



## The Analysis of Helicopter Parenting Based on the Lived Experiences of Mothers of Children with Behavioral Problems

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**Received:** 27.09.2020

**Accepted:** 04.10.2020

**Published online:** 20.12.2021

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**Citation:**

Farshad MR, Najarpourian S, Mohamadi K, Samavi A, Javdan M. The analysis of helicopter parenting based on the lived experiences of mothers of children with behavioral problems. J Qual Res Health Sci. 2021; 10(4):253-260.

### Abstract

**Introduction:** Helicopter parenting is a type of parenting style that is used by parents in general and mothers in particular. This study aimed to identify the harms and problems of helicopter parenting based on the lived experiences of mothers of children with behavioral problems.

**Methods:** This study was conducted qualitatively using the interpretive phenomenology approach in 2019. To this end, 19 mothers living in Bandar Abbas who had children with behavioral problems and visited the counseling center of Hormozgan University were selected via purposive sampling and surveyed using semi-structured interviews. The interview data were collected, recorded, and then coded and classified into main categories.

**Results:** The themes that emerged in this study were classified into 5 main categories and 17 subcategories. The main categories included "the mother's experience of the parenting style, harms to the mother, harms to the child, the factors affecting the choice of this parenting style, and maternal views on continuing parenting".

**Conclusion:** This study revealed that the helicopter parenting style causes major harm to both mothers and their children. Therefore, to reduce and eliminate the harms associated with helicopter parenting style, experts, educators, psychologists, and counselors should design and implement parenting programs based on psychological components as well as the positive upbringing of the child.

**Keywords:** Parental education, Behavioral problems, Mother-child relationship, Phenomenology

### Introduction

Children face major emotional and behavioral problems throughout their developmental stages (1, 2). These problems create many difficulties for the family and reduce children's efficiency in individual

and academic performance followed by child exclusion by others (3, 4). Parents in the family play an important role in the formation or non-formation of problems in children (5). Besides, quality parent-



child interactions by creating a healthy interpersonal framework promote the development of desirable emotions and social behaviors in children (6). However, maladaptive parent-child interactions lead to children's malfunctioning and destructive behaviors in the community (6).

The mother plays a more prominent role in interacting with the child (5,7,8,9), and the development of children's psychological and emotional characteristics is mainly influenced by mothers (9). Mothers generally spend more time with their children and allocate more time caring for them than fathers, and this has made mothers more controlling and supportive (10). Previous studies have shown that the cause of most children's disorders is deprivation of the mother or disruption of the mother-child interaction, and thus communication and parenting style, especially on the part of the mother can significantly affect the performance of their children (11). Among the various factors affecting parent-child interactions, parenting patterns play a significant role in the positive and healthy development of children or the occurrence of children's behavioral problems (12-16).

Different parenting models have been developed so far. For instance, Baumrind introduced one of the most important parenting methods, which includes authoritarian, neglectful, and authoritative styles, and explains the role of parents in parenting and educational practices (17). Another parenting style that affects the psychological characteristics of mothers and children's behavioral problems is the helicopter parenting style (12). Helicopter parenting is a broad term used to describe parents who have supportive and warm behaviors in their parenting program, are excessively involved in their children's life, show controlling behavior, and limit their children's autonomy (18). This parenting style involves the actions of parents who are controlling or very diligent in their child upbringing. Helicopter parents are too involved, strict, and protective, keep their children in limbo, and are overly involved in the children's homework, academic affairs, work, and social life (19). They are also stricter and exercise more control over their child's activities (20). Research has shown that such parents provide significant support to their children (21). Various studies have shown that mothers' helicopter parenting style has direct and indirect effects on children's anxiety, depression, self-efficacy, psychological health, and psychological characteristics (22-25).

In helicopter parenting, parents exercise a high level of supervision and control over their child's life, which is harmful to child development, deprives the child of independence, and leads to conflicts

between parents and their children (19). Helicopter parents either give too much power to the child (for example, food or entertainment), give too much help (e.g., parents who do their children's work), or exercise more control on their children (by regulating or not regulating rules) (19), which ultimately creates major behavioral problems for their children in various respects (22-25). The use of helicopter parenting along with compassionate parenting also causes depression, anxiety, and emotional problems for children (26). Another study showed that the use of helicopter and control parenting by both parents has a significant relationship with the mental health of their children (24). Schiffrin et al. (25) also showed that the use of helicopter parenting style by parents affects reducing motivation and academic achievement as well as avoiding conflicts that require challenge and resilience.

In addition to the importance of parenting issues, several important factors motivated this research. First, helicopter parenting has detrimental effects on children and perpetuates children's behavioral problems. Second, mothers spend more time communicating with their children. This warrants a further focus on mothers. Third, to develop effective intervention programs, it is necessary to provide an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of mothers who use the helicopter parenting style and explore its effects on their children. Fourth, to the best of our knowledge, there is no extensive qualitative study on analyzing the harms of helicopter parenting based on the lived experiences of mothers in Iran, and the generalization of research findings obtained abroad to Iranian samples is associated with some restrictions due to cultural differences. To understand the real experiences of mothers of children with behavioral problems, this study explores the lived experiences in Iranian mothers. Accordingly, this qualitative study contributes to gaining a better understanding of issues and problems faced by mothers of children with behavioral problems by exploring the harms and problems of helicopter parenting based on the lived experiences of this group of mothers.

## Methods

The present study employed a qualitative approach to explore the helicopter parenting style based on the lived experiences of mothers of children with behavioral problems. Accordingly, phenomenology is a suitable method for entering the lived world of individuals and examining their life experiences (27). Phenomenology considers the individual as part of the environment and the main focus of phenomenological analysis is to examine the conscious experience of individuals and to reveal the

structure and essence of the experienced phenomena in the same way they occur in life (28). In other words, the purpose of this method is to describe and explain certain phenomena as lived experiences (29). Phenomenology is divided into two main descriptive and interpretive methods (30). Interpretive phenomenology seeks to identify patterns in data that follow a theoretical framework and provides knowledge of phenomena through understanding the real-life experience of individuals (31). Since the present study focused on the lived experiences of mothers with helicopter parenting style, an interpretive phenomenological approach was used.

The research population included mothers of children with behavioral problems in Bandar Abbas in 2019. Using purposive sampling and initial screening, 19 mothers who met the inclusion criteria were selected as the participants in the sample. The data were collected individually through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The inclusion criteria were being female, being a mother, and having children 5 to 12 years. Written consent was obtained from the participants. The research objectives and the participants' rights were explained to them, and they gave permission to record the interviews.

The interview framework and questions were developed based on the objectives of the study and a review of the literature. The questions were developed based on the opinions of several experts in this field and addressed the participants' parenting style and its effects on themselves and their children. An interview session was held for each interviewee. The interviews continued until data saturation. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The data collected through semi-structured exploratory interviews were analyzed reviewing the data several

times to come up with a general picture of the research problem. The researchers performed the initial data analysis based on their understanding of the context of the study, and this process continued until the emergence of the underlying codes. Finally, the extracted codes were categorized based on the similarities and differences among them.

The extracted codes were described in the participants' language so that readers could find themselves in the world of the participants and this way to increase the interpretive validity of the research findings. After categorizing the data in a cluster of themes, the researchers reviewed the initial explanations to remove the additional materials and information that did not undergo the identified categories. Accordingly, recurrent, relevant, and correct facts were retained, and this added to the validity of the research findings. To ensure the credibility of the data after analysis, each interview was reviewed by the participant to verify the accuracy of the content and, finally, to make the necessary changes. To ensure the conformability and adequacy of the data, the codes extracted from the data were checked and revised by peer reviewers. Finally, to increase the transferability of the data and their generalization to other situations, an effort was made to select the participants from among the persons with different socio-economic, spiritual, and age levels.

## Results

The participants in the study were 19 women whose demographic data are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the participants were from different social classes with different levels of education (from high school diploma to a master's degree) and they were residing in Bandar Abbas.

**Table 1. The participants' demographic data**

Participant	Age	Education	Occupation	Marriage duration	Number of children
1	32	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	13	2
2	35	Associate's degree	Housewife	15	5
3	31	Associate's degree	Housewife	16	1
4	40	Associate's degree	Employee	11	3
5	34	Associate's degree	Employee	11	2
6	34	Master's degree	Housewife	11	2
7	24	Associate's degree	Housewife	7	1
8	38	Bachelor's degree	Employee	11	2
9	43	Bachelor's degree	Employee	20	2
10	46	Associate's degree	Housewife	23	2
11	37	Master's degree	Employee	14	2
12	34	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	16	3
13	34	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	16	3
14	32	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	12	3
15	31	Associate's degree	Housewife	10	2
16	35	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	9	1
17	32	Bachelor's degree	Employee	22	2
18	28	Associate's degree	Housewife	9	2
19	29	Associate's degree	Housewife	8	2

### 1. The mother's experience of the parenting style:

The first category included 3 subcategories: Lack of information on parenting styles, parental inconsistency in education, and mother's perfectionism in education.

Some of the participants stated that the lack of information about parenting styles was the reason for choosing this parenting style (Participant 1). They also believed that the choice of this parenting style was due to the inconsistency between her and her husband in raising their children. One of the participants stated, *"I told my husband that we should have more control on our second son and we talked more about it. Of course, I did not agree with my husband, and this turned my son into a stubborn and nervous child"* (Participant 4). Some participants believed that they have set certain expectations and criteria for parenting that if they are met by their child, they would feel like a successful parent (Participant 2). The participants who had a perfectionist view of parenting believed that they had chosen helicopter parenting to better raise their children and show their affection and love to them.

In Table 2. The main categories and subcategories of the analysis of helicopter parenting style analysis are presented.

**2. Harms to the mother:** The second category that emerged in this study was subcategorized into intrapersonal and interpersonal harms.

The parenting methods used by mothers to raise their children have different effects on their performance as mothers. Some of these effects have an intrapersonal aspect (Participant 8). In addition to intrapersonal harms, this parenting method has also negatively affected the mothers' interpersonal relationships (Participant 3).

**3. Harms to the child:** The third category that emerged in this study was divided into the two subcategories of exogenous and endogenous

psychological harms.

Some participants believed that their children had difficulty communicating with others and were unable to make friends and communicate with others (Participant 6). Others believed that their child lacked self-confidence and they seemed to be harmed from the inside (Participant 11). The use of helicopter parenting has a great impact on the psychological components of children. One of the participants stated, *"I feel that my parenting style has caused my child to grow up anxious, irritated, and obsessive. She is not happy, does not laugh, and sometimes even delivers an artificial smile. I feel that my daughter has low self-esteem"* (Participant 17).

### 4. The factors affecting the choice of the parenting style:

The fourth category identified in this included 6 subcategories: Lack of awareness, the previous family role, consulting with the spouse, social issues, maternal psychological characteristics, and the feedback received.

Some participants believed that the lack of awareness of parenting practices led to the choice of this parenting style (Participant 8). Some participants also suggested their previous family had an effective role in choosing this parenting style and believed that their experiences affected their decision to choose or not choose this parenting style (Participant 3). Besides, some participants stated that the experiences they had in their biological family led to choosing this parenting method (Participant 17).

Some participants stated that consultation with their husbands was effective in their decisions to choose this parenting style (Participant 4). Some participants also believed that communication with other people in the wider community played a significant role in their decision (Participant 15).

Table 2. The main categories and subcategories of the analysis of helicopter parenting style

Subcategories	Main categories
Lack of information on parenting styles Parental inconsistency in education Mother's perfectionism in education	The mother's experience of the parenting style
Intrapersonal harms Interpersonal harms	Harms to the mother
Exogenous harms Endogenous harms	Harms to the child
Lack of awareness The previous family role Consulting with the spouse Social issues Maternal psychological characteristics Feedback received	The factors affecting the choice of the parenting style
Changing the current parenting practice Reaching an agreement with the spouse about the parenting style Receiving help and support from an expert Working on oneself	Maternal views on continuing parenting



Another fact affecting the participants' decision to choose the helicopter parenting style was the psychological characteristics of the mother. One of the participants stated, *"I was anxious and nervous and I was scared because of what I saw and heard about Tina's upbringing and this influenced my choice of the parenting style"* (Participant 4). The feedback received was referred to as another reason affecting the participants' choice of this parenting style. According to one of the participants, *"At least he fights less in his game and is less nervous and aggressive"* (Participant 5).

### 5. Maternal views on continuing parenting:

The fifth category in this study covered four subcategories including changing the current parenting practice, reaching an agreement with the spouse about the parenting style, receiving help and support from an expert, and working on oneself.

Some participants believed that they did not get the desired result in raising their children with the current parenting method and are thinking of changing it (Participant 4). Some participants stated that they chose this parenting style to reach an agreement with the spouse about the parenting style (Participant 1). Raising a child is important and requires the cooperation of both parents. Some participants stated that their husband does not spend time raising their child (Participant 19).

They also stated that using the psychological services available helps them to have a more effective child-rearing function (Participants 2 & 6). Some participants stated that their own problems influenced their choice of parenting style and they tried to work more on themselves in raising the next child (Participants 2 & 9).

## Discussion

This study analyzed helicopter parenting based on the lived experiences of mothers of children with behavioral problems. The categories emerged included the mother's experience of the parenting style, harms to the mother, harms to the child, the factors affecting the choice of this parenting style, and maternal views on continuing parenting. A study by Locke showed that the use of helicopter parenting leads to poor growth, lack of child autonomy, and high levels of parental involvement in their child's life. Moreover, the children of these mothers have many behavioral problems that are mainly caused by the parenting style used by mothers than the children themselves (19).

The present study showed the mothers who use

the helicopter parenting style are exposed to intrapersonal and interpersonal harms. Similarly, Kremer et al showed that parenting style affects mothers' performance (32). Furthermore, Kremer et al found that mothers' parenting style is associated with their children's performance and is also significantly correlated with family and interpersonal relationships (32).

This study also indicated that harms done to the child by the mother's parenting style were generally divided into exogenous and endogenous harms. Other studies have shown that children's behavioral problems can be broadly divided into exogenous and endogenous problems (33). For instance, Hosokawa and Katsura suggested that destructive, law-breaking, aggressive, impulsive, and antisocial behaviors and hyperactivity were external problems associated with negative consequences such as academic failure and academic maladjustment (15). They also showed that endogenous problems including anxiety, isolation, and depression (15) were associated with negative consequences such as isolation, loneliness, and school dropout (34). These behavioral problems, along with emotional problems, can lead to academic dysfunction in reading, math, and other areas of academic achievement (35). Another study by Barry et al. showed that many families use unfavorable parenting methods that result in mistrust, dissatisfaction, pessimism, and anxiety in their children (36).

Extensive studies have shown that there is a strong link between child psychological trauma and parental traumatic issues and acknowledged the role of parental psychological factors in causing trauma and behavioral problems in children (37). These studies generally highlighted an association between psychological disorders of mothers with poor cognitive function and increased risk of depression and anxiety (38).

The findings of the present study showed that the factors affecting the choice of the helicopter parenting style included the lack of awareness, the previous family role, consulting with the spouse, social issues, maternal psychological characteristics, and feedback received, as evident in the literature (39). In a similar vein, Ramackers and Swisa showed that social context influences the choice of parenting styles (40).

Another major issue emerged in this study addressed the maternal views on continuing parenting that covered four main categories:

Changing the current parenting practice, reaching an agreement with the spouse about the parenting style, receiving help and support from an expert, and working on oneself, as indicated in previous studies (41).

## Conclusion

The present study showed that the major issues related to the use of helicopter parenting are the mother's experience of the parenting style, harms to the mother, harms to the child, the factors affecting the choice of this parenting style, and maternal views on continuing parenting. Although applying this parenting style has advantages for child-rearing, it can cause major harm to both mothers and their children. As a result, to reduce and eliminate the harms associated with helicopter parenting style, experts, educators, psychologists, and counselors should design and implement parenting programs based on psychological components as well as the positive upbringing of the child. Besides, training programs can be held for mothers to raise their awareness of the differences between parenting styles and the consequences of each on their relationship with the child.

This study was a part of a doctoral dissertation in

counseling that addressed the analysis of helicopter parenting. The results of the present study are more generalizable and comprehensive due to its focus on a local context and the use of a qualitative approach. However, findings from other studies conducted in developed countries may not be applicable due to the different social, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds of developing countries like Iran. Moreover, the present study was conducted through interviews with mothers of children with behavioral problems and they provided more reliable data on their lived experience of helicopter parenting. Finally, since the present study employed a qualitative approach, it filled the gap in previous studies in the literature that mainly used quantitative procedures.

## Acknowledgments

The present article was extracted from a doctoral dissertation in counseling registered with the code of ethics IR.HUMS.REC.1399.257 in Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences. The authors would like to appreciate the participants and all those who contributed to this research project.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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