, children.

## 1. Introduction

One of the issues concerning divorced individuals is the vulnerability of children due to parental divorce (Perry, 2021). The dispersal of family members and the deprivation of children from joint parental custody following the collapse and disintegration of the family deprives them of the benefits and advantages of family life, disrupting the individual and family identity of children of divorce (Roseiro et al., 2020). In fact, divorce leaves negative and detrimental effects on children at all stages of their lives (Agarwal & Agrawal, 2018). Most studies to date have focused on the negative impacts and damages that parental divorce inflicts on children and adolescents. Some study findings include: anxiety and tension, worry, distrust, physical problems, nightmares, and eating and sleep disorders (Haimi & Lerner, 2016); depression, paranoid thoughts, and interaction problems with peers, especially in higher grades (Saini et al., 2017); isolation, bad temper, and severe anxiety about separation from the present parent (Hayati & Soleimani, 2016); being caught between parents, pessimism towards the other parent (Karimi et al., 2016); anger, aggression, and distress (Parandin, 2020); feelings of abandonment and loneliness (Herrero et al., 2020); incompatibility, grief disturbances, feelings of hopelessness and despair, confusion, denial (Nelson, 2019); eating disorders and feelings of guilt, increased divorce-related tension (Portugal & Alberto, 2019); individual and social behavioral disorders (Heggeness, 2020); decreased school performance and academic, behavioral, and emotional decline (Oren & Hadomi, 2020); running away from home or school (Amato, 2014); dysfunctional interpersonal relationships (Allendorf, 2017); sexual deviations, suicide (Ghyzan, 2019); addiction, smoking, and committing crimes (Haimi & Lerner, 2016). In contrast, some studies indicate that the cause of the vulnerability of children of divorce is not the separation of parents or living with one parent; rather, it is the family tensions and parental conflicts before the divorce that lead to mental and psychological problems and, subsequently, behavioral issues in children (Jarwan & Al-frehat, 2020). Lamb (2021) expressed that the negative impacts and conflicts between parents are greater than the decree of divorce itself. They showed that moving children from a high-conflict family environment provides them the opportunity to grow in a less tense environment, thereby reducing their poor academic performance and behavioral and psychological problems (Lamb, 2021). Elliott (2021) believes that, contrary to problematic beliefs about parental

divorce, especially the fear of abandonment, which is thought to increase the risk of insecure attachment in children of divorce, there is no causal relationship between parental divorce and insecure attachment, depression, or low self-esteem (Elliott, 2021).

Therefore, to address the problems associated with divorce among divorced Iranian individuals, various treatments such as metaphor therapy and forgiveness therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, compassion-focused therapy, and emotion-focused therapy have been subjects of research (Haghjou et al., 2020). Additionally, integrative therapy combines the latest psychotherapeutic findings, especially from humanistic and existential therapists, with the ethical and mystical teachings of Islam and has been used in recent years to address psychological issues. However, existing studies have mainly focused on conventional treatments to improve problems associated with divorce. These treatments, despite addressing the psychological dimensions of divorced individuals, overlook the local aspects of the issue and are not developed based on the lived experiences of individuals on the verge of divorce.

In other words, as previously mentioned, the treatments conducted for problems among divorced individuals have not specifically examined the lived experiences of these individuals, particularly focusing on the components of the lived experiences of mothers on the verge of divorce (Haghjou et al., 2020). Additionally, the treatments conducted among divorced individuals in Iran are mostly implemented within non-indigenous frameworks and often overlook spiritual and religious components, which are significant aspects of the psychological structure of humans. Developing treatments based on the needs of divorced individuals, examining the components of their lived experiences, and focusing on indigenous approaches is essential, especially in a country like Iran, where a large portion of the population is religious.

Given the detrimental effects of parental separation on children in various individual, familial, psychological, and social dimensions, and the lack of exploratory and in-depth domestic research in this area, there is a need to address this issue comprehensively, considering the sensitivities of children in these families, particularly during adolescence. Therefore, this research aims to gain a better and more precise understanding of the lived experiences of parents on the verge of separation. It is important to note that divorce does not occur in a vacuum but within a cultural and social context. Furthermore, the experience of divorce may vary among different cultures and subcultures within a society.

The increasing prevalence of this phenomenon underscores the importance and necessity of studying and examining this issue. Researching this phenomenon is a fundamental societal need, especially given the uncontrolled rise of divorce, which has disrupted family stability, the cohesion of spouses and children, and the social order and balance within the family institution in major cities.

The necessity of research on this topic, from a scientific perspective, lies in its contribution to human knowledge and the literature on the phenomenon of divorce, which advances science and understanding in this area. This study aims to explore the perspectives of parents on the verge of separation regarding the causes, contexts, and consequences of separation and divorce, as well as their strategic approaches to dealing with divorce. Through this research, we hope to provide necessary insights gently and deeply, resonating with the hearts of other individuals who have experienced divorce. In this context, the research seeks to understand and explain the motivations behind divorce among divorced couples, allowing them to share their real experiences and providing us with the key to understanding fundamental questions in this critical matter. This study was conducted to investigate the impact of an educational package based on the lived experiences of mothers on the verge of separation on the vulnerability of their children.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method employed in this study was quasi-experimental, utilizing a pretest-posttest design with a control group, including follow-up. The population of this study consisted of all mothers on the verge of separation (along with their children) seeking counseling services before divorce in Isfahan in the year 2021. The sampling method in this research was non-random sampling of the convenience type. Since the research is of an intervention nature, a minimum sample size of 15 individuals was considered in each group. Thus, 30 of these mothers requesting psychological therapy services were randomly assigned (random substitution based on group matching method using initial data) to the intervention and control groups based on entry and exit criteria from the study. Entry criteria for the study included: willingness to participate in the research, not receiving psychological treatments prior to or during group therapy sessions, mothers with a history of formal court requests with at least one child aged 4 to 10 years old, and obtaining low scores on the research

questionnaires. Exit criteria from the study included: presence of psychological disorders or a history of psychiatric illness and hospitalization (based on the initial interview conducted).

After conducting the research and participants' presence, initial interviews, assessment, and screening of individuals were carried out. After identifying the group members, in the first session, the work process, including objectives, scheduling, plan execution, benefits of attending therapy sessions, and the exit strategy if desired, was discussed, and the research questionnaires were provided to the group, along with guidance on how to respond. Subsequently, the participants were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group, and the start date of the sessions was determined. It is anticipated that the experimental group will receive a maximum of 8 sessions lasting 90 minutes each, while the control group will remain on the waiting list. Furthermore, to observe ethical considerations, a consent form was prepared, outlining the general purpose of the research. Participants first read the consent form and then chose to participate in the study if they wished. One of the points explained to the participants was that they were assured that there would be no personal misuse in this research.

### 2.2. Measure

#### 2.2.1. Vulnerability

The Partial vulnerability Scale, developed by Bird and colleagues in 2005, consists of 23 items graded on a 4-point scale for most items, ranging from: No problem, Minor problem, Noticeable problem, to Serious problem. The items of the Partial Damage Scale are categorized into three subscales: Interpersonal relationships, Home/School, and Self-actualization. Additionally, all items can be scored on an overall scale. Intra-class correlation coefficients after a 12-day interval for the subscales were 0.56 for Interpersonal, 0.54 for Home/School, 0.76 for Self-actualization, and 0.70 for the overall scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were 0.81 to 0.73 for Interpersonal, 0.81 to 0.76 for Home/School, 0.73 to 0.56 for Self-actualization, and 0.88 to 0.81 for the overall scale. The correlation between the overall scale of the Partial damage Scale and clinicians' reported measurements of significant damage ranged from 0.53 to 0.52. The scores of the Partial Damage Scale were significantly higher for users of mental health services compared to non-users. A table distinguishes between clinical and non-clinical children and users and non-users of

mental health services. These results are based on a single ethnic group. The authors recommend using cutoff points in populations where this tool is employed (Bird et al., 2005).

### 2.3. Intervention

#### 2.3.1. Training Program Based on Mothers' Lived Experience

The training program for the experimental group comprised weekly 8 sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. The content of these sessions was derived from the conceptual framework components obtained from the qualitative phase of the research. The validity of the educational package content was confirmed by 15 experts.

**Session 1: Introduction:** This initial session welcomes all participants and fosters a sense of community and comfort among group members. Participants are introduced to the structure and goals of the sessions, which include reviewing tasks from prior meetings, learning specific techniques, participating in group activities, and completing assignments. The session emphasizes the importance of adherence to group norms, such as timeliness, active engagement, and respectful communication. The confidentiality of shared experiences is guaranteed to build trust. The objectives of the training are explained, alongside the purpose of skill development in family life. Through mutual discussions, participants reflect on shared challenges, discuss the need for training, and are encouraged to engage actively, with questions addressed throughout.

**Session 2: Acceptance Training:** This session focuses on the values, goals, and sense of purpose in life. Participants explore these elements by envisioning different scenarios and sharing their experiences of marital life. They identify factors contributing to marital dissatisfaction that are beyond their control and learn to accept these as unchangeable aspects. The session guides participants to redefine their life path and establish goals that are meaningful to them, based on their current circumstances rather than their past marital expectations. This helps create a foundation for personal growth independent of previous constraints.

**Session 3: Life Skills Training:** This session introduces essential life skills and emphasizes their importance in daily life. Participants learn about the ten core life skills, starting with self-awareness. Techniques such as the "window view" and Harry's techniques are discussed to enhance self-understanding. The session continues with training in empathy, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, equipping participants with tools for self-improvement and

effective management of life's challenges. Participants engage in exercises to practice these skills, enhancing their ability to navigate personal and familial relationships.

**Session 4: Texts and Strategies for Improving Communication Skills:** Participants are taught various communication skills aimed at improving relationship satisfaction. The session covers the recognition of different types of messages in communication and the development of active listening skills. Techniques for managing and diffusing destructive conversations are practiced, with emphasis on identifying communication shortcomings. Strategies to foster positive and effective interactions are introduced, empowering participants to establish healthier and more meaningful connections with their partners and loved ones.

**Session 5: Texts and Strategies for Enhancing Psychological Well-being:** This session introduces the concept of psychological well-being and includes a survey to understand the experiences of mothers facing marital challenges. The components of psychological well-being are explored, and practical training is provided to enhance these components. The focus is on promoting self-care, resilience, and emotional stability. Participants are encouraged to share their experiences and receive support in applying these principles to their daily lives, leading to improved mental and emotional health.

**Session 6: Strategies and Texts for Preventing Domestic Violence:** The session addresses the concept of aggression in marital relationships, including its different types and causes. Techniques for managing and preventing verbal and non-verbal aggression are taught. Participants learn strategies for responding constructively to criticism and methods for diffusing tension. Problem-solving and interruption skills are also introduced, providing a toolkit for managing conflicts constructively. The session aims to empower participants to create a safer and more respectful home environment, reducing the risk of domestic violence.

**Session 7: Parenting Education:** In this session, participants discuss the roles and responsibilities of parenting, including the influence of extended family members and the division of household duties. Different parenting styles and their effects on child development are reviewed. Techniques for fostering quality time, implementing reward and punishment systems, and giving effective instructions are covered. The session also addresses common behavioral disorders in children and adolescents, providing practical guidance on managing and understanding these challenges within the family context.

Session 8: Summary and Review of Content: The final session provides a comprehensive review of the course content, facilitated by group discussions. Participants reflect on the skills and lessons learned, share their feelings about the experience, and clarify any lingering questions. Feedback on the program is gathered, and participants are motivated to continue practicing the techniques in their everyday lives. Post-course assessments are conducted, emphasizing the importance of applying these newly acquired skills to ensure lasting positive change in their family dynamics and overall well-being.

**Table 1**

*Mean and standard deviation of vulnerability by assessment stage in the groups*

Group	Variable	Index	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up
Experimental	Vulnerability	Mean	50.47	41.60	40.93
		Standard deviation	8.93	8.35	7.89
Control	Vulnerability	Mean	49.93	50.87	51.93
		Standard deviation	7.78	9.96	10.02

As observed, the mean in the experimental groups, training based on the lived experience for divorcing mothers, decreases in the post-test stage compared to the pre-test. Based on the results presented in the table, it can be inferred that the method of experience-based educational package for mothers on the brink of divorce has led to a reduction in children’s vulnerability.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, all statistical assumptions were carefully checked and confirmed. The normality of the distribution was assessed, and the values fell within acceptable ranges. Homogeneity of variances was

2.4. *Data analysis*

Data analysis from the questionnaires was performed using SPSS-v24 software, divided into two sections: descriptive and inferential (including within-group and between-group mixed analysis of variance).

**3. Findings and Results**

This section analyzes study variables, exploring potential differences among groups across various assessment stages.

also evaluated and satisfied, allowing for the use of parametric tests. Specifically, the assumptions underlying the mixed analysis of variance were verified, including the sphericity assumption, which was checked using Mauchly’s test. Where necessary, adjustments were made using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction. For instance, the F values reported for the within-group (3.34,  $p = 0.04$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.11$ ) and the interaction effect (6.46,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.19$ ) both support the reliability of the results, confirming that the statistical analysis appropriately reflected the differences across assessment stages and between groups.

**Table 2**

*Mixed Analysis of Variance Test for Vulnerability Scores*

Variable	Statistical Index	SS	df	MS	F	Sig	Eta Squared
Vulnerability	Within-Group	299.62	1.97	151.88	3.34	0.04	0.11
	Test*Group	580.16	1.97	294.07	6.46	0.003	0.19
	Between-Group	973.51	1.00	973.51	6.67	0.02	0.19

The results from Table 2 indicate that the calculated F value for the within-group factor (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) for vulnerability is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, there is a significant difference in the mean scores of vulnerability at the three stages: pre-test, post-test, and follow-up therapy. The Bonferroni post-hoc test results for investigating the differences between the means at the therapeutic stages show a significant difference between the vulnerability scores at

the pre-test and post-test stages, and between the pre-test and follow-up stages ( $p < 0.05$ ). Additionally, there is no significant difference between the vulnerability scores at the post-test and follow-up stages, indicating that the vulnerability scores did not significantly change from the post-test to the follow-up stage ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Considering the results of Table 3 regarding the interaction between the stages and groups, the calculated F value for the effect of stages (pre-test, post-test, and follow-



up) between the two groups, based on experiential-based maternal separation therapy and control, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, there is a significant difference in the mean scores of vulnerability between the two groups at the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages.

Overall, it can be concluded that the structured training method based on the lived experiences of mothers on the brink of divorce has influenced the vulnerability scores. Additionally, considering the significant reduction in vulnerability scores during the follow-up compared to the pre-test, the trend of decreasing vulnerability scores during the follow-up compared to the pre-test has continued and has been significantly different. This indicates the stability of the treatment (the training package based on the divorcing mother's lived experience) on vulnerability scores.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of a structured training package based on the divorcing mother's lived experience on children's vulnerability. The results indicated that the method significantly influenced vulnerability scores. Moreover, considering the significant reduction in vulnerability scores during the follow-up compared to the pre-test, the trend of decreasing vulnerability scores during the follow-up compared to the pre-test has continued and has been significantly different. This indicates the treatment's (Training package based on the divorcing mother's lived experience) stability on vulnerability scores. The research findings align with prior studies (Amani et al., 2018; Zamani Zarchi et al., 2018). Consistent with these findings, the educational program based on the lived experiences of mothers on the brink of separation addresses interventions aimed at improving each of the factors contributing to children's vulnerability. Based on this, various dimensions of vulnerability, factors influencing the reduction of children's vulnerability to divorce, and strategies to increase adaptation were examined in the provided intervention. Efforts were also made to reduce children's vulnerability by improving parenting styles, understanding children's emotional needs, teaching communication skills, life skills, and psychological well-being education, thereby facilitating the expression of children's emotional needs. Therefore, parental education, by improving parent-child communication skills and understanding children's emotional and cognitive worlds, leads to the improvement of children's psychological status

and increases their resilience, thus reducing their vulnerability (Klein Velderman et al., 2018; Shanholtz et al., 2017). This is while the decrease in relationship quality and the lack of caregiving behaviors and support from parents are among the factors leading to increased vulnerability in children of divorce (Hutauruk et al., 2019; Karela & Petrogiannis, 2018). Therefore, under such circumstances, providing training on understanding the emotional and psychological needs of children and striving to understand the factors involved can reduce the impact of risk factors, leading to decreased vulnerability. In explaining the effectiveness of the results obtained in the special intervention for children of divorce, it was emphasized that the first attempt was to create a safe and supportive environment. In this regard, in the intervention sessions, efforts were made to create a stable and supportive environment for children, especially regarding divorce, by accepting their feelings and perspectives, facilitating the expression of emotions and experiences, providing solutions to some problems, and supporting children's control over certain issues beyond their control. Previous research has also shown that receiving support from the environment is one of the effective factors in reducing harm to children. Secondly, the special intervention for children of divorce aims to teach skills to empower them to cope with the consequences of divorce. Therefore, efforts were made to teach skills such as problem-solving, recognizing strengths, and improving parent-child relationships through role-playing for children. In this regard, research supports the notion that training in skills such as problem-solving and communication can contribute to reducing vulnerability in children (Pasyar et al., 2019). Therefore, overall, providing and creating a supportive environment along with teaching basic skills in special interventions for children of divorce has been able to improve vulnerability in both individual and caregiver relationship aspects. Training in skills and understanding and accepting the child's feelings are the main principles for enhancing the individual component. Additionally, teaching skills such as problem-solving and improving parent-child relationships based on role-playing are perceived as explanatory for reducing vulnerability in the caregiver relationship aspect.

#### 5. Limitations & Suggestions

In this research, the sample size was limited due to the restricted timeframe for completing the doctoral thesis, and future studies could be conducted with a larger sample size.

It is suggested to investigate the lived experiences of fathers in the context of divorce as well. Additionally, it is proposed to examine the designed experiential educational package in this study on other dependent variables and compare it with other intervention programs. Family counselors and other psychotherapy clinics are suggested to utilize the lived experiences of children of divorce to reduce their vulnerability.

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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

This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation. All authors equally contributed to this article.

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