

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The effect of marital satisfaction and experiential avoidance on parental psychological flexibility among mothers of preschool children

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Abstract

Background: Decreased marital satisfaction among mothers with preschool children in China may increase their risk of reduced parental psychological flexibility. Enhancing maternal marital satisfaction could improve this flexibility, thereby promoting the development of physically and mentally healthier preschool children.

Objective: This study investigates the association between the marital satisfaction of preschoolers' mothers and their parental psychological flexibility, as well as the mediating role of maternal experiential avoidance.

Methods: A total of 335 Chinese mothers of preschoolers from three kindergartens participated in this study and completed the Chinese versions of the Olson Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire, the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (II), and the Parental Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire in January 2022.

Results: This study revealed that higher marital satisfaction of preschoolers' mothers was associated with greater parental psychological flexibility. Moreover, maternal experiential avoidance was found to mediate the relationship between marital satisfaction and parental psychological flexibility.

Conclusion: It is essential to explore effective strategies to enhance the marital satisfaction of preschoolers' mothers and reduce their experiential avoidance. For instance, support from the mother's family of origin and in-laws, as well as greater childcare involvement from the husband, may enhance maternal marital satisfaction. This, in turn, may reduce experiential avoidance and improve parental psychological flexibility, ultimately having a positive impact on parenting. In addition, mothers can reduce experiential avoidance through acceptance and commitment therapy and mindfulness practices.

Keywords: Maternal marital satisfaction; Experiential avoidance; Parental psychological flexibility; Preschoolers' mothers; Acceptance and commitment therapy

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1. Introduction

Parental psychological flexibility is the ability of parents to accept their own negative thoughts, emotions, and impulses toward their children during the parenting process while maintaining effective parenting behaviors.¹ Research has found that parental psychological flexibility is strongly associated with children's problem behaviors.² Compared to fathers, mothers are more likely to assume the role of primary caregiver in child-rearing, thus carrying greater parenting stress.³ A study conducted in China on mothers of preschoolers aged 4 to 6 years found that reduced parental psychological flexibility in mothers reinforces their experiences of parenting stress, which in turn transfers to parent-child interactions and is negatively associated with the mental health of preschoolers.⁴ Research has also shown that psychological problems in preschool children are likely to persist into later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.⁵ Therefore, an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing the parental psychological flexibility of mothers and the mechanisms through which these factors operate is important for family education and the psychological development of preschool children.

2. Marital satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is a subjective assessment of married couples' satisfaction with their marital relationship and is an important indicator of the quality and stability of marital life.⁶ According to family system theory, the family is a complete unit and system, with family members functioning as its components. The family system includes three subsystems: the couple, parent, and sibling subsystems. Researchers believe that the couple subsystem is the core of the family system and influences the functioning of the other subsystems.^{7,8}

Marital satisfaction is a key indicator of couple relationships within the couple subsystem and has a significant effect on the parenting of preschoolers in the parenting subsystem – the higher the marital satisfaction among mothers of preschoolers, the more positive their parenting style.⁹ Emotion socialization-based models suggest that marital satisfaction is associated with maternal emotional expressions within the family, which in turn are linked to parenting quality.¹⁰ Related studies in China have demonstrated that mothers of preschool children with higher marital satisfaction show more positive emotional expressions toward their children, whereas those with lower marital satisfaction show more negative emotional expressions.¹¹ In addition, mothers with low marital satisfaction are more likely to adopt ineffective parenting styles such as avoidance, neglect, and control when disciplining their children,¹² which are all manifestations

of reduced parental psychological flexibility.^{2,13} Therefore, marital satisfaction may be an important predictor of the parental psychological flexibility of preschoolers' mothers.

3. Experiential avoidance

In 1996, Hayes – the founder of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) – introduced the concept of experiential avoidance, which refers to people's attempts to change the form, frequency, or situational sensitivity of their internal experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions, somatic sensations), which may lead to actions that are inconsistent with personal values or goals.^{14,15} Experiential avoidance is an important indicator of psychological distress and behavioral ineffectiveness. The greater the experiential avoidance, the more likely one is to adopt rigid – rather than flexible and adaptive – responses and choices in the face of changing situations. This may reduce engagement with the present moment, increase distress, and decrease the likelihood of engaging in value-oriented behaviors.¹⁶

In the context of family systems, lower maternal marital satisfaction is associated with poorer mental health¹⁷ and greater experiential avoidance.¹⁸ In a study of mothers of Chinese preschoolers, it was found that lower experiential avoidance enabled mothers to recognize and effectively accept distressing emotions and thoughts that arose during parenting, actively resist avoidant and controlling attitudes, and demonstrate higher parental psychological flexibility.¹⁹

4. The current study

A woman is a wife, mother, and an independent individual in the context of marriage and family education. Marital satisfaction is an important indicator of a woman's mental state as a wife, parental psychological flexibility is a key indicator of her mental state as a mother, and experiential avoidance is an important indicator of her mental state as an independent individual. It is essential to explore how the psychological states associated with these three roles interact to improve the quality of family parenting.

No research has specifically examined the relationship between marital satisfaction and the parental psychological flexibility of preschoolers' mothers nor has it explored experiential avoidance as a potential mediator of this relationship. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of marital satisfaction among mothers of preschoolers on their parental psychological flexibility in three kindergartens in Shanxi Province and to analyze the mediating role of maternal experiential avoidance. In addition, this study aims to identify the factors and mechanisms that influence the parental psychological flexibility of mothers, which is critical for the development

of preschool children and provides a reference point for family education.

Three major research questions in this study are:

- (i) Are there any significant differences in scores for marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and parental psychological flexibility among mothers of preschoolers with different family structures?
- (ii) Is there an association between the marital satisfaction of mothers of preschoolers and their parental psychological flexibility?
- (iii) Does experiential avoidance in mothers of preschoolers mediate the association between their marital satisfaction and parental psychological flexibility?

5. Methods

5.1. Participants and procedures

This study was conducted in January 2022 at three kindergartens in China, whose principals agreed to participate. The principal of each kindergarten distributed the questionnaires, which included the Chinese versions of the Olson Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire, the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II, and the Parental Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire, including a self-compiled demographic characteristic questionnaire. The principals instructed teachers to place these materials into the children's school bags before the end of the school day.

At the same time, written informed consent was provided to participants through each classroom's parent WeChat group. Parents were asked to place the completed questionnaires in their child's bag and return them to the kindergarten within 2 days. A total of 407 questionnaires were distributed, and 390 were collected.

The self-compiled demographic characteristic questionnaire included the item "Are you a father or a mother?," allowing for identification of the respondent. A total of 55 questionnaires were excluded due to missing data, incomplete responses, uniform response patterns, divorced maternal marital status, or completion by the father. In total, 335 valid questionnaires completed independently by mothers were retained for analysis. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Marital satisfaction scale

The Chinese version of the Marital Satisfaction Sub-scale of the Olson Marital Quality Questionnaire²⁰ was employed to measure maternal marital satisfaction, as reported by the mothers. The questionnaire included items such as "I

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Item	Samples (n)
Mothers' age	
20 – 29	22
30 – 39	301
≥40	12
Mothers' education level	
Below undergraduate	148
Undergraduate	162
Master's degree and above	25
Family living structure	
Husband and wife only	265
Living with at least one elderly parent	70
One-child family	
Yes	179
No	156
Marital Status	
First marriage	329
Remarriage	6

don't like my spouse's personality and personal habits," "I am very satisfied with each spouse's responsibilities in the marriage," and "I am not satisfied that my spouse does not understand me regarding communication between spouses."

A total of 10 items were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (indeed) to 5 (indeed, this is not the case), with the second, fourth, sixth, seventh, and tenth items being reverse-scored. Higher total scores indicate higher marital satisfaction. Olson's large nationwide sample in the United States yielded a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.74, demonstrating good reliability and validity. Chinese researchers have shown that the questionnaire is suitable for use in the Chinese population.²¹ The Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale in the present study was 0.860.

5.2.2. Experiential avoidance scale

The 2nd edition of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire, developed by Bond *et al.*¹⁴ and revised by Cao *et al.*,²² was employed to measure maternal experiential avoidance, as reported by mothers. The questionnaire included items such as "Painful experiences make it difficult for me to live an ideal life," "Certain feelings scare me," and "I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings." There were seven items in total, scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always), with higher total scores representing higher experiential avoidance. The Cronbach's α coefficient for the original scale was 0.880,

indicating good reliability and validity.²² The Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale in the present study was 0.874.

5.2.3. Parental psychological flexibility scale

The Parental Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire, developed by Burke and Moore¹ and revised by Li *et al.*,²³ was used to measure maternal parental psychological flexibility, as reported by mothers. The questionnaire included items such as "My emotions prevent me from being the perfect father/mother I want to be," "Painful memories keep me from parenting my children the way I would like to," and "I can only show my child love and care when I am in a good mood."

There were 16 items in total, covering three dimensions: cognitive defusion, committed action, and acceptance. A 7-point scale was used, ranging from 1 (very much does not match) to 7 (very much matches). Items under cognitive defusion and committed action were reverse-scored, with higher scores on each dimension representing better performance. Higher total scores indicate higher parental psychological flexibility of mothers. The Cronbach's α coefficient for the original scale was 0.850, demonstrating good reliability and validity.²³ The Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale in the present study was 0.883.

5.4. Statistical methods

In this study, SPSSAU software (Version: web-based, developed by Beijing QingSi Technology Co., Ltd., China) was employed to analyze the data. All questionnaires were completed by mothers, and Harman's single-factor test was conducted to examine the presence of common method deviation and determine whether the data are suitable for analysis. In addition, an independent sample *t*-test was employed to compare differences in maternal marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and parental psychological flexibility across different family structure characteristics. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships among maternal marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and parental psychological flexibility. The non-parametric bootstrap method was used to test the mediating effect of maternal experiential avoidance on the relationship between maternal marital satisfaction and parental psychological flexibility.²⁴ A $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

6. Results

6.1. Common method deviation test

Harman's single-factor test was employed to examine the presence of common method deviation, as data for all variables were obtained from maternal reports. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test value is 0.90, and the Bartlett's

test of sphericity corresponds to a $p < 0.001$, indicating the data are suitable for factor analysis. An unrotated exploratory factor analysis of all entries demonstrates that the explanatory rate of the first common factor is 29.891%, which is below the critical threshold of 40%. Therefore, the data in this study are considered free of serious common method deviation.

6.2. Differences in scores on each scale among mothers across different family structure characteristics

The analysis of differences in scale scores among mothers across different family structure characteristics was conducted and the result demonstrates that there are no statistically significant differences in the scores for "family living structure" (husband and wife living alone or with at least one elderly parent), "whether a one-child family" (one-child family or non-one-children family), and "marital status" (first marriage or remarriage).

6.3. Correlational analysis

Correlations between the marital satisfaction of preschoolers' mothers, their experiential avoidance, and parental psychological flexibility are presented in Table 2. Pearson's correlation analysis demonstrates that marital satisfaction is negatively correlated with experiential avoidance and positively correlated with parental psychological flexibility. Moreover, experiential avoidance is negatively correlated with parental psychological flexibility.

6.4. The mediating role of experiential avoidance between marital satisfaction and parental psychological flexibility

Marital satisfaction was used as the independent variable, parental psychological flexibility as the dependent variable, and experiential avoidance as the mediating variable. The non-parametric bootstrap method ($n = 5000$) was applied to test for mediating effects. Based on Figure 1, the total effect of marital satisfaction on parental psychological flexibility is $\beta = 0.44$ ($p < 0.01$). After including the mediating variable, experiential avoidance, the direct effect is $\beta = 0.12$ ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that experiential avoidance significantly mediates the relationship between marital satisfaction and parental psychological flexibility (mediating effect = 0.32, $p < 0.01$, 95% confidence interval = 0.20 – 0.35), accounting for 72.73% of the total effect.

7. Discussion

This study examines the effects of marital satisfaction among Chinese preschoolers' mothers on their parental psychological flexibility and the mediating role of maternal

Table 2. Correlation matrix between scores on each scale (r , $n=335$)

Variable	$\bar{x}\pm s$	Marital satisfaction	Experiential avoidance	Parental psychological flexibility
Marital satisfaction	3.7 $\pm$ 0.8	1	-	-
Experiential avoidance	2.6 $\pm$ 1.1	-0.50**	1	-
Parental psychological flexibility	5.1 $\pm$ 1.0	0.38**	-0.60**	1

Note: Mean $\pm$ standard deviation ($\bar{x}\pm s$) is shown in the second column. The values in the correlation matrix (above the diagonal) represent Pearson correlation coefficients. Double asterisks (**) indicate statistical significance at $p<0.01$.

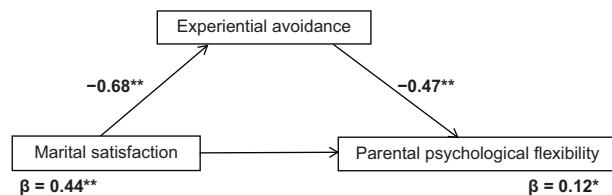


Figure 1. Schematic diagram illustrating the mediating effect of experiential avoidance. A single asterisk (*) represents $p<0.05$, and a double asterisk (**) indicates $p<0.01$.

experiential avoidance, in the context of family factors associated with maternal parental psychological flexibility. A t -test of the scores on each scale for mothers across different family structure characteristics reveals no significant differences in maternal marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and parental psychological flexibility – regardless of whether the mothers live only with their husbands or with at least one elderly parent, have only one child or two children, or are in a first marriage or remarriage.

This study shows that the marital satisfaction of mothers of Chinese preschoolers is positively associated with their parental psychological flexibility – the higher the marital satisfaction, the greater the parental psychological flexibility. Higher marital satisfaction is associated with lower parenting stress,²⁵ and more positive parenting styles in mother–child interactions, such as less control and greater acceptance,²⁶ both of which are key indicators of higher parental psychological flexibility.^{1,2}

The crossover hypothesis suggests that the emotions or behaviors of one party in a family subsystem (e.g., how mothers feel in the couple subsystem) can influence the emotions or behaviors of another party in a different subsystem (e.g., how fathers behave in the father–son subsystem). Previous research has found that higher maternal marital satisfaction motivates husbands to be more actively involved in parenting.²⁷ When the husband's parenting input increases and helps the mother share the stress of parenting, the mother's interactions with the child become more harmonious and reflect higher parental psychological flexibility.^{28,29}

In addition, this study reveals that experiential avoidance in mothers of preschoolers significantly

mediates the relationship between marital satisfaction and parental psychological flexibility. Maternal marital satisfaction is an important indicator of maternal quality of life and is significantly associated with experiential avoidance. Lower maternal marital satisfaction is linked to higher experiential avoidance.

Mothers tend to interpret the negative emotions generated during the parenting process as facts, and attempt to resist and avoid them rather than experiencing and accepting them as objective experiences,¹² resulting in reduced parental psychological flexibility.¹⁹ Consequently, mothers may adopt more ineffective parenting styles and transmit excessive negative emotions to their children, leading to emotional disorders and problem behaviors in children.^{2,13}

After having children, parenting occupies much of the time previously devoted to couple interaction, thereby reducing positive communication between partners. Combined with conflicts related to parenting responsibilities, parenting styles, career development, and values, maternal marital satisfaction may significantly decline.²⁵ As a result, mothers often experience substantial negative emotions that are difficult to manage,¹¹ which may inevitably carry over into parenting, thereby increasing experiential avoidance and reducing parental psychological flexibility.^{18,19}

When faced with changing situations during parenting, mothers may become constrained by rigid thoughts and conceptualized self-perceptions. They may unconsciously adopt avoidant and controlling attitudes, fail to stay connected to the present moment, and respond with inflexible patterns of behavior. When reacting to distressing emotions and thoughts, they exhibit low acceptance, struggle to engage in parenting behaviors aligned with their values, and thus, demonstrate lower parental psychological flexibility.¹

In traditional Chinese culture, the norm that men manage external affairs while women care for the families influences family relationships. Mothers are usually the primary caretakers of children, and the burden of housework and education falls on their shoulders. Especially during the preschool years, mothers devote

most of their time and energy to raising children and caring for their families, while their own needs are suppressed and neglected. Moreover, mothers in modern society are expected to advance in their careers simultaneously, placing them in situations where their personal and family responsibilities become imbalanced.^{3,25,30}

Coupled with economic pressure, generational conflicts, and the demands of children's education, maternal parental psychological flexibility faces significant challenges.³¹ In this process, support from the mother's family of origin and in-laws, as well as increased parenting input from the husband, is particularly important for mothers.

Studies in China have shown that support from the mother's family of origin and in-laws, as well as increased parenting input from the husband, can effectively enhance maternal marital satisfaction.^{32,33} The family of origin and in-laws can provide both financial and emotional support to help mothers of preschoolers experience higher marital satisfaction,³⁴ while husbands can increase their parenting involvement – such as spending more time with their children and wife, and participating in family activities – which can further improve maternal marital satisfaction.³³ This, in turn, may reduce experiential avoidance and promote the parental psychological flexibility of preschoolers' mothers. In addition, mothers of preschoolers themselves can enhance their parental psychological flexibility by reducing experiential avoidance through ACT and mindfulness practices.³⁵

8. Limitations

Several limitations remain in this study. First, since a cross-sectional study design was employed, causal relationships cannot be determined. This is because the study does not examine the relationships between maternal marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and parental psychological flexibility from a developmental perspective. Longitudinal data collected at multiple time points in future research could help address this limitation. In addition, all data in this study were self-reported by preschoolers' mothers, which may introduce self-reporting bias. Future studies could incorporate data from husbands' perspectives to explore the relationships between marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and parental psychological flexibility more comprehensively and in greater depth.

9. Conclusion

The findings reveal that the marital satisfaction of mothers of Chinese preschoolers is positively associated with their parental psychological flexibility – the higher the maternal marital satisfaction, the greater the parental psychological

flexibility. In addition, the study shows that experiential avoidance mediates this relationship. These results indicate that maternal marital satisfaction is not only directly related to parental psychological flexibility but also influences it indirectly through experiential avoidance.

This study highlights that, to raise mentally healthy children, family members can contribute to the development of maternal parental psychological flexibility by supporting improvements in the mother's marital satisfaction. For example, support from the mother's family of origin and in-laws – including both financial and emotional support – as well as increased involvement from the husband in childcare, can enhance maternal marital satisfaction.³²⁻³⁴ This, in turn, can reduce maternal experiential avoidance and improve parental psychological flexibility, ultimately contributing positively to the mother's parenting. If improving marital satisfaction appears difficult, mothers can also reduce experiential avoidance through ACT and mindfulness practices,³⁵ thereby enhancing their parental psychological flexibility and fostering a more positive parenting experience.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: All authors

Data curation: All authors

Formal analysis: Bingkun Zhang

Methodology: Bingkun Zhang

Supervision: Chunlei Fan

Writing–original draft: Bingkun Zhang

Writing– review & editing: All authors

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the ethics review approval number: H21090. All participants were informed of the study's objectives before participation, and written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants through the parent WeChat groups of each classroom before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and data confidentiality.

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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