

Identification and Ranking of Factors Influencing Parental Role Conflict in One-Child Families

Seyedeh Zahra. Abtahi^{1*} 

¹ M.A of Clinical psychology, Marv.C., Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: z.abtahi8468@gmail.com

Article Info

Article type:

Original Article

How to cite this article:

Abtahi, S. Z. (2026). Identification and Ranking of Factors Influencing Parental Role Conflict in One-Child Families. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 7(1), 1-12.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.4719>



© 2026 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to identify and rank the psychological, relational, and contextual factors contributing to parental role conflict in one-child families.

Methods and Materials: This research employed a sequential mixed-method design consisting of two complementary phases. In the qualitative phase, a systematic literature review was conducted, and the extracted data were analyzed using NVivo 14 through open, axial, and selective coding until theoretical saturation was achieved. Seven main thematic categories were identified: Parenting Expectations and Role Strain, Emotional Regulation and Stress Management, Marital Relationship Dynamics, Socioeconomic and Cultural Pressures, Child-Centered Dependency, Psychological Well-being of Parents, and Support Systems and Coping Resources. In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire based on the qualitative results was administered to 230 parents of one-child families living in Tehran, selected through convenience sampling. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 and the Friedman test to rank the importance of the identified factors.

Findings: The Friedman test revealed significant differences in the ranking of factors influencing parental role conflict ($p < 0.05$). Parenting Expectations and Role Strain received the highest mean rank (6.35), followed by Emotional Regulation and Stress Management (5.92) and Marital Relationship Dynamics (5.48). Support Systems and Coping Resources was ranked lowest (3.71). The results highlight that intrapersonal and relational dimensions have a stronger predictive influence on role conflict than external socioeconomic conditions.

Conclusion: Parental role conflict in one-child families is primarily driven by emotional and cognitive factors, particularly perfectionistic parenting expectations, emotional dysregulation, and marital tension. Addressing these determinants through psychological skills training, marital support, and social resource enhancement could significantly mitigate parental strain and improve family well-being.

Keywords: Parental role conflict; one-child families; emotional regulation; marital dynamics; parenting stress; family well-being

1. Introduction

The structure and dynamics of the modern family are undergoing profound transformations due to global demographic shifts, changing gender roles, and the redefinition of parental responsibilities. One significant manifestation of these changes is the increasing prevalence of one-child families, particularly in urban contexts where social, economic, and psychological factors intertwine to shape family functioning. In such families, the child often becomes the central emotional and social focus, amplifying parental investment and, consequently, the risk of parental role conflict—a condition wherein parents experience psychological strain in balancing their multifaceted responsibilities as caregivers, partners, and individuals (Gómez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Sánchez, 2022; Wang et al., 2025).

Research on parental role conflict has traditionally focused on the interplay between work and family roles, but emerging perspectives emphasize that intrafamilial variables—such as emotional regulation, parenting style, and marital dynamics—play equally critical roles (Aslanabadi et al., 2025; Findley et al., 2025). In one-child households, these conflicts may become even more pronounced due to the heightened emotional dependency and perfectionistic expectations placed on the parent–child relationship. Studies reveal that parents of only children often exhibit a tendency toward overinvolvement, striving to meet idealized standards of child-rearing, which in turn leads to emotional exhaustion and identity diffusion (Jeong et al., 2020; Lu, 2025).

The parent–child relationship represents the core unit through which emotional development, socialization, and moral guidance are transmitted. However, this relationship can also become a source of conflict when emotional boundaries blur or when parents internalize their child’s successes and failures as reflections of their own competence (Li & Ye, 2024; Meijing, 2024). Research in developmental and family psychology underscores that excessive parental control and emotional fusion can disrupt both child autonomy and parental well-being, fostering cycles of dependency and frustration (Wong et al., 2023; Ying et al., 2023). Moreover, the psychological well-being of parents—shaped by self-efficacy, emotional clarity, and coping strategies—serves as a mediating factor linking family stressors to role conflict outcomes (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025; Ramos et al., 2022).

Parental role conflict is not only a psychological phenomenon but also a social construct that reflects broader cultural and structural conditions. In many societies, particularly those with collectivist orientations, parental roles are embedded within extended kinship expectations and community norms (Sakharova & Tsvetkova, 2024; Савина & Сафуанов, 2024). Cultural ideologies of “good parenting” frequently prescribe idealized behaviors that can become unattainable for modern urban families facing economic strain and social isolation. As globalization and urbanization accelerate, dual-income households have become more common, yet institutional support for balancing professional and domestic roles remains limited (Cao et al., 2022; Goworko-Składanek & Prymak, 2022). This discrepancy produces what researchers term role strain, where the simultaneous demands of parenting, partnership, and employment exceed an individual’s available emotional and temporal resources (Lin et al., 2020; Stearns & McKinney, 2020).

The psychological burden of modern parenting has been widely documented. Parents increasingly report burnout symptoms, anxiety, and guilt, particularly in households where both parents work full-time and have limited access to social support networks (Aslanabadi et al., 2025; Findley et al., 2025). The emotional labor inherent in parenting an only child intensifies these effects: parents feel compelled to be constantly attentive, emotionally available, and achievement-oriented on behalf of their child. The lack of sibling interactions places additional pressure on parents to serve as the child’s primary companion and role model, potentially heightening emotional exhaustion and interpersonal tension (Gómez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Sánchez, 2022; Lu, 2025).

Marital relationships constitute another pivotal determinant of parental role conflict. Empirical evidence suggests that spousal disagreement over parenting strategies—such as discipline, affection, or autonomy—can significantly undermine both parental coherence and marital satisfaction (Cyr et al., 2020; Lange et al., 2021). In families where communication is poor, unresolved marital conflict often spills over into parent–child interactions, a process described as emotional spillover (Papp & Hartley, 2019; Ramos et al., 2022). Conversely, positive spousal support and empathy have been shown to buffer parents from emotional exhaustion and strengthen co-parenting alliances (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025; Moore & McDougall, 2022). Marital satisfaction thus functions as both a protective and

risk factor: harmonious partnerships promote shared responsibility, while conflictual ones amplify parental strain.

A growing body of literature also highlights emotional regulation as a central mechanism linking family stress and parental conflict (Jeong et al., 2020; Lu, 2025). Parents with limited emotional awareness or maladaptive coping strategies—such as suppression, denial, or overcontrol—are more susceptible to experiencing frustration and burnout when faced with parenting challenges (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025; Wintner et al., 2023). Emotional clarity has been found to correlate positively with adaptive parenting practices and negatively with parental distress (Merino et al., 2024). Conversely, chronic stress and poor emotional regulation may not only affect parents' mental health but also influence child outcomes such as behavioral problems and anxiety (Li & Ye, 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

Beyond psychological and relational variables, socioeconomic and cultural conditions exert powerful contextual effects on parental role conflict. Economic instability, job insecurity, and high living costs are key predictors of family stress and diminished parental efficacy (Margaletić & Šimović, 2024; Rinaldo et al., 2024). Families in metropolitan areas often face time scarcity and limited leisure, reducing opportunities for quality interactions and self-care. Moreover, societal expectations surrounding “intensive parenting” reinforce guilt and inadequacy when parents cannot meet idealized standards (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Gómez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Sánchez, 2022). Studies indicate that in societies undergoing rapid modernization, parental aspirations for their only child's success may paradoxically heighten stress and reduce emotional connectedness (Qu et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2023).

From a legal and institutional perspective, the regulation of parental responsibilities and child welfare policies also indirectly shape parental role strain (Goworko-Składanek & Prymak, 2022; Zhuravleva, 2021). For example, the absence of structured parental leave, insufficient childcare infrastructure, and rigid work schedules exacerbate role conflict, particularly for mothers (Findley et al., 2025; Jeong et al., 2020). Moreover, research on legal proceedings concerning custody or child representation underscores the psychological toll such processes impose on parents, revealing the systemic nature of stress within family institutions (Margaletić & Šimović, 2024; Савина & Сафьянов, 2024). These findings highlight that parental conflict is embedded not only in psychological and familial contexts but also within societal and policy frameworks.

Parental overprotection and child-centered dependency are particularly prevalent in one-child families. Parents may overidentify with their child's achievements or struggles, perceiving them as extensions of their own self-worth (Meijing, 2024; Willemsen, 2023). This enmeshment often leads to emotional overinvolvement, hindering the child's autonomy and fostering parental anxiety during separation or developmental transitions (Shaki et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). The dynamic becomes mutually reinforcing: the more dependent the child becomes, the greater the parental vigilance and fear of loss. Such dependency not only heightens the intensity of daily interactions but also restricts parents' engagement in self-care and marital intimacy, perpetuating emotional imbalance (Gómez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Sánchez, 2022; Lu, 2025).

The literature also underscores the importance of social support systems in mitigating parental role conflict. Spousal cooperation, extended family involvement, and access to professional counseling or community-based resources serve as critical buffers against psychological strain (Perez et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2023). However, social stigma surrounding mental health and parenting difficulties often prevents parents from seeking help, especially in cultures that idealize parental sacrifice and endurance (Findley et al., 2025; Sakharova & Tsvetkova, 2024). Empirical studies demonstrate that parents who engage in supportive networks exhibit greater emotional resilience, enhanced marital satisfaction, and improved role balance (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025; Wintner et al., 2023).

Technological and cultural shifts have also redefined parent-child communication, introducing both opportunities and new stressors. The emergence of “parental phubbing”—parents' distraction by smartphones—has been linked to increased emotional and behavioral problems in children and greater parent-child conflict (Wang et al., 2025). Similarly, inconsistent digital mediation practices can undermine parental authority and exacerbate intergenerational tension (Spielvogel et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the digital environment introduces new dimensions of role conflict, requiring parents to navigate the intersection of modern technology, family intimacy, and self-regulation (Moore & McDougall, 2022; Ying et al., 2023).

Another crucial yet underexplored aspect of parental role conflict concerns psychological well-being and self-identity. Many parents of one-child families report a sense of diminished personal identity, perceiving their worth primarily through their child's development (Aslanabadi et

al., 2025; Lu, 2025). The transition to parenthood often involves renegotiating personal boundaries and redefining self-concept, processes that become particularly challenging in high-pressure environments. Without adequate self-reflection and autonomy, parents may experience cognitive dissonance between who they are as individuals and who they believe they must be as parents (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025; Wintner et al., 2023). This identity tension underlies much of the psychological distress observed in contemporary families, emphasizing the importance of self-care and emotional literacy as protective factors (Lu, 2025; Merino et al., 2024).

Lastly, cross-cultural and comparative studies have provided valuable insight into how societal values and family structures interact to shape parental experiences. In collectivist societies, parents often perceive childrearing as a communal responsibility, while in individualist cultures, it is treated as a personal achievement (Sakharova & Tsvetkova, 2024; Stearns & McKinney, 2020). Both orientations carry unique pressures: collectivist parents fear social judgment, while individualist parents fear failure of self-realization. Comparative research across diverse populations—ranging from Spain and China to Iran and Eastern Europe—confirms that the emotional consequences of one-child parenting transcend cultural boundaries, although the sources and coping mechanisms differ (Gómez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Sánchez, 2022; Margaletić & Šimović, 2024; Rinaldo et al., 2024).

Given this extensive body of evidence, the present study seeks to integrate and empirically examine these multidimensional determinants of parental role conflict. Through a two-phase mixed-method approach—qualitative identification via literature synthesis and quantitative ranking through statistical analysis—this research aims to identify and rank the factors influencing parental role conflict in one-child families.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a sequential mixed-method design consisting of two distinct phases: a qualitative exploratory phase and a quantitative ranking phase. The first phase aimed to identify the underlying factors influencing parental role conflict in one-child families through an extensive qualitative content analysis. The second phase sought to prioritize and rank these factors based on empirical data gathered from parents.

The qualitative phase was conducted using a document-based approach, where relevant academic literature, including journal articles, theses, and reports, were reviewed systematically. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, when no new factors or dimensions emerged from the literature. This phase formed the conceptual foundation for the subsequent quantitative investigation.

The quantitative phase involved 230 parents of one-child families residing in Tehran, selected through convenience sampling. Participants were diverse in terms of gender, education, and socioeconomic background, representing various districts of the city. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one biological child and to be living with their spouse. The selected sample size was determined sufficient for reliable ranking analysis using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques in SPSS-26.

2.2. Measures

In the first phase, data were obtained solely through a comprehensive literature review focused on concepts such as parental role conflict, family structure, and the psychosocial dynamics of one-child households. Sources were extracted from major academic databases and indexed repositories, with emphasis on studies published in the past decade. The collected textual data were imported into NVivo 14 software for qualitative analysis. Using an inductive approach, open, axial, and selective coding procedures were applied to extract relevant themes, categories, and subcategories. Through iterative coding and comparison, conceptual clusters representing key dimensions of parental role conflict were developed and refined until theoretical saturation was achieved.

In the second phase, a structured questionnaire was developed based on the qualitative findings. The instrument contained items representing each identified factor and was rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “very low” to “very high.” The questionnaire’s content validity was confirmed through expert review by five faculty members specializing in family psychology and social sciences. To ensure reliability, a pilot test was conducted with 30 participants, yielding a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient above 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted separately for the two phases.

In the qualitative phase, thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns and conceptual relationships among the extracted themes. NVivo 14 software facilitated data management, coding, and frequency analysis. The credibility of the findings was ensured through peer debriefing and comparison of extracted codes with existing theoretical frameworks.

In the quantitative phase, the finalized factors from the qualitative analysis were statistically analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution) were first calculated. Then, the Friedman test was employed to rank the identified factors based on participants' responses. This non-parametric test was selected due to its suitability for ordinal data and its effectiveness in identifying the relative importance of multiple variables. The resulting rankings provided empirical prioritization of the main dimensions influencing parental role conflict in one-child families.

Table 1

Qualitative Analysis

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Parenting Expectations and Role Strain	Unrealistic parenting ideals	perfectionistic standards; pressure for "ideal child"; social comparison; emotional exhaustion
	Dual work–family responsibilities	overcommitment; time conflict; role overload; burnout symptoms; neglect of self-care
	Overinvolvement in child development	micromanagement of activities; excessive monitoring; fear of failure; dependence reinforcement
2. Emotional Regulation and Stress Management	Parental anxiety and guilt	fear of inadequacy; self-blame; anticipatory worry; emotional rumination
	Coping style inflexibility	avoidance coping; overcontrol; suppression; lack of emotional resilience
3. Marital Relationship Dynamics	Lack of social support for stress buffering	isolation; limited peer exchange; perceived judgment; lack of communal help
	Disagreement in parenting approaches	inconsistent discipline; conflicting values; boundary disputes
	Decline in marital satisfaction	reduced intimacy; communication breakdown; emotional distance
4. Socioeconomic and Cultural Pressures	Power imbalance and decision conflict	dominance struggle; lack of negotiation; resentment; dissatisfaction
	Economic strain	financial insecurity; employment instability; cost of education
	Cultural expectations of parenting	gendered norms; extended family influence; societal labeling of "only-child parents"
5. Child-Centered Dependency	Urban lifestyle stressors	limited time; traffic and housing pressures; lack of leisure; work overload
	Overprotection tendencies	fear of harm; limited autonomy; parental overpresence; intrusive care
	Emotional overidentification	blurred boundaries; vicarious success; projection of parental hopes
6. Psychological Well-being of Parents	Difficulty with separation or independence	resistance to child autonomy; parental anxiety at school transitions; clinginess reinforcement
	Low self-efficacy in parenting	self-doubt; fear of mistakes; reduced confidence; avoidance of decision-making
	Emotional exhaustion and burnout	fatigue; loss of motivation; irritability; sense of entrapment
7. Support Systems and Coping Resources	Identity confusion and self-neglect	loss of individuality; reduced leisure; prioritizing child over personal goals
	Perceived lack of control	helplessness; unpredictability; stress reactivity
	Spousal emotional support	empathy; shared parenting; emotional validation; active listening

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase of the study aimed to explore and conceptualize the major factors influencing parental role conflict in one-child families. Data were derived exclusively from a comprehensive literature review until theoretical saturation was reached. Using NVivo 14, qualitative content analysis was conducted through open, axial, and selective coding. Seven overarching themes (categories) were identified, each comprising several subthemes (subcategories) and corresponding conceptual indicators (open codes) that reflect the underlying behavioral, emotional, and social mechanisms shaping the parental role conflict experience. The final coding structure, refined through iterative analysis and expert validation, is presented below.

Extended family and community support
Institutional and counseling resources

availability of relatives; intergenerational care; cultural expectations of help
access to therapy; parenting workshops; guidance services; social policy support

1. Parenting Expectations and Role Strain

The first theme, Parenting Expectations and Role Strain, captures the internal and external pressures experienced by parents in one-child families who often strive to fulfill perfectionistic standards of parenting. The literature reveals that these parents tend to internalize societal ideals of raising an “ideal child,” leading to overinvolvement and micromanagement of their child’s life. Many feel compelled to achieve success vicariously through their child, which intensifies emotional exhaustion and self-imposed pressure. Dual work–family responsibilities exacerbate the strain, as parents juggle professional and household duties with limited time and energy. This persistent overextension results in role overload and burnout, where parents struggle to balance nurturing, discipline, and self-care simultaneously. The clash between personal aspirations and parental obligations creates a sustained sense of inadequacy and guilt, which lies at the heart of parental role conflict in these families.

2. Emotional Regulation and Stress Management

The second major theme, Emotional Regulation and Stress Management, centers on parents’ psychological struggles in coping with the emotional demands of raising an only child. Studies highlight elevated levels of parental anxiety, guilt, and fear of failure, particularly among those who perceive their child as their sole emotional investment. Many parents exhibit inflexible coping patterns—such as avoidance, suppression, or overcontrol—which hinder adaptive stress management and lead to chronic emotional rumination. The lack of accessible emotional support networks intensifies these difficulties; without peer or familial reassurance, parents may feel isolated and judged. Consequently, unresolved stress contributes to heightened tension in family dynamics and further disrupts parents’ ability to maintain emotional equilibrium in the face of everyday challenges.

3. Marital Relationship Dynamics

The third theme, Marital Relationship Dynamics, illustrates how parental role conflict is deeply intertwined with spousal interactions. In one-child families, parenting practices often become a central focus of marital life, and disagreements about discipline, education, or emotional expression can create persistent friction. When parents hold differing values or approaches, inconsistent parenting

emerges, confusing both partners and the child. This discord often coincides with declining marital satisfaction, marked by reduced intimacy, emotional distance, and communication breakdowns. Power imbalances and struggles over decision-making further aggravate relational stress, leading some couples to experience resentment and disengagement. The literature suggests that when marital harmony deteriorates, the emotional climate of the household suffers, amplifying the sense of conflict parents experience between their roles as partners and as caregivers.

4. Socioeconomic and Cultural Pressures

The fourth theme, Socioeconomic and Cultural Pressures, underscores the contextual forces shaping parental conflict. Economic insecurity—manifesting through unstable employment, high living costs, and educational expenses—places parents under chronic strain. These stressors are compounded by societal expectations that idealize intensive parenting, particularly within urban Iranian contexts where success and competition are highly valued. Gendered norms further influence parental dynamics, with mothers often bearing disproportionate responsibility for childrearing while fathers prioritize financial provision. Extended family members may also impose traditional beliefs or unsolicited advice, creating added tension. The urban lifestyle—characterized by time scarcity, heavy workloads, and environmental stressors such as traffic and limited leisure—magnifies fatigue and diminishes family cohesion, making socioeconomic and cultural factors key external contributors to role conflict.

5. Child-Centered Dependency

The fifth theme, Child-Centered Dependency, highlights the emotional overattachment that frequently develops in one-child households. Parents often display overprotective behaviors, fearing harm or failure for their child, and thereby limit the child’s autonomy and independence. This overinvolvement stems from deep emotional identification—parents equate the child’s success or distress with their own self-worth. Over time, this dynamic fosters dependency on both sides: parents become overly enmeshed in their child’s development, while children may struggle with self-regulation and separation. The inability to allow independence during transitions, such as entering school or adolescence, further intensifies parental anxiety. The literature indicates that such enmeshment sustains a cycle of

emotional dependency, reinforcing parental role conflict as parents oscillate between nurturing and control.

6. Psychological Well-Being of Parents

The sixth theme, Psychological Well-Being of Parents, addresses the internal states that mediate parental role conflict. Many parents in one-child families experience low self-efficacy, doubting their ability to make effective parenting decisions. Emotional exhaustion and burnout are widespread, often accompanied by irritability, fatigue, and a sense of entrapment in the parental role. Identity confusion emerges as parents sacrifice personal interests and social connections to prioritize their child's needs, resulting in a loss of individuality and reduced life satisfaction. Feelings of helplessness and lack of control over the child's future add to this psychological burden. Overall, diminished well-being not only undermines parental functioning but also perpetuates a negative emotional environment that reinforces the conflict between personal fulfillment and parental duties.

7. Support Systems and Coping Resources

The final theme, Support Systems and Coping Resources, captures the buffering mechanisms that can alleviate or intensify parental role conflict. The presence of empathetic spousal support, characterized by shared parenting and

emotional validation, significantly reduces the perceived burden of parenting. Extended family networks also play a critical role, offering practical assistance and moral guidance; however, when support is absent or judgmental, it may have the opposite effect. Institutional resources—such as counseling centers, parenting workshops, and social welfare programs—are identified as valuable but often underutilized due to stigma or limited accessibility. The literature emphasizes that parents who engage with supportive systems demonstrate greater resilience, improved emotional regulation, and reduced role strain, highlighting the protective influence of social and institutional coping resources in mitigating parental role conflict.

In the second phase of the study, the seven qualitative themes derived from the literature review were operationalized into a structured questionnaire and distributed among 230 parents of one-child families in Tehran. Respondents rated the importance of each factor influencing parental role conflict on a five-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using the Friedman test in SPSS version 26 to determine the mean ranking of the identified factors. This method allowed for a systematic prioritization of the relative importance of each factor based on parents' lived experiences and perceptions.

Table 2

Ranking of Factors Influencing Parental Role Conflict in One-Child Families (n = 230)

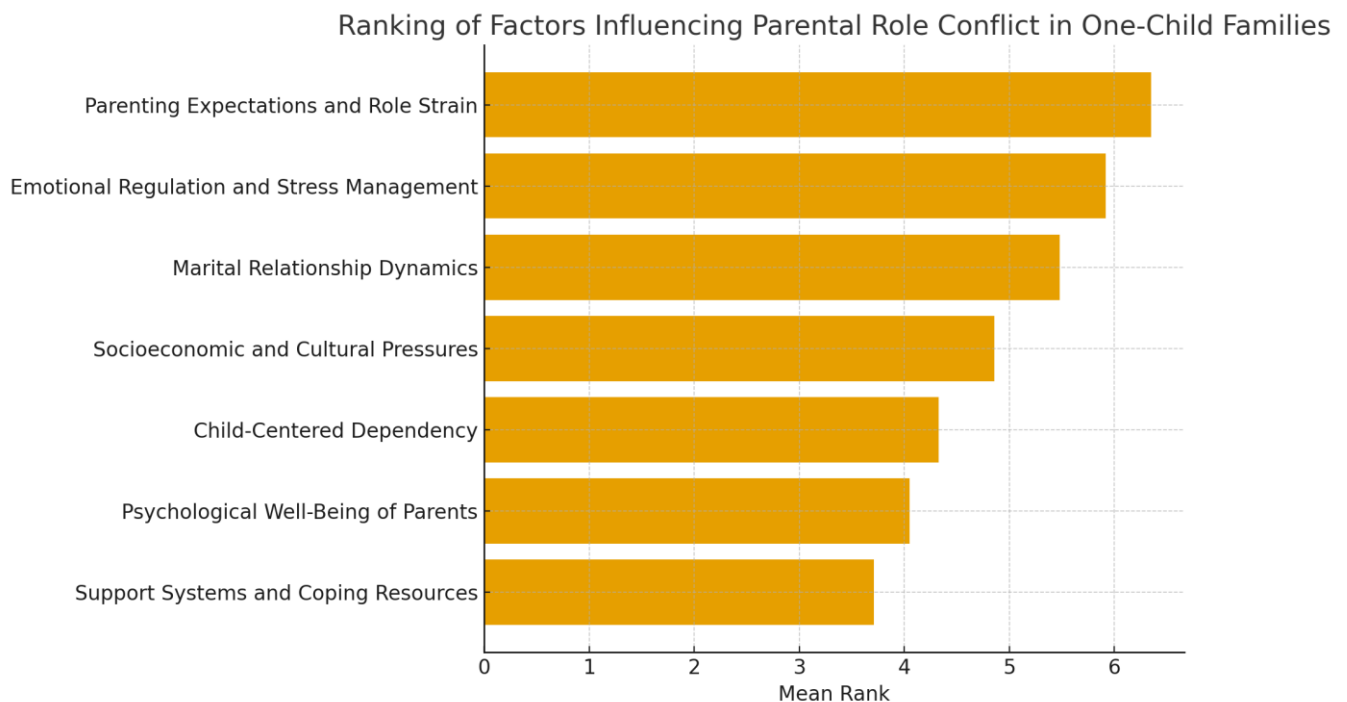
Rank	Factor	Mean Rank
1	Parenting Expectations and Role Strain	6.35
2	Emotional Regulation and Stress Management	5.92
3	Marital Relationship Dynamics	5.48
4	Socioeconomic and Cultural Pressures	4.86
5	Child-Centered Dependency	4.33
6	Psychological Well-Being of Parents	4.05
7	Support Systems and Coping Resources	3.71

The ranking results reveal that Parenting Expectations and Role Strain hold the highest influence on parental role conflict among one-child families, reflecting the overwhelming expectations, perfectionism, and work-family imbalance experienced by parents. Emotional Regulation and Stress Management ranks second, highlighting the emotional vulnerability and coping difficulties associated with raising an only child. The third-ranked factor, Marital Relationship Dynamics, underscores the interdependence between spousal harmony and effective parenting. Socioeconomic and Cultural Pressures occupy the middle range, suggesting that contextual challenges such as

financial strain and societal norms contribute significantly but indirectly to parental tension. Child-Centered Dependency and Psychological Well-Being of Parents follow closely, reflecting how emotional overinvolvement and self-neglect amplify role conflict. Finally, Support Systems and Coping Resources rank lowest, suggesting that while these resources serve as vital buffers, their limited availability and underutilization reduce their mitigating impact. Overall, the results emphasize the predominance of intrapersonal and relational factors over purely contextual ones in explaining parental role conflict dynamics in Tehran's one-child families.

Figure 1

Ranking of Factors Influencing Parental Role Conflict in One-Child Families



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify and rank the factors influencing parental role conflict in one-child families, integrating qualitative findings from a systematic literature review with quantitative validation through ranking analysis among parents in Tehran. The results revealed that seven overarching factors—*Parenting Expectations and Role Strain*, *Emotional Regulation and Stress Management*, *Marital Relationship Dynamics*, *Socioeconomic and Cultural Pressures*, *Child-Centered Dependency*, *Psychological Well-being of Parents*, and *Support Systems and Coping Resources*—jointly contribute to the complexity of parental conflict. The Friedman test indicated that *Parenting Expectations and Role Strain* was ranked as the most influential factor, followed by *Emotional Regulation and Stress Management* and *Marital Relationship Dynamics*, while *Support Systems and Coping Resources* received the lowest rank. These results suggest that intrapersonal and relational variables play a more central role than structural or contextual factors in shaping parental role conflict among one-child families.

The finding that parenting expectations and role strain emerged as the most influential factor aligns with prior research emphasizing the psychological burden of modern

parenthood, particularly in single-child households. Parents in such families often internalize social ideals of perfection, perceiving the success or failure of their only child as a reflection of their own competence (Gómez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Sánchez, 2022; Wang et al., 2025). This self-imposed standard intensifies stress and creates unrealistic expectations that can lead to burnout (Aslanabadi et al., 2025). According to (Jeong et al., 2020), working mothers often experience severe role overload when balancing occupational demands with parenting duties, which diminishes their perceived competence and heightens emotional conflict. Similarly, (Lu, 2025) found that heightened parental sensitivity and overconcern, particularly among mothers of preadolescents, amplify fear of failure and exacerbate self-blame. These findings resonate with (Findley et al., 2025), who identified that interparental conflict and parenting stress in the early postnatal period are significantly correlated with parental exhaustion and identity confusion. Collectively, the evidence suggests that when parents in one-child families strive for unattainable ideals, they compromise their psychological resilience and intensify role strain.

The second-ranked factor, emotional regulation and stress management, underscores the importance of psychological adaptability in parental functioning. The

current findings demonstrate that parents with limited emotional regulation skills or maladaptive coping strategies are more vulnerable to experiencing role conflict. This is consistent with (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025), who found that parents' psychological well-being predicts family cohesion and effective parenting, emphasizing the value of emotional intelligence in navigating conflict. (Merino et al., 2024) further demonstrated that emotional clarity serves as a protective factor against parental stress, mediating the relationship between parenting style and child well-being. Similarly, (Wang et al., 2025) reported that parents' inability to regulate emotional responses—particularly in the presence of “phubbing” behaviors—can increase the risk of emotional and behavioral problems in children. When parents engage in emotional suppression or avoidance, they may inadvertently model dysregulated behavior for their children, thereby perpetuating a cycle of conflict and distress (Li & Ye, 2024; Wintner et al., 2023). Moreover, research by (Lu, 2025) highlights that emotional sensitivity and self-evaluative concerns in parents elevate vulnerability to stress, supporting the notion that emotional regulation deficits form a critical foundation for parental role conflict.

The third factor, marital relationship dynamics, reflects the interdependence between spousal harmony and parental functioning. The results indicate that disagreements in parenting style, inconsistent discipline, and diminished marital satisfaction significantly contribute to role conflict. These findings are consistent with those of (Lange et al., 2021), who demonstrated that persistent marital disputes in high-conflict families lead to child post-traumatic stress and parental burnout. Likewise, (Cyr et al., 2020) emphasized that unresolved marital tensions often spill over into parent–child interactions, impairing emotional responsiveness and communication. Marital discord has been linked to inconsistent co-parenting behaviors, which undermine both parents' confidence and the emotional climate of the home (Papp & Hartley, 2019; Ramos et al., 2022). Moreover, (Moore & McDougall, 2022) argues that ethical dilemmas in parental roles often stem from competing loyalties between marital and caregiving obligations. Conversely, cooperative relationships, characterized by shared decision-making and emotional empathy, have been associated with lower levels of stress and higher co-parenting satisfaction (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025). These findings confirm that marital harmony not only promotes emotional stability but also reduces the likelihood of parental role conflict in one-child families, where both parents' attention tends to concentrate on a single child.

The mid-ranked factor, socioeconomic and cultural pressures, demonstrates that contextual stressors remain significant contributors to parental conflict, albeit less direct than psychological ones. Economic hardship, unstable employment, and high living costs have long been identified as predictors of family stress (Cao et al., 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2024). In the context of one-child families, these factors are intensified by cultural expectations that parents provide exceptional educational and material opportunities for their child. (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023) noted that financial strain and lack of social support can diminish parents' emotional availability and increase family tension. Furthermore, cultural ideals of “intensive parenting,” particularly prevalent in collectivist societies, place disproportionate emotional labor on mothers (Sakharova & Tsvetkova, 2024; Савина & Сафуанов, 2024). These findings align with (Goworko-Składanek & Prymak, 2022), who argued that institutional frameworks often fail to accommodate modern parental realities, leading to chronic stress. Urbanization and limited leisure opportunities further exacerbate these difficulties, creating what (Stearns & McKinney, 2020) describes as “compressed family time,” where parents struggle to meet both societal and familial expectations simultaneously.

The fifth-ranked factor, child-centered dependency, captures the tendency of parents in one-child families to exhibit overprotection and emotional overidentification with their child. The study found that overinvolvement in the child's daily life and resistance to granting autonomy lead to intensified parental anxiety and self-neglect. (Meijing, 2024) demonstrated that parental overcontrol in everyday communication fosters emotional tension and restricts children's independence. (Willemsen, 2023) further discussed how distorted parental identity can manifest as possessiveness, especially when the child becomes the sole focus of parental purpose. Research by (Yang et al., 2022) found that inconsistent maternal conflict resolution styles exacerbate child dependency and problem behaviors, reflecting the bidirectional nature of the dynamic. Similarly, (Shaki et al., 2022) warned that overinvolved “helicopter parenting,” though well-intentioned, often produces anxiety and psychological inflexibility in both parent and child. Together, these studies illustrate that emotional enmeshment and overdependence serve as critical pathways linking parental role expectations to emotional conflict and burnout.

The sixth-ranked factor, psychological well-being of parents, underscores that internal states—such as self-efficacy, identity stability, and emotional exhaustion—

directly influence how parents experience their roles. The current findings suggest that low self-confidence and chronic fatigue are associated with higher conflict levels, consistent with (Aslanabadi et al., 2025), who found that parental burnout is linked to increased risk of child maltreatment and reduced interaction quality. (Lu, 2025) also emphasized that when parents lack self-acceptance and emotional clarity, they are more likely to misinterpret their child's behavior as personal failure. Similarly, (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025) showed that psychological distress in fathers predicts diminished well-being and family satisfaction. These results resonate with (Wintner et al., 2023), who highlighted that parents engaging in emotional co-regulation activities (such as structured play or biofeedback) exhibit reduced stress and improved relationships. Therefore, promoting parental mental health emerges as a crucial preventive strategy against role conflict and maladaptive family functioning.

Finally, support systems and coping resources, though ranked lowest, remain vital buffers in mitigating the adverse effects of parental conflict. The relatively low ranking indicates that while external support exists, it is either underutilized or perceived as insufficient among urban Iranian families. Research has consistently shown that spousal and extended family support can enhance resilience and reduce the intensity of family stress (Perez et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2023). (Sakharova & Tsvetkova, 2024) and (Findley et al., 2025) both reported that community and institutional resources, such as counseling and parent education programs, are crucial yet often inaccessible due to stigma or logistical constraints. Moreover, comparative studies demonstrate that access to supportive networks correlates with improved emotional regulation and marital satisfaction (Ko & Rodriguez, 2025; Wintner et al., 2023). The findings underscore a need for systemic interventions that strengthen social infrastructure and normalize psychological support for parents, especially in one-child contexts.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that parental role conflict is a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in psychological, relational, and structural domains. Emotional and cognitive processes—such as self-criticism, anxiety, and perfectionism—serve as primary mechanisms, while contextual stressors and cultural expectations modulate their intensity. The hierarchical structure of the factors suggests that interventions aimed at improving emotional regulation, redefining parenting expectations, and fostering marital harmony are likely to yield the greatest reductions in

parental role conflict. Furthermore, developing community-based and institutional support mechanisms may alleviate the external pressures that perpetuate these challenges. These results contribute to a growing international discourse on the psychosocial dynamics of one-child families, providing evidence-based insight into both universal and culturally specific aspects of parenting stress (Gómez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Sánchez, 2022; Margaletić & Šimović, 2024; Rinaldo et al., 2024).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Despite its comprehensive mixed-method design, this study is not without limitations. First, the qualitative phase relied on literature-based data extraction rather than direct interviews or focus groups, which may limit the contextual depth of emerging themes. While theoretical saturation was achieved through extensive review, the absence of first-hand experiential data might have constrained the exploration of nuanced emotional processes unique to Iranian parents. Second, the quantitative sample was limited to 230 parents from Tehran, which may not reflect the experiences of parents in smaller cities or rural areas where cultural norms, economic pressures, and social networks differ significantly. Third, the study's reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces the potential for social desirability bias, as parents may underreport emotional strain or marital difficulties. Finally, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference, restricting the ability to determine temporal relationships between variables such as emotional regulation and role conflict.

Future research should build upon these findings by employing longitudinal and multi-method approaches to explore how parental role conflict evolves over time. In-depth qualitative interviews could capture richer emotional narratives, while structural equation modeling may clarify the causal pathways between psychological well-being, marital dynamics, and role expectations. Cross-cultural comparisons would be particularly valuable for distinguishing culturally specific stressors from universal mechanisms underlying parental conflict. Moreover, studies could investigate how digital media use, gender identity, and parenting interventions interact to influence conflict levels in one-child families. Integrating biological indicators of stress, such as cortisol measurement, could also strengthen the empirical grounding of this field. Lastly, future research might evaluate the effectiveness of psychoeducational or

therapeutic programs aimed at reducing perfectionism and enhancing emotional literacy among parents.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for multilevel interventions that address both psychological and systemic determinants of parental conflict. Parenting education programs should emphasize emotional regulation, self-care, and realistic goal setting, helping parents move away from perfectionistic standards. Marital counseling can promote cooperative communication and equitable division of childcare responsibilities, thereby reducing emotional spillover. On a broader scale, policymakers and social institutions should enhance access to community-based support, flexible work policies, and affordable childcare services. Additionally, integrating family well-being modules into public health initiatives could help normalize seeking psychological assistance and reduce stigma. Ultimately, empowering parents through education, emotional support, and social infrastructure represents a sustainable path toward mitigating parental role conflict in one-child families.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

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

Ethical Considerations

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

References

- Aslanabadi, S., Khanjani, Z., Hashemi, T., & Jamalpour, Y. (2025). The Relationship Between Parental Burnout and Parent-Child Interaction Quality and Child Abuse. *Appl Psychol Health Promot*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.5812/aphp-148860>
- Cao, H., Fine, M. A., & Zhou, N. (2022). The Divorce Process and Child Adaptation Trajectory Typology (DPCATT) Model: The Shaping Role of Predivorce and Postdivorce Interparental Conflict. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 25(3), 500-528. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-022-00379-3>
- Chavda, K., & Nisarga, V. (2023). Single Parenting: Impact on Child's Development. *Journal of Indian Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 19(1), 14-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09731342231179017>
- Cyr, F., Poitras, K., & Godbout, É. (2020). An Interdisciplinary Case Management Protocol for Child Resistance or Refusal Dynamics[†]. *Family Court Review*, 58(2), 560-575. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12487>
- Findley, H., McMahon, G., & Giallo, R. (2025). Parent, Child and Family Factors Associated With Interparental Conflict: A Study of Parents Seeking Support From a Community Health Service in the Postnatal Period. *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13283>
- Gómez-Ortiz, O., & Sánchez-Sánchez, C. (2022). Is the Predisposition to Have More Children Beneficial Among Parents With Only One Child? Evidence From Spanish Parents. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 19(13), 7685. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19137685>
- Goworko-Składanek, B., & Prymak, T. (2022). Parent-Child Contacts in the Presence of Legal Court-Appointed Guardian. Practice in View of the Need for Legislative Change. *Białostockie Studia Prawnicze*, 27(3), 91-106. <https://doi.org/10.15290/bsp.2022.27.03.05>
- Jeong, E. H., Kim, J. Y., Lee, H. A., & Lee, K. (2020). The Effects of Work-Child Education Conflict on Parenting Role Competence of Working Mothers of Second Graders: Focus on the Moderating Effect of Mother-Child Identification. *Korean Journal of Child Studies*, 41(2), 89-101. <https://doi.org/10.5723/kjcs.2020.41.2.89>
- Ko, K., & Rodriguez, M. R. (2025). Exploring Fathers' Psychological Well-being Using Supervised Machine Learning Random Forest Analysis. *Family Relations*, 74(3), 1198-1215. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.13191>
- Lange, A. M. C., Visser, M., Scholte, R. H. J., & Finkenauer, C. (2021). Parental Conflicts and Posttraumatic Stress of Children in High-Conflict Divorce Families. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 15(3), 615-625. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00410-9>
- Li, M., & Ye, H. (2024). Effects of Parental Conflict on Adolescent Academic Burnout: A Moderated Mediation Model. *Social Behavior and Personality an International Journal*, 52(3), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.12838>
- Lin, S.-Y., Schleider, J. L., & Eaton, N. R. (2020). Family Processes and Child Psychopathology: A Between- And Within-Family/Child Analysis. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/cwyah>

- Lu, Y. (2025). Parent-Child Relationships and Fear of Evaluation in Preadolescents: The Mediating Role of Sensory Processing Sensitivity. *Psychology in the Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.70072>
- Margaletić, A. Č., & Šimović, I. (2024). Child Representation in Cases Before the European Court of Human Rights. *Pravni Vjesnik*, 40(4), 31-53. <https://doi.org/10.25234/pv/32050>
- Meijing, Y. (2024). The Study of Interactional Stancetaking in Conflict Talk Between Parents and Children—A Case Study of the TV Series "A Little Reunion". *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.23977/langl.2024.070217>
- Merino, L., Martínez-Pampliega, A., & Herrero, M. (2024). Differential Impact of Parental Practices and Parental Emotional Clarity on Child Symptoms in Single-Child vs. Multiple-Child Divorced Families. *Children*, 11(12), 1481. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children11121481>
- Moore, B., & McDougall, R. (2022). Exploring the Ethics of the Parental Role in Parent-Clinician Conflict. *The Hastings Center Report*, 52(6), 33-43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hast.1445>
- Papp, L. M., & Hartley, S. L. (2019). Child-Present and Child-Themed Marital Conflict in Daily Life of Parents of Children With and Without Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Developmental Psychology*, 55(1), 148-156. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000631>
- Perez, J., Heradura, R. P., & Tuttle, B. (2023). The Role of Parents' Characteristics on Child-Parent Relationships in Homeschooling During COVID-19 Lockdown. *Academia Lasalliana Journal of Education and Humanities*, 4(2), 119-131. <https://doi.org/10.55902/cptp1544>
- Qu, Y., Li, X., Ni, B., He, X., Keqin, Z., & Wu, G. (2021). Identifying the Role of Parent-child Conflict and Intimacy in Chinese Adolescents' Psychological Distress During School Reopening in COVID-19 Pandemic. *Developmental Psychology*, 57(10), 1735-1747. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001218>
- Ramos, A. M., Shewark, E. A., Fosco, G. M., Shaw, D. S., Reiss, D., Natsuaki, M. N., Leve, L. D., & Neiderhiser, J. M. (2022). Reexamining the Association Between the Interparental Relationship and Parent-child Interactions: Incorporating Heritable Influences. *Developmental Psychology*, 58(1), 43-54. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001278>
- Rinaldo, C., Stenmarker, M., Øra, I., & Pergert, P. (2024). No Conflicting Loyalties in Parents When Their Healthy Child Donates Stem Cells to a Severely Ill Sibling: An Interview Study. *Journal of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology Nursing*, 41(5), 315-323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27527530241285792>
- Sakharova, T., & Tsvetkova, N. A. (2024). Large Families: Aspects of Interpersonal Communication Between Spouses and Strategies for Dealing With Marriage Conflicts. 119(4), 47-58. <https://doi.org/10.22204/2587-8956-2024-119-04-47-58>
- Shaki, O., Gupta, G. K., Yadav, P., & Faisal, F. A. (2022). Helicopter Parenting, From Good Intentions to Poor Outcomes. What Parents Needs to Know? *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 11(8), 4753-4757. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc_2474_21
- Spielvogel, I., Naderer, B., Binder, A., & Matthes, J. (2021). The Forbidden Reward. The Emergence of Parent-Child Conflicts About Food Over Time and the Influence of Parents' Communication Strategies and Feeding Practices. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.604702>
- Stearns, M., & McKinney, C. (2020). Conflict Associated With Stronger Parent-Child Religiosity in Emerging Adults, Especially for Sons. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 12(2), 149-156. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000220>
- Wang, X., Wang, L., Wang, X., Cheng, C., & An, Z. (2025). Impact of Parental Phubbing on Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Young Children: The Mediating Role of Parent-child Conflict. *Social Behavior and Personality an International Journal*, 53(5), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.14341>
- Willemsen, H. (2023). Parental Alienation: A Case of Perversion of Motherhood. *The International Journal of Forensic Psychotherapy*, 5(2), 135-144. <https://doi.org/10.33212/ijfp.v5n2.2023.135>
- Wintner, S. R., Peechatka, A. L., & Kahn, J. (2023). A Randomized Controlled Trial Examining Parent-Child Play as an Adjunct to Biofeedback Game-Based Emotion Regulation Learning (Preprint). <https://doi.org/10.2196/preprints.47681>
- Wong, L. P., Alias, H., Farid, N. D. N., Yusop, S. M., Musa, Z., Hu, Z., & Lin, Y. (2023). Parent-child Relationships and Psychological Distress: Survey of Parents From Low-Income Families After the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1158698>
- Yang, H., Ng, W. Q., Yang, Y., & Yang, S. (2022). Inconsistent Media Mediation and Problematic Smartphone Use in Preschoolers: Maternal Conflict Resolution Styles as Moderators. *Children*, 9(6), 816. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9060816>
- Ying, L., Wang, Y., & Yu, S. (2023). Marital Conflict, Family Socioeconomic Status, and Depressive Symptoms in Migrant Children: A Moderating Mediation Model. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(6), 441. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13060441>
- Zhuravleva, M. (2021). The Expediency of Questioning of a Child in Court During the Determination of Place of Residence. *Slovo of the National School of Judges of Ukraine*(1(34)), 118-127. [https://doi.org/10.37566/2707-6849-2021-1\(34\)-10](https://doi.org/10.37566/2707-6849-2021-1(34)-10)
- Савина, О. Ф., & Сафьянов, Ф. С. (2024). Forensic Psychological Expert Assessment Conflict of Loyalties of the Child in Court Disputes Between Parents About His Upbringing. *Psychology and Law*, 14(3), 39-49. <https://doi.org/10.17759/psylaw.2024140304>