



*Research paper*

## **The Relationship of Maternal Traumatic Childhood Experiences and Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems: The mediating Role of Reflective Functioning**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of maternal reflective functioning mediators in association with the mother's traumatic childhood experiences and their children's emotional and behavioral problems. The research method was descriptive correlational. The sample size consisted of 320 mothers who visited secured houses in Tehran, completed Paternal Reflective Functioning Questionnaire, Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and Child Behavioral Check List. The data were analyzed by path analysis test. The results showed that traumatic childhood experiences predicted low reflective functioning, traumatic childhood experiences and low reflective functioning of mothers have a significant positive relationship with emotional and behavioral problems in their children. These findings indicated that reflective functioning played a mediating role in the relationship between traumatic childhood experience and children's behavioral problems. According to the findings, it is recommended to hold workshops in order to deal with mothers' traumatic experiences.

**Keywords:** Emotional and behavioral problem, reflective functioning, traumatic childhood experiences

### **Introduction**

Emotional and behavioral problems are common psychological problems in children. These problems are divided into two groups: internalizing and externalizing disorders (Ogundele, 2018). One of the most important risk factors for behavioral problems is negative parent-child interactions, which the role of mother is very necessary and if it is negative, the probability of traumatic experiences in childhood and the occurrence of mental disorders is higher (Witges, et al., 2019). Traumatic experiences may change the capacity of parents to Reflective Functioning (Jones, et al., 2018). Reflective Functioning means the capacity of a person to understand her own behavior and others, which is a vital capacity to have effective social relations in humans (Krink, et al., 2018). Also, if the mother has a limited action to recognize and respond to the child's initial emotional signs, their child is more exposed to behavioral and emotional problems during their life (Ordway, et al., 2014). Based on what was said, emotional and behavioral problems are very essential because they can predict many problems in adulthood (Cui, et al., 2019). Therefore, investigating the influential and mediating variables in this field can be of great help in preventing and the treatment of children's emotional and behavioral problems. Therefore, the present study investigated this overall hypothesis: The reflective functioning of the mother plays a mediating role in the relationship between the mother's traumatic childhood experiences and the child's behavioral and emotional problems.

## Method

The present study method was descriptive-correlation. The statistical population consisted of mothers with children aged 6 to 18 who visited to secured houses in Tehran in 2021. Based on the voluntary sampling method, 320 questionnaires were randomly distributed among mothers in three secured houses in Tehran. After removing 14 distorted questionnaires from the statistical analysis, 306 participants formed the research sample and completed research tools. The Data were analyzed by path analysis test.

## Tools

**Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL):** The CBCL by 113 items with 8 factors, was developed by Achenbach, et al. (2001), reported internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha ranging 0.66 to 0.95. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.93 for total score.

**Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ):** The CTQ by 25 items with 5 scales was developed by Bernstein, et al. (2003), reported the internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha ranging 0.81 to 0.94 for subscales and 0.85 for total score. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.95 for total score.

**Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ):** The PRFQ with 18 items and its three parts including; the state of pre-mentalization, certainty about the state of mind and interest and curiosity, was developed by Luyten, et al. (2017). Cronbach's alpha ranging for these three sections have been reported respectively 0.83, 0.82 and 0.69. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.82, 0.77, and 0.89 for the above subscales.

## Results

The mean and standard deviation of the variables of children's behavioral problems, traumatic childhood experiences and mothers' reflective functioning are shown in Table 1. The results of Table 1 show that there is a significant positive relationship between traumatic childhood experiences with children's behavioral problems and pre-mentalization of mothers' reflective functioning, and there is a significant positive relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and confidence and interest in mothers' reflective functioning. In addition, the pre-mentalization subscale has a significant positive relationship with the child's behavioral problems, also the confidence and interest subscales have a significant negative relationship with the child's behavioral problems.

**Table 1: Mean, standard deviation and correlation coefficients of research variables**

| Variables                       | M     | SD    | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4     |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Child behavioral problems       | 41.06 | 23.51 | -      |        |        |       |
| Traumatic childhood experiences | 67.37 | 30.24 | *0.80  | -      |        |       |
| Pre-mentalization               | 7.67  | 9.86  | *0.81  | *0.75  | -      |       |
| confidence                      | 29.27 | 7.67  | *0.41- | *0.44- | *0.49- |       |
| interest                        | 31.87 | 8.66  | *0.53- | *0.53- | *0.63- | *0.82 |

\*= p<0.01

Based on the paths tested in Table 2, the direct effect of traumatic childhood experiences on children's behavioral problems is positive and negative on confidence and interest. Based on the results, the direct effect of the pre-subjective subscale on the child's behavioral problems is

positive and significant. But the direct effect of confidence and interest subscales on child's behavioral problems are not significant. In addition, the indirect effect of traumatic childhood experiences on the child's behavioral problems is significant through the reflective functioning of the mother. These findings show that the mother's reflective functioning plays a mediating role in the relationship between the mother's traumatic childhood experiences and the child's behavior problems.

**Table 2: Total, direct and indirect standard coefficients**

| <b>Routes</b>                          | <b>total effect</b> | <b>direct effect</b> | <b>indirect effect</b> | <b>Variance explained</b> |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>On pre mentalizing of</b>           |                     |                      |                        |                           |
| <b>Traumatic childhood experiences</b> | 0.75                | 0.75                 | -                      | 0.56                      |
| <b>On the assurance of</b>             |                     |                      |                        |                           |
| <b>Child behavioral problems</b>       | -0.44               | -0.44                | -                      | 0.20                      |
| <b>On the interest of</b>              |                     |                      |                        |                           |
| <b>Traumatic childhood experiences</b> | -0.53               | -0.53                | -                      | 0.28                      |
| <b>On child behavioral problems</b>    |                     |                      |                        |                           |
| <b>Traumatic childhood experiences</b> | 0.79                | 0.44                 | 0.35*                  | 0.73                      |
| <b>Pre-mentalization</b>               | 0.48                | 0.48                 | -                      |                           |
| <b>Assurance</b>                       | 0.05                | 0.05                 | -                      |                           |
| <b>Interest</b>                        | -0.04               | -0.04                | -                      |                           |

\*= p<0.001

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Mothers with traumatic childhood experiences are likely to suffer from various mental disorders such as mood disorders, anxiety disorders and alcohol addiction in adulthood. And this issue has a destructive effect on their parenting styles and reflective functioning. In fact, these mothers usually behave associated with boredom and lack of expressing verbal and non-verbal emotions when dealing with their children, and these cause the formation of insecure attachment and inefficient defense mechanisms in these mothers. Finally, these mothers fail to communicate and understand their children, and because of this, their children suffer from all kinds of emotional and behavioral problems. The use of self-reporting tools and cross-sectional survey limits the possibility of generalizing the results. Therefore, it is suggested that the causal explanation of the results can be made possible by organizing qualitative researches and longitudinal studies to test the relationships between research variables.

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## Conflicts of interest

Authors found no conflict of interest.



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