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# Comparing the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy on the anxiety and loneliness of children with separation anxiety disorder

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## Original research article

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy on the anxiety and loneliness of children with separation anxiety disorder.

**Methods:** The current research was of the type of practical and quasi-experimental designs of pre-test-post-test and follow-up with a control group. The statistical population of this research included all children (girls and boys) suffering from separation anxiety disorder in Sari city in the first six months of 2021. The sample of this research includes 30 people who referred to Bammad Counseling Center and Bawar Counseling Center who were selected using available sampling method and randomly divided into two experimental groups of cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy and the control group in the list. They waited. The data were obtained using the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (1997) and Asher et al.'s (1984) Loneliness Questionnaire. The data was analyzed using the method of analysis of variance with repeated measurements and SPSS-26 software. **Results:** The results showed that there is a significant difference between the two groups of cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy on anxiety and loneliness in children with separation anxiety disorder, and cognitive-behavioral therapy causes more changes in anxiety in children. He was diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder and this treatment is stronger than parent-child interaction therapy in this group of patients. However, according to the average indices and the effect size obtained in the treatment of parent-child interaction, it caused more changes in loneliness in children with separation anxiety disorder, and this treatment is stronger than cognitive-behavioral therapy in this group of children with separation anxiety disorder. It was separation anxiety disorder ( $P<0.001$ ). **Conclusion:** Therefore, it can be concluded that cognitive-behavioral treatment of anxiety in children with separation anxiety disorder and parent-child interaction therapy can be an effective intervention method to improve the loneliness of children with separation anxiety disorder.

**Keywords:** cognitive-behavioral therapy, parent-child interaction therapy, anxiety, Loneliness, Separation anxiety disorder.

## Introduction

Anxiety is the most common psychiatric disorder among children and it ranks first in terms of the reason for referral to mental health centers (Leuki et al., 2021). The classic childhood anxiety disorder is separation anxiety disorder (Mathis et al., 2018). This disorder is more common in children under 12 years of age, the diagnosis of this disorder in childhood is significant in terms of mental health risk throughout life. Separation anxiety in children, as one of the most significant causes of unhealthy behaviors in behavior, can lead to unfortunate injuries for the child. It will cause disruption in social and academic performance in other important areas of a person's life. Children with separation anxiety disorder often refuse to go to school, summer camps, and activities with friends (Moondale et al., 2020). The main characteristic of separation anxiety disorder is excessive fear or anxiety when separating from home or loved ones, and its severity is more than expected from the person's developmental level (Ilbay et al., 2021).

One of the topics that has been the focus of many psychologists in the field of interpersonal relationships in the past decades is the feeling of loneliness. The feeling of loneliness is a complex set of feelings, cognitions, distress and the experience of negative emotions, as well as the core of many emotional disorders (Lovadis et al., 2020). Loneliness is an unpleasant feeling that arises as a result of a deficiency in one's social relationships in a quantitative and qualitative way and not having access to close and favorable relationships with others (Davis et al., 2019). Loneliness is defined as a negative and internal experience that is rooted in the quality and quantity of social networks and groups and probably affects the health and well-being of a person. Loneliness has been discussed by various researchers as an important indicator of a person's social well-being (Kao et al., 2020). Loneliness has social and emotional dimensions and the presence of one does not mean the presence of the other. The concept of social and emotional loneliness was first proposed by Weiss and supported by other researchers. Social loneliness has been described as the absence of a social group, which makes a person feel empty and not belonging to a group or community (Mayes et al., 2019).

Children's behavior, like parents' behavior and attitude, contributes to this interaction. No parent wants to ruin their child's life. No parent intends for a child to be timid, shy, stubborn, careless, or bored, however, most of these undesirable behaviors are the product of parenting methods and clumsy interactions between parents and children. It seems that parent-child interaction therapy directly modifies parenting style. On the other hand, it has been proven in various researches that parents' parenting style is related to behavioral disorders, including separation anxiety; Therefore, parent-child interaction therapy seems to be a potentially effective treatment for behavioral disorder in Kokan (Kimonis et al., 2019). One of the therapeutic and educational methods focused on the child is the cognitive-behavioral method. The cognitive-behavioral approach is characterized by a group of methods in which the emphasis is on the internal consistency of the individual (Silk et al., 2020).

Considering the importance and impact of psychological consequences of separation anxiety disorder, in case of impact, it will be determined which treatment method is more effective and can be used for treatment. The effectiveness of drug therapy in anxiety disorders is not clear and many parents

refuse drug therapy because of its side effects. These therapeutic approaches (cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy) have not been clinically tested in Iran in the field of children's separation anxiety disorder. In addition, since both treatment methods can be performed in a group, they are very economical in terms of money and time. Child and adolescent clinical psychologists, child psychiatrists, and children's mental health practitioners can benefit from the results of this research.

### **Method**

The current research was of the type of practical and quasi-experimental designs of pre-test-post-test and follow-up with a control group. The statistical population of this research included all children (girls and boys) suffering from separation anxiety disorder in Sari city in the first six months of 2021. The sample of this research includes 30 people who referred to Bammad Counseling Center and Bawar Counseling Center who were selected using available sampling method and randomly divided into two experimental groups of cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy and the control group in the list. They waited. The data were obtained using the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (1997) and Asher et al.'s (1984) Loneliness Questionnaire. The data was analyzed using the method of analysis of variance with repeated measurements and SPSS-26 software.

### **Results**

The correlation coefficients between the scales of irrational beliefs, marital justice, positive emotion regulation, positive emotion regulation, and marital commitment were statistically significant ( $P < 0.05$ ). One of the assumptions of structural equation modeling is the normality of multivariate distribution. For this purpose, Mardia's multivariate elongation coefficient is used in AMOS software. The value of Mardia's coefficient for the data of the present study is equal to 2.76, which shows that the assumption of multivariate normality is valid.

Factors of irrational beliefs and marital justice have a direct effect on marital commitment. Also, the hypothesis raised in connection with the existence of an indirect effect of irrational beliefs on the marital commitment of couples referring to counseling centers through positive emotion regulation has been confirmed with 95% confidence. Negative emotion regulation and positive emotion regulation had a significant mediating role in the relationship between irrational beliefs and marital commitment ( $P < 0.05$ ). Finally, negative emotion regulation had a significant mediating role in the relationship between marital justice and marital commitment ( $P < 0.05$ ).

The results of each of the obtained indicators alone are not the reason for the suitability or lack of suitability of the model and these indicators should be interpreted together. The obtained values for these indicators show that overall the model has a good condition in terms of explanation and fitting.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy on anxiety and loneliness of children with separation anxiety disorder. According to the findings, it can be seen that there is a significant difference between the two groups of cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent-child interaction therapy on the anxiety and loneliness of children with separation anxiety disorder. Cognitive-behavioral therapy treatment caused more changes in anxiety in children with separation anxiety disorder, and

this treatment is stronger than parent-child interaction therapy in this group of patients. However, according to the mean indices and the obtained effect size, parent-child interaction therapy caused more changes in loneliness in children with separation anxiety disorder. This treatment was more powerful than cognitive-behavioral treatment in this group of children with separation anxiety disorder.

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