



The effect of reflective parenting on children's separation anxiety symptoms, parent-child relationship, and emotional style in mothers of children with separation anxiety disorder

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Abstract

Introduction: Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is the most common anxiety disorder in children, in which parental factors play a significant role. The present study aimed to investigate the effect of reflective parenting on children's separation anxiety symptoms, parent-child relationship, and emotional style in mothers of children with separation anxiety disorder.

Materials and Methods: The statistical population included all mothers of children aged 4 to 6 years with separation anxiety disorder residing in Isfahan-Iran, in 2023. From this population, 30 mothers were selected through purposive sampling from kindergartens in Isfahan and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Pre-test measures included the Separation Anxiety Assessment Scale (SAAS), the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS), and the Maternal Emotional Style Questionnaire (MESQ), which were administered to both groups. The reflective parenting intervention was presented to the experimental group in ten sessions, and then post-test and follow-up test were administered to both groups. Data were analyzed using mixed multivariate analysis of variance.

Results: Compared to the control group, the experimental group showed significant changes that were maintained at follow-up ($P < 0.001$), including reductions in children's separation anxiety symptoms and mothers' emotion-dismissing style, as well as improvements in parent-child relationship quality and mothers' emotion-coaching style.

Conclusion: Reflective parenting can enhance the parent-child relationship, promote emotion-coaching style in mothers, and reduce both separation anxiety symptoms in children and emotion-dismissing style in mothers.

Keywords: Emotion, Parent-child relationship, Parenting, Separation anxiety disorder

Please cite this paper as:

Eskandari E, Akrami N, Namdari K, Abedi A. The effect of reflective parenting on children's separation anxiety symptoms, parent-child relationship, and emotional style in mothers of children with separation anxiety disorder. *Journal of Fundamentals of Mental Health* 2026 Jan-Feb; 28(1): 55-63. DOI: 10.22038/JFMH.2025.88497.3250

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Received: May. 25, 2025

Accepted: Oct. 31, 2025



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Introduction

Childhood is one of the most fundamental stages of human development, forming the basis for a healthy personality in adulthood. Therefore, early intervention in psychological issues during this period is of great importance (1). One of the most common anxiety disorders in children is Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD), characterized by intense and developmentally inappropriate anxiety when separated from attachment figures. This disorder can lead to serious academic and social impairments, as affected children tend to avoid attending school and have difficulty separating from their caregivers. These children often display excessive worries about their attachment figures becoming ill, having accidents, or dying, making separation a distressing experience (2). A systematic review indicated that the prevalence of SAD among Iranian children and adolescents ranges from 7% to 15.7% (3). Given its relatively high prevalence and both short- and long-term negative consequences, special attention to this disorder is warranted (4).

Etiological research has emphasized the key role of parental, particularly maternal, factors in the development and maintenance of SAD symptoms (4-7). In this regard, the parent-child relationship is a crucial domain of concern for affected children (8). In general, the relationship between parents—especially mothers—and their children represents the first and most enduring interaction throughout a child's life, forming the foundation of the child's psychological development. As such, it has garnered significant attention from psychologists (1). This relationship can be explained through attachment theory, where attachment is a system that promotes proximity between the child and the primary caregiver (usually the mother), thus ensuring the child's protection. Sensitive and predictable responses by the caregiver foster secure attachment and consequently reduce anxiety, whereas inappropriate responsiveness can lead to insecure attachment and increased vulnerability to anxiety, which is evident in children with SAD (9).

Another factor related to SAD is maternal emotional style (10,11). To understand this concept, one must first define parental meta-emotion, which refers to how parents perceive, regulate, and respond to their own and their children's emotions. Aligned with the concept

of meta-emotion, two distinct maternal emotional styles have been identified: the emotion-coaching style and the emotion-dismissing style. Emotion-coaching style is characterized by increased emotional awareness, facilitation of emotional conversations, and teaching coping strategies in anxiety-provoking situations. In contrast, in emotion-dismissing style, parents are unaware of their own and their child's emotional states and believe that unpleasant emotions like anxiety are inherently harmful and should be ignored or suppressed (12). Research suggests that parents of anxious children are less likely to adopt an emotion-coaching style, which may contribute to insecure attachment and heightened anxiety in children (11).

Given the central role of parents in the emergence and persistence of SAD (4-7), designing and implementing parent-empowerment interventions aimed at modifying parental behaviors to reduce child's separation anxiety, becomes essential (13). Reflective parenting is one such effective intervention (14). This program, which is based on Cooper and Redfern's model, is an effective parenting intervention that draws on theories of attachment-based therapy, mentalization, and mindfulness. Within this framework, parents are encouraged not only to develop awareness of their own internal experiences—including their thoughts and emotions—but also to become attuned to their child's internal states. This dual focus enables parents to respond effectively to the psychological needs of their children. Additionally, the program teaches parents to regulate their own emotional reactions so that they can respond thoughtfully to their child's needs rather than reacting impulsively. In this way, the emotional bond between parent and child is strengthened, parental sensitivity to the child's psychological requirements is increased, and the child's psychological wellbeing is promoted (15).

Several studies support its efficacy. For instance, a single-case study found that reflective parenting reduced SAD symptoms in children (14). Another study concluded that the program had a positive impact on the mother-child relationship and maternal emotion regulation (16). A meta-analysis demonstrated that reflective parenting improves parent-child relationships (17). Additionally, a study showed that the program enhances the quality of the mother-child relationship and maternal

self-efficacy, while simultaneously improving child's self-regulation and reducing behavioral problems (18). Another research has revealed that parental reflective functioning improves child's emotion regulation by promoting emotion-coaching style and decreasing the use of emotion-dismissing style in mothers (19). In a quasi-experimental study conducted on anxious mothers, the results demonstrated that reflective parenting significantly contributed to the reduction of maternal stress and the improvement of the mother-child relationship (20). In a systematic review, researchers concluded that parental reflective functioning significantly enhances parental sensitivity to child needs and improves the quality of parenting during infancy and early childhood. Furthermore, this effect varies across different populations, with vulnerable groups experiencing emotional distress benefiting more from these interventions compared to non-vulnerable groups (21).

Reflective parenting is a relatively novel approach in the field of parenting interventions. Despite some emerging research, few studies have comprehensively examined its effects. Moreover, most of the existing research has been conducted outside Iran, and its efficacy in the Iranian context remains underexplored. Importantly, there is a gap in research evaluating the simultaneous effects of reflective parenting on both parental variables and child symptoms.

Based on the aforementioned points, it can be concluded that the present study is distinguished and innovative compared to previous related research in several ways: First, this study was conducted within the cultural context of Iran and specifically examined the effectiveness of reflective parenting program among Iranian mothers, whereas most previous studies were conducted in Western contexts. Second, prior studies largely focused on non-clinical samples, while this study specifically targeted individuals diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder. Third, previous research often concentrated separately on either child-related symptoms or parental variables, but the current study simultaneously measures the impact of reflective parenting on maternal variables and child symptoms, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of intervention. Finally, previous Iranian studies have mostly been conducted as single-case or quasi-experimental designs with

small sample sizes, limiting generalizability. In contrast, this study employed an experimental design with an adequate sample size, which adds to its scientific value. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate reflective parenting on children's separation anxiety symptoms, parent-child relationship, and emotional style in mothers of children with separation anxiety disorder.

Materials and Methods

This experimental study employed a pre-test–post-test–follow-up design with a control group. The statistical population of this study included all mothers of children aged 4 to 6 years diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder residing in Isfahan city in 2023. From this population, 30 mothers were selected through purposive sampling from kindergartens in Isfahan and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Inclusion criteria for the mothers were as follows: (1) having a child aged 4 to 6 diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder based on the Anxiety and Related Disorders Interview Schedule for DSM-5: Parent Version (ADIS-5-P) (22) conducted by an experienced clinical psychologist, and completion of the parent version of the Separation Anxiety Assessment Scale (SAAS-P); (2) providing informed consent to participate in the study; (3) having at least a high school diploma; and (4) not currently receiving any psychological treatment. Exclusion criteria included (1) missing more than three sessions of the reflective parenting intervention and (2) unwillingness to continue participation in the study. After sample selection, pre-test was administered to both experimental and control groups. The experimental group received ten-session reflective parenting intervention, held weekly with each session lasting 90 minutes. The control group received no intervention during this period. Post-test was conducted after the intervention, followed by follow-up test three months later. To adhere to research ethics, the control group was provided with a condensed version of the intervention following the follow-up phase.

There was no sample attrition during the data collection process, and all participants' data were included in the analyses. To test the hypotheses, a 2×3 mixed multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, with group (reflective parenting vs. control) as the

between-subjects factor and time (pre-test, post-test, follow-up) as the within-subjects factor. Separation anxiety symptoms, parent-child relationship, and emotional style served as the dependent variables. Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 27). The Type I error rate was set at .05 for all analyses.

Research instruments

A) Separation Anxiety Assessment Scale-Parent Version (SAAS-P): It was developed by Hahn and colleagues. This 34-item scale measures separation anxiety disorder in children based on parent report. Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always). The tool has demonstrated adequate validity. Reliability testing yielded Cronbach's alpha and test-retest coefficients of 0.91 and 0.90, respectively (23,24). Psychometric evaluation of the Persian version confirmed its validity and reliability, with Cronbach's alpha estimated at 0.86. Concurrent validity was supported through correlation with the Spence Preschool Anxiety Scale (PAS) (23). In the present study, the internal consistency of the scale, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was excellent ($\alpha=0.939$).

B) Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS): It was designed by Pianta. This 33-item self-report measure assesses parental perceptions of their relationship with their child. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (definitely does not apply) to 5 (definitely applies). Cronbach's alpha for the original scale was reported at 0.80 (25). In Iran, content validity has been confirmed, and Cronbach's alpha was calculated as 0.86 (26).

In the present study, the internal consistency of the scale, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was very good ($\alpha=0.889$).

C) Maternal Emotional Style Questionnaire (MESQ): It was developed by Lagacé-Séguin and Coplan. This scale assesses maternal emotional styles in interactions with their children. While the original version included 45 items, the current version contains 14 items, divided into two subscales: emotion-coaching and emotion-dismissing styles (7 items each). Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Factor analysis confirmed the two-subscale structure. The emotion-coaching style correlated with empathetic traits, and the emotion-dismissing style correlated with parent-centered traits. Cronbach's alpha for the subscales was 0.90 and 0.92, respectively (27). In Iran, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported the two-factor model. Concurrent validity was established through correlation with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Emotion-coaching style was positively associated with prosocial behaviors, while emotion-dismissing style was positively associated with behavioral problems. Cronbach's alpha was 0.86 and 0.88 for the two subscales, respectively, and test-retest reliability was reported as 0.89 and 0.90 (28). In the present study, internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha was good for the emotion-coaching style ($\alpha=0.821$) and acceptable for the emotion-dismissing style ($\alpha=0.756$). The content of the reflective parenting sessions, adapted from Cooper and Redfern (15), is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of reflective parenting sessions

sessions	Content
1	Goal: Introduction to the general principles of reflective parenting. Content: Introduction and brief introduction to the underlying principles of reflective parenting; understanding the impact of secure mother-child interactions; exploring factors affecting emotional development (e.g., temperament, disorders); awareness of parental influence on emotional regulation; examining the role of parental history; introduction to mentalization. Homework: Self-monitoring throughout the day and identifying factors influencing the mother-child relationship based on the content of the first session.
2	Goal: Designing a comprehensive parenting program by identifying relevant influential factors. Content: Developing a parent plan for self-management; exploring self-reflection in parenting; recognizing mental states and past experiences; identifying current influencing factors (e.g., beliefs, needs); recognizing emotional triggers and barriers (e.g., fatigue, medication). Homework: Self-monitoring throughout the day and identifying factors influencing the mother-child relationship based on the content of the second session.
3	Goal: Introduction to emotion regulation (Part 1) Content: Introduction to managing and regulating parental emotions (Part 1): introduction to the "emotional thermometer" and its range (cold, warm, hot); emotional labeling; observing and distancing from emotions.

	Homework: Daily recording of unpleasant moments and applying the emotion regulation techniques learned in this session.
4	Goal: Introduction to emotion regulation (Part 2) Content: Introduction to managing and regulating parental emotions (Part 2): continuation of emotional thermometer work; viewing oneself from an outside perspective; seeing the child as a child; seeking support; self-acceptance. Homework: Daily recording of unpleasant moments and applying the emotion regulation techniques learned in this session.
5	Goal: Understanding how to give effective attention to child Content: Introduction to the concept of a parenting assistant: practicing attention toward the child (e.g., eye contact, active listening); understanding perspective-taking and curiosity toward the child's mind; defining empathy. Homework: Engaging in one hour of daily interaction with the child, incorporating session-based skill practices such as active listening, sustained eye contact, empathy, and related techniques.
6	Goal: Supporting the children in regulating their emotions. Content: How to help your child cope with their emotions: understanding the effects of attention, perspective-taking, and empathy; learning emotion regulation strategies (e.g., validating feelings, using humor or distraction, offering touch, apologizing). Homework: Providing the child with daily prompts to utilize the emotion regulation strategies acquired during the session when encountering adverse or challenging situations.
7	Goal: Enhancing intra-family and extra-family interactions. Content: Intra-family and extra-family interactions: addressing intra-family conflicts and their impact on children; enhancing positive interactions within and outside the family (e.g., with teachers and peers). Homework: Developing a list of intra-family and extra-family issues and providing practical strategies to overcome them in order to improve interactions.
8	Goal: Applying disciplinary strategies alongside fostering a high-quality relationship with the child. Content: Discipline in child: managing parent-child conflict; fostering connectedness during conflict; promoting positive interactions; preparing children for behavioral boundaries; discussing authoritarian vs. controlling styles. Homework: Establishing healthy boundaries for the children while considering their needs and monitoring daily adherence to them.
9	Goal: Practicing mindfulness and reflective functioning in interactions with the child. Content: Introduction to mindfulness in good times: emphasizing the role of reflective parenting during positive moments; fostering closeness and self-esteem; maintaining a reflective stance during play. Homework: Engaging in one hour of mindful play with the child each day and fostering joyful and emotionally connected moments.
10	Goal: Summary and clarification Content: Summary and clarification: general review of sessions; addressing frequently asked parenting questions. Homework: Summarizing all educational content and applying it in daily life.

Results

Each group included 15 mothers, with 9 housewives and 6 employed in both groups. The mean age of mothers in the reflective parenting group (35.80 ± 2.34) and the control group (36.53 ± 2.36) did not differ significantly ($P= 0.399$). Years of formal education also did not differ significantly between groups (reflective parenting: $M= 16.33$, $SD= 2.19$;

control group: $M= 16.47$, $SD= 2.23$; $t(28)= -0.165$, $P= 0.870$). Socioeconomic status was likewise comparable (reflective parenting: 1 low, 12 middle, 2 high; control: 1 low, 13 middle, 1 high; $\chi^2(2)= 0.373$, $P= 0.830$). Descriptive statistics of the study variables are presented in Table 2, indicating group equivalence at pre-test and changes over time only in the intervention group.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the study variables

Variable	Reflective parenting group (N= 15)			Control group (N= 15)		
	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up
Separation anxiety	94.37±7.37	74.60±6.12	72.53±7.26	93.80±5.27	92.27±5.74	91.67±6.45
Relationship	72.47±14.56	104.67±14.73	106.93±12.86	75.27±15.43	75.27±13.77	73.33±12.10
Coaching style	16.53±3.98	26.13±2.85	26.13±2.97	16.47±3.85	15.20±3.23	15.73±2.91
Dismissing style	32.33±2.58	18.80±4.36	21.60±3.16	33.07±1.98	32.27±1.94	32.47±2.07

Before conducting the MANOVA, statistical assumptions were evaluated. The Shapiro-Wilk test supported the normality of the variables ($P > 0.05$). Levene's test confirmed the homogeneity of variances ($P > 0.05$), and Box's M test indicated equality of covariance matrices (Box's $M = 152.285$, $F(78, 2475.7) = 1.025$, $P = 0.420$). However, Mauchly's test revealed a violation of the sphericity assumption for all repeated measures variables ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied in the univariate analyses.

MANOVA using Wilks' lambda revealed statistically significant effects of time ($\lambda = 0.035$, $F(8,21) = 73.322$, $P < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.965$), group ($\lambda = 0.162$, $F(4,25) = 32.261$, $P < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.838$), and, more importantly, the interaction between time and group ($\lambda = 0.029$, $F(8,21) = 89.114$, $P < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.971$). Accordingly, follow-up univariate analyses were conducted to identify which variables contributed to these effects. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the univariate analyses of variance with Greenhouse-Geisser correction

Variable	Effect type	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	Partial η^2	Statistical power
Separation anxiety	Time	2671.667	1.503	1777.769	147.244	< 0.001	0.840	1.000
	Group	3216.044	1	3216.044	30.557	< 0.001	0.522	1.000
	Interaction	1876.956	1.503	1248.956	103.445	< 0.001	0.787	1.000
Relationship	Time	5238.422	1.347	3889.298	277.282	< 0.001	0.908	1.000
	Group	9060.100	1	9060.100	16.023	< 0.001	0.364	0.971
	Interaction	5948.600	1.347	4416.574	314.873	< 0.001	0.918	1.000
Coaching style	Time	378.867	1.425	265.808	104.003	< 0.001	0.788	1.000
	Group	1166.400	1	1166.400	39.355	< 0.001	0.584	1.000
	Interaction	574.467	1.425	403.039	157.697	< 0.001	0.849	1.000
Dismissing style	Time	775.556	1.612	481.180	81.284	< 0.001	0.744	1.000
	Group	1698.678	1	1698.678	118.974	< 0.001	0.809	1.000
	Interaction	760.622	1.612	471.915	79.719	< 0.001	0.740	1.000

As shown in Table 3, the main effects of time ($F_s > 81.283$, $P_s < 0.001$, $\eta^2_s > 0.744$), group ($F_s > 16.022$, $P_s < 0.001$, $\eta^2_s > 0.364$), and, most notably, the time \times group interaction ($F_s > 79.719$, $P_s < 0.001$, $\eta^2_s > 0.740$) were all significant across the outcome variables. Given the focus on differential change, the significant interaction effects were further examined using the LSD post hoc test to assess changes in mean scores within the intervention group.

LSD post hoc tests in the intervention group revealed a significant reduction in children's separation anxiety symptoms from pre- to post-test (mean difference (MD) = -20.133 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -2.918$), which was maintained at follow-up (MD = -22.200 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -3.034$). Parent-child relationship improved significantly after treatment (MD = 32.200 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.197$) and remained stable at follow-up (MD = 34.467 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.397$). Both dimensions of mothers' emotional style also showed significant change at post-test: an increase in coaching style (MD = 9.800 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.440$) and a decrease in

dismissing style (MD = -13.533 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -3.726$). These changes persisted at follow-up (coaching style: MD = 9.600 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.594$; dismissing style: MD = -10.733 , $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -3.727$). In contrast, no significant changes were observed in the control group across any outcome variables ($P_s > 0.05$).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effect of reflective parenting on children's separation anxiety symptoms, parent-child relationship, and emotional style in mothers of children with separation anxiety disorder. The results showed that the reflective parenting intervention led to a reduction in children's separation anxiety symptoms, improvement in the parent-child relationship, an increase in the use of the emotion-coaching style, and a decrease in the use of the emotion-dismissing style among mothers. These results remained stable over time.

The findings regarding the effect of reflective parenting on children's separation anxiety

symptoms align with the single-case study by Kazemeini et al., which reported a significant reduction in SAD symptoms following the intervention (14).

In the reflective parenting program, parents learn to be curious about their child's mind and adopt an exploratory, rather than judgmental attitude. This allows them to empathize with their child's specific emotional needs and foster a sense of security. The program encourages parents to shift focus from merely managing behaviors to understanding the inner mental world of the child. By reducing external pressure on the child and offering support and understanding, separation anxiety symptoms gradually diminish over time.

The findings concerning the improvement in the parent-child relationship are consistent with previous studies (16-18,20,21).

This intervention supports mothers in understanding how their own attachment styles affect their relationship with their child and provides tools for managing these influences. Mothers are empowered to respond sensitively and consistently to their child's emotional needs, which strengthens the quality of their bond. Additionally, communication techniques such as active listening, eye contact, and empathy are taught to enhance the interactive context between mother and child.

Finally, the results related to the influence of reflective parenting on maternal emotional styles are in line with earlier studies (16,19). One of the core elements of this intervention is emotion regulation. Mothers are taught emotion regulation skills so that they can serve as emotional coaches for their children. The program, by enhancing parents' capacity for mentalization, helps them better understand and process their own emotions and those of their children.

This increased awareness enables mothers to replace emotion-dismissing responses—such as denial or invalidation—with empathic, coaching-oriented responses. This transformation leads to a shift in parents' attitudes toward their children's emotional experiences and fosters healthier emotional styles. In this secure context, not only are children better able to regulate separation anxiety, but their self-confidence and socio-communicative skills also improve, making separation from the mother less distressing when necessary. Like any study, this research had limitations. The intervention was limited to

mothers, excluding other influential caregivers such as fathers. Additionally, due to the small sample size, generalizability should be approached with caution.

Future researchers are recommended to examine the effectiveness of this intervention among fathers and to compare it with other existing parenting interventions. The findings of this study can be applied in counseling centers and school-based family education programs, and even used preventively to prevent further complications.

Conclusion

According to the results, reflective parenting not only reduced separation anxiety symptoms in children but also improved the parent-child relationship and enhanced the emotional style of mothers. Therefore, reflective parenting training can be practically implemented in counseling centers as an effective intervention.

Acknowledgments

We sincerely appreciate the efforts of the mothers who participated in this study.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical standards, informed consent was obtained from participating mothers. Simple explanations about the process were provided, along with assurances regarding voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality and data protection were also emphasized. Furthermore, after the follow-up assessment, the reflective parenting program was offered to the control group in a condensed format. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Isfahan.

Code of Ethics

IR.UI.REC.1402.070

Author's Contributions

This study is derived from the doctoral dissertation of the first author. The first author conducted all operational aspects of the study, including sampling, intervention implementation, pre-test, post-test, follow-up assessments, data analysis, and manuscript writing. The second, third, and fourth authors supervised the process, assisted with data analysis, and contributed to manuscript revision.

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