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Research Article

The Relationship between Parental Conflicts and Parenting Styles with Children's Behavioral Problems in Preschool Children: The Mediating Role of Anxiety

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Abstract

Objective: Parenting styles, parental conflict, child anxiety, and behavioral problems are closely linked in health psychology. These factors influence a child's emotional, psychological, and behavioral development. Their interaction can have long-term effects on mental health. This study examined whether anxiety mediates the relationship between parental conflicts, parenting styles, and children's behavioral disorders.

Method: This correlational study surveyed 1,500 five- to six-year-old preschoolers in Behbahan City. Using the Klein rule, a sample of 200 was selected through single-stage cluster sampling. Tools included the Child Behavior Checklist, the Interparental Conflict Scale, the Parenting Style Questionnaire, and the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale. Data were analyzed with path analysis in SPSS 22 and AMOS.

Results: Structural model analysis showed parental conflicts directly and significantly affected externalizing behavior problems ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$). Parental conflicts also significantly impacted children's anxiety ($\beta=0.417$, $p<0.05$). Parenting styles (permissive and strict) significantly predicted anxiety and internalizing problems ($p<0.05$). Authoritative style had a negative, significant effect on anxiety and behavioral problems ($\beta = -0.17$, $p<0.05$). Indirect effects of parental conflict and all parenting styles on behavioral problems, through anxiety, were significant ($p<0.05$).

Conclusion: Children's behavioral problems are influenced by anxiety, parental conflicts, and parenting styles. Anxiety can intensify the effects of parental conflicts and parenting styles. Increased perceptions of parental conflict are linked to higher behavioral problems and anxiety in children.

Keywords: Child Anxiety, Children's Behavioral Problems, Health Psychology, Parental Conflict, Parenting Styles.

How to Cite

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Extended Abstract

Background and Objectives

The relationship between parenting styles, parental conflict, children's anxiety, and behavioral problems is a crucial area of study in health psychology. Health psychology is a field that examines the complex interplay between psychological, behavioral, and social factors and their impact on physical health and well-being. Within this field, the study of child behavior is particularly important, as early childhood experiences and environments play a fundamental role in shaping long-term health outcomes. Research focusing on this early developmental period can expand psychological knowledge regarding how family mechanisms influence children's behavior. Utilizing this knowledge enables the design of counseling programs and interventions. The relationship between parenting styles, parental conflict, children's anxiety, and behavioral problems is a crucial area of study in health psychology. Health psychology is a field that examines the complex interplay between psychological, behavioral, and social factors and their impact on physical health and well-being. Within this field, the study of child behavior is particularly important, as early childhood experiences and environments play a fundamental role in shaping long-term health outcomes. Research focusing on this early developmental period can expand psychological knowledge regarding how family mechanisms influence children's behavior. Utilizing this knowledge enables the design of counseling programs and interventions. On the other hand, unhealthy parenting styles can affect children's emotional security and worsen their anxiety cycle. According to previous research, parental conflict has a negative relationship with children's anxiety and behavioral problems. Authoritative parenting styles also have a positive effect on reducing anxiety and improving children's behavior. This research examines the relationship between parenting styles and parental conflict with children's behavioral problems. Children's anxiety is considered a mediating variable to determine how anxiety can mitigate the detrimental effects of parental conflict and unhealthy parenting styles on children's behavioral problems. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to identify the mediating role of anxiety in the relationship between parental conflict, parenting styles, and children's behavioral problems.

Materials and Methods

This research is a correlational study that investigates the relationships between variables using structural equation modeling. The statistical population included all preschool children (5-6 years old) in the city of Behbehan, from which 200 individuals were selected using cluster sampling. Questionnaires on children's behavioral problems, parental conflict scale, parenting style questionnaire, and children's anxiety scale were completed by parents. Data analysis was performed using SPSS (22) and AMOS software.

Result

Descriptive findings showed that out of a total of 200 children, 102 were boys and 98 were girls. The average age of the children was 9.5 years. The majority of mothers were housewives (88%), the majority of fathers were self-employed (92%), and the majority were only children (84%). Only 4.8% of fathers had higher education. 62% of mothers had a bachelor's degree. The indirect effects of parental conflict and parenting styles on children's behavioral problems via anxiety are significant ($p<0.05$). The path coefficient between parental conflict and internalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.163$). The path coefficient between permissive parenting and internalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.48$); the path coefficient between authoritarian parenting and internalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.066$); the path coefficient between authoritative parenting and internalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.076$); the path coefficient between parental

conflict and externalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.17$); the path coefficient between permissive parenting and externalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.05$); the path coefficient between authoritarian parenting and externalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.069$); the path coefficient between authoritative parenting and externalized behavioral problems mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.079$).

Discussion

Generally, based on this model, it can be concluded that parental conflict, as a stressor, can affect family processes such as negative parenting and disciplinary methods. These methods themselves can create a breeding ground for anxiety and behavioral problems in children. Parents experiencing conflict usually show less adaptability with their children and are more inclined to use coercive behaviors or even derogatory words as a way of enforcing discipline. Therefore, they utilize harsh strategies more often in their interactions. In addition, if anxiety is considered as an indicator of the child's overall mental state and mood, an anxious child will have greater vulnerability. A strength of this research is its focus on preschool children and consideration of several variables simultaneously. This feature allows for a more thorough and complete examination of the psychological and family variables involved in the development, continuation, or improvement of the behavioral status of this group of children. Simultaneously examining variables within the family context can enable family and child therapists to design and propose new approaches to the treatment and care of children, emphasizing the important factors identified in this research. A weakness of this study is the lack of inclusion of children of other age groups and the use of questionnaires, which may limit the accuracy and generalizability of the findings. Using other assessment methods, such as observation and interviews, might provide more accurate data.

Conclusion

Given the meaningful relationships between the variables, these results could lead to the development of stronger treatment protocols with good empirical support. Strengthening effective family factors in children's development through targeted interventions could potentially offer better coping mechanisms for these children, ultimately contributing to their well-being.

Introduction

The relationship between parenting styles, parental conflicts, children's anxiety, and behavioral problems is an important area of study in health psychology. Health psychology examines the complex relationships between psychological, behavioral, and social factors. It studies how these factors impact physical health and well-being. In this field, research on child behavior is significant. Early childhood experiences and environments play a key role in shaping long-term health outcomes.

Behavioral disorders in children represent a major mental health challenge. Evidence indicates that about 50% of these disorders begin in the preschool period. Many of these can follow a chronic course into adulthood. These disorders include Attention-Deficit. Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), and Conduct Disorder. They are associated with outcomes such as substance abuse and criminal behavior (Ogandela, 2018). Maladaptive behaviors are categorized into internalizing (e.g., depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression) types (Halse et al., 2022). These lead to impairments in academic and social functioning. The prevalence of these disorders among school-aged children ranges from 5% to 20% (WHO,

2022). Various studies also report similar figures, from 5% to 20% (Sekaran et al., 2020; Faghani et al., 2024). From a health psychology perspective, children's behavioral disorders are not just maladaptive behavioral patterns. They are multifactorial phenomena that emerge from the complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors. According to this view, these disorders result from the interaction of individual and environmental risk factors. These disruptions affect the child's psychosocial adaptation.

In examining this issue, risk and protective factors are significant. The family is an important element, as children are influenced by family context during development. Various models and theories have been proposed to explain this process. These include the Cognitive-Contextual Framework (Grych et al., 2003), Emotional Security Theory (Cummings & Davies, 2010), and the Developmental Systems Approach (Rutter & Sroufe,2000). These frameworks focus on the role of family interactions and conflicts, especially parent-child relationships, in children's psychological and behavioral functioning.

Parental conflict is a significant factor in the development of children's behavioral and psychological problems. These undesirable marital interactions, characterized by criticism, blame, and hostility (Lindahl & Malik,1999), are associated with increased internalizing and externalizing problems in children, lower self-esteem, and poorer school adjustment (Branje, 2018). According to the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994), children's perception of inter-parental conflict threatens their sense of safety within the family system, which can lead to heightened emotional distress and maladaptive behaviors. Children exposed to parental conflict face elevated risks of internalizing and externalizing problems, including depression, aggression, and cognitive-behavioral disorders. These children often exhibit lower self-confidence, poor school adjustment, and may model parental behavior by displaying aggression and antisocial tendencies with peers (Branje, 2018; Cummings et al., 2015; Li et al., 2024).

Another key variable in the family context is parenting styles. These styles—authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive—reflect parents' beliefs and practices, each distinctly shaping a child's personality and behavior (Baumrind, 2013; Delvecchio, 2020; Saeedifar & Saeedifar, 2023).

Depending on the parenting style they adopt, parents employ different disciplinary strategies to manage their children's behavior, which can be considered an important and fundamental aspect of parenting (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019; Zemp et al., 2016). Research by Fakhri, Zare, Alipour, and Sharif-Al-Hosseini (2022) demonstrated that the Supportive Parenting Training Program is an effective approach to reducing children's externalizing behavioral problems and improving the quality of parenting among mothers of children with behavioral problems. Furthermore, research (Safari et al., 2019) indicates a significant link between behavioral disorders and parenting styles, with authoritative parenting being the strongest negative predictor, while permissive and authoritarian styles show a positive correlation. Appropriate parenting practices lead to happier, less anxious children with higher life satisfaction (Zupardo et al., 2021; Kim & Chang, 2021).

Anxiety is a common challenge for many children. Parental anxiety and poor parenting practices are strongly linked to child anxiety and its effects. These parental behaviors can harm a child's psychological adjustment, self-image, and academic performance (Afshari, 2022; Zemp et al., 2016). High parental anxiety also undermines caregiving and negatively impacts parents (Ayenew et al., 2020). In children, anxiety disorders often occur with behavioral problems, further disrupting daily functioning and reducing intervention effectiveness (Roesmann & Asbrand, 2023; Hines et al., 2020).

As previously discussed, parental conflict and inappropriate parenting styles can have detrimental effects on

children's mental health, with anxiety and behavioral problems being among the consequences. Therefore, the present study investigates the outcomes of parent-child conflict. Based on the research background, it appears that parental conflict (Branje, 2018; Merolla & Kam, 2018; Jalililou, 2017) and parenting styles (Fakhri et al., 2022; Safari et al., 2019; Zupardo et al., 2022) can not only directly affect child anxiety and behavioral problems but also have an indirect effect on behavioral problems through the mediation of increased anxiety (Cosgrove et al., 2019; Adabla et al., 2024). To this end, the following hypotheses were examined in the present study:

Hypothesis 1: Parental conflict has a direct effect on child anxiety and behavioral problems.
Hypothesis 2: Parenting styles have a direct effect on child anxiety and behavioral problems.
Hypothesis 3: Anxiety mediates the relationship between parental conflict and parenting styles with children's behavioral problems.

Conducting research in this area can expand psychological knowledge regarding how family mechanisms influence children's behavior. Utilizing this knowledge enables the design of counseling programs and interventions. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the present study.

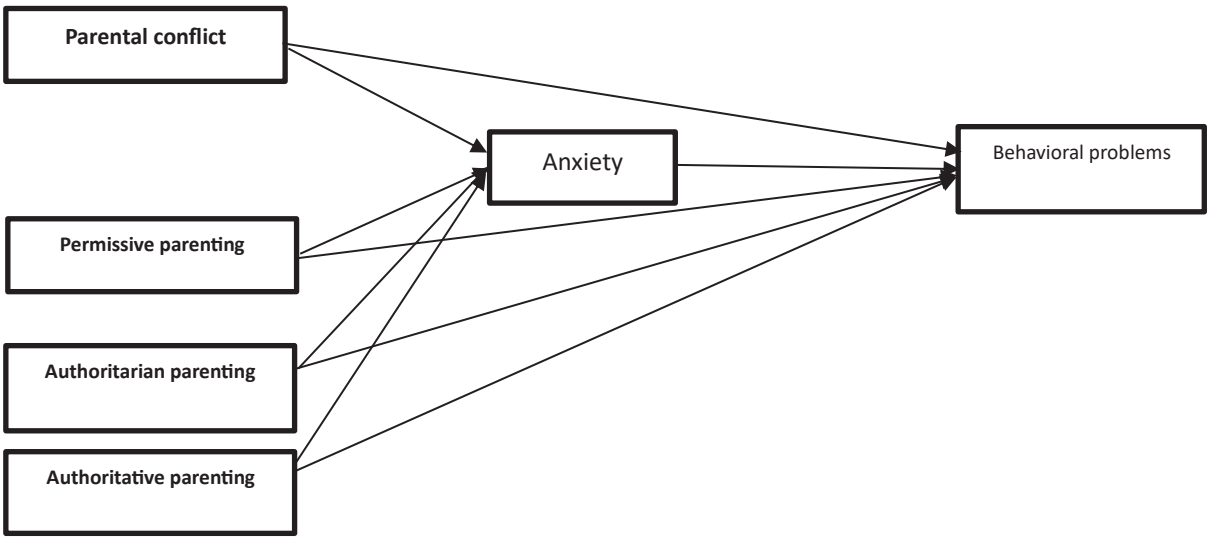

Figure 1, the proposed model of the research

Method

Participants

The research method of this study is correlational, using structural equation modeling to examine relationships among variables. The statistical population included all children in preschool centers (5 to 6 years old) in Behbahan city in the academic year 2023-2024. The total number of children was 1500, and according to Klein's (2023) rule (20 for each component), 150 was appropriate. However, since sample adequacy is affected by various parameters, a larger sample was considered, so 200 people participated in the sample, who were selected using a single-stage cluster sampling method —each center is a cluster. Then, during meetings with parents arranged by preschool principals, after providing the necessary explanations, the mothers were asked

to complete the questionnaire. The inclusion criteria included preschool age, living with both parents, the child not having a chronic illness requiring medication, willingness to complete the questionnaires, and a complete parental response. To comply with research ethics, oral and written explanations were provided to the children's parents. Emphasis was also placed on the freedom to complete the questionnaires, the confidentiality of the responses, and the absence of the need to include personal information. The research tools were completed by parents (mostly mothers).

Ethical statement

Regarding ethical considerations, the present study has been approved by the research committee of Payame Noor University. Also, online informed.

Measures

Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL): The Child Behavior Checklist was developed by Achenbach (1991) and consists of 113 questions, completed by parents for their children. It is scored on a three-point scale (0=true, 1=somewhat or sometimes true, 2= completely or often true) to measure emotional-behavioral problems in eight domains. Test scores can be presented in three indices: internalizing problems (including withdrawal, anxiety, and depression), externalizing problems (including aggression and delinquent behaviors), and general problems (including internalizing and externalizing problem indices, concentration, thinking, social, and miscellaneous problem axes. Higher scores indicate more problems in that area. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported to range from 0.78 to 0.97 (Achenbach & Verskorla, 2001). Achenbach and Rescola's studies showed high concordance and correlation between the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, and the scores on this questionnaire. Its reliability in the Iranian population was reported by Turk Ladani and Aghababaei (2022) as 0.95 using Cronbach's alpha. Also, the present study obtained an alpha of 0.92 using Cronbach's alpha.

Interparental Conflict Scale (IPC): This 13-question scale was developed by Lopez (1986) to measure conflict, tension, and instability in marital relationships. The scale includes four subscales: children, family fear of separation, parent-child role exchange, and parents' marital conflict. Each question on this scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (completely true, most of the time true, I don't know, most of the time false, and completely false), ranging from 5 to 1, with some items reversely scored. Individual scores on this subscale range from 13 to 65, with higher scores indicating greater marital conflict. Lopez (1986) reported the scale's overall reliability as 0.90. In Salehvand's (2016) study, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the marital conflict scale questionnaire, yielding a value of 0.61. The reliability of this scale in the present study was 0.76, as measured by Cronbach's alpha.

Parenting Style Questionnaire (PSQ): This questionnaire was developed by Baumrind (1991) and consists of 30 items, 10 of which are related to the easygoing style (item numbers 28-24-21-19-17-14-13-10-6-1), 10 to the authoritarian style (item numbers 29-26-25-18-16-12-9-7-3-2), and the other 10 to the assertive and reassuring style (item numbers 30-27-23-22-20-15-11-8-5-4) (Baumrind, 1973). Each question is followed by a continuum from "I completely agree" to "I completely disagree," scored from 1 to 5. By summing the scores for the questions on parenting style, three separate scores are obtained. Higher scores on the dimension indicate that parents predominantly use that style. Bury (1991) reported the questionnaire's reliability using the test-retest method in a group of mothers as follows: 0.81 for the permissive style, 0.86 for the authoritarian style,

and 0.78 for the assertive style. This questionnaire was used in Iran by Doodman (2018), and its reliability was 0.69 for the permissive mother's style, 0.77 for the authoritarian mother's style, and 0.73 for the authoritative mother's style. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were obtained for the permissive style (0.85), the authoritarian style (0.86), and the authoritative style (0.87).

Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS): The Parent Form Questionnaire was developed by Spence (1998) and consists of 38 items, each scored on a Likert scale (never = 0, sometimes = 1, most of the time = 2, always = 3). The maximum possible score is 114, and the minimum is 0. The questionnaire comprises six subscales, which are: 1) separation anxiety, 2) general anxiety, 3) social anxiety, 4) panic attacks and fear of open spaces, 5) obsessive-compulsive disorder, and 6) phobias and specific fears. Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater problems in that area. The reliability of this scale has been reported as 0.92 for general anxiety and 0.60-0.82 for the subscales (Spence, 1998). In the study by Hassanzadeh et al. (2021), the questionnaire's reliability, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was reported to be 85%. In the present study, the scale's reliability was 0.89 using Cronbach's alpha.

Results

In a sample of 200 children (mean age 5.9 years), most were single children, with mothers primarily homemakers (88%) yet highly educated (62% with a bachelor's), while fathers were predominantly self-employed (92%) with low higher education attainment (4.8%). Assumptions, such as data normality, were checked before testing the model. According to the results, none of the variables' kurtosis and skewness values fell outside the range of -2 to +2. According to Klein (2016), skewness and kurtosis indices of -2 to +2 indicate no significant deviation from the normal curve assumption. Also, the tolerance statistic is less than 1, and the variance inflation factor for each variable was not greater than 10, so the assumption of non-collinearity has also been met. In the next step, correlation coefficients are presented.

Table 1: Mean, Standard deviation and Correlation Matrix Between Variables

variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parental conflict	*						
Easygoing parent	0.436*	*					
Strict parent	0.584*	-..232*	*				
Authorities parent	-0.556*	-0.329*	-0.369*	*			
Anxiety	0.676*	0.407*	0.512*	-0.528*	*		
Internalized problem	0.593*	0.424*	0.539*	-0.528*	0.679*	*	
Externalizing problem	0.593*	0.424*	0.293*	-0.324*	0.545*	0.492*	*
mean	40.07	28.41	28.05	29.17	30.07	15.02	28.57
Standard deviation	9.45	6.1	6.69	6.8	14.51	7.23	11.21

As can be seen in Table 1, all correlation coefficients obtained between the research variables are significant at $P<0.05$ levels.

After examining the correlation between the variables to validate the path coefficients between them using the structural equation modeling method, the fit indices obtained are presented in Table 2. The results show

that the measured model has an acceptable fit.

Table 2: Fitness indicators of the final model

Fitness indicators	2χ	df	χ2.df	GFI	AGFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Final model	6.85	1	6.85	0.990	0.742	0.990	0.787	0.990	0.989	0.171
Acceptable Values			<3	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.05

According to the results in Table 2, the final model fit indices, including the chi-square index (χ2=8.07), relative chi-square (χ2/df=1.61), goodness-of-fit index (GFI=0.989), adaptive goodness-of-fit index (AGFI=0.936), comparative fit index (CFI=0.995), incremental fit index (IFI=0.995), Tucker-Lewis fit index (TLI=0.978), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.05). The model fit indices indicated that the research model has a good fit. Therefore, the research's general hypothesis is confirmed. By eliminating non-significant pathways, primarily from parenting style to child behavior problems, the model's fitness is confirmed.

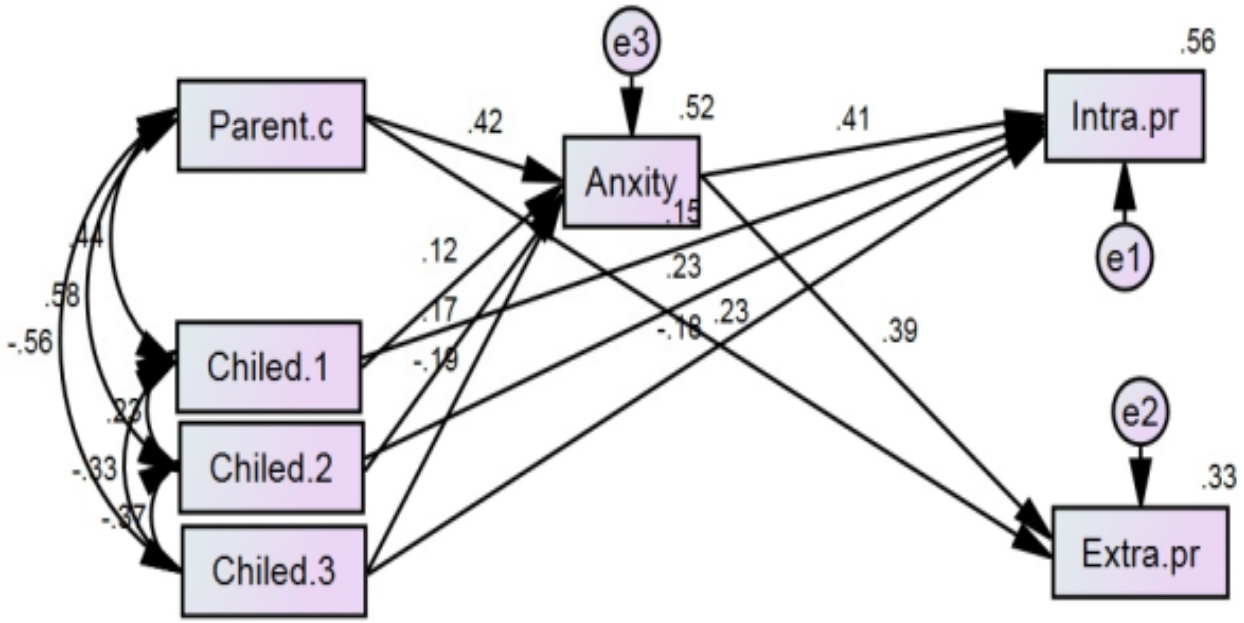

Figure 2. Output of the proposed model of the present study, along with the standard path coefficients

The results of the structural model analysis, i.e., the estimation of direct and indirect effects, indicate that parental conflicts have a direct and significant impact on externalizing behavior problems ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$). Also, the effects of parental conflicts on children's anxiety are significant ($\beta=0.417$, $p<0.05$). The effects of parenting styles on anxiety ($p<0.05$) and internalized behavioral problems ($p<0.05$) are also significant. Parental conflict has no significant effect on internalized problems. Also, parenting style did not have any significant impact on externalized problems. In summary, considering the above figure, it can be said that anxiety can mediate the effects of parental conflicts and parenting style, meaning that with children's negative

perception of parental conflicts and parenting styles, anxiety as a mediating variable can exacerbate the occurrence of behavioral problems. Table 3 shows the direct and indirect effects.

Table 3: Structural model: paths and standardized coefficients related to effects in the final

Path		Proposed Model			
		Standard estimate β	Standard Estimate B	Critkal ratio	Significaoce Level P
Parental conflict	Anxiety	0.417	0.640	5.86	0.001
Permissive parenting	Anxiety	0.122	0.291	2.22	0.02
Strict parenting	Anxiety	0.168	0.351	2.77	0.006
Authoritative Parenting	Anxiety	-0.194	-0.414	-3.25	0.001
Parental conflict	Internal problems	-	-	-	-
Permissive parenting	Internal problems	0.145	0.172	2.78	0.01
Strict parenting	External problems	0.231	0.239	4.16	0.001
Authoritative Parenting	Internal problems	-0.180	-0.191	17.3-	0.004
Parental conflict	External problems	0.227	0.270	2.86	0.004
Permissive parenting	External problems	-	-	-	-
Strict parenting	External problems	-	-	-	-
Authoritative Parenting	External problems	-	-	-	-
Anxiety	External problems	0.408	-0.203	6.48	0.001
Anxiety	External problems	0.392	0.304	4.96	0.001

Based on the results in Table 3, all path coefficients related to the final model are significant.

Table 4: Results of the Bootstrap test between exogenous, endogenous, and mediator variables

paths	Data	Bootstrap value	Lower limit	Upper limit	SD	Bias
Parental conflict leads to internalized behavioral problems through anxiety	0.124	0.163	0.108	0.231	0.039	0.009
Permissive parenting to internalized behavioral problems through anxiety	0.057	0.048	0.021	0.098	0.022	0.003
Strict parenting to internalized behavioral problems through anxiety	0.068	0.066	0.034	0.120	0.024	0.003
Authoritative parenting to internalized behavioral problems through anxiety	-0.080	-0.076	-0.127	-0.038	0.026	0.006
Parental conflict to externalizing behavioral problems through anxiety	0.202	0.170	0.103	0.244	0.043	0.018
Permissive parenting and externalizing behavioral problems through anxiety	0.092	0.05	0.014	0.102	0.025	0.005
Strict parenting to externalizing behavioral problems through anxiety	0.111	0.069	0.032	0.135	0.029	0.006

Authoritative to parcnting to externalizing behavioral problems through anxiety	-0.131	-0.079	0.157	0.038	0.033	0.005

Based on Table 4, the indirect effects of parental conflicts and parenting styles due to anxiety on children's behavioral problems are significant ($p<0.05$). It means that the path coefficient between parental conflict and internalizing behavioral problems is mediated by anxiety ($\beta=0.163$, $p<0.05$), the path coefficient between permissive parenting and internalizing behavior problems by anxiety ($\beta=0.48$, $p<0.05$), the path coefficient between strict parenting and internalizing behavior problems by anxiety ($\beta=0.066$, $p<0.05$), the path coefficient between authoritative parenting and internalizing behavior problems by anxiety ($\beta=0.076$, $p<0.05$), the path coefficient between authoritative parenting and externalizing behavior problems by anxiety ($\beta=0.079$, $p<0.05$), the path coefficient between parental conflict and externalizing behavior problems by anxiety ($\beta=0.17$, $p<0.05$), the path coefficient between permissive parenting and externalizing behavior problems by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.05$), and the path coefficient between strict parenting and externalizing behavior problems is mediated by anxiety ($p<0.05$, $\beta=0.069$).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of anxiety in the relationship between parental conflicts, parenting styles, and children's behavioral problems. Initial results showed that there is a positive relationship between parental conflicts and children's behavioral problems (internal and external problems) as well as anxiety, meaning that as children's perception of conflict between their parents increases, their behavioral issues and anxiety also increase. This finding is consistent with research results (Branje, 2018; Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Jalililo, 2017). According to the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994), the Cognitive-Contextual Framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990), and family systems theory, parental conflict leads to children's behavioral problems through cognitive-emotional mechanisms. These models emphasize that children's perception and interpretation of parental conflicts lead them to appraise the situation as threatening, and feeling helpless in coping with it results in persistent anxiety.

Parental conflict functions as a key pathogenic factor that disrupts family emotional security, establishing direct pathways to child psychopathology. Through cognitive-contextual and family systems frameworks, research demonstrates that children's perception of interparental conflict generates feelings of self-blame and powerlessness, manifesting as internalizing disorders, including diminished self-esteem and clinical anxiety (Li et al., 2024). Concurrently, the absence of effective conflict-resolution models precipitates maladaptive coping mechanisms, leading to social withdrawal and externalizing behaviors (Adabla et al., 2024; Branje, 2018). These dynamics are exacerbated when parental hostility intensifies adversarial parent-child interactions (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017), ultimately compromising children's social adaptation and increasing vulnerability to both internalizing and externalizing disorders (Hess, 2022; Poursharifi et al., 2015).

According to the second finding, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles can lead to an increase

in behavioral problems, while authoritative styles help reduce these behavioral problems. This finding is consistent with the results of Fakhri et al. (2022), Safari et al. (2019), Romero-Acosta et al. (2021), and Haghshenas et al. (2024). As the ecological model suggests, parenting styles, when combined with individual and environmental factors, can significantly affect children's adjustment. This research finding shows that parenting styles affect children's internalized behavioral problems. This means that the more permissive or strict the parenting style, the more internal behavioral problems children will have, and the more authoritative the parenting style, the fewer internal behavioral problems children will have. Research demonstrates that supportive family environments significantly reduce child behavioral problems (Chen, 2023). Conversely, excessive parental control coupled with low emotional support is strongly associated with child anxiety and depression, as restrictive parenting limits autonomous development and heightens psychological distress (Hosokawa& Katsura,2017).

According to the third finding, behavioral problems increase with increasing anxiety. These findings align with those of Haghshenas et al. (2024), Gorostiaga et al. (2019), and Romero-Acosta et al. (2021). This means that the greater the level of anxiety in children, the greater the internal and external behavioral problems they will have.

While anxiety serves as an adaptive response to threat, its dysregulation significantly contributes to childhood behavioral disorders (Breinholst et al., 2019). Frequently rooted in adverse familial experiences, maladaptive anxiety manifests through avoidance behaviors or externalizing symptoms, establishing a cyclical pattern that disrupts family dynamics and heightens parental stress (Ayenew et al., 2020). According to psychodynamic frameworks, when anxiety remains unmanaged, it becomes pathogenic, potentially evolving into various psychopathologies through its disruptive impact on psychological development.

Research confirms anxiety's significant mediating role between family dynamics and childhood behavioral issues. Parental conflict and maladaptive parenting elevate children's anxiety levels, which subsequently manifests as problematic behaviors through reduced psychological well-being. This model identifies parental conflict as a primary stressor that disrupts family processes—including parenting quality—while highlighting anxiety as the core mechanism transmitting these effects. Consequently, therapeutic interventions targeting anxiety management may effectively mitigate the adverse behavioral impacts of dysfunctional family environments. An integrated analysis of prominent theoretical models in this domain suggests that children tend to interpret authoritarian parenting styles as forms of rejection, while perceiving permissive styles as representing unstable relational patterns. These negative appraisals may fundamentally shape children's perceptions of themselves and their environment (Grych & Fincham, 1990). At the emotional level, such parenting approaches threaten children's sense of emotional security, potentially maintaining them in a state of persistent hyperarousal that exacerbates anxiety symptoms and compromises emotion regulation capacities (Cummings & Davies, 2010). From a systemic perspective, these maladaptive parenting styles generate conflicts within family subsystems, thereby disrupting overall family functioning. Dysfunctional parenting adversely affects child development through direct pathways and indirect mechanisms involving cognitive, emotional, and systemic disruptions. Such parenting practices—often characterized by coercive discipline and diminished adaptability—elevate children's anxiety levels, thereby increasing vulnerability to behavioral problems and compounding developmental risks (Gard et al., 2020; Van Zijl et al., 2007).

One of the strengths of this research is its focus on a group of preschool children and its consideration of multiple variables simultaneously. This feature enables a more detailed and comprehensive examination of the psychological and family variables involved in the development, persistence, or improvement of the behavioral status of this group of children. Simultaneously examining variables within the family context can allow family and child therapists to design and propose new approaches to treating and caring for children, with an emphasis on the important factors highlighted in this research.

While the findings of this study generally align with international research, their interpretation must consider the unique cultural characteristics of Iranian society, particularly in traditional regions. In this cultural context, blurred intergenerational boundaries (Minuchin, 1985) facilitate the rapid infiltration of parental conflicts into the child's subsystem, thereby intensifying triangulation. Furthermore, cultural emphasis on familial loyalty and high normative expectations creates dual layers of stress and anxiety in children. According to emotional security theory (Cummings & Davies, 2010), limited supportive social networks in these communities reduce children's compensatory resources to offset insecurity arising from conflicts. Additionally, although authoritarian parenting styles are somewhat normative in these societies (Deater-Deckard et al., 2011), when interfering with children's basic psychological needs for autonomy, they can contribute to internalizing problems like anxiety. Thus, testing this model in other societies with distinct cultural characteristics is essential to generalize the findings.

Limitation

This study requires cautious generalization due to sampling limitations and lack of control over important variables such as gender, parental education, and economic status. The use of self-report questionnaires also carries potential bias. Future studies should utilize more diverse populations, multiple data collection methods, and control for confounding variables.

The findings of this study yield multiple practical implications for family education and timely interventions. Specifically, raising family awareness and providing education on intra-familial factors contributing to behavioral problems are critically important. Clinically, attention to anxiety's mediating role between family variables and children's behavioral problems is essential in designing therapeutic interventions.

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