

Predicting Children's Behavioral Problems Based on Marital Satisfaction, Phubbing, and Differentiation of Self with the Mediating Role of Mothers' Resilience

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Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 13 December 2025
Revised 15 March 2026
Accepted 17 March 2026
Initial Publish 12 May 2026
Published online 01 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to predict children's behavioral problems based on marital satisfaction, phubbing, and differentiation of self, with the mediating role of mothers' resilience. The research method was descriptive-correlational. The statistical population included 4- to 6-year-old children and their mothers residing in districts 8, 9, and 10 of Tehran in 2025-2026. To select the research sample, 250 participants (mothers and children) were selected using a multi-stage cluster sampling method. Data were collected using the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) scale, the Generic Scale of Phubbing (GSP), the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R), the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), and the parent form of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). Data analysis was performed using structural equation modeling. The results showed that there is a significant negative relationship between mothers' marital satisfaction, differentiation of self, and resilience with children's behavioral problems, and a significant positive relationship between mothers' phubbing and children's behavioral problems ($p < .01$). Furthermore, the results indicated that marital satisfaction, phubbing, and differentiation of self can indirectly predict children's behavioral problems through the mediating role of mothers' resilience.

Keywords: Resilience, Differentiation of self, Marital satisfaction, Phubbing, Behavioral problems

How to cite this article:

Elyasi, F. (2026). Predicting Children's Behavioral Problems Based on Marital Satisfaction, Phubbing, and Differentiation of Self with the Mediating Role of Mothers' Resilience. *Mental Health and Lifestyle Journal*, 4(4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.61838/mhlj.200>

Introduction

Early childhood is a critical developmental period during which the foundational structures of emotional regulation, social functioning, and cognitive development are established. However, this period is also highly susceptible to the emergence of early psychological difficulties, predominantly manifested as behavioral problems. Behavioral problems in young children are generally conceptualized into two broad domains: internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety, social withdrawal, and depressive symptoms, and externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, rule-breaking, and hyperactivity. The prevalence of these behavioral problems has increasingly become a global public health concern, with recent epidemiological data highlighting significant risk factors associated with children and adolescents' psychological distress in various populations (1). The etiology of these behavioral deviations is highly complex, largely rooted in the familial environment and the quality of early parent-child interactions. When children are exposed to suboptimal caregiving environments, they often lack the necessary scaffolding to develop adaptive emotional regulation

strategies. Furthermore, interventions such as puppet play therapy have demonstrated effectiveness in mitigating symptoms of shyness, loneliness, and behavioral issues, particularly in vulnerable demographics like single-parent children, indicating that these early behavioral trajectories are malleable but heavily dependent on external psychological support (2).

The psychological well-being of the mother serves as one of the most proximal and potent determinants of a child's behavioral outcomes. The emotional climate established by the mother significantly dictates the child's sense of security and subsequent behavioral expressions. Extensive literature demonstrates that a mother's mental health is intimately correlated with the behavioral problems exhibited by her children (3). This dynamic is further complicated when maternal psychological distress is compounded by historical adversity. For instance, maternal exposure to severe childhood maltreatment and traumatic experiences creates a cascade of psychological vulnerabilities that can predispose her offspring to a higher incidence of mental and behavioral disorders (4). This intergenerational transmission of psychological distress underscores the necessity of examining the maternal psychological landscape—including her interpersonal relationships, behavioral habits, and intrapsychic differentiation—when seeking to understand and predict behavioral problems in preschool-aged children.

Within the family system, the marital relationship constitutes the primary subsystem, and its quality inevitably cascades into the parent-child subsystem. Marital satisfaction, defined as the subjective evaluation of one's marital relationship, plays a pivotal role in maintaining family equilibrium. High levels of marital satisfaction foster an environment characterized by warmth, emotional availability, and consistent parenting practices. Conversely, chronic marital discord and low marital satisfaction disrupt optimal family functioning, serving as a robust predictor of deteriorating mental health and increased behavioral problems in children (5). Specifically, empirical evidence has established a direct, negative relationship between a mother's marital satisfaction and the frequency of behavioral problems in preschool children (6).

The mechanisms underlying the quality of marital satisfaction are multifaceted. Therapeutic interventions, such as emotionally focused couple therapy, have proven effective in elevating marital satisfaction by fostering secure attachment bonds and positive feelings between spouses (7). However, marital satisfaction is also vulnerable to individual psychological traits. For example, high levels of maladaptive perfectionism, coupled with rigid metacognitive beliefs and a lack of psychological flexibility, can severely undermine marital harmony (8). When mothers experience low marital satisfaction, the resulting emotional depletion often leads to harsh, inconsistent, or withdrawn parenting, which subsequently triggers externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems in their children. Therefore, understanding the protective role of marital satisfaction is crucial in the broader context of developmental psychopathology.

In contemporary society, the widespread integration of digital technology into daily life has introduced novel disruptions to family functioning and maternal responsiveness. One of the most prominent behavioral manifestations of this digital era is "phubbing," a portmanteau of "phone" and "snubbing," which refers to the act of ignoring one's physical companion in favor of interacting with a smartphone (9). The measurement and conceptualization of this phenomenon have been rigorously validated across various cultural contexts, including the confirmation of the psychometric properties of the Generic Scale of Phubbing within the Iranian population (10). Phubbing is not merely an innocuous habit; it is a complex behavior often linked to

deeper psychological vulnerabilities. Research indicates that traumatic childhood experiences can predispose individuals to heightened dissociative experiences and diminished mindfulness, which in turn significantly increase the likelihood of engaging in phubbing behaviors during adulthood (11).

The relational consequences of maternal phubbing are profound and multifaceted. Within the marital dyad, phubbing behavior acts as a severe barrier to intimacy. It deteriorates communication skills and significantly diminishes the marital satisfaction of married individuals, creating an atmosphere of perceived neglect and emotional distance (12). Beyond the marital relationship, maternal phubbing directly impairs the parent-child interaction. When mothers consistently redirect their attention to their devices, they engage in technological interference that deprives children of contingent emotional feedback. This lack of responsive caregiving mimics the “still-face” paradigm, inducing distress in young children. Consequently, technology interference and problematic internet use by mothers have been identified as strong predictors of elevated behavioral problems in 3- to 5-year-old children (13). Children subjected to chronic maternal phubbing frequently resort to externalizing behaviors to capture maternal attention or develop internalizing symptoms due to perceived emotional rejection.

Beyond external behaviors and interpersonal dynamics, a mother’s deep-seated intrapsychic architecture—specifically her differentiation of self—profoundly influences her parenting capacity. Rooted in Bowen’s family systems theory, differentiation of self refers to an individual’s ability to balance intellectual and emotional functioning, allowing them to experience profound intimacy with others while maintaining a distinct, autonomous sense of self. The cultural and contextual nuances of differentiation indicators have been extensively studied within Iranian families, revealing the complex interplay between traditional family enmeshment and individual psychological autonomy (14). Comprehensive meta-analyses of differentiation of self in Iranian families further confirm that higher levels of differentiation are consistently associated with superior family functioning, better emotional regulation, and enhanced psychological well-being (15).

Differentiation of self is a critical asset for effective parenting. Mothers with high differentiation are capable of maintaining an “I-position” during stressful child-rearing moments; they do not fuse with their child’s emotional reactivity nor do they employ emotional cutoff as a defense mechanism. Instead, they respond to their children’s distress with calmness and objectivity. Conversely, mothers with low differentiation are highly emotionally reactive and struggle with emotional regulation, vulnerabilities that are often accompanied by psychological difficulties such as alexithymia. However, interventions focusing on mindful practices have shown efficacy in improving self-differentiation and reducing alexithymia, highlighting the dynamic nature of this construct (16). Crucially, the level of parental differentiation is intergenerationally transmitted. A parent’s differentiation level significantly predicts the differentiation and attachment styles of their adolescent children (17). This predictive relationship holds true across both male and female offspring, demonstrating that the structural components of parental differentiation are fundamental to shaping the emotional autonomy and behavioral stability of the next generation (18). Thus, a mother’s lack of differentiation serves as a systemic vulnerability that directly exacerbates a child’s susceptibility to behavioral problems.

While marital satisfaction, phubbing, and differentiation of self exert direct influences on children’s behavior, these factors likely operate through an intermediate psychological mechanism: maternal

resilience. Resilience is defined as the dynamic capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from significant adversity and stress. In the context of parenting, resilience equips mothers with the psychological fortitude required to navigate the chronic demands of child-rearing. The vital role of resilience is especially evident when parents are faced with extraordinary stressors, such as managing children with severe neurodevelopmental disorders like ADHD during periods of social quarantine (19). High parental resilience not only fosters maternal happiness but is also systematically linked to a reduction in behavioral problems among school-aged children (20).

Maternal resilience is not an isolated trait; it is heavily influenced by the mother's relational and intrapsychic environment. A secure and satisfying marital relationship serves as a primary source of emotional support, significantly bolstering parental resilience and subsequently carving a pathway to highly positive child developmental outcomes (21). Conversely, when the marital environment is fraught with conflict—or when individuals suffer from marital burnout—their psychological resilience is severely compromised. Structural models indicate that factors like emotional self-regulation and differentiation of self are deeply entwined with resilience, acting as causal determinants that mitigate marital burnout (22). Therefore, when a mother possesses high differentiation of self, experiences strong marital satisfaction, and minimizes disruptive behaviors like phubbing, her psychological resilience is fortified. This enhanced resilience allows her to employ adaptive, responsive, and consistent parenting strategies, which ultimately serve to prevent or ameliorate her child's behavioral problems.

Despite the individual evidence linking marital satisfaction, technological interference, intrapsychic differentiation, and maternal resilience to child developmental outcomes, there is a notable lacuna in the literature regarding how these variables interact within a comprehensive structural model. The modern Iranian mother navigates a complex intersection of traditional familial expectations, the rapid influx of digital communication, and the universal intrapsychic challenges of emotional differentiation. Understanding how the novel behavioral phenomenon of phubbing interacts with foundational systemic variables—such as marital satisfaction and differentiation of self—to influence children's psychological well-being is of paramount importance. Furthermore, identifying the mediating role of maternal resilience offers crucial clinical insights, suggesting that therapeutic interventions aimed at bolstering a mother's adaptive coping mechanisms could disrupt the negative pathways stemming from marital discord, low differentiation, and digital distraction. Exploring these interconnected variables specifically within the demographic of mothers raising preschool-aged children (4 to 6 years old) will provide critical empirical data for developing targeted preventative measures and systemic family therapies.

The aim of the present study was to predict children's behavioral problems based on marital satisfaction, phubbing, and differentiation of self, with the mediating role of mothers' resilience.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

In terms of purpose, the present study was fundamental research, and in terms of the data collection method, it was a descriptive-correlational study. The statistical population of the present study consisted of all 4- to 6-year-old children and their mothers who resided in districts 8, 9, and 10 of Tehran in 2025, and whose children were enrolled in kindergartens and preschool centers in these districts. Given the

researcher's access and the objective of the study, the sampling method was conducted as multi-stage cluster sampling. Thus, initially, out of the mentioned districts, three urban districts were selected purposively; then, from each district, a number of kindergartens and preschool centers were randomly selected, and finally, mothers of eligible children (aged 4 to 6 years, actively cohabiting, and willing to participate in the research) entered the study. To determine the sample size, considering the number of model variables and applying the ratio of at least 10 to 15 subjects per observed variable in the model, the sample size was considered to be approximately 250 individuals (mother and child) to ensure the necessary statistical power for analyzing the mediation model. Data collection was carried out using standard questionnaires for marital satisfaction, phubbing, differentiation of self, mothers' resilience, and the parent form of the child behavioral problems questionnaire (based on the Achenbach model). Furthermore, ethical considerations were fully taken into account in all stages of the research. Before entering the study, the participants signed a written informed consent form and were informed about the objectives, confidentiality of information, and the right to freely withdraw from the research. The participants' information was analyzed solely in the form of grouped and statistical data, and the individuals' identities remained completely confidential. Also, all stages of data collection and analysis were conducted in accordance with the principles of the university's ethics committee and the ethical codes of human subjects research.

Data Collection

Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL): This questionnaire was designed by Achenbach (2001) and consists of 113 items and 8 factors: Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn/Depressed, Somatic Complaints, Social Problems, Thought Problems, Attention Problems, Rule-Breaking Behavior, and Aggressive Behavior. This questionnaire has two components: internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. The scoring method for this questionnaire is based on a three-point Likert scale (from 0= never to 2= always). The overall reliability coefficients of the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist forms have been reported as .97 using Cronbach's alpha and .94 using test-retest reliability. Favorable content validity, criterion validity, and construct validity have been reported (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The Child Behavior Checklist was translated and standardized for the first time in Iran by Tehrani-Doost et al. (2002). In a study by Minaei (2006), the range of internal consistency coefficients of the scales using Cronbach's alpha formula was reported to be between .63 and .95. The temporal stability of the scales was examined using the test-retest method with an interval of 5 to 8 weeks, yielding temporal stability coefficients ranging from .32 to .67. Furthermore, inter-rater agreement was also examined, with the range of this condition fluctuating from .09 to .67. This questionnaire possesses high and favorable reliability and validity, and it can be confidently used to assess emotional and behavioral disorders in children and adolescents. Yazdkhasti and Oreyzi (2011) obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .90, .93, and .80 for the parent, teacher, and child versions of this questionnaire, respectively. Regarding construct validity, the correlations between the subscales of the behavioral and emotional problems section with the total score of this section in the parent, teacher, and child versions were reported as .62 – .88, .44 – .91, and .51 – .85, respectively; and the correlations between the subscales of the skills section with the total score of this section in the parent, teacher, and child versions were reported as .24 – .82, .77 – .93, and .64 – .87, respectively. In the present study, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .78 was obtained.

ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS): This questionnaire was designed by Olson et al. (1993) and consists of 47 items and 12 components (Idealistic Distortion, Marital Satisfaction, Personality Issues, Communication, Conflict Resolution, Financial Management, Leisure Activities, Sexual Relationship, Children and Parenting, Family and Friends, Egalitarian Roles, and Ideological Orientation). The scoring method for this questionnaire is on a five-point Likert scale (from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). A higher score indicates higher marital satisfaction. In the study by Fowers and Olson (1993), content validity was reported as .81, and reliability in terms of Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported as .86. In a study, the validity of the questionnaire using the internal consistency method was obtained as .93 (Asadi et al., 2020). The degree of convergent validity between this questionnaire and the Family Assessment Device scale was obtained as .92. In the study by Raygani et al. (2022), a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .85 was reported, and in the present study, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .88 was obtained.

Generic Scale of Phubbing (GSP): This scale was designed by Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018) and consists of 15 items and 4 subscales (Nomophobia, Interpersonal Conflict, Self-Isolation, and Problem Acknowledgment). This scale is scored based on a five-point Likert scale (from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). The range of scores on this scale is between 15 and 75, and higher scores indicate more phubbing problems. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018) reported the convergent validity of this scale with the Internet Addiction Test as .75, and they also reported an internal consistency of .93 using Cronbach's alpha. In an Iranian sample, validity was examined using exploratory factor analysis, and four factors were identified, which explained a total of 65.19% of the variance, and reliability using Cronbach's alpha was calculated as .87. The internal consistency in the present study was calculated using Cronbach's alpha as .81.

Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R): This questionnaire was designed by Skowron and Schmitt (2003) and consists of 46 items, which was developed based on the standard 45-item Differentiation of Self Inventory. This questionnaire includes 4 components: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others. The scoring method for this questionnaire is on a six-point Likert scale (from 1= not at all true of me to 6= very true of me). The maximum score of the questionnaire is 270. A lower score on this questionnaire indicates lower levels of differentiation of self. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) confirmed the face validity of this questionnaire and obtained its reliability using Cronbach's alpha as .88. Additionally, in a study, Skowron and Friedlander (1998) extracted construct validity for the 4 subscales and explained a total of 78% of the data variance. The calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire has been estimated to be above .70. Furthermore, in the present study, Cronbach's alpha was used to examine the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire, yielding a coefficient of .88.

Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC): This scale was designed by Connor and Davidson (2003) and consists of 25 items. This scale is multidimensional and consists of 5 components: Personal Competence, Trust in One's Instincts/Tolerance of Negative Affect, Positive Acceptance of Change/Secure Relationships, Control, and Spiritual Influences, which is scored based on a 5-point Likert scale (from 0= not true at all to 4= true nearly all the time). The minimum resilience score is 0 and the maximum score is 100 (Connor & Davidson, 2003). The validity and reliability of this scale have been examined and confirmed in domestic research. Mohammadi (2005) translated and standardized this scale for the first time in Iran, and in a study using Cronbach's alpha method, obtained a reliability coefficient equal to .89 (Mohammadi et al., 2006). Samani et al. (2007) also reported an internal consistency of .93 for this scale in a study to determine its

validity using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and they confirmed the existence of a single factor in this scale using the principal component analysis method. And in the present study, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .82 was obtained.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, structural equation modeling was used with the help of SPSS version 25 and AMOS version 26 software.

Findings and Results

The mean age of the children participating in the study was 5.10 and the standard deviation was 0.87. Furthermore, the mean age of the mothers was 34.40 and the standard deviation was 6.89.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix, Mean, Standard Deviation, Skewness, and Kurtosis

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Behavioral Problems	1				
2. Marital Satisfaction	-.29**	1			
3. Phubbing	.27**	-.31*	1		
4. Differentiation of Self	-.29**	-.25*	-.37**	1	
5. Resilience	-.30**	.22*	-.36*	.38**	1
Mean	81.01	118.60	40.30	171.30	52.40
Standard Deviation	33.48	56.37	19.28	43.08	10.74
Skewness	.14	-.08	.33	.17	-.65
Kurtosis	.33	.37	-.29	.80	.36

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

As shown in Table 1, there is a significant negative relationship between marital satisfaction, differentiation of self, and resilience with behavioral problems at the .001 level, and a significant positive relationship between phubbing and behavioral problems at the .001 level. The Pearson correlation coefficients of the variables are significant, and the assumption of a relationship among the model variables is confirmed. In addition, to examine the assumption of univariate normal distribution, the values of skewness and kurtosis were examined, and to evaluate the assumption of non-multicollinearity, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance coefficient were investigated. Since the skewness and kurtosis of the variables did not fall outside the acceptable range and none of the factors crossed the boundaries of -2 to $+2$, the distribution of the studied data was normal. Therefore, the assumption of non-multicollinearity was also met in the research variables. It should be noted that in the inclusion of all indicator variables entered into the model, the criterion of having a coefficient greater than .40 was observed.

Table 2. Total, Direct, and Indirect Path Coefficients

Paths		<i>b</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Total Path Coefficient	Marital Satisfaction - Behavioral Problems	-.72	-.33	-2.86	.001
	Phubbing - Behavioral Problems	-.50	-.28	-2.28	.001
	Differentiation of Self - Behavioral Problems	-.504	-.30	-2.28	.001
Direct Path Coefficient	Marital Satisfaction - Behavioral Problems	-.41	-.28	-1.86	.001
	Phubbing - Behavioral Problems	.78	.27	1.91	.001
	Differentiation of Self - Behavioral Problems	-.95	-.29	-1.57	.001
	Marital Satisfaction - Resilience	1.94	.30	2.56	.001
	Phubbing - Resilience	-.71	-.31	-2.80	.001

Indirect Path Coefficient	Differentiation of Self - Resilience	-.50	-.25	-1.28	.001
	Resilience - Behavioral Problems	-1.18	-.32	-2.08	.001
	Marital Satisfaction - Resilience - Behavioral Problems	-.89	-.25	-1.90	.001
	Phubbing - Resilience - Behavioral Problems	-1.13	-.30	-2.51	.001
	Differentiation of Self - Resilience - Behavioral Problems	-1.13	-.31	2.81	.001

Table 2 shows that resilience mediates the relationship of phubbing, marital satisfaction, and differentiation of self with behavioral problems.

Table 3. Fit Indices of the Final Structural Model of the Research

Fit Indices	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	p-value	Cmin/df	GFI	AGFI	IFI	NFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Desired Level	> .05	-	Between 1 and 5	> .05	< 3	> .90	> .90	> .90	> .90	> .90	> .90	< .08
Final Model	.09	83	3.34	.057	1.37	.94	.93	.99	.98	.99	.99	.038

The results in Table 3 indicate that the obtained model has a good fit.

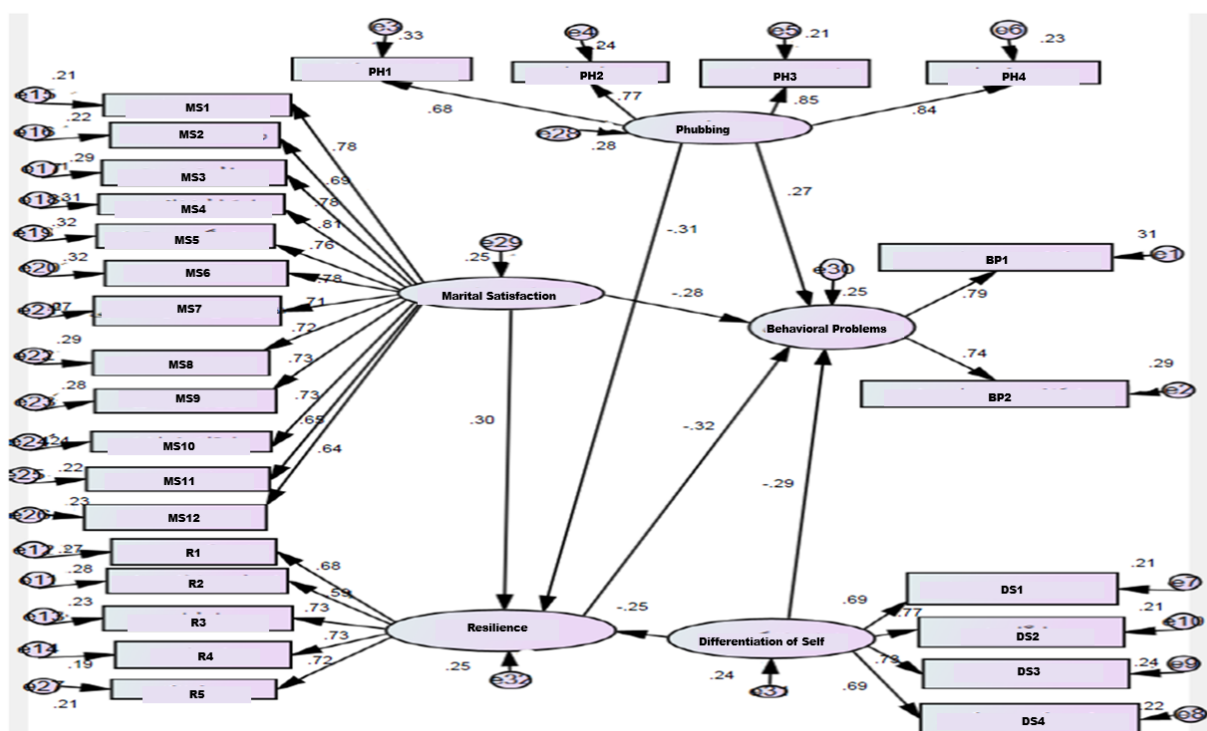


Figure 1. Structural coefficients of the research

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of the present structural equation modeling study was to predict behavioral problems in preschool children by rigorously examining the direct and indirect influences of maternal marital satisfaction, phubbing behaviors, and differentiation of self. Central to this theoretical framework was the investigation of maternal resilience functioning as a crucial mediating psychological mechanism. The empirical findings robustly supported the hypothesized structural model, demonstrating that all proposed antecedent variables exerted statistically significant effects ($p < .01$) on children’s behavioral developmental outcomes, both directly and indirectly through the conduit of maternal resilience. This comprehensive systemic perspective illuminates the highly intricate interplay between a mother’s

interpersonal spousal dynamics, her modern digital habits, her intrapsychic emotional autonomy, and her foundational psychological fortitude in shaping her offspring's behavioral trajectories.

The structural path analysis revealed a highly significant negative coefficient from mothers' marital satisfaction to children's behavioral problems. This empirical reality dictates that as a mother's subjective satisfaction with her spousal relationship increases, the frequency, intensity, and severity of her child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors correspondingly decrease. This specific outcome strongly corroborates established developmental psychopathology paradigms, which consistently identify the marital subsystem as the emotional bedrock and primary stabilizing force of the overarching family environment (5). When mothers experience a nurturing, emotionally secure, and deeply satisfying partnership, they are fundamentally better equipped to cultivate a warm, predictable, and consistent caregiving environment. Optimal spousal support functions as an immediate buffer against the daily, relentless stressors of child-rearing, directly allowing mothers to engage in much more sensitive, contingent, and responsive parenting (6). Conversely, enduring marital discord severely compromises a mother's finite psychological resources. As demonstrated by extant clinical literature, emotional dysregulation within the marital dyad—often exacerbated by rigid individual traits such as maladaptive perfectionism—inevitably generates a toxic marital disharmony that spills over into the parent-child subsystem (8). The profound emotional exhaustion stemming from chronic marital dissatisfaction frequently manifests as harsh, highly inconsistent, or emotionally withdrawn disciplinary tactics. This deprives the developing child of the essential psychological scaffolding required for adaptive emotional regulation, thereby directly precipitating behavioral deviations. This pathway unequivocally underscores the profound systemic therapeutic value of interventions such as emotionally focused couple therapy, which not only serve to repair the fractured marital bond but secondarily, yet crucially, function as a potent preventative measure against early child psychopathology (7).

A particularly salient and contemporary finding of the current investigation is the significant positive predictive relationship between maternal phubbing and children's behavioral problems. In the modern digital era, phubbing represents a profound structural disruption to the vital micro-interactions that constitute healthy, contingent parenting (9). The data unequivocally suggest that when mothers frequently and unpredictably divert their visual and emotional attention to smartphones during interactions with their offspring, the resulting technological interference acts as an active catalyst for child behavioral issues. This finding strongly aligns with recent compelling evidence highlighting the deeply detrimental developmental impact of problematic maternal internet use on the behavioral profiles of preschool-aged children (13). The underlying psychological mechanism dictating this phenomenon can be optimally understood through the lens of early attachment theory and emotional availability. Phubbing creates a state of intermittent and entirely unpredictable maternal emotional withdrawal, effectively mimicking a chronic "still-face" paradigm that predictably provokes acute psychological distress in young, dependent children. To frantically regain maternal attention or to cope with the profound anxiety of perceived emotional neglect, children frequently resort to disruptive externalizing acting-out behaviors, or alternatively, withdraw into debilitating internalizing symptomatology. Furthermore, the verified structural model suggests that phubbing operates as a pervasive systemic toxin, steadily deteriorating adult communication skills and drastically lowering overall marital satisfaction (12). It is also clinically imperative to contextualize this compulsive behavior not merely as a superficial modern habit, but potentially as a deeply ingrained maladaptive coping mechanism.

Contemporary psychological literature indicates that habitual maternal phubbing may be firmly rooted in severe, unaddressed psychological distress, such as latent childhood trauma and heightened dissociative tendencies (11). Thus, a mother's digital distraction is a highly complex, multi-layered phenomenon that severely compromises the holistic safety of the caregiving environment.

Entirely consistent with the foundational tenets of Bowenian family systems theory, the present study found that a mother's differentiation of self inversely and significantly predicted her child's behavioral problems. Mothers possessing high, mature levels of differentiation demonstrate an advanced psychological capacity to seamlessly balance profound emotional intimacy with highly preserved individual autonomy (14). This exceptional intrapsychic stability permits them to engage with their children's needs without becoming pathologically emotionally fused to the child's momentary distress or behavioral acting-out. Consequently, highly differentiated mothers can successfully maintain a calm, objective "I-position" and consistently employ rational, structured discipline, rather than spontaneously reacting out of their own triggered anxiety or unresolved historical trauma (15). This specific finding is heavily supported by robust prior research demonstrating that parental differentiation is a primary structural cornerstone that intergenerationally dictates offspring behavioral stability, emotional regulation, and attachment security (17). When a mother severely lacks self-differentiation, she becomes highly prone to chronic emotional reactivity and may frequently struggle with paralyzing psychological conditions such as alexithymia, which severely limits her overarching capacity for empathetic attunement (16). The current empirical results reiterate with high statistical confidence that a mother's internal psychological boundary formation is just as critical to a child's optimal development as her observable, external parenting behaviors. High maternal differentiation systematically creates a highly predictable, emotionally regulated, and fundamentally safe developmental environment, directly and significantly mitigating the overarching risk of profound behavioral disorders in preschool children (18).

The most theoretically significant and clinically actionable contribution of this comprehensive research is the empirical confirmation of maternal resilience as a crucial mediating systemic variable. The structural equation model clearly elucidated that marital satisfaction, phubbing, and differentiation of self do not merely operate in statistical isolation; rather, they collectively and dynamically shape a mother's core psychological resilience, which in turn decisively dictates child behavioral outcomes. The statistical pathway flowing from enhanced resilience to reduced child behavioral problems was found to be robust and highly significant. This seamlessly aligns with an extensive body of literature conceptualizing parental resilience as a highly dynamic, adaptable psychological asset that actively buffers the entire family system against multifaceted adversity (19). Mothers possessing high levels of resilience are endowed with the immense psychological elasticity required to adapt to the relentless, exhausting demands of parenting, successfully maintain their own baseline mental well-being, and continuously provide highly responsive, attuned care (3). When a mother is fundamentally resilient, she possesses the power to effectively interrupt the toxic intergenerational transmission of psychological distress, even if she harbors a complex history of childhood maltreatment herself (4). The structural data confirms that maternal resilience acts as an active, protective systemic shield, fostering a deeply harmonious home environment that significantly curtails the emergence and exacerbation of early child behavioral deviations (20).

Furthermore, analyzing the specific antecedent paths leading to resilience provides critical, nuanced clinical insights. A highly differentiated mother who simultaneously experiences profound marital satisfaction possesses an immense wealth of internal psychological and external interpersonal resources that collectively and profoundly fortify her baseline resilience (21). She can effectively regulate her intense emotional states, heavily rely on her trusted spouse for instrumental and emotional support, and successfully navigate chronic developmental stressors without plunging into debilitating marital burnout (22). Conversely, the insidious modern behavioral intrusion of phubbing acts as a continuous, active drain on this very resilience. By systematically eroding spousal intimacy and actively disrupting mindful, present parenting engagement, phubbing rapidly diminishes the mother's vital psychological reserves, leaving her highly vulnerable to everyday stress and vastly less capable of maintaining resilient parenting strategies. Therefore, resilience firmly serves as the crucial psychological bridge within this framework. The structural quality of a mother's marriage, the strictness of her digital boundaries, and the maturity of her intrapsychic differentiation culminate to create either a highly resilient or a dangerously depleted maternal state. This precise systemic state ultimately, and powerfully, governs her parenting efficacy and, by direct extension, the fundamental behavioral health of her developing child.

Despite the robust theoretical and empirical contributions of the present investigation, several methodological and contextual constraints necessitate a highly cautious and nuanced interpretation of the findings. Primarily, the reliance on a cross-sectional research design intrinsically and completely precludes the establishment of definitive causal relationships among the examined psychological variables. Although advanced structural equation modeling provides a highly sophisticated directional framework based on solid theoretical underpinnings, the resulting data merely reflect statistical associations captured at a single, isolated point in time. This inherent temporal limitation leaves the distinct possibility of complex bidirectional or highly reciprocal psychological influences entirely unaddressed. Furthermore, the structural operationalization of all primary constructs—including spousal marital satisfaction, the frequency of phubbing behaviors, complex intrapsychic differentiation, baseline resilience, and the severity of child behavioral issues—was exclusively dependent on maternal self-report psychometric inventories. This monolithic methodological approach to data collection introduces the pervasive, well-documented risk of common method variance and deeply ingrained social desirability bias. Mothers might unintentionally, or defensively, underreport their own problematic digital phubbing habits or artificially minimize the true severity of their children's behavioral deviations due to unconscious psychological defense mechanisms or heavy societal expectations regarding maternal perfection. Additionally, the specific sampling framework was geographically constrained to a highly specific urban demographic. This inherently limits the overarching ecological validity and the broader generalizability of the empirical findings to rural populations, vastly diverse socioeconomic strata, or entirely different cultural landscapes where digital technology integration and traditional familial structures may operate under fundamentally different psychosocial paradigms. Lastly, the tested theoretical model did not account for several highly potent potential confounding variables, such as paternal psychological health and direct caregiving involvement, latent undiagnosed neurodevelopmental conditions within the children, or broader macroeconomic familial stressors, all of which could substantially and invisibly skew the observed structural pathways.

To successfully transcend the current boundaries of this foundational study, future scholarly inquiries must actively adopt significantly more rigorous, longitudinal, and highly multidimensional methodological architectures. The direct implementation of sophisticated longitudinal cohort tracking designs is absolutely paramount to accurately capture the dynamic developmental trajectories of these specific variables over extended periods and to definitively establish the strict temporal precedence required for true causal inference. Methodically tracking maternal digital behavioral habits and fluctuating intrapsychic states across the entire early childhood developmental continuum would successfully illuminate critical, time-sensitive windows of systemic vulnerability and emerging resilience. Moreover, future research frameworks should strictly mandate multi-informant data collection strategies as a standard procedure. Actively incorporating the independent perspectives of fathers, trained early childhood educators, and objective, independent clinical observers would yield a highly comprehensive, perfectly triangulated assessment of the child's true behavioral profile and the actual, unbiased frequency of maternal digital interference, effectively neutralizing the severe biases inherent in isolated maternal self-reporting. Furthermore, the integration of direct observational methodologies, such as recording standardized, structured parent-child play interactions in a laboratory setting to precisely quantify micro-moments of digital phubbing and immediately subsequent child emotional dysregulation, would provide absolutely invaluable empirical granularity. Additionally, researchers are highly encouraged to structurally expand the current theoretical model by actively integrating critical, complex moderating variables. Rigorously investigating the compensatory, protective role of high paternal involvement, the systemic buffering effects of robust extended family networks, or the highly specific moderating impact of innate child temperamental traits will successfully afford a vastly more nuanced and structurally holistic understanding of the entire familial ecosystem. Finally, executing broad cross-cultural comparative studies is absolutely essential to definitively delineate which specific aspects of the phubbing-resilience-behavioral triad are deeply universal human phenomena and which exact pathways are uniquely dictated by specific sociodemographic and cultural environments.

The empirical pathways conclusively validated in this structural equation model offer profound, highly actionable, and empirically backed blueprints for clinical practitioners, systemic family therapists, and overarching public health strategists. Given the highly significant and deleterious developmental impact of maternal technological interference, widespread psychoeducational campaigns specifically targeting parents must immediately prioritize strict digital hygiene. These public health initiatives should explicitly highlight the severe, long-term developmental and psychological costs of parental phubbing. Preventative clinical interventions should not merely instruct parents to superficially reduce overall screen time, but rather deeply guide them in recognizing compulsive phubbing as a potential, unconscious emotional detachment mechanism. Therapists must actively assist parents in replacing hollow digital distraction with highly mindful, deeply contingent, and emotionally resonant parent-child attunement. In the direct therapeutic domain, emotionally focused couples counseling should be strategically positioned not only as a localized remedy for intense marital discord but essentially as a frontline early intervention strategy designed to actively safeguard vulnerable child mental health. By profoundly enriching spousal communication frameworks and solidifying mutual emotional support, family therapists can indirectly, yet powerfully, elevate core maternal resilience and permanently stabilize the overarching caregiving environment.

Furthermore, highly individualized therapeutic frameworks, particularly those deeply rooted in Bowenian systemic principles, should be extensively utilized by clinicians to actively cultivate and mature maternal self-differentiation. Deeply empowering mothers to establish highly robust, impenetrable intrapsychic boundaries ensures they can successfully maintain profound emotional equilibrium during acute child-rearing crises, rather than inevitably succumbing to highly reactive, anxiety-driven parenting patterns. Ultimately, all preventative community psychological programs must actively pivot toward holistic, systemic parental resilience-building protocols. By effectively equipping mothers with highly adaptive stress management tools, advanced emotional regulation strategies, and robust cognitive flexibility, modern clinical practices can actively construct an impenetrable psychological buffer that comprehensively shields the rapidly developing child from the vast cascading effects of modern relational discord and pervasive digital stressors, thereby successfully fostering a generation of deeply psychologically secure and highly behaviorally regulated youth.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their deep gratitude to all participants who contributed to this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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