

The Indicators of Effective Parenting: A Qualitative Study

Habib Jokar¹, Zabihollah Abbaspour¹, Reza Khojasteh Mehr¹

¹Department of Counseling, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran

Abstract

Background: Parents are the main caregivers in raising children, and the quality and quantity of knowledge of parenting styles and child-rearing practices are essential for improving the growth, health, and correct upbringing of children. Thus, correct upbringing is one of the very important issues as it requires parental responsibility. To this end, the present study aimed to identify the components of effective parenting.

Methods: This study was conducted using a conventional qualitative content analysis method. The participants were 9 family counseling specialists in Ahvaz, who were selected using homogeneous purposive sampling. The data were collected through in-depth and exploratory interviews. The collected data were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke.

Results: The analysis of the participants' experiences revealed 5 main themes in effective parenting, including conscious knowledge, cohesion and intimacy in marital relationship, scientific application of direct and indirect parenting practices, a structured family, and creating a context for growth and availability.

Conclusion: The results reported in this study can have some implications for parents in using effective child-rearing practices. Besides, family counselors and psychologists can use the results of this study to increase parents' awareness of effective parenting components and patterns by teaching the components of effective parenting to parents.

Keywords: Effective parenting, Qualitative research, Thematic analysis

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Introduction

Parenting has received research attention from many different scientific disciplines. Many theoretical frameworks emphasize that parenting plays a vital role in child development. Thus, many studies have addressed the impact of parenting on child development for more than 75 years (1). Parenting is full of worries, stress, and increasing pressures, and parents are looking for improving their knowledge about parenting practices (2). Parenting practices can be defined as directly observable specific behaviors that parents use to teach socialization to their children (1). Parenting refers to certain behaviors and practices that affect children's development individually or in conjunction with each other. Parenting is a personal matter and all children are so different from each other that we may wonder if there is any consensus on what constitutes effective parenting (3). Defining parenting, especially good parenting, is a complex task that is associated with some uncertainties. Good parenting is defined as a dynamic and two-way process of the characteristics of the parents, the child, and the broad social environment in which the child lives (4). Although it may be difficult to find a good definition for parenting, parenting refers to a system of parents' feedback to their children, physical care, emotional support, education

and guidance, and protection of children from harm. In its minimal form, parenting refers to the upbringing of children, which is one of the dimensions of the lifestyle followed by each person and includes a set of parents' interactions and behaviors with their children. Thus, effective parenting refers to the indicators of appreciation, encouragement, intimacy, positive communication, guidance, responsibility, justice, supervision, control, and role models of parental functions (5).

Parents should neither be harsh nor careless, but should set rules for their children while being in favor of them (1). There are many ways to educate and guide children to have the best possible personality so that they can succeed in life, overcome disappointments, and avoid problems (6). Parenting styles is divided into authoritarian, authoritative, uninvolved, and permissive styles (7,8). The best way to raise a child is to use an authoritative parenting style (6). In this parenting style, the child feels that their opinions are valued, and as a result, it will lead to a more responsible and independent child. Baumrind has extensively addressed the relationship between parenting styles and child development. The results showed that authoritative parenting has favorable growth outcomes and authoritarian and permissive parenting styles are associated with negative growth outcomes, while the



uninvolved parenting style is the weakest (7).

A review of previous studies shows that each study has focused on some aspects of parenting: Baumrind examined the relationship between parenting styles and child development (7). Hirata and Kamakura addressed the effects of parenting styles on personal growth and self-esteem (9). Moreover, Hosokawa and Katsura examined the relationship between family processes and the development of disruptive behavior disorders in children (10). Kuppens and Ceulemans identified the types of parenting styles (1). Khojasteh Mehr et al examined parenting after divorce (11) and Dehdast and Esmaeili addressed ethics-based parenting (12). However, the main controversy is how effective parenting is. Most of the time, Iranian parents consider themselves responsible for their children's behavior and actions and they regard any child's misbehavior as a sign of their incompetency and inadequacy and feel defeated (13). Another important point is that culture can greatly influence parenting and parenting practices. Thus, effective parenting methods differ from one culture to another, and effective parenting methods in one culture may be ineffective in another culture (14). In their study, Asadi et al. addressed the characteristics of effective parenting during adolescence from parents' views but they did not address experts' opinions (5). Thus, identifying the components of effective parenting from the perspective of family counseling specialists has been neglected as an important factor in parenting styles. Moreover, parents often face a growing number of problems in raising their children, and this is one of the current concerns of parents and family counseling professionals. Hence, an effective solution to reduce these problems is to identify the components of effective parenting from the point of view of family counseling professionals. These components can be helpful for parents in effectively raising their children. Since few studies have addressed the components of effective parenting, the present study seeks to identify the components of effective parenting from the perspective of family counseling specialists and provide an answer to this question: What are the components of effective parenting?

Methods

The present study was conducted using a conventional qualitative content analysis method. The exploratory nature of the study highlighted the perceptions of the participants (family counseling specialists) and their experiences with successful parenting practices. Therefore, the aim of the study was to identify the components of effective parenting, which have been neglected or not addressed so far. The participants were family counseling specialists from Khuzestan province in 2021 who were selected using homogeneous purposive sampling. The sampling process continued until the

data saturation point. The data were saturated with 9 participants and no new information emerged in the sixth interview. The inclusion criteria were the willingness to participate in this study, working for at least 5 years as a family counseling specialist, having a Ph.D. degree in psychology and family counseling, being married, and having children. The exclusion criterion was leaving the study at any stage of data collection. After obtaining informed consent from the participants and explaining the objectives of the study, the researcher assured them that the information provided by them and their identity would remain completely confidential. The participants were also assured that the recorded conversations would be deleted after the analysis was completed. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and follow-up questions to encourage participants to share their experiences. The interview questions were formulated coherently by reviewing the literature and surveying subject-matter experts. Examples of the questions were, "Could you please define parenting?" and "What behavioral methods do successful parents use to raise their children?" Furthermore, follow-up questions (Can you explain more about it? or What do you mean?) were asked for further clarification. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, and the time and place of the interview were determined in advance by the researcher with the participant's agreement. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a technique for recognizing, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. This data analysis technique is used to transform scattered and diverse data into rich and detailed data (15). Thematic analysis was performed in this study in six steps: Getting familiar with the data, generating primary codes, searching for themes, reviewing and revising themes, defining and naming themes, and preparing a report (15). The trustworthiness of the data in this study was checked using four separate criteria (credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability) proposed by Guba and Lincoln (16,17). To evaluate the credibility of the data, after analyzing each interview, its content was returned to the participant to confirm the reliability of the results and apply the necessary revisions. To increase the transferability of the finding, the interviewees were selected with maximum variation in terms of occupation, education, and age to explore the phenomenon in question in an extended setting. To ensure the confirmability of the findings, two experts in the field of qualitative research and family counseling specialists reviewed the reports and transcripts and confirmed the accuracy of the findings. [Table 1](#) shows the participants' demographic characteristics:

Results

The data in this study were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke

Table 1. The participants' demographic characteristics

Participant code	Age	Gender	Counseling services (year)	Education	Occupation
1	44	Male	15	Counseling	Faculty member
2	42	Female	14	Counseling	Faculty member
3	42	Male	16	Counseling	Family counselor
4	45	Male	16	Counseling	Faculty member
5	39	Female	10	Educational psychology	Child psychologist
6	40	Female	11	Educational psychology	Child psychologist
7	40	Male	16	Family Counseling	Faculty member
8	36	Male	10	Counseling	University instructor
9	38	Female	8	Clinical psychology	Child psychologist

(15): 1) Familiarizing with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. The main focus of this study was to identify the components of effective parenting. The analysis of the data revealed 79 subthemes, 19 secondary themes, and 5 core themes as shown in Table 2.

Theme 1: Conscious knowledge

According to the data, conscious knowledge is one of the most important components of effective parenting. This theme was subdivided into 5 subthemes: 1) Knowing oneself, the child, and the needs, 2) Awareness of the complex nature of parenting, 3) Adopting parenting styles fitting the child's age and personality, 4) Parent's self-promotion of parenting practices, and 5) Parents' maturity in raising the children.

The participants pointed out that successful parents have a conscious knowledge of themselves and their children's needs in raising children. These parents can identify the needs of their children with the knowledge they gain from themselves and have a suitable response to their children's demands. Thus, in raising their children, they use parenting practices fitting children's developmental periods. These practices make them successful in raising their children. One of the participants said, *"In my opinion, parents should know themselves first. In the next step, they should know what their child wants, and then they must know their children"* (Participant 2).

Successful parents acquire the knowledge and awareness required for raising children. They have also the necessary abilities and skills for raising children and resolving problems and challenges they face. One of the participants stated, *"Successful parents know that parenting is a challenging and sometimes difficult task. I think this is part of what parents know. In other words, if you are told that this path you are going is easy and then you face difficulties, you will get disappointed"* (Participant 7).

The findings of this study also showed that parents' self-promotion of parenting practices involves parents' responsibility for children, parents' self-regulation, parent attention to self-promotion and self-growth, parents'

focus on their behaviors, training parents in the first parenting step, the significance of parents' mental health in raising children, and parents' self-care. Successful parents try to receive some training in the first step and acquire the skills necessary for raising children by studying and participating in various parenting courses before having children. In the next step, they use their learned skills in raising children. One of the participants said, *"In my opinion, the first step or the root of parenting education is ourselves. I mean if we want to raise a child, we must first be trained ourselves. Because there is nothing like the proverb 'Actions speak louder than words' to describe parenting, which means that our children will follow us as role models"* (Participant 5).

Parents' maturity in raising children was found as an organizing theme in this study. Accordingly, successful parents are responsible and law-abiding people who had tried to develop these constructive and positive qualities in themselves and serve as role models in raising children. One of the participants stated, *"Successful parents are first of all responsible, law-abiding, and logical people, and they do not have anxiety before doing anything. Also, to have a successful parenting style, they must resolve the conflicts that exist between them"* (Participant 4).

Theme 2: Cohesion and intimacy in marital relationship

The second main theme extracted in this study was the cohesion and intimacy in marital relationship. This theme was subdivided into emotional relationships and marital intimacy between the parents, marital stability and determination, and collaborative parenting. When parents try to raise children with a strong emotional relationship and improve the quality of their marital relationship, it will create a sense of security in the family for both the couple and the children. According to one of the participants, *"Successful parents spend quality time with their children because it contributes to developing attachment and attachment is the solution to all problems. If the attachment is well formed in my child, it will protect my child from many future problems that I worry he will face. Attachment is formed with quality time spent with the child"* (Participant 6).

Table 2. The main themes, secondary themes, and subthemes identified in the study

Main themes	Secondary themes	Subthemes
Conscious knowledge	Knowing oneself, the child, and the needs	Conscious child-rearing practices, parent's self-knowledge, parents' awareness of child-rearing principles, parents' awareness of their children's demands, a sound understanding of children, parents' conscious knowledge of themselves and their demands, parents' conscious knowledge of children in different developmental periods
	Awareness of the complex nature of parenting	The multi-dimensionality of parenting, an awareness of the difficulties of parenting, parents' awareness of parenting fatigue and frustration
	Adopting parenting styles fitting the child's age and personality	Adopting effective parenting styles that fit the child's age and conditions
	Parent's self-promotion of parenting practices	Parents' responsibility for children, parents' self-regulation, parent's attention to self-promotion and self-growth, parents' focus on their behaviors, training parents in the first parenting step, the significance of parents' mental health in raising children, parents' self-care
	Parents' maturity in raising the children	Parents' responsibility, law-abiding, and reasonableness
Cohesion and intimacy in marital relationship	Emotional relationships and marital intimacy between the parents	Having secure attachment, parents' efforts to improve the quality of the marital relationship, the children feeling secure in the family atmosphere, having emotional intimacy with the partner
	Marital stability and determination	Parental stability and determination in parenting duties, successful parents' discipline in parenting practices, marital stability in emotional relationships and parenting practices
	Collaborative parenting	Collaborative parenting practices used by successful parents, expecting the children to be cooperative, parents' dialogue about parenting practices, agreement and unity between parents about child rearing, agreement and collaboration between parents about child rearing
Scientific application of direct and indirect parenting practices	Establishing effective communication	Having respectful relationships with the child, having effective relationships with the child, paying positive attention to the child, transferring a sense of self-worth to the child, receiving attention and reward after doing a correct behavior, admiring and praising the children, parents' respect for the decisions made by children
	Solution-oriented parenting	Questioning the child about their misbehavior, role modeling parents' practices, the need for inspecting the reasons for children's misbehavior, discovering the reasons for the child's incompatibility and aggression, the use of solution-oriented parenting practices by successful parents
	The use of scientific and professional resources	Parents seeking advice from counselors to raise their children
	Indirect and observational education	Children role modeling their parents' behaviors, observing parents' behaviors to role model them
	Direct education	Educating children to express their emotions, teaching children to have a sense of responsibility, teaching children the right to choose, teaching children about restrictions in life
A structured family	Clarifying family members' duties	Parents differentiating between the children's and their duties, parents not doing the children's duties, leaving the functions of family members to themselves
	Specifying and imposing parenting restrictions	Parents setting restrictions and notifying them to the children, parents' flexibility in imposing reasonable restrictions on effective parenting practices, children's awareness of family restrictions, successful parents' awareness of family restrictions, the morality of parenting restrictions, successful parents' flexibility in parenting practices
	Setting and imposing parenting rules	Expressing family rules in kind and gentle language, compliance with principles and rules in effective parenting, having clear parenting rules, making children aware of family rules, not engaging in power struggles with children, parents refraining from involving their unresolved issues in child-rearing, compliance with family rules by parents and children
	Parenting based on behavioral outcomes	Parenting based on behavioral outcomes, raising happy, thoughtful, and responsible children
Creating a context for growth and availability	Having quality time for raising children	Parents' kindness and availability to children, parents setting enough time for children, spending enough time with children, spending time and being accountable to children
	Creating a suitable context for the child's growth	Paving the way for the child's growth, providing the necessary conditions for the actualization of children's abilities, responding to the needs of the child and paving the way for their growth, providing a context for the development of the child's talents, responding uniquely to the conditions of the parent and the child, actualizing the latent talents of the child

The marital stability of couples in life is one of the important factors in stable families. It is also considered an effective factor in raising successful children. One of the participants said, *“Another important rule in parenting is to be consistent and decisive. A parent who specifies a limit and does not fulfill it when it is violated is not decisive. Children learn to do correct behaviors by observing the rules that are important to the parents. Thus, being decisive along with some degrees of flexibility can be helpful and effective in raising a child”* (Participant 9).

Theme 3: Scientific application of direct and indirect parenting practices

The third main theme extracted in this study was the scientific application of direct and indirect parenting practices, which addressed establishing effective communication, solution-oriented parenting, the use of scientific and professional resources, indirect and observational education, and direct education. Given the increasing problems faced by parents in raising

their children, there is a growing need for the scientific application of educational methods for raising healthy children because scientific and practical training for parents who are about to have children can prevent wrong educational methods in raising children and prepare parents for raising children without many problems. Parents who can communicate well with their children are successful in their interactions with their children. This effective communication helps them resolve conflicts and respect each other's choices through effective dialogue even if there are conflicts in their interactions with each other. One of the participants said, *"Successful parents are looking for reasons for their children's incompatibility, misbehavior, and aggression. Many times, successful parents notice their child is behaving badly because he/she needs attention and wants more attention"* (Participant 8).

According to psychological theories, observational learning is one of the important factors for children to model their parent's behavior, which plays an important role in raising children. One of the participants stated, *"In effective parenting, when children observe parents are disciplined in their work and they live according to certain rules, they can be good behavioral models for raising children. Therefore, observational education can be an unspoken part of raising a child. This is a part of education, as mentioned in various theories. God also says in the Qur'an, 'Invite people with your actions'"* (Participant 1). Another participant said, *"Successful parents praise their children when they do something new and positive so that the new behavior is established in them and they learn and consider that behavior as part of their responsibilities"* (Participant 2). The participants pointed to the use of scientific and specialized resources as one of the effective factors in raising children. For example, successful parents seek advice from counselors for raising children. One of the participants stated, *"There are cases where parents have problems with each other, and the important point is that these types of parents do not raise their issues in front of their children and talk about that issue in private. If they can reach an agreement to solve it, so much the better. Otherwise, they seek advice from counselors"* (Participant 3).

Theme 4: A structured family

The fourth main theme extracted in this study was the structured family, which involves clarifying family members' duties, specifying and imposing parenting restrictions, setting and imposing parenting rules, and parenting based on behavioral outcomes. The family, like any other group, has a relatively stable structure that governs the whole family and determines the role of each person. Therefore, in families with specific rules and structures, each family member is aware of their duties in the family. Thus, parents tend to consider certain educational rules in raising their children, which can

make them successful in parenting matters. Furthermore, God has clarified this issue in the Qur'an by explaining the structure of the family in the best situation. Thus, using this model, the structure of the family can be improved in various situations, including worldly life and future stages. One of the participants stated, *"We tend to take on too much role and assume the child is clumsy, and we give this message to the child that this is his/her parent's job. Even in extreme cases, the child blackmails the parents for doing his/her school assignments. This is the result of not learning responsibility and not distinguishing between the duties of the child and the parent"* (Participant 8). Adopting and imposing restrictions was an organizing theme identified in this study. Accordingly, specifying and imposing restrictions and rules is one of the effective parenting behaviors. A participant said, *"Successful parents know that life has restrictions. Anyone who drives fast will be fined, and anyone who does not study will not be admitted to the university. Therefore, children should be educated in such a way that they know that they can prepare for life in the larger society right now in the family"* (Participant 7). Another participant said, *"Successful parents try to be more careful in their family relationships. They avoid heated arguments in the presence of their children. They have rules for their relationship, they don't use physical violence, and they don't insult each other. They solve their unsolved problems by themselves. Thus, a set of those stable and acceptable behaviors of parents makes the children be educated"* (Participant 4). Education based on behavioral outcomes was identified as an organizing theme in this study that included the sub-themes of raising children based on behavioral outcomes and raising happy, thoughtful, and responsible children. One of the participants said, *"Sometimes they say that the child should be punished, but it is better if the children see the consequences of their behavior, they will better understand what was wrong with their behavior. When successful parents see that their child was supposed to do his/her homework and did not do it, they probably confront their child with the consequences of his/her work instead of engaging in strict behavior"* (Participant 2).

Theme 5: Creating a context for growth and availability

The fifth main theme extracted in this study was creating a context for growth and availability. This theme included having quality time for raising children and creating a suitable context for the child's growth. Responsiveness means being in tune with the child's feelings, needs, and concerns. If parents can show the necessary enthusiasm to their child, they provide the child with a sense of security and support. Hence, one of the factors effective in raising successful children is the responsiveness of parents to their children. Moreover, successful parents make the most of this important factor in their parenting practices.

Spending quality time and positive interaction with

children is another behavior of successful parents. Participant 6 said, *“Good parents are parents who give time to their children, and occupational issues and work difficulties should not prevent us from spending time for our children, but we must create big psychological and protective walls for our children to have hope that they can use different skills in different situations and transfer those skills to their children so that our children can engage in a healthy, positive, and progressive behavior”*. Successful parents provide a context so that their children can demonstrate their talents and abilities. One of the participants suggested, *“Parents should know and respond to the different needs of their children. Therefore, in addition to not creating barriers, providing the ground for the development of the child’s talents is also an important issue”* (Participant 5).

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the components of effective parenting using the content analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (15). The analysis of the participants’ experiences revealed that 5 main themes including conscious knowledge, cohesion and intimacy in marital relationship, scientific application of direct and indirect parenting practices, a structured family, and creating a context for growth and availability can contribute to effective parenting.

The results of this study indicated that conscious awareness plays a significant role in effective parenting. Systematic training for effective parenting (STEP) emphasizes improving the interactions between children and parents, recognizing the goals of parents’ misbehavior, and knowing themselves and the child within the context of the family (16). Therefore, the results of this study were consistent with the STEP goals and previous studies in the literature (4,18). Following the findings of this study, conscious knowledge was one of the main themes highlighted by family counseling specialists. The data showed that successful parents are aware of the nature of parenting and improve their parenting skills. These parents use parenting methods that fit the child’s growth in different stages. These parents know their children and their own needs. Thus, they use effective parenting practices that fit their children’s growth in different periods and as a result, they are successful in raising their children. They also acquire the knowledge necessary for child-rearing. Therefore, they can cope with the problems they face. Another theme identified in this study was parents’ self-promotion in raising children. This is to argue that successful parents try to receive some training in the first step and acquire the skills necessary for raising children by studying and participating in various parenting courses before having children. In the next step, they use their learned skills in raising children.

The results of this study indicated that marital cohesion

and intimacy are the outcomes of strong emotional relationships, the existence of stable security in family relationships, and secure attachment for children. These factors play an influential role in the parenting styles of successful parents as indicated in previous studies (5,19,20). According to specialists, collaborative parenting and friendly relationship between parents and children are important parenting factors. Parents with a strong emotional relationship who try to improve the quality of their marital relationship can create a sense of security in themselves and also the children in the family. Marital stability in life is one of the important factors in stable families, which is considered an effective factor in raising successful children.

The results of this study highlighted the conscious use of scientific methods by successful parents for raising children as shown in other studies (11,5,21). Establishing effective communication makes parents resolve any conflicts in their interactions with each other through effective dialogue and respect for each other’s choices. Indirect and observational training was another important point mentioned by the participants. Observational learning, as highlighted in psychological theories, is one of the important factors for children to model their parents’ behavior. Observational learning also plays an important role in raising children. These parents can teach their children skills such as responsibility, expressing feelings, and making effective choices, which help them raise successful children. Successful parents also seek advice and help from experts in the field of child education whenever it is necessary for raising their children.

The findings of this study indicated that the family, like any other group, has a relatively stable structure that governs the whole family and determines the role of each individual. The structure of the family in his structural theory and suggested that the family, like all adapting organisms, needs some kind of internal organization to tell them how, when, and with whom to communicate (22). The interactive model resulting from this organization forms the family structure, which organizes the way family members interact with each other. In families with specific rules and structures, each family member is aware of their duties in the family. Moreover, parents in these families consider certain training rules in raising their children. The findings of this study were consistent with Minuchin’s structural theory and the results reported in other studies (19,20,23). By explaining the structure of the family in the best situation in the Qur’an, God has made it clear that with this model, the structure of the family can be improved in various situations, including worldly life and future stages. The participants in the study pointed to the structured family as an important factor in raising children. In structured families, the duties of the family members are defined

and each member knows exactly what they have to do and they accept the responsibility of their duties. In these families, members are aware of the restrictions imposed and parents are flexible in raising their children. Thus, in raising their children, they act based on the behavioral consequences of their children. According to the findings of the present study, a structured family is considered one of the important components of effective parenting.

The data in this study indicated that creating a context for growth and availability is one of the components of effective parenting. If parents can show the necessary enthusiasm to their children, they can provide a sense of security and support for their children as evident in similar studies (11,19). As a result, successful parents make the most of this important factor in their parenting practices. These parents reserve enough time for their children. They also are accountable for raising their children. Therefore, in addition to having enough time for their children, these parents also pave the way for the development of their children's talents.

One of the limitations of the present study was that the research population was restricted to family counseling specialists in Ahvaz. Thus, caution must be exercised when generalizing the results to other communities. Furthermore, as the findings of this study reflect the opinions of family counseling specialists, these findings can be used as topics in family education in the field of child-rearing. The results of this study can also be used by family counselors and psychologists for promoting effective parenting in psychological services and counseling centers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed parenting is a continuous and conscious process and requires patience. The family counseling specialists participating in this study believed marital intimacy is one of the facilitating factors in successful parenting, and couples should create an appropriate family environment to be able to raise healthy children. In such a healthy environment, educational strategies in different forms should also be used. Family and school counselors can use the findings of this study to help parents create a successful family environment following satisfying parenting styles.

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Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: Habib Jokar, Zabihollah Abbaspour.

Data curation: Habib Jokar, Zabihollah Abbaspour.

Formal analysis: Habib Jokar, Zabihollah Abbaspour.

Funding acquisition: Habib Jokar, Zabihollah Abbaspour, Reza Khojasteh Mehr.

Investigation: Habib Jokar.

Methodology: Habib Jokar, Zabihollah Abbaspour, Reza Khojasteh

Mehr.

Project administration: Habib Jokar.

Resources: Habib Jokar.

Software: Habib Jokar.

Supervision: Zabihollah Abbaspour.

Validation: Reza Khojasteh Mehr.

Visualization: Habib Jokar, Zabihollah Abbaspour.

Writing—original draft: Habib Jokar, Zabihollah Abbaspour.

Writing—review & editing: Zabihollah Abbaspour.

Competing Interests

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Ethical Approval

This article reports the results of a master's thesis in family counseling approved with the code of ethics at EE/1400.2.24.37347/Scu.ac.ir by the Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz.

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