

# The Relationship between Marital Satisfaction and Psychological Flexibility in Parenting among Mothers of Chinese Preschool Children: The Mediating Role of Experiential Avoidance

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

Lower maternal marital satisfaction in families with preschool children in China puts mothers at risk of having lower parenting psychological flexibility. Improving mothers' marital satisfaction may be effective in enhancing their psychological flexibility in parenting and thus raising physically and mentally healthier preschool children. The purpose of this study is to investigate the association between maternal marital satisfaction and psychological flexibility in parenting and the mechanism of maternal experiential avoidance. 365 mothers of Chinese preschool children in 3 kindergartens have participated in this study and completed the Chinese version of the Olson Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire, the Chinese version of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (Version II), and the Chinese version of the Psychological Flexibility in Parenting Questionnaire. The total number of valid questionnaires is 335. Whether mothers live alone with her husbands or live with at least one elderly parent most of the time, or whether it is the first marriage of mothers or the second marriage, the results have showed that there are no significant differences in mothers' scores for marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, parenting psychological flexibility and cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance on either type of family residence structure and family structure characteristics. In addition, higher maternal marital satisfaction is associated with higher psychological flexibility in parenting, and maternal marital satisfaction also influences psychological flexibility in parenting through maternal experiential avoidance. In traditional Chinese practices, the idea that men manage external affairs while women take care of families influences family relationships, especially during the preschool years when mothers, as the primary caregivers of children, devote much of their time and energy to raising children and caring for their families, while their own needs are compressed and confined without limits. Moreover, mothers in modern society expect to advance in their careers at the same time, so they are often in a situation where family and themselves are out of balance. Therefore, fathers should spend as much time as possible with their children and wives and participate in more family activities, which will not only help their wives relieve physical and mental stress, enhance their marital satisfaction and maintain good psychological flexibility in parenting, but also enhance their happiness as fathers and promote the healthy physical and mental development of their preschool children.

## Highlights

Whether mothers live alone with her husbands or live with at least one elderly parent most of the time, there are no significant differences in mothers' scores for marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, parenting psychological flexibility and cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance on either type of family residence structure.

Whether it is the first marriage of mothers or the second marriage, there are no significant differences in mothers' scores for marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, parenting psychological flexibility and cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance on either type of family structure characteristics.

Low maternal marital satisfaction leads to low psychological flexibility in parenting.

Maternal marital satisfaction influences parenting psychological flexibility through experiential avoidance.

A well-run marital relationship between husband and wife is a protective factor for good parenting psychological flexibility, thus raising psychologically healthy preschool children.

## Full Text

Born from the migration of the core concept of psychological flexibility from acceptance commitment therapy to the family system and more sensitive than individual parental psychological flexibility in predicting children's problem behaviors (Brassell et al., 2016). Parenting psychological flexibility is the ability of parents to accept their own negative thoughts, emotions, and impulses with their children during the parenting process and still maintain effective ability to parenting behaviors. Psychological flexibility in parenting is reflected in three main aspects: cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance. Cognitive dissociation refers primarily to the ability of parents to consciously separate their own emotions and thoughts from parenting-related behaviors during the parenting process so that parenting behaviors and decisions are not controlled by their own emotions and thoughts. Commitment to action is the ability of parents to step back from their children's choices and actions to allow their children to assert their independence in an appropriate manner. This may increase parental concern for their children, but parents are able to embrace the worried emotions and thoughts and adhere to effective parenting behaviors. Acceptance refers to the ability of parents to recognize that negative emotions and thoughts generated by themselves or their children are part of the parenting process, so as to accept them, and that they do not interfere with their own effective parenting behaviors (Burke et al., 2015). Research has found that Chinese parents' psychological flexibility in parenting is strongly associated with children's problem behaviors (Li, 2019). Compared to fathers, mothers are more likely to assume the role of primary caregiver in child rearing, thus carrying greater parenting stress and resulting in lower parenting psychological flexibility (Wang et al., 2021; Moyer et al., 2015). Other research has also shown that psychological problems in preschool children are likely to continue into childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Bayer et al., 2003); therefore, an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing mothers' psychological flexibility in parenting and their mechanisms of action is important for family education and preschool children's psychological health development.

Marital satisfaction is a subjective assessment of married couples' satisfaction with their marital relationship and is an important stability indicator of marital life quality (Lian et al., 2014). Family system theory suggests that family is a complete unit and system, and family members are the components of the system. Family system includes couple subsystem, parent subsystem and sibling subsystem, and researchers believe that couple subsystem is the core of family system and influences the functions of other subsystems (Minuchin, 1974; Cox et al., 1997). Marital satisfaction is an important indicator of couple relationship in couple subsystem and has a significant impact on the parenting of preschoolers in parenting subsystem; the higher the marital satisfaction of mothers of preschoolers, the more positive the parenting style (Boric et al., 2011). Emotional socialization-inspired models suggest (Eisenberg et al., 1998) that marital satisfaction affects mothers' emotional expressions in family, which in turn affects parenting quality. Related studies in China have shown that mothers of preschool children with high marital satisfaction show more positive emotional expressions towards their children, and those with low marital satisfaction show more negative emotional expressions towards their children (Liang et al., 2013). In addition, they are more inclined to adopt ineffective parenting styles such as avoidance, neglect and control in disciplining their children, which also implies that those mothers possess lower psychological flexibility in parenting (Zhou et al., 2016; Li, 2019). Therefore,

marital satisfaction may be an important predictor of psychological flexibility in parenting for mothers of preschool children.

Hayes, the founder of acceptance and commitment therapy, introduced experiential avoidance in 1996, which refers to people's attempts to change the form, frequency, or situational sensitivity of their internal experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions, somatic sensations) that come to mind, even when doing so leads to actions that are inconsistent with personal values or goals (Hayes et al., 1996; Bond et al., 2011). Experiential avoidance is an important determinant of psychological distress and behavioral ineffectiveness (Hayes et al., 2006), and the greater the experiential avoidance, the more likely one is to adopt rigid rather than flexible and varied responses and choices in the face of changing situations, which can decrease engagement with the present moment, increase distress, and reduce the likelihood of adopting value-oriented behaviors (Bond et al., 2011). Studies have shown that the higher the marital satisfaction of Chinese mothers, the less likely they are to adopt an avoidant conflict coping style (Jia et al., 2012); the lower the marital satisfaction of mothers, the lower the level of psychological well-being (Wang, 2012), and the higher the level of experiential avoidance (Zhou et al., 2018). Brassell et al. and Wu et al. conclude that experiential avoidance in mothers of preschool-aged children can negatively predict their psychological flexibility in parenting, which influences children's problem behaviors (Wu et al., 2018; Brassell et al., 2016). Mothers who consciously avoid parenting attitudes such as avoidance and control during parenting have higher psychological flexibility in parenting (Burke et al., 2015). Based on this, it is hypothesized that experiential avoidance in mothers of preschoolers may mediate the relationship between marital satisfaction and maternal psychological flexibility in parenting.

A woman is a wife, a mother, and an independent individual in marriage and family education, so how do her psychological states in these three important roles interact and influence each other? No research has explored the relationship between marital satisfaction of preschool mothers and the psychological flexibility of maternal parenting and the mechanisms by which maternal experiential avoidance plays a role in this. This study is aimed to investigate the influence of mothers' marital satisfaction on mothers' psychological flexibility of parenting in three kindergartens in Shanxi Province, and analyze the mediating role of mothers' experiential avoidance. From a family system perspective, it reveals the factors and mechanisms that influence the psychological flexibility of maternal parenting, which is extremely important for the development of preschool children, and provides a reference basis for family education.

## 1 Subject And Methodology

### 1.1 Subject

Mothers of children in three kindergartens in Shanxi Province were selected for the study. Each kindergarten director arranged teachers to distribute and collect the questionnaires by class, and informed the questionnaire guideline, anonymity principle and basic content of the study through each class group, and collected them after two days. A total of 365 questionnaires were collected, and 30 questionnaires with blank, missing items, apparently regular responses and mothers' marital status of divorce were excluded, and 335 valid questionnaires were obtained. The family living structure shows that 265 mothers live alone with husband and 70 mothers live with at least one elderly parent; 179 mothers have only one child and 156 mothers have more than two children; 329 mothers are in the first marriage and 6 mothers are remarried.

## 1.2 Tools

### 1.2.1 Marital Satisfaction Scale

The Chinese version of Marital Satisfaction Sub-scale of the Olson Marital Quality Questionnaire (Li et al., 1999) was used to measure mothers' marital satisfaction, as reported by mothers. A total of 10 items were scored on a 5-point scale from 1 (it really is) to 5 (it really is not), where the 2nd, 4th, 6th, 7th, and 10th items were scored inversely, with higher total scores representing higher marital satisfaction. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient for this scale in this study was 0.860.

### 1.2.2 Experiential Avoidance Scale

The Acceptance and Action Scale, Second Edition (AAQ-II), developed by Bond and Hayes et al. and revised by Cao et al. (Cao et al., 2013) was used to measure mothers' experiential avoidance, as reported by mothers. There were 7 items in total, scored on a 7-point scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always), with higher total scores representing higher levels of experiential avoidance. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient for this scale in this study was 0.874.

### 1.2.3 Psychological Flexibility in Parenting Scale

The Parenting Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire (PPFQ), developed by Burke and Moore and revised by Li et al. (Li et al., 2018) was used to measure mothers' parenting psychological flexibility, as reported by mothers. There were 16 items, including 3 dimensions of cognitive dissociation (CD), commitment to action (CA), and acceptance (A), using a 7-point scale from 1 (very non-conforming) to 7 (very conforming). Cognitive dissociation and commitment to action are reverse scored, higher scores on each dimension representing better performance on that dimension. Higher total scores represent higher psychological flexibility in parenting for mothers. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficients for this scale and the three sub-scales in this study were 0.883, 0.877, 0.792, and 0.863, respectively.

## 1.3 Statistical Methods

SPSSAU software was used for statistical analysis of the data. Harman's one-way test was used to explore the presence of common method deviation; independent samples t-test was used to compare mothers' marital satisfaction scores, experiential avoidance scores, total parenting psychological flexibility scores, and cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance scores under different family structure characteristics. Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the correlation between mothers' marital satisfaction scores, experiential avoidance scores, total parenting psychological flexibility scores, and cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance scores. A new mediation test procedure (Wen et al., 2014) was used to examine the mediation effect of mothers' experiential avoidance scores on mothers' marital satisfaction scores and parenting psychology flexibility scores. The difference was considered statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

## 2 Results

### 2.1 Common Method Deviation Test

Harman's one-way test was used for possible common method deviation since data on all variables were obtained from mothers' reports. The KMO test value was 0.90 and the Bartlett's spherical test corresponded to a p-value < 0.001, indicating suitability for factor analysis. An unrotated exploratory factor analysis of all entries showed that the explanatory rate of the first common factor was 29.891%, which was less than the critical value of 40%, and therefore the data in this study were considered free of serious common method deviation.

## 2.2 Differences in Scores on Each Scale among Mothers with Different Family Structure Characteristics

The analysis of the differences in scores of each scale among mothers with different family structure characteristics showed (Table 1) that there were no statistically significant differences in scores of each scale for family residential structure, one-child or two-children families, and marital status. For them, the p is more than 0.05.

Table 1 Comparison of Scores on Each Scale among Mothers with Different Family Structure Characteristics ( $\pm s$ )

Item	Samples	Marital Satisfaction Score	t value	AAQ-II Score	t value
<b>Family Living Structure</b>			-1.66		-0.10
Husband and Wife Living Alone	265	3.7 $\pm$ 0.8		2.6 $\pm$ 1.1	
Living with at Least One Elderly Parent	70	3.9 $\pm$ 0.7		2.6 $\pm$ 1.1	
<b>Whether One-child Family</b>			-0.37		-0.79
One-child Family	179	3.7 $\pm$ 0.8		2.6 $\pm$ 1.1	
Non-One-child Family	156	3.7 $\pm$ 0.8		2.7 $\pm$ 1.1	
<b>Marital Status</b>			-0.87		-0.18
First Marriage	329	3.7 $\pm$ 0.8		2.6 $\pm$ 1.1	
Remarriage	6	4.0 $\pm$ 0.7		2.7 $\pm$ 0.7	

Item	Samples	PPFQ Score	t value	CD Score	t value	CA Score	t value	A Score	t value
<b>Family Living Structure</b>			0.28		0.01		-0.56		1.15
Husband and Wife Living Alone	265	5.1±1.0		5.1±1.2		4.5±1.5		5.5±1.1	
Living with at Least One Elderly Parent	70	5.1±1.0		5.1±1.3		4.6±1.4		5.4±1.3	
<b>Whether One-child Family</b>			0.69		0.76		1.00		-0.18
One-child Family	179	5.2±0.9		5.2±1.2		4.6±1.4		5.5±1.2	
Non-One-child Family	156	5.1±1.0		5.1±1.2		4.4±1.5		5.5±1.1	
<b>Marital Status</b>			0.63		1.07		-0.86		0.56
First Marriage	329	5.1±1.0		5.1±1.2		4.5±1.5		5.5±1.2	
Remarriage	6	4.9±1.1		4.6±1.2		5.0±1.8		5.2±1.6	

### 2.3 Correlational Analysis of Mothers' Marital Satisfaction, Experiential Avoidance, Psychological Flexibility in Parenting, and Three Dimensions

Pearson correlation analysis showed (Table 2) that mothers' marital satisfaction scores were negatively correlated with mothers' experiential avoidance scores, positively correlated with mothers' total parenting psychological flexibility scores and cognitive dissociation and acceptance scores. Moreover, mothers' experiential avoidance scores were negatively correlated with mothers' total parenting psychological flexibility scores and cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance scores.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix between Scores on Each Scale (r, n=335)

Questionnaire	Score	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Marital Satisfaction	3.7±0.8	1					
2 AAQ-II	2.6±1.1	-0.50**	1				
3 PPFQ	5.1±1.0	0.38**	-0.60**	1			
4 CD	5.1±1.2	0.37**	-0.63**	0.91**	1		
5 CA	4.5±1.5	0.11	-0.27**	0.57**	0.37**	1	
6 A	5.5±1.2	0.30**	-0.35**	0.72**	0.48**	0.15**	1

Note: \*\*p<0.01

#### 2.4 A Test of the Mediating Role of Experiential Avoidance between Mothers' Marital Satisfaction and Psychological Flexibility in Parenting

A test of mediating effects was conducted using mother's marital satisfaction score as the independent variable, the total parenting psychological flexibility score as the dependent variable, and the experiential avoidance score as the mediating variable. The independent and mediating variables were first centered before testing. The results showed (Figure 1) that the total effect of mother's marital satisfaction score on total parenting psychological flexibility score was significant ( $c=0.44, p<0.01$ ); the effect of mother's marital satisfaction score on experiential avoidance score was significant ( $a=-0.68, p<0.01$ ); and the effect of experiential avoidance score on total parenting psychological flexibility score was significant ( $b=-0.47, p<0.01$ ). Therefore, the value of the mediating effect of mothers' marital satisfaction score on the total score of psychological flexibility in parenting through experiential avoidance score is  $a*b=0.32$  with a 95% confidence interval (0.20 to 0.35) not containing 0, indicating a significant mediating effect. The direct effect of mothers' marital satisfaction score on total parenting psychological flexibility score was significant ( $c'=0.12, p<0.05$ ), indicating that experiential avoidance score partially mediated the effect between mothers' marital satisfaction score and total parenting psychological flexibility score, with a mediating effect of 73.04%.

### 3 Discussion

This study has explored the effects of mothers' marital satisfaction on mothers' parenting flexibility and the mediating role of mothers' experiential avoidance in the context of family factors affecting mothers' parenting flexibility in Chinese preschoolers. A t-test of the scores on each scale for mothers with different family structure characteristics has revealed no significant differences in mothers' scores on marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, psychological flexibility in parenting, and cognitive dissociation, commitment to action, and acceptance for either mothers living alone with their husbands or living with at least one elderly parent most of the time, in the scores for mothers having only one child or two children, and on either mothers are in the first marriage or remarriage.

This study has showed that the marital satisfaction of mothers of Chinese preschoolers is positively associated with their psychological flexibility in parenting, i.e., the higher the marital satisfaction of mothers, the higher the psychological flexibility of mothers in parenting their preschoolers. The study also implies that the higher the marital satisfaction of mothers of Chinese preschoolers, the less parenting stress they feel (Cai et al., 2021),

and the more positive parenting styles they would use in their interactions with their children, such as less control and more acceptance (Shu et al., 2016), which shows higher psychological flexibility in parenting. The crossover hypothesis suggests that the emotions or behaviors of one of the interacting parties in one subsystem of the family (e.g., how mothers feel in the couple subsystem) affect the emotions or behaviors of the other party in the other subsystem (e.g., how fathers behave in the father-son subsystem). Research finds that higher marital satisfaction of mothers motivates their husbands to be more actively involved in parenting (Chen et al., 2014). Mothers are more likely to show higher psychological flexibility in parenting when their husbands' parenting input increases to assist mothers in sharing parenting stress.

This study also concludes that mothers' marital satisfaction indirectly affects their psychological flexibility in parenting through mothers' experiential avoidance. Mothers' marital satisfaction is an important part of mothers' quality of life and is significantly associated with mothers' level of experiential avoidance. The lower the mothers' marital satisfaction, the higher the level of experiential avoidance (Zhou et al., 2018). Mothers tend to regard the negative emotions generated in the parenting process as facts and try to resist and avoid them instead of experiencing and accepting them as objective things, resulting in mothers' lower psychological flexibility in parenting. So, mothers will adopt more ineffective parenting styles in the parenting process and transmit too many negative emotions to children, causing emotional disorders and problem behaviors in children (Wu et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018). After having children, parenting takes up a lot of time that belongs to the couple's interaction, making the positive interaction between the couple decrease. Coupled with conflicts such as parenting responsibilities and parenting conflicts, career development and values conflicts, mothers' marital satisfaction decreases significantly (Cai et al., 2021), and mothers themselves have a lot of negative emotions that are difficult to cope with (Liang et al., 2013). This results in lower psychological flexibility and higher experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 2006), which will inevitably be carried over into parenting. When faced with changing situations in the parenting process, mothers are constrained by their own thoughts and conceptualized selves in their minds. They unconsciously adopt attitudes such as avoidance and control, failing to better maintain an adequate connection with the present moment. They adopt rigid responses or choices, and respond to the emotions and thoughts that cause them distress in the parenting process with low acceptance. They have difficulty in adopting parenting behaviors that are consistent with their own parenting values, and possess a low psychological flexibility in parenting, resulting in pessimistic parenting quality (Burke et al., 2015).

In traditional Chinese practices, the idea that men manage external affairs while women take care of families influences family relationships. Mothers are usually the primary caretakers of children, and the burden of housework and education rests on their shoulders. Especially during the preschool years, mothers devote much of their time and energy to raising children and caring for their families, while their own needs are compressed and confined without limits. Moreover, mothers in modern society expect to advance in their careers at the same time, so they are often in a situation where family and themselves are out of balance (Cai et al., 2021). Coupled with economic pressure, the pressure of getting along with the older generation, and the pressure of children's education, mothers' own psychological flexibility and parenting psychological flexibility are facing great challenges. However, mothers' parenting psychological flexibility is closely related to children's psychological flexibility and physical and mental health (Williams et al., 2012), as well as to mothers' own quality of life and that of their families (Zhao et al., 2020). In this process, the understanding, emotional support and increased parenting input of husbands are particularly important for mothers and families. More importantly, fathers play

an important role in family education, whose nurturing function cannot be replaced by mothers. Therefore, fathers should spend as much time as possible with their children and wives and participate in more family activities, which will not only help their wives relieve physical and mental stress, enhance their marital satisfaction and maintain good psychological flexibility in parenting, but also enhance their happiness as fathers and promote the healthy physical and mental development of their preschool children.

There are still some shortcomings in this study. First, the cross-sectional study design was used, which could not examine the relationship between mothers' marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and psychological flexibility in parenting from a developmental perspective, and longitudinal data could be collected at different time points in subsequent studies; second, the data sources in this study were all reported by mothers, and data from husbands' perspectives could be added in the future, so as to explore the relationship between marital satisfaction, experiential avoidance, and psychological flexibility in parenting more extensively and deeply.

This study concludes that:

1. Mothers' marital satisfaction is positively associated with mothers' psychological flexibility in parenting.
2. Mothers' experiential avoidance mediates the relationship between mothers' marital satisfaction and psychological flexibility in parenting.

## Declarations

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing interests.

A statement of ethics approval: The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of Institute of Psychology, CAS (Ethics approval number: H13044)

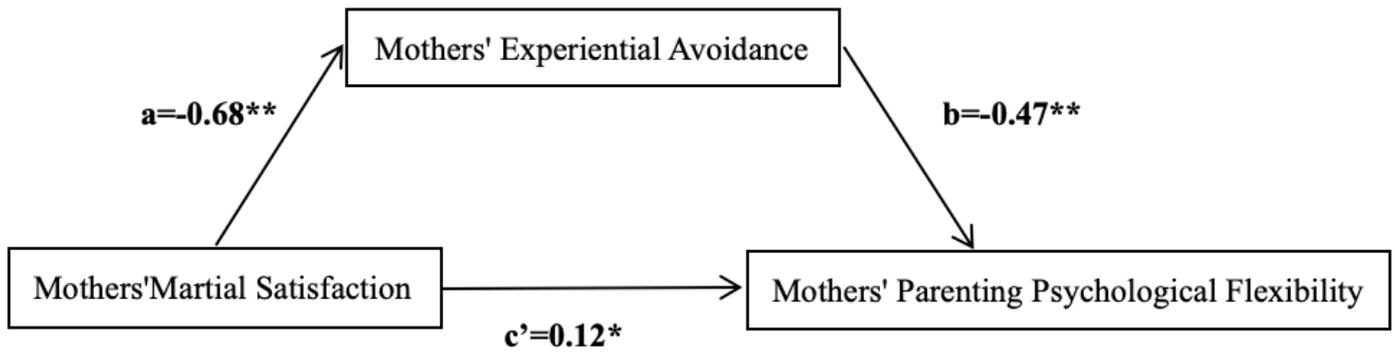
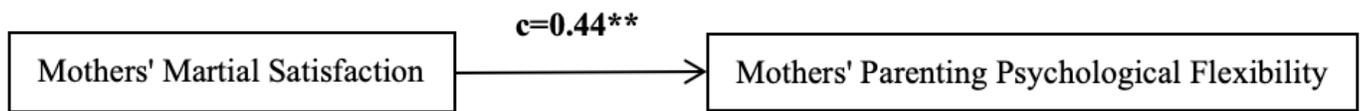
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## Figures



**Figure 1**

Schematic Diagram of the Mediating Effect of Experiential Avoidance between Mothers' Marital Satisfaction and Psychological Flexibility in Parenting