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Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-Based Parenting Training on Mothers' Meta-Emotional Perspective and Impulsivity in Mothers of Lower Secondary School Children

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment-based parenting training on the meta-emotional perspective and impulsivity of mothers of lower secondary school children.

Materials and Methods: This research employed a quasi-experimental design using a pretest–posttest control group format with a two-month follow-up. The statistical population consisted of mothers of elementary school children in Isfahan during the 2024–2025 academic year. Thirty participants were selected using convenience and voluntary sampling and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 15) and a control group (n = 15). Research instruments included the Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy Questionnaire (Evelinike, 2006) and the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (2004). The parenting training was conducted in eight 90-minute sessions based on the acceptance and commitment approach. Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Bonferroni post-hoc test.

Findings: The results of ANOVA indicated that acceptance and commitment-based parenting training led to a significant increase in the meta-emotional perspective and a significant decrease in impulsivity scores among mothers in the experimental group compared to the control group at both the posttest and follow-up stages. A significant interaction was found between time and group membership across all three primary variables, indicating the sustained effectiveness of the intervention.

Conclusion: Acceptance and commitment-based parenting training improves psychological indicators in mothers, including enhancing the meta-emotional perspective, increasing emotional flexibility, and reducing impulsivity. Therefore, it can be employed as an effective approach in parent education programs.

Keywords: Parenting training, acceptance and commitment, impulsivity, meta-emotional perspective

1. Introduction

Parenting during the developmental years of childhood plays a foundational role in shaping children's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning. The family, particularly the mother-child dyad, is considered the primary context for emotional socialization, where mothers serve as core agents of regulation, scaffolding, and emotional coaching. The maternal meta-emotional philosophy — a parent's beliefs, awareness, and emotional reactions toward emotions — profoundly impacts children's ability to manage their own affective experiences (Shao et al., 2023). In recent years, attention has turned toward Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as a promising framework for enhancing parenting efficacy, particularly among mothers of children facing emotional and behavioral difficulties (Coyne, 2009; Whittingham et al., 2022). ACT-based parenting training, rooted in psychological flexibility, helps parents align their behaviors with values while embracing difficult emotions, thereby enhancing emotional regulation and decreasing impulsivity (Coto-Lesmes et al., 2020; Holmberg Bergman et al., 2023).

Impulsivity in mothers is an especially crucial variable when examining parenting behaviors. Defined as the tendency to act prematurely without foresight, impulsivity has been linked to a range of maladaptive parenting styles and poor emotional attunement to children (Hamza & Willoughby, 2019; Strickland & Johnson, 2021). Studies have shown that high levels of maternal impulsivity are associated with harsh discipline, increased parenting stress, and inconsistent responses to child behavior (Ghodrati et al., 2023; Ran et al., 2021). Conversely, interventions that enhance emotional awareness and self-regulation—such as ACT—have been shown to reduce impulsivity and improve the quality of parent-child interactions (Karimi Imamvardikhan et al., 2023; Mobini Kashheh et al., 2024). According to (Hoptman et al., 2025), emotional impulsivity, characterized by a lack of inhibitory control in affectively charged situations, is a predictor of psychological distress and parenting dysfunction. Given that mothers are often the primary caregivers in early and middle childhood, addressing maternal impulsivity through structured interventions holds significant promise.

The concept of meta-emotional perspective refers to the cognitive and emotional framework that individuals use to interpret and respond to emotions, both their own and others'. Within parenting, a positive meta-emotional perspective can lead to more supportive emotion

socialization practices, fostering adaptive outcomes in children such as resilience, self-regulation, and social competence (Hurrell et al., 2017; Shao et al., 2023). In contrast, parents with a negative or dismissive meta-emotional philosophy may invalidate children's feelings, contributing to emotional dysregulation and conflict (Ojala, 2020). Research conducted in Iran confirmed the reliability and cultural relevance of instruments designed to assess parental meta-emotional perspectives, further reinforcing the cross-cultural applicability of this construct (Parsaei & Fuladchang, 2010). Furthermore, cognitive developmental theorists such as Piaget have emphasized the importance of parental scaffolding in helping children move through developmental stages of emotional understanding (Piaget & Inhelder, 2021).

ACT has gained empirical support across multiple cultural and clinical contexts for its effectiveness in reducing psychological distress and enhancing well-being among parents, particularly those caring for children with special needs, chronic illness, or behavioral disorders (Bahrani Tanha et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023; Sabahi & Makvand Hosseini, 2023). ACT fosters acceptance of difficult internal experiences while encouraging committed action aligned with personal values, which is highly relevant in parenting scenarios that often involve emotional complexity and behavioral challenges (Howell & Passmore, 2019; Petersen & Pimentel, 2024). Unlike cognitive-behavioral approaches that emphasize symptom reduction, ACT emphasizes psychological flexibility as the core mechanism of change (Berk, 2022). Psychological flexibility in parents enables them to tolerate distress, disengage from unhelpful thoughts, and engage more meaningfully with their children.

Empirical studies have provided evidence for the efficacy of ACT-based parenting interventions in improving a range of maternal outcomes. For instance, (Banani et al., 2022) found that acceptance and commitment-based parenting training significantly improved emotion regulation, resilience, and the mother-child relationship in mothers of children with ADHD. Similarly, (Safarealikhani & Donyamali, 2023) demonstrated that ACT parenting training enhanced emotional self-regulation and reduced anxiety in parents of children with learning disorders. Such improvements can translate into a more constructive meta-emotional stance, better emotional coaching, and reduced impulsivity in emotionally charged interactions. Moreover, (Mobini Kashheh et al., 2024) reported significant reductions in impulsivity and improvements in parent-child interactions

following ACT-based parenting training among mothers of children with externalizing problems.

The interconnectedness of impulsivity and emotional regulation has also been extensively investigated in both clinical and subclinical populations. (Hamza & Willoughby, 2019) established that higher impulsivity predicted non-suicidal self-injury among emerging adults, indicating a broader pattern of emotional dysregulation. (Hejimi Nejad et al., 2025) highlighted the role of difficulties in emotion regulation and existential distress as predictors of impulsivity among women, further emphasizing the need for emotion-focused interventions. From a neurocognitive standpoint, deficits in emotion regulation and increased impulsivity have been associated with abnormalities in prefrontal-limbic circuits, which can be moderated through structured behavioral interventions (Hoptman et al., 2025).

Another relevant body of research pertains to the relationship between parenting styles and children's psychological outcomes. Authoritative parenting, often considered the most adaptive, balances responsiveness with structure and has been associated with positive emotional and behavioral outcomes in children (Febiyanti & Rachmawati, 2021). However, the effectiveness of this style largely depends on the parent's emotional awareness and regulatory capacities, which are modifiable through interventions such as ACT. A growing body of literature also points to the mediating role of maternal meta-emotional awareness in shaping child emotion regulation, emphasizing the intergenerational transmission of emotional skills (Shao et al., 2023).

Furthermore, studies indicate that ACT not only benefits parents but also leads to improvements in children's functioning. (Maughan et al., 2024) found that ACT delivered to parents of autistic children led to significant gains in child behavior and family functioning. Likewise, (Whittingham et al., 2022) conducted an RCT of an online ACT-based parenting course for families of children with cerebral palsy and reported significant improvements in parental psychological flexibility, stress reduction, and emotion regulation. The scalability and adaptability of ACT-based programs make them suitable for diverse parenting populations, including those dealing with normative parenting stressors and clinical-level challenges alike.

The effectiveness of ACT-based interventions has also been confirmed in group settings, further supporting its feasibility for broad implementation. (Holmberg Bergman et al., 2023) conducted an open feasibility trial using the Navigator ACT program for parents of children with

disabilities and found improvements in emotional functioning and parenting satisfaction. This aligns with the conclusions of (Coto-Lesmes et al., 2020), who highlighted ACT's potential as an effective group-based intervention for anxiety and depression, especially when grounded in shared values and experiential learning.

In the Iranian context, several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of ACT in improving parenting outcomes. (Ghodrati et al., 2023) demonstrated its efficacy in reducing shared rumination and impulsivity among students with suicidal ideation. Similarly, (Karimi Imamvardikhan et al., 2023) observed significant improvements in rumination, impulsivity, and self-blame in individuals with trichotillomania following ACT. These findings indicate the cross-cutting utility of ACT in managing a spectrum of psychological vulnerabilities, many of which are salient in parenting dynamics.

Given these empirical foundations, the present study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment-based parenting training on mothers' meta-emotional perspective and impulsivity among mothers of lower secondary school children.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method in this study followed a quasi-experimental design with two groups (one group receiving acceptance and commitment-based parenting training and the other serving as a control group) across three stages (pretest, posttest, and a two-month follow-up) to determine the differential effectiveness of the intervention on the dependent variables of the study. The statistical population consisted of all mothers of lower secondary elementary school students in Isfahan during the 2024–2025 academic year. The sample was selected from schools in District 5 of Isfahan through convenience and voluntary sampling, with random assignment to groups. Inclusion criteria included: being the mother of a child currently enrolled in elementary school, willingness to participate in the educational research project, having at least a high school diploma, and no prior participation in similar parenting training courses. Exclusion criteria included: withdrawal from the study by the mother, absence from more than three educational sessions, presence of acute psychological or physical disorders in either mother or child, and the use of medication for treating such disorders in either.

2.2. Measures

To assess mothers' meta-emotional perspectives, the Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy Scale developed by Swain-Brown (Evelinike, 2006) was used. The original version contains 30 items, which were translated and standardized in Iran by Parsaee and Fouladchang (2009), with 3 culturally inappropriate items removed, resulting in a revised 27-item version. Of these, 18 items assess the "guidance" subscale and 9 items assess the "awareness" subscale. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Total scores range from 27 to 135. Parsaee (2009) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.93 for the guidance subscale and 0.85 for the awareness subscale. Evelinike (2006) assessed the validity of the questionnaire through factor analysis, with orthogonal rotation yielding the two components of guidance and awareness. Parsaee and Fouladchang (2009) also confirmed the instrument's validity using principal component analysis and Varimax rotation. Factor loadings for individual items ranged from 0.45 to 0.85, indicating acceptable construct validity.

Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11) was developed by Professor Ernest Barratt, Stanford, Kent, and Felthous in 2004. It consists of 30 items presented in a four-option format. Items are scored from 1 (rarely/never) to 4 (almost always), yielding a total score range of 30 to 120. Barratt et al. (2004) reported an internal consistency reliability of approximately 0.81. Akhtari, Rezvani, and Mokri (2008) reported a reliability of 0.83 for the Persian version. In their study, the internal consistency coefficients for the total BIS score were 0.83 and 0.84 among normative and addicted populations, respectively.

2.3. Intervention

The Acceptance and Commitment-Based Parenting Intervention Package consisted of eight weekly sessions,

each lasting 90 minutes, during which mothers were trained in parenting skills grounded in ACT principles. Based on the framework by Coyne and Murrell (2009), the first session introduced different family types through the ACT lens and defined the concept of the "loving parent" and its core characteristics. The second session explored the nature of the mind and its cognitive productions. In the third session, cognitive flexibility was developed by deepening the understanding of how thoughts are created and interpreted. The fourth session focused on promoting creative hopelessness by encouraging parents to reflect critically on previously used ineffective parenting strategies. The fifth session examined antecedents, behaviors, consequences, and the contextual factors involved in parental control practices. In the sixth session, participants identified their core parenting and personal values. The seventh session introduced the concepts of goal setting and committed action based on these clarified values. Finally, the eighth session covered effective communication methods and ACT-informed parenting techniques aimed at fostering mindful and value-consistent parent-child interactions.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Bonferroni post-hoc test via SPSS-26.

3. Findings and Results

This section examines the effect of acceptance and commitment-based parenting training on the meta-emotional perspective and impulsivity of mothers of lower secondary school children. To analyze the results, the mean and standard deviation of the studied variables in the pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages for the experimental group are first reported, followed by the results of repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Bonferroni post-hoc test.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Variables in the Experimental Group at Different Stages

Variable	Group	Stage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Meta-emotional Perspective	Experimental	Pretest	118.93	2.53
		Posttest	132.53	1.24
		Follow-up	132.73	1.35
	Control	Pretest	113.26	4.93
		Posttest	112.93	4.89
		Follow-up	113.13	4.93
Impulsivity	Experimental	Pretest	67.86	7.90
		Posttest	55.46	8.63

Control	Follow-up	57.06	8.81
	Pretest	63.93	8.52
	Posttest	64.80	9.35
	Follow-up	63.13	8.72

The results in the table above indicate that the meta-emotional perspective in the experimental group increased from the pretest to the posttest and follow-up stages. Moreover, impulsivity scores significantly decreased, with a

slight increase observed at the follow-up stage. Nevertheless, the scores remained substantially lower than the pretest, indicating an improvement in this skill.

Table 2

Repeated Measures ANOVA Results for Between-Subjects and Within-Subjects Effects

Variable	Source	F	Significance Level	Effect Size	Statistical Power
Meta-emotional Perspective	Time × Group	50.66	<0.001	0.64	1.000
Impulsivity	Time × Group	70.28	<0.001	0.71	1.000

Based on the above table, the interaction effect of Time × Group is significant for both variables. This indicates that the observed changes in meta-emotional perspective and impulsivity in the experimental group were significantly

greater than those in the control group. The high F values, very low p-values, and large effect sizes all confirm the high effectiveness of the intervention.

Table 3

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test Results for Comparing Different Stages Across Variables

Variable	Comparison Stage	Mean Difference	Significance Level
Meta-emotional Perspective	Pretest - Posttest	-21.36	<0.001
Meta-emotional Perspective	Posttest - Follow-up	4.80	0.43
Impulsivity	Pretest - Posttest	5.76	<0.001
Impulsivity	Posttest - Follow-up	0.33	1.00

The Bonferroni post-hoc test results indicate that, for the meta-emotional perspective variable, a significant increase occurred from pretest to posttest. Although a further increase from posttest to follow-up was observed, it was not statistically significant. For impulsivity, the differences in means between both stages were statistically significant, indicating a meaningful reduction in impulsivity.

underscores the enduring impact of the intervention over time. These outcomes validate the psychological flexibility model at the heart of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), suggesting that the development of mindful awareness, emotional acceptance, and value-driven action through ACT contributes meaningfully to the improvement of parenting-related psychological constructs.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment-based parenting training in improving the meta-emotional perspective and reducing impulsivity in mothers of lower secondary school children. The results indicated a statistically significant increase in the meta-emotional perspective scores from pretest to posttest and follow-up in the experimental group, alongside a notable and sustained reduction in impulsivity scores. The significant interaction between time and group membership in both variables

The significant improvement in the meta-emotional perspective of mothers aligns with earlier findings demonstrating the benefits of ACT on parental emotional awareness and emotion coaching capacity. Mothers trained in ACT are encouraged to become more accepting of their own emotional responses, which in turn enables them to respond more constructively to their children’s emotions (Coyne, 2009; Whittingham et al., 2022). This is consistent with (Hurrell et al., 2017), who highlighted the role of parental meta-emotional philosophy in emotion coaching, especially in families dealing with internalizing disorders. Similarly, (Shao et al., 2023) emphasized the influence of

maternal reflective functioning and emotion-related beliefs on children's emotional development. The observed improvement in meta-emotional perspective in this study supports the notion that ACT-based parenting training fosters meta-awareness and reduces automatic or reactive parenting patterns. By training mothers to hold space for difficult emotions rather than avoiding or suppressing them, the intervention may lead to increased attunement to children's emotional needs, greater empathy, and more adaptive parenting practices.

The reduction in impulsivity observed in the experimental group is a particularly noteworthy outcome. Impulsivity is often associated with maladaptive parenting behaviors such as inconsistent discipline, emotional reactivity, and diminished emotional regulation (Hamza & Willoughby, 2019; Ran et al., 2021). The fact that ACT-based parenting training produced a marked decrease in impulsivity over time reinforces the idea that ACT's mechanisms—particularly cognitive defusion, acceptance, and committed action—are effective in regulating impulsive tendencies (Ghodrati et al., 2023; Karimi Imamvardikhan et al., 2023). This finding resonates with (Mobini Kasheh et al., 2024), who found that ACT-based parenting significantly improved parent-child interactions and reduced impulsivity in mothers of children with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Moreover, (Hoptman et al., 2025) stressed that emotional impulsivity is not merely a behavioral deficit but a regulatory dysfunction, deeply rooted in emotional awareness and inhibition. The current study's results suggest that ACT's focus on mindfulness and present-moment awareness may help mothers respond thoughtfully rather than reactively in emotionally charged situations.

The findings also echo research that situates ACT as a valuable tool for parents managing parenting stress and enhancing emotional self-regulation. For instance, (Safarealikhani & Donyamali, 2023) demonstrated that ACT-based training reduced anxiety and increased emotional regulation in parents of children with learning disorders, while (Bahrani Tanha et al., 2024) reported improvements in meaning-making and emotional empathy among mothers of children with cancer following ACT-based intervention. These results, along with the current study's outcomes, suggest that ACT may be effective not only in clinical populations but also in non-clinical but psychologically vulnerable groups. Additionally, ACT's capacity to improve psychological flexibility may allow parents to shift away from rigid or avoidant parenting behaviors, cultivating resilience and adaptability in the

parent-child relationship (Howell & Passmore, 2019; Li et al., 2023).

Another important implication of this study is the sustained nature of the intervention effects observed during the two-month follow-up. While a slight increase in impulsivity was recorded at follow-up, scores remained significantly lower than pretest levels, indicating that the intervention produced durable changes in maternal behavior. This durability may be attributed to ACT's experiential focus and emphasis on value-oriented living, which fosters long-term behavioral change (Coto-Lesmes et al., 2020; Holmberg Bergman et al., 2023). The consistency of findings across time further supports the growing body of literature advocating for the use of ACT as a parenting intervention strategy, as seen in studies such as (Maughan et al., 2024) and (Sabahi & Makvand Hosseini, 2023), both of which found sustained improvements in parenting quality and stress reduction following ACT-based interventions.

The present study also contributes to the understanding of the interplay between parenting style, emotion regulation, and impulsivity. Research indicates that authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles are often associated with higher impulsivity in both parents and children, while authoritative parenting—which emphasizes emotional responsiveness—can moderate impulsive behavior (Dong et al., 2022; Febiyanti & Rachmawati, 2021). Through ACT-based parenting, participants in this study may have developed an authoritative stance rooted in emotional acceptance and behavioral consistency, reducing the need for reactive or impulsive responses. Furthermore, the findings support the idea that meta-emotional awareness serves as a mediator between parenting behaviors and child emotional regulation (Shao et al., 2023), reinforcing the intergenerational impact of parental emotion regulation skills.

From a developmental psychology perspective, this study also affirms that interventions targeting parental emotion regulation and impulsivity are timely and critical during middle childhood—a stage where children's socio-emotional skills are still highly influenced by parental modeling (Berk, 2022; Piaget & Inhelder, 2021). Parenting at this stage requires both cognitive sensitivity and emotional availability, qualities that ACT fosters by encouraging mindful, present-focused engagement with the child. Additionally, the decrease in impulsivity aligns with findings by (Strickland & Johnson, 2021), who argued for the contextual and relational understanding of impulsivity, challenging the notion of it as a fixed trait and instead framing it as modifiable through targeted intervention.

In summary, the results of this study support the hypothesis that ACT-based parenting training significantly enhances maternal meta-emotional perspective and reduces impulsivity. These findings are in line with the broader literature supporting the utility of ACT in parent training programs, emotional regulation enhancement, and psychological well-being promotion. The study reinforces ACT's theoretical foundation and practical application in educational and psychological contexts and adds to the growing evidence base advocating for its integration into family-based mental health interventions.

Despite the promising findings, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and restricted to a single geographic area, which may limit the generalizability of the results to broader populations. Second, the use of self-report instruments introduces the possibility of response bias, particularly social desirability effects, which may have influenced participants' answers. Third, the study focused exclusively on mothers, excluding the role of fathers or other caregivers who may also play a significant role in shaping the emotional climate of the home. Fourth, although a follow-up was conducted, its duration was limited to two months, which may not adequately capture the long-term sustainability of intervention effects. Finally, while the study demonstrated statistically significant improvements in both outcome variables, it did not explore potential mediators such as psychological flexibility or experiential avoidance that might explain the mechanisms of change in greater depth.

Future studies should consider employing larger, more diverse samples across multiple cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to enhance external validity. Longitudinal research designs with extended follow-up periods would be beneficial in evaluating the long-term effects and relapse prevention potential of ACT-based parenting interventions. Future research should also include multi-informant assessment strategies, such as observational methods or teacher reports, to supplement self-report data and increase objectivity. Additionally, exploring the role of psychological flexibility, mindfulness, and emotion coaching as mediators could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ACT exerts its effects. Researchers may also investigate the comparative effectiveness of ACT-based parenting relative to other well-established parenting interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral or emotion-focused parenting programs. Finally, extending the intervention to include both parents or other caregivers may yield valuable insights into systemic family-level changes.

Practitioners working in educational, psychological, or community-based parenting programs are encouraged to incorporate ACT-based parenting interventions as a viable approach for enhancing parental emotional awareness and reducing impulsive reactions. The experiential and values-based nature of ACT makes it a practical fit for group workshops, school counseling programs, and community mental health services. Training programs should emphasize not only the theoretical foundations of ACT but also the development of skills in present-moment awareness, acceptance, and values clarification. Given the positive outcomes seen in a relatively short time frame, ACT-based parenting interventions can be integrated into preventive mental health initiatives aimed at promoting emotional well-being in families with school-aged children. Furthermore, educators and school psychologists can play a crucial role in identifying families who may benefit from such interventions and providing referrals or facilitating access.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

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.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance

of the research before the start of the study and participated in the research with informed consent. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, under the code IR.IAU.KHUISF.REC.1401.313 on December 19, 2022.

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