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Research Paper

Investigating The Effect of Joint Reading of The Stories in The Book "Talk to Me" in Mother-Child Dyads on The Child's Empathy and Emotional Regulation of Mother



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Studies show that joint parent-child activities have far-reaching effects on a child's emotional, cognitive, and social development. Research also reports the significant impact of mother-child relationships on mother-child interactions. The aim of this study was to investigate The Effect of Joint Reading in Mother-Child dyads on The Child's Empathy and Emotional Regulation of the Mother.

Methods: In the present study, which was conducted as quasi-experimental with the control group, 20 mother-child pairs from Alborz Elementary School in Sanandaj, by quota sampling, were randomly divided into two intervention and control groups. Data collection instruments included a Persian version of EmQue-CA for children and an emotional self-regulation questionnaire by Hoffman and Kashdan for mothers. The mother-child pairs in the intervention group read ten stories for 10 weeks, lasting thirty to forty-five minutes each with the mother and child. Data were analyzed using the ANCOVA and MANCOVA methods.

Results: In the intervention group, mean empathy (27.60) and mean tolerance style (21.28) increased, and this difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: The results show that joint reading affects the child's empathy and the mother's emotion regulation. Reading the story helps the child gain a better understanding of the events and improves mother-child interactions.

1. Introduction

Stories are as old as mankind. Throughout history, stories have had various uses, from providing entertainment in friendly and family circles and cafes to conveying sublime philosophical, cultural and religious concepts by thinkers, philosophers and thinkers in human life. In the literature of nations, stories are used in various forms of order and prose, and human values, historical events, allegories, and everything that can and value be passed on to the next

generations have been transformed into stories. In almost all cultures, people have benefited from stories and storytelling to share values and recount important life events (Hsu, 2008; Wormald et al., 2018). Stories help people make sense of their life experiences (Rahiem et al., 2020). Children learn valuable life lessons from stories (Eder, 2010; Jalongo, 2004). For example, they learn how people overcome problems (Berkowitz, 2011), explore emotions, and

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deal well with others (Kerry-Moran & Aerila, 2019). They learn how to be kind, forgiving, and treat others right (Haynes & Murriss, 2013; Reese, 2013). Also, with the help of stories, they will learn how to think critically, realistically, and, of course, imagine (Haynes & Murriss, 2013; Reese, 2013; Trisciuzzi, 2017). In fact, with the help of stories, people will gain a better and deeper understanding of life events (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). By listening to and retelling the story, people will better understand themselves and those around them. In addition, the characters in the story help the children examine the issues from different angles and develop areas of empathy (Bratitsis & Ziannas, 2015). Retelling the story enables a person to think about her thoughts and express them along with her emotions (Erickson, 2018). Children's literature and books provide an opportunity for children to explore their feelings (Erickson, 2018). Research shows the relationship between reading and storytelling and emotional development, a child's self-expression, empathy and improving the child's social relationships. Pakdogan's study has shown that interventions (education) centered on reading stories have significant effects on children's ability to express themselves (Pekdogan, 2016). In general, research confirms the effects of reading and telling stories on children's better understanding of themselves and others (Bratitsis & Ziannas, 2015; Pekdogan, 2016; Willis & Schiller, 2011; Wright et al., 2013). Also, Erickson's study showed that when children hear stories about feelings and emotions and talk about them, they have a better ability to express their feelings and understand the feelings of others (Erickson, 2018).

Positive interactions between parents and children, which are strengthened during the reading process, increase the child's capacity for emotional understanding and improve the parent-child relationship. A pleasant and regular program of joint book reading (in parent-child pairs) can be a significant source of creating and sustaining positive emotions in both parent and child (Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1997; Bus et al., 1995). Therefore, parent-child interactions are not one-sided, and the quality of the relationship affects both parties. A mother who establishes a foundation of empathy in her child by talking about emotions with her is also affected by this activism.

One of the factors that influence the quality of this relationship is the parent's emotional self-regulation. Emotional self-regulation is a key process to identify parents' motivations in order to track, guide and change their behavior to make (mostly positive) changes in children's lives, with the aim that these changes lead to positive and healthy developmental outcomes (Barros et al., 2015; Gharadaghi & Masoumi Ala, 2022). One study showed that mothers in mother-child dyads regulated their emotions

better and had a better understanding of themselves (Hosseini, Najarpourian, Samavi, Rastegar, 2024).

Emotional self-regulation, which refers to the ability to successfully manage ongoing emotional experience, especially in social situations, can be very influential in the early years of parent-child relationships (Allahyari, 2021; Schultheis et al., 2019). Having this cognitive-emotional skill can affect all dimensions of social and interpersonal functioning.

It can be said that the emphasis on parent-child interactions in the form of a two-way process that leads to the improvement and cultivation of empathy skills in the child on the one hand and focuses on the emotional self-regulation of the parent on the other hand, is an issue that has been less seen in previous researches in this field, so this study aimed to determine the effect of teaching empathy skills to children through joint reading of stories in parent-child pairs and parent's emotional self-regulation.

2. Materials and Methods

In this study, the participants were randomly divided into two intervention and control groups, and after holding an orientation workshop to explain the framework of the plan to parents, the link to the questionnaires was provided to the parents. Then, the parents were asked to complete the questionnaires under their supervision and act as facilitators in case of ambiguity or questions for the child. To collect information, the Persian version of EmQue-CA was used for children in two stages: pre-test and post-test (Khosravi Larijani et al., 2021). Parents also completed the emotional self-regulation questionnaire (emotional styles) by Hoffman and Kashdan in two phases: pre-test and post-test (Hofmann & Kashdan, 2010). The questionnaire was provided to the participants through WhatsApp software so that the children could complete it under the supervision of their parents. Then, online meetings were scheduled with parents via Skype so that every bit of the story was read to the child and parent once a week. The source of the stories was a book titled "Talk to Me". At the beginning of the online version of the questionnaires, demographic information, including the child's age and educational level, the parent's age and education along with his gender and other necessary information, such as the family's income level, were also collected. Also, the lead researcher held a free parenting workshop for the control group. At the commencement of the research endeavour, there were a total of 15 individuals comprising each group; however, due to the discontinuation of participation by 5 individuals from the experimental group, an equivalent number of 5 individuals from the control group were subsequently and randomly excluded. Consequently, the conclusive sample size amounted to a total of 20 individuals, with 10 individuals allocated to each respective group.

Instruments

EmQue-CA standard questionnaire for children and adolescents (EmQue-CA): The empathy questionnaire for children and adolescents was designed and developed for empathy between children and adolescents. Netten et al.(2015) confirmed the overall validity and reliability of the questionnaire(internal correlation of validity= 0.44 & Cronbach's alpha = 0.83). This questionnaire has been validated in Iran by Khosravi Larijani et al. (Cronbach's alpha = 0.72; validity: 0.48) (Khosravi Larijani et al., 2021). The questionnaire has 17 questions and 4 components of social motivation empathy (7 questions), cognitive empathy (4 questions), emotional empathy of friends orientation (3 questions) and affective empathy of family orientation (3 questions) based on the Likert scale with questions such as (if My mother is happy, I feel happy too) measures the empathy of children and adolescents. Also, the range of scores on the questionnaire is between 0 and 34; the higher the score, the higher the level of emotional empathy.

Standard emotional self-regulation questionnaire (emotional styles) by Hoffman and Kashdan (Hofmann & Kashdan, 2010): The emotional self-regulation questionnaire includes 20 questions that are answered on a 5-point Likert scale from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5). In the original version, the Alpha coefficient was 0.84 for internal consistency, and the item-total correlation coefficients were high for all subscales($r_s > 0.60$). The validity and reliability of this questionnaire have been confirmed by Karsheki et al. (Cronbach's alpha = above 0.80) (Kareshki, 2013). The questionnaire has three components or subscales of concealment, adaptation, and tolerance, with 8, 7, and 5 questions, respectively (Kareshki, 2013). Characteristics of the concealment style include inhibition and other strategies aimed at hiding or avoiding emotions after they appear. Adaptability style introduces people who are able to obtain and apply emotional information in solving compromise issues and are better able to adjust their experience and emotional expression according to

the requirements of the context and environment. Tolerance style is the characteristic of people who respond to arousal caused by emotional experiences comfortably and non-defensively.

Analysis of data: Therefore, the mean, standard deviation, and number (percentage) were used to describe quantitative and qualitative variables and check the normality of the distribution of quantitative variables. The frequency of qualitative variables in two groups was compared using Fisher's exact test. In the analysis and testing of hypotheses, univariate analysis of covariance or ANCOVA (ANCONA) and multivariate covariance analysis or MANCOVA (MANCOVA) were used. Data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 22). For all statistical tests, $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

3. Results

This study included 20 participants, including 10 in the intervention group and 10 in the control group. In children, the average age in the intervention group was 8.60 ± 1.58 years (with an age range of 7 to 12 years); in the control group, it was 7.30 ± 2.41 years (with an age range of 1 to 10 years). There was no difference in mean age ($p=0.17$). Based on the results, 50% of the children were male and 50% were female, and there was no difference between the intervention and control groups regarding marital status, education, and income.

A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) test was employed to examine the research hypotheses in this study. Prior to conducting the test, thorough assessments were conducted to verify the assumptions, including the absence of outlier data, the normal distribution of the data, the homogeneity of regression slopes, the equality of variances, and the homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices. The findings from these assessments indicated that all assumptions were met and confirmed. Detailed in Table 1 are the comprehensive descriptive statistics of empathy and its components within both the experimental and control groups, both before and after the intervention took place.

Table 1. Descriptive indices of empathy and its components in two experimental and control groups in pre-test and post-test

Group		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	
Control	Pretest	social empathy	8.52	10.45	9.63	.60
		cognitive empathy	3.54	5.11	4.09	.42
		affective empathy	3.48	4.95	4.10	.44
		family empathy	2.97	4.01	3.45	.37
		total empathy	19.34	24.22	21.28	1.51
	Posttest	empathy Social	9.12	10.78	9.97	.43
		empathy cognitive	3.58	5.21	4.49	.54
		empathy Affective	3.54	5.68	4.33	.58
		empathy Family	2.78	4.25	3.56	.49
		empathy Total	20.41	25.25	22.36	1.54

Group		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	
Experimental	Pretest	empathy Social	9.11	11.52	10.02	.71
		empathy cognitive	3.85	5.21	4.35	.51
		empathy Affective	3.78	5.21	4.53	.56
		empathy Family	2.98	4.68	3.71	.53
		empathy Total	20.46	24.86	22.63	1.21
	Posttest	empathy Social	10.25	13.75	11.90	1.06
		empathy cognitive	4.56	7.21	5.98	.93
		empathy Affective	4.78	7.52	5.75	.93
		empathy Family	3.25	4.98	3.96	.56
		empathy Total	25.19	31.89	27.60	2.39

Table 2 illustrates the findings derived from the multivariate covariance analysis. As delineated in Table 2, the statistical analysis indicates that the four tests of the Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) exhibit a notable level of significance. To delve deeper into the nuances of the differences in the two groups

pertaining to the empathy variable and its components, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) embedded within the MANCOVA was executed. The outcomes of this analytical approach have been meticulously documented and are elucidated in Table 3.

Table 2. Results of multivariate covariance analysis of empathy and its components

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis DF	Error DF	P	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.742	7.897	4	11	.003	.742
Wilks' Lambda	.258	7.897	4	11	.003	.742
Hotelling's Trace	2.872	7.897	4	11	.003	.742
Roy's Largest Root	2.872	7.897	4	11	.003	.742

Table 3. Results of ANCOVA embedded in MANCOVA of empathy and its components (Tests of Between-Subjects Effects)

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	P	Partial Eta Squared
Group	Social empathy	9.859	1	9.859	21.823	.000	.609
	Cognitive empathy	4.390	1	4.390	8.035	.013	.365
	Affective empathy	3.102	1	3.102	5.351	.036	.277
	Family empathy	.009	1	.009	.755	.400	.051
	Total empathy	50.264	1	50.264	15.503	.001	.525
Error	Social empathy	6.325	14	.452			
	Cognitive empathy	7.649	14	.546			
	Affective empathy	8.116	14	.580			
	Family empathy	.162	14	.012			
	Total empathy	45.390	14	3.242			
Total	Social empathy	2423.839	20				
	Cognitive empathy	570.865	20				
	Affective empathy	529.460	20				
	Family empathy	288.983	20				
	Total empathy	12693.715	20				

As per the data presented in Table 3, the F values indicated statistical significance across various aspects of empathy, including total empathy, social motivation, cognitive empathy, and family empathy. It was observed that the mean score of the experimental group surpassed that of the control group in total empathy and the aforementioned three components, with a statistical significance level of $p < 0.05$. Consequently, the hypotheses pertaining to these specific variables were

confirmed and supported by the data. However, when examining emotional empathy, the F value did not reach a level of statistical significance, leading to the rejection of the hypothesis associated with this particular variable.

Table 4 illustrates the descriptive indices pertaining to emotion regulation styles observed within the experimental and control groups during the pre-test and post-test phases of the study.

Table 4. Descriptive indices of emotion regulation styles in two experimental and control groups in pre-test and post-test

Group			Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Control	Pretest	Concealment	18.95	22.65	21.01	1.19
		Adaptation	23.65	26.78	25.32	.97
		Tolerance	13.25	15.77	14.72	.67
	Posttest	Concealment	19.31	23.54	21.32	1.43
		Adaptation	23.98	26.87	25.49	.91
		Tolerance	14.01	15.36	14.78	.51
Experimental	Pretest	Concealment	19.54	22.63	21.22	1.18
		Adaptation	23.65	27.21	25.21	1.10
		Tolerance	13.99	16.21	14.96	.70
	Posttest	Concealment	19.87	22.36	21.28	.96
		Adaptation	24.02	26.95	25.56	.91
		Tolerance	16.54	17.81	17.04	.39

Table 5 details the findings of the multivariate covariance analysis. The outcomes derived from the analysis, as depicted in Table 5, underscore the significance of the four tests assessed through MANCOVA. Furthermore, to delve deeper into the

differences between the groups concerning the emotion regulation styles, an ANCOVA procedure nested within the MANCOVA was conducted, with the ensuing findings meticulously documented in Table 6.

Table 5. Results of multivariate covariance analysis of emotion regulation styles

	Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis DF	Error DF	P	Partial Eta Squared
group	Pillai's Trace	.934	61.21	3	13	.001	.934
	Wilks' Lambda	.066	61.21	3	13	.001	.934
	Hotelling's Trace	14.127	61.21	3	13	.001	.934
	Roy's Largest Root	14.127	61.21	3	13	.003	.934

Table 6. Results of ANCOVA embedded in MANCOVA of emotion regulation styles (Tests of Between-Subjects Effects)

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
group	Concealment	.159	1	.159	.162	.693	.011
	Adaptation	.083	1	.083	.221	.645	.014
	Tolerance	22.419	1	22.419	208.715	.000	.933
Error	Concealment	14.650	15	.977			
	Adaptation	5.671	15	.378			
	Tolerance	1.611	15	.107			
Total	Concealment	9105.497	20				
	Adaptation	12984.899	20				
	Tolerance	5095.011	20				

According to Table 6, the F value was significant in the emotion regulation style, and since the average of the experimental group was higher than the control group ($p < 0.05$), the hypothesis related to this variable was confirmed. However, in the case of adaptive and hidden emotion regulation styles, the F values were not significant, so the hypotheses related to these variables were not confirmed.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present research showed that reading the book's stories together (talk to me) has a positive and significant effect on the child's empathy and the parents' emotional self-regulation. Also, the effectiveness of the book story-matching intervention (talk to me) was confirmed on three components of empathy, including social motivation, cognitive empathy, and family empathy, and according to the results, the intervention improved social motivation

empathy, cognitive empathy, and family empathy. On the other hand, the intervention of consonance of book stories was not effective on the component of emotional empathy, which is in line with previous research (Berkowitz, 2011; Pekdogan, 2016; Willis & Schiller, 2011; Wright et al., 2013) Reading the story helps the child gain a better understanding of the events. In general, the research shows the connection between reading and storytelling and emotional development, self-expression, empathy, and improvement of the child's social relations. Interventions centered on reading stories (education) have significant effects on children's ability to express themselves. In general, research confirms the effects of reading and telling stories on children's better understanding of themselves and others.

One of the findings of the current research is the development of empathy in children as a result of joint reading of stories in parent-child pairs. This finding is

consistent with previous findings (Duursma et al., 2008; Farrant & Zubrick, 2012; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Also, joint reading of books in parent-child pairs activates the brain areas related to the child's narrative (textual) understanding and mental imagery (Hutto et al., 2015). Through reading the story, one can gain a deeper and broader understanding of the emotional experiences of others and, as a result, strengthen the field of emergence and cultivation of empathy. According to Huto (2007), children can reach a favorable understanding of phenomena through participation in stories, especially with the help of others (such as parents or an adult caregiver) (Hutto, 2007). By engaging in storytelling/reading and dealing with various narratives, especially when accompanied by an adult, children can build their analytical skills with this support on situations similar to those they have studied in stories (Gallagher & Hutto, 2008). Many studies have shown a relationship between narrative abilities and the capacity to understand others (Britton & Pellegrini, 2014; Lewis et al., 1994; Peterson & McCabe, 1994). These studies show the importance of children reading stories and, more importantly, reading stories with an adult caregiver.

Reading books by children, especially when accompanied by an adult caregiver, will promote other aspects of development, such as the child's social-emotional adjustment (Aram & Shapira, 2012). Children's books often provide her with emotional and social experiences (Colwell, 2000). Moreover, reading these books with and for children, will involve conversations about the characters' motivations, emotions, and behaviors. This finding is also consistent with previous findings. For example, Colwell's research showed that there is a dialogue between the child and the parents, by which the children are encouraged to define and name the feelings, examine the motives of the characters in the story from the things they do, and the series of relationships between the characters' behaviors and their environment. They understand and help children understand, express, and manage their feelings and emotions (Colwell, 2000).

In addition, the present study showed the relationship between joint reading of the story and the emotional self-regulation of the parent (mother). Since the parent-child relationship is a two-way relationship, parents' self-regulation can be affected by this relationship, and the child can also affect the parent's self-regulation because this relationship is important and affects the sense of efficacy of parents. This influence is a double-edged sword and can be positive or negative (Peterson & Biggs, 2001). In Rutherford et al.'s research, mothers who

showed more curiosity (in terms of interest) about their baby's mental states showed more persistence (resistance) in soothing their crying baby. This study confirms the hypothesis that the mentalizing capacity of the parent affects his ability to regulate his own and the child's emotions (Rutherford et al., 2013). One of the limitations of the present study is the small sample size, so the generalization of the study results should be done with caution. Also, the lack of a six-month or more follow-up test is another limitation of the study.

In the end, based on the results of this study, there is a close and significant relationship between the joint reading of stories in parent-child pairs and the development of children's empathy skills. The deeper the conversations between the parent and the child while reading the story and are full of deeper emotional and cognitive words and themes, the greater the effect of this joint activity on the development of the child's empathy. Also, joint reading of stories in parent-child pairs affects parent's emotional self-regulation. After the intervention, the parents participating in the current study reported that they have better self-awareness of their emotions, their access to words to describe these emotions is better, and reading stories helps them to perform better in their daily interactions with their child, who sometimes becomes erosive.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This article considered all ethical principles. The participants were informed about the research objective and its implementation phases. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information and allowed to leave the study whenever they wished. Moreover, the research results would be available if they desired.

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Authors' contributions

O.H. designed the study and conducted the experimental work; S.N., A.S., and Y. R. analyzed the data and helped write the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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