

# Topics and Effects of Iranian Mothers' Disclosure to Their Children: A Phenomenological Analysis

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## Abstract

**Background:** Parental disclosure is a phenomenon that occurs in families to a greater or lesser extent and has different effects on children and family relationships. Some parents do not know what topics are appropriate for disclosure and what the consequences may be. Therefore, the objective of the present study was to investigate the phenomenology of Iranian mothers' disclosure, its topics, and the experienced consequences.

**Methods:** In this qualitative study based on the descriptive phenomenological method, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 22 first-marriage mothers who had disclosure experience and at least one 10- to 30-year-old child. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method.

**Results:** Analysis of data revealed five main themes and 12 subthemes, including inappropriate disclosure topics (personal problems, problems with spouse), appropriate topics (positive or neutral comments about the spouse, financial problems, neutral and pleasant experiences, goals and viewpoints), contextual topics (negative comments about herself, communication problems with others, unpleasant experiences), positive consequences of disclosure (raising children's awareness, improving the parent-child relationship quality), and negative consequences (undermining the parent-child relationship quality, creating negative emotions and thoughts in children). Mothers disclosed more frequently and about more diverse subjects to their children than their husbands.

**Conclusion:** In general, the effects of mothers' disclosure on children are different and depend on its content, and these effects are greater on adolescents. Family therapists, parent educators, and others who work with families can help mothers carefully evaluate their disclosures to establish clear and healthy communication boundaries with their children.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Self-disclosure, Mother-child interaction, Financial disclosure, Parenting

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## Introduction

The behavior and speech of parents, especially the information they share with their children play a critical role in the development of behavioral problems, children's mental health, and their adaptation to various issues (1). As Bowen pointed out, the emotional interdependence of family members is a key mechanism through which family members transmit anxiety to each other (2). One of these transmission tools is disclosure. Parental disclosure refers to those verbal and non-verbal messages of one parent or both that transmit personal, private, and unknown information about them to their children (1). So far, the phenomenon of disclosure and its effects among adults (3), siblings (4), and friends (5) and also adolescents' disclosure to their parents (6) have been well studied, and its positive effects on people's relationships and health have been confirmed, but few studies have been conducted on parental disclosure to children (7). The topics that parents may disclose to

their children include subjects related to their divorce (8), dating, disagreements over how to co-parent, daily activities, positive or negative comments about their spouse (7), their spouse's life (9), financial concerns (10), and spiritual disclosure (11).

Parents' messages about personal issues can both help children cope with family-related stress and increase their stress levels (2). For instance, some studies show that parental disclosure is beneficial when it helps children understand events such as divorce or remarriage in the family (12). In contrast, other studies have shown that if parents' disclosure is too much and contains negative and inappropriate information for the child's age (e.g., negative comments about the spouse), such disclosure will harm children's mental health and parent-child relationships (13). Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory, a framework for understanding parental disclosure, states that children become co-owners of information when parents disclose personal information



to them. When expectations surrounding information ownership are unclear or not agreed on, boundary turbulence or conflict may occur (14). That is, when parents disclose negative information, children may feel that communication boundaries have been violated and may report feelings of pain, frustration, or unnecessary worry as a result (15).

According to CPM theory, parental disclosure and its effects are influenced by factors such as gender and marital status of parents and the child's age. For instance, mothers are more likely than fathers to disclose problems to their children (9). About the child's age, previous studies have found that the destructive effects of inappropriate parental disclosure on younger children are greater than on older children (13). Considering that most of the studies on parental disclosures have sampled adolescents (9), for further investigation, different age groups of children (from childhood to youth) were included in the present study. Due to the severity of divorce-related stressors in a divorced family compared to a non-divorced family (16), divorced parents typically admit that they need to discuss the divorce with their children, and children's perception of these disclosures is more negative (15). Therefore, we sought to study maternal disclosure in non-divorced families.

Cultural differences play a critical role in individuals' decisions about whether to keep something to themselves or to reveal it (17). For example, considering the religious and cultural values of Iran, it is not acceptable to talk about parents' sexual behaviors and relationships with children (18), whereas divorced fathers living in the midwestern United States perceived disclosing such information to children to be generally beneficial and reasonable (7). Thus, due to the unique cultural and social context of Iran and since no study in this field has been done in the country so far, it is important to investigate parental disclosure in the context of Iran. Disclosure is an important part of interpersonal relationships. In past research in the country, this process and its function in marital performance have been studied more among couples, and the results have shown that disclosure is an important variable in creating marital satisfaction (319). Because of the different nature of intimacy in couple relationships compared to parent-child relationships, the function of disclosure between parents and children is different. Therefore, it seems necessary to further investigate this phenomenon in the context of parent-child communication.

Most of the existing studies in this field are quantitative and only one qualitative study about divorced fathers' disclosure has been conducted by Kang and Ganong (7). In this study, the data obtained through in-depth interviews with about 20 divorced fathers with children aged between 10 and 18 years showed that they considered disclosing information about daily activities, positive comments

about their spouse, the spouse's life, and financial issues appropriate, and negative comments about their spouse, disagreement over co-parenting, personal concerns, and sexual relationships as inappropriate disclosure.

The mother-child relationship is the most fundamental relationship for the child (20), and mothers spend more time communicating with their children. This warrants a further focus on mothers (21). Although this study focused on maternal disclosure to children, it also had a brief look at mothers' observations of their spouses' disclosures to their children. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine mothers' experience of disclosures to their children and answer the main question, «How were these mothers' experiences of disclosures to children?»

## Methods

Parental disclosure, despite its importance, has not yet been sufficiently clarified from the perspective of the parent doing it; therefore, the qualitative method has been followed in this study. Our qualitative approach had a descriptive phenomenological strategy, a strategy that has greatly contributed to the science of psychology for the understanding of the human world (22). Phenomenology is a way of thinking about knowledge – a philosophical and theoretical viewpoint. Phenomenology provides a theoretical guideline to researchers to study human phenomena at a deeper level of consciousness and to understand it at the level of subjective reality (23).

The participants were Iranian mothers who lived in Tehran in 2020 and 2021. They were recruited in a targeted manner by snowball sampling method through advertising in cyberspace (such as WhatsApp and Instagram) and via word of mouth among the female staff of Farhangian University of Tehran. To participate in this study, individuals had to have criteria such as willingness to participate, not having experienced divorce and being in the first marriage, and having at least one child between 10 and 30 years of age. The child's minimum age was 10 because parents are more likely to disclose to older children than younger children (24). The mothers ranged from 36 to 50 years of age (mean = 39), and their number of children ranged from 2 to 4. Fourteen mothers had children of both sexes. Their lowest educational degree was high school, and the highest was master's degree.

Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews, along with follow-up questions. The interviews were conducted following coronavirus guidelines, lasted from 90 to 120 minutes, and were audio-recorded. After collecting demographic data, the interview questions started with the general and open-ended question, "Tell me about the kinds of topics you discuss with your children." Following this, follow-up questions were asked based on the responses of the participants to explore the phenomenon more deeply (e.g., "Can you explain more?", "Do you evaluate your disclosure as

appropriate?”, and “In response, what reaction have you seen in your child?”). The interviews continued until data saturation was achieved. All recorded files were accurately transcribed verbatim. Due to the nature of the present study, to analyze the data, the Colaizzi method was used. Important phrases were extracted from the obtained data and short descriptions of their hidden meanings were written after multiple reviews of the phrases. Then, these meaning units (codes) were classified according to conceptual similarity. Finally, the data were placed into main classes (themes), which were more general.

To ensure the accuracy and precision of the data, four criteria were used. Regarding the credibility criterion, strategies such as allocating sufficient time to data collection and establishing a professional relationship with the participants were used. Considering the criterion of dependability, the transcripts of the interviews were given to the researcher's colleagues for coding, and an agreement coefficient of over 85% was obtained. Concerning the confirmability criteria, being interested in the subject and trying to obtain the opinions of others were among the factors. Finally, in order to increase the transferability of the data, the participants were selected with the greatest variety in terms of demographic characteristics. The ethical issues observed in this study included obtaining informed consent from the participants, ensuring that the data remained confidential, using pseudonyms for the participants, and giving them the right to leave the study at any stage.

## Results

Based on the data analysis, 64 initial codes, 13 subthemes, and 5 main themes were identified. Some of the initial codes and all of the subthemes and main themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 lists nine subjects that mothers and their spouses disclosed to their children (subthemes). These topics include personal problems, problems with their spouse, problems with others, positive or neutral comments about their spouse, financial problems, neutral and pleasant experiences, unpleasant experiences, negative comments about themselves, and goals, plans, and viewpoints. Each of these topics is a collection of minor topics, some of which are listed in Table 1 as initial codes. Mothers believed that some of the issues should not have been disclosed to their children. This type is called inappropriate disclosure. Appropriate disclosure refers to those topics that may lead to positive consequences for the child and the whole family. We labeled information perceived to be appropriate by mothers only under certain conditions as contextual disclosures.

### **The first main theme: Inappropriate disclosure topics**

All mothers stated that they or their spouses had frequently disclosed to their children these inappropriate

topics (personal problems and problems with their spouse). According to the mothers, children (especially younger children and teenagers) are not cognitively able to understand some issues and they do not know the correct way to deal with them. For instance, participant 1 (2 and 10 y/o; numbers in parentheses are children's ages) stated, “*We never tell our daughter about job problems because there is nothing she can do about it. If we do so, she will become more anxious and worried.*” In addition, participant 2 (13 y/o) recalled, “*Unfortunately, my husband was being unfaithful, and I told my son about it, he was very upset for a while and became very pessimistic about his father.*”

### **The second main theme: Appropriate disclosure topics**

From the mothers' view, what the parents tell their children about these topics (positive or neutral comments about their spouse, financial problems, neutral and pleasant experiences, and goals and viewpoints) will have positive consequences if it is said with the intention of informing the children and without hostility and negative views. For example, participant 3, (17, 14, and 4 y/o) noted, “*Until three years ago, my daughter did not know that my husband went to a good university and he was in the military, so I told her. I wanted to improve my daughter's opinion about her father.*” Participant 4 (19 and 8 y/o) mentioned, “*My oldest daughter had too many expectations. I told her how much daddy was paid, and that he couldn't cover all these expenses.*”

### **The third main theme: Condition-dependent disclosure topics**

Mothers believed that some issues are more challenging and such disclosures must be done with caution; various factors, including the situation, the parent's intention, and the child's mental capacity should be taken into account. These subjects included communication problems with others, unpleasant childhood experiences, and negative comments about themselves. For example, participant 5 (20, 12, and 7 y/o) stated, “*My husband told my son about our problem with a family member to change his mind about him. My son had to cut ties with that person to support his family. I don't think that my husband did the right thing in that situation. However, some of these issues can be discussed. For example, when I go shopping, and the shopkeeper mistreats me, I can talk about it to my daughter so that she learns how to communicate with others and does not make the same mistakes.*”

Positive and negative emotions that mothers experienced following their parents' disclosure in their childhood help them to decide what and how much to disclose to their children. The secondary findings of this study indicate that mothers had disclosed more to their children than their husbands did.

**Table 1.** The main themes and subthemes identified in this study

Main themes	Subthemes	Some of the initial codes
Inappropriate disclosure topics	Personal problems	Work problems; Physical and mental discomfort
	Problems with spouse	Complaints about the spouse's lack of emotional and financial support; Sexual relations with the spouse
Appropriate disclosure topics	Positive or neutral comments about the spouse	Clarify the spouse's behavior; The positive qualities of the spouse
	Financial problems	Financial problems; Financial regrets
	Neutral and pleasant experiences	Experiences of interaction with parents and siblings in childhood; Successful professional and academic experiences
Condition-dependent disclosure topics	Goals, plans, and viewpoints	Work and educational goals; Views on various issues including political and religious subjects
	Negative comments about herself	Her negative qualities; Daily mistakes and faults
	Communication problems with others	Problems with people outside the nuclear family such as friends; Problems with the other children
Positive consequences	Unpleasant experiences during life	Memories of being sexually abused in childhood; The experiences of academic and professional failure
	Raising children's awareness	Increase children's understanding of various issues including family finances and parental qualities; Increase the child's ability to make the correct decisions
Negative consequences	Improving the parent-child relationship quality	More intimate child-parent relations; Reciprocal disclosure by children to parents
	Undermining the parent-child relationship quality	Creating a pessimistic view in the child toward one or both parents; Entering an alliance with one of the parents
	Creating negative emotions and thoughts in children	Negative emotions such as helplessness and worry in children; Involving children in subjects which are not under their control

#### **The fourth main theme: Positive consequences of disclosure**

One of the most important points that mothers mentioned was the effects of disclosure on children and family relationships. Mothers noted the benefits of appropriate disclosure. These effects include raising children's understanding of parents and the environment and improving the quality of parent-child relationships. Some of the related statements are as follows:

*"Sometimes I tell my older son about the problems that I have with my little son. I ask for help. By doing so, I make him feel that he is an important and influential person and others can count on him."* Participant 6 (22 and 14 y/o)

*"It would have been better if I had told my daughter about my daily life because she, in return, would have told me what happened in her life more easily. In addition, I could have trained her better and she would have accepted me more. In fact, I feel that there is not an intimate relationship between my daughter and me. This is exactly the repetition of my childhood experience; my mother did not talk to me much either."* participant 7 (30 y/o).

#### **The fifth main theme: Negative consequences of disclosure**

Mothers also believed that some disclosures would lead to negative consequences, including negative feelings in children (such as anxiety and insecurity) and weakening the parent-child relationship. Participant 8 (32 and 25 y/o) said, *"My husband and I do not agree on the principles of parenting, and unfortunately, we express these conflicts in front of the children. It causes children to consider one of us*

*good and supportive and the other one non-supportive and cooperate with the supportive parent against the other."*

#### **Discussion**

Considering the existing literature and the findings of this study, it can be seen that except for the issues related to divorce, other subjects mentioned by mothers are the same as those discussed by divorced parents in previous studies. Between both divorced and non-divorced parents, a relatively high level of disclosure in various subjects and different levels of privacy (from professional goals to romantic relations) is common (25). According to the definition of parental disclosure (21), it seems that the mothers considered the mentioned issues as private and unknown to their children and considered talking about them to their children as disclosure. Therefore, the marital status of the parents did not affect the disclosure topics.

The topics evaluated as inappropriate by mothers are consistent with the evaluation of divorced fathers in Kang and Ganong (7). However, the mothers considered disclosure about parents' sexual relationships as inappropriate for children of all ages, but the participants in previous studies (7,9) considered them inappropriate only for young children (i.e., primary school children). This may be a consequence of cultural differences in different countries, including Iran. Talking about sexual issues is a taboo subject in Iran. As CPM theory informs, cultural values influence individuals' judgments about what is considered a private matter and how these topics are managed. Having privacy and maintaining it is more

important in some cultures (for example in the UK) than in other cultures (14).

Contrary to the findings of Kang et al (9) regarding the participants' negative evaluation of father disclosures about financial issues, the mothers of the current study found it appropriate to talk to their children about financial problems. One of the reasons for this different opinion may be the unfavorable economic conditions in Iran. Sharing information about the real financial situation with children can help them understand family finances and help manage the family's financial resources. Another reason is the gender stereotypes about parenting behavior. Traditional norms about fathering and masculinity imply that fathers should be primarily responsible for financial matters (26). This gender norm might have led participants in previous studies to evaluate paternal disclosures about financial issues more negatively than maternal disclosures in the same context. According to mothers, expressing some issues (e.g., unpleasant experiences and negative comments about herself) should be done after considering various factors such as the parent's intention, the child's mental capacity, and the amount of information. Thus, as the CPM theory states, some factors, including the age of the child, can affect parental disclosure. The mothers did not know exactly whether their children were mentally ready to receive this information and how to share it with them. Considering these two issues, perhaps using the professional assistance of family specialists is more beneficial to parents and children.

Another main theme was the consequences of parental disclosure to children. The mothers referred to the negative consequences such as the weakening of parent-child relationships and creating negative emotions and thoughts in children. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies confirming that inappropriate disclosure (e.g., negative comments about the spouse) is accompanied by the weakening of children's physical and mental health and their psychological well-being (24) and behavioral problems such as drug abuse (27). It can be said that mothers disparaging their husbands or forcing children to act as messengers between parents may be associated with children's psychological distress symptoms because such talk sets the stage for possible triangulation within the family. One triangulation mechanism is characterized by a parent pressuring a child to side with them against the other. Such disclosure would certainly be viewed as a violation of generational boundaries by structural family systems scholars (28). Based on the child's response, this can lead to one of the following patterns: the child's alliance with one parent and active anger towards or separation from the other parent, withdrawal from both parents, and feeling trapped between parents (24).

According to social penetration theory (29), people have

different layers (like an onion), with layers representing the surface to the depth of a person's personality. In an equal-level relationship (e.g., a couple's relationship), the level of intimacy moves from the surface layers to the inner and deep layers; couples talk about deeper issues over time. If people engage in a lot of disclosure in the early stages of a relationship, it may lead to the termination of the relationship (30). Accordingly, parents' excessive disclosure in the parent-child relationship, which is more superficial in terms of intimacy level than the marital relationship, will lead to a weak parent-child relationship.

Mothers believed that the negative effects of inappropriate disclosure on their adolescent children were greater. This finding is consistent with those of Afifi and McManus (31). This negative impact may be because adolescents have a greater understanding of what they are told than younger children, but because of their emotional and cognitive immaturity and low level of autonomy in dealing with their parents, they are not ready to adapt to what they have been told, and they cannot be a listener and counselor for their parents (9).

Similar to the fathers participating in Kang and Ganong's study (7), the mothers pointed out the positive effects of some parental disclosure, which have been less mentioned in previous studies. Mothers believed that appropriate parental disclosure could lead to raising the children's awareness and improving the quality of parent-child relationships. Golish and Caughlin (32) found that parental disclosure can lead to reciprocal disclosure in children, especially during adolescence, because children's disclosure to parents decreases during adolescence. Some parents believe that appropriate disclosure is a way for parents to communicate with children and leads to a closer and more intimate relationship. It also helps children to learn more about themselves, their parents, and the rules and values of the family (25). Given that college students' and their parents' lives are still quite intertwined (e.g., they are still largely financially dependent upon their parents), they need to know at least some aspects of their parents' lives. Adolescents in some previous studies considered their parents' disclosure as one of their most enjoyable experiences (33). This shows that when parents appropriately disclose important issues, children feel important, useful, and equal to their parents. Furthermore, this strategy of openness to the concerns of others becomes a model for increasing the ability of understanding and acceptance throughout family relationships (24).

Examining gender differences has shown that mothers reveal more diverse topics to their children than their husbands. This finding is consistent with those of Kang et al (9). Women tend to talk more about their feelings, while men tend to talk less about their issues. This may be because men are more incapable of expressing themselves than women. Results from numerous studies have

indicated that women are more emotionally expressive than men (34). Thus, women are more likely to express themselves in a relationship.

This research study, like any other qualitative study, was not without limitations. First, although in qualitative research the researcher does not seek to generalize the findings to the larger population, the selection of samples with more diverse demographic characteristics and different cultural and ethnic contexts would have resulted in more consistent data. Second, mothers may not have recalled all of their experiences or may have omitted parts of them intentionally. In addition, examining the phenomenon of parental disclosure from the perspective of children by in-depth interviews can help to further explore the consequences of parental disclosure. Undoubtedly, increasing parents' knowledge in this area will lead to improvements in parent-child relationships. Moreover, based on the findings, therapists and professionals can provide the parents with training when they violate the disclosure rules.

### Conclusion

The results of the present study showed that the phenomenon of parental disclosure is very complex and has various dimensions and significant individual and interpersonal consequences. To evaluate its appropriateness, we should pay attention to several questions, such as what parents' disclosure is about, whether the content is suited to the child's age and developmental capacity, and other dimensions that may be discovered and highlighted in future studies. As parents do not have access to an experimental and sufficient guidance model for disclosing appropriately to their children, these findings can help family specialists design such a model for developing the appropriate content of self-disclosure to children.

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### Authors' Contribution

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### Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Approval

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