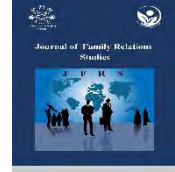




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## Research Paper

Explaining the causal model of co-parenting based on parenting stress by moderating role of family leisure and humor



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of this study was to determine the mediating role of family leisure and humor in the relationship between parenting stress and co-parenting.

**Methods:** The present study population consisted of all parents living in Kermanshah in 2020, from which 300 people were selected to participate in the study using multi-stage cluster sampling. Research instruments included Parenting Stress Index-Short Form, Zabriski Family Leisure Activity Profile, C.-parenting Relationship Scale, and the Family Members' Humor Scale. The research was descriptive and structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data.

**Results:** The results of data analysis showed that there is a significant direct relationship between parenting stress variables and co-parenting ( $P < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = -0.43$ ), parenting stress and family humor ( $P < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = -0.34$ ), parenting stress variables and family leisure ( $P < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = -0.28$ ), humor in the family and co-parenting ( $P < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.4$ ). Also, the humor variable in the family could play a mediating role in the relationship between parenting stress and co-parenting ( $P < 0.002$ ;  $\beta = 0.17$ ).

**Conclusion:** Therefore, it can be said that humor and games in families can play an important role both in creating co-parenting and decreasing of the negative effect of parenting stress on co-parenting.

## 1. Introduction

Having children or the family expansion stage is the most important turning point in the family life cycle (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2018). At the same time as the children are born, the couple as parents become more individualized human beings and having children forces a couple to transform their system into a parental subsystems and thus face new responsibilities. Complementarity of roles remains essential. At the beginning and during parenting, it is very important that parents, despite all the

requirements of parenting and expanding efforts to form an effective parental subsystem, continue to strive for maintaining and strengthening their marital subsystem, which is the basis of family well-being (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2018). Increasing a wife's expectation of her husband to help her with childbearing and her turning to more adult affairs and the pressure the husband feels from his wife, children, and work can cause the marriage to decline (Haley, 1993).

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The term “co-parenting” is used to describe the relationship between at least two people (parents) who have accepted the common role of parenting and child raising (Feinberg, 2003; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Co-parenting refers to a multidimensional concept that is the cooperation and coordination of both parents in the upbringing of the child and the psychological investment and commitment of both parents in raising and of course respecting the educational ideas and attitudes of the other party, as well as awareness of the importance and position of the other parent in the optimal development of children (Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Research has shown that co-parenting predicts a child's unique performance beyond the influence of other family variables (Stright & Neitzel, 2003). Low levels of parental involvement are also associated with insecure attachment in children (Brown et al., 2010), and cause interpersonal problems as well as externalizing problems in the future (Feinberg et al., 2007; Goodrum et al., 2012). Research findings also show that there is a positive and significant relationship between parents' unity and their children's high ability to self-regulate in the future. The findings also suggest that the initial interactions of parents with their children provide opportunities for them to acquire a set of self-monitoring skills such as monitoring and controlling thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in different situations (Belsky et al., 1996).

Leisure time is an important part of family life that provides opportunities for family members to interact, communicate and learn from each other during enjoyable activities (Walton, 2019). Family leisure activities are classified into two main types: core leisure activities and balance leisure activities. Core leisure activities are usually done frequently and continuously in the family environment and at a low cost: such as eating with family members, playing in the yard with each other and walking outside the house with other members, but balance activities are usually less repetitive and take place outside the home, and require planning and, of course, higher costs, such as family vacations, travel, and dinner at restaurants. Zabriskie and MackCormick (2003) found in a study that both core and leisure activities provide family cohesion and flexibility. Many researchers have been interested in how family leisure activities play a role in communication, performance and satisfaction with family life. They found that families who choose leisure time that is pleasing to all family members, experience more family life satisfaction, even by controlling for other personal and demographic variables (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003). Poff, Zabriskie and Townsend (2010) examined the

relationship between the variables mentioned in a national study with a sample of 900 families. They concluded that family participation in recreational activities was positively related to life satisfaction. Smith, Freeman and Zabriskie (2009) developed this model by examining the role of family relationships and concluded that family interactions play a facilitating role in family leisure and functioning (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Jokes and humor have long been recognized as a useful tool in social friendship and of course romantic situations. Relationships and interactions of family members with each other can be a model for learning romantic, friendly and of course humorous relationships, which in adulthood are considered as criteria for the ability to establish a healthy relationship (Knapp et al., 2008). Research findings indicate that the skill of using humor is not inherent but an acquired skill that one can use in different situations of life and enjoy its benefits (Ziv, 1984). Humor has a great effect on a person's ability to cope with stressful life situations (Martin & Lefcourt, 1984; Miczo, 2004), and it has a positive and significant relationship with creativity and intimacy in relationships. In fact, the hypothesis that a high level of intimacy is associated with a high level of humor in relationships has been proven (Sternberg, 1987), jokes also have a huge impact on a person's ability to cope with stressful life situations (Martin & Lefcourt, 1984). Parental stress refers to conditions or situations in which parents face environmental demands and needs that go beyond the social and personal resources at their disposal (Cooper et al., 2009). Abidin and Brunner (1995) attribute parenting stress to the interaction of key parental characteristics (e.g., depression, feelings of competence, attachment relationships with the child, relationships with spouse, limitations due to role-playing, or motherhood with child characteristics (e.g. adaptability, acceptance, exaggeration, creation of hyperactivity and reinforcement) (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). They also believe that parent and child characteristics along with external situational variables and life stress factors (such as divorce, job problems, etc.) are the reasons for the possible increase in performance at the optimal level as well as parenting stress. Increasing maternal stress has an important effect on children's emotional and behavioral development. Increasing the level of stress in married life increases the likelihood of divorce (Karney et al., 2005), decreases the quality of married life (Proulx et al., 2007), reduces the level of psychological well-being in couples (Kamp Dush et al., 2008), and sexual efficiency in the marital relationship (Bodenmann et al., 2007), and also has devastating and destructive effects

on marital satisfaction (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Karney et al., 2005; Tesser & Beach, 1998). Thus, daily stresses have devastating effects on quality of life and marital relationships (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

Due to the importance of co-parenting in the family and its effect on the upbringing of children, as well as stress and quality of marital relationships in the context of family relationships, so far no coherent research has been able to explain and describe the above variables in a causal model. There is a research gap in this area. Therefore, the question of the present study was whether family leisure and humor can play a mediating role in the relationship between parental union and parenting stress

## 2. Materials and Methods

The method of this research was descriptive and correlational as well as path analysis which was a form of multiple regression, which helps us to determine the relationship between variables and the independence or dependence of each of them in the model and tries to establish causal models on how to combine predictor variables in influencing the level of dependent variable. The statistical population included all parents of primary school students in Kermanshah in the academic year of 1997-98 and multi-stage cluster sampling was performed. In this way, one district was selected from the three education districts of Kermanshah and three schools were randomly selected from the primary schools located in this district. Then 110 student parents were randomly selected from each school. Given that the total sample size in structural equations is based on the rule and for each parameter is at least 5 subjects, and also, according to the minimum sample size is 200 people, therefore, according to the probability of falling and estimating 60 parameters in the proposed model, the researcher considered 300 people to participate in the present study. Out of 330 collected questionnaires, 22 distorted questionnaires were removed from the analysis and 308 questionnaires were entered into SPSS 24 and Amos-24 software. Also, path analysis method was used in data analysis.

### Research Tools

Family Leisure Activity Profile (.LAP): This questionnaire was developed by Zabriskie (2000) and its questions indicate the core patterns of family leisure and the balance patterns of family leisure (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). In each question, the respondent is asked about his / her participation in one of those related activities. If the answer is yes, the respondent must complete the estimated ordinal scales of frequency (approximately several times) and duration

(approximately how long) for each category. To score, first each of the sequential scales of frequency and duration in each activity category is calculated. The scores of activities by core or balance are then added together to calculate each of the subscales. The sum of the scores of these two subscales gives the total score of leisure activities. This questionnaire has two subscales, core and balance. This scale demonstrates acceptable psychometric properties such as evidence of structural validity, content validity, and internal reliability (Smith et al., 2009; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001), and retest reliability has been reported for core subscale ( $R = 74\%$ ), for balance ( $R = 78\%$ ) and for total score ( $R = 78\%$ ) (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001), and the reliability of Iranian retest with a time interval of one month has been calculated 0.64 (Seidi et al., 2011). Parenting Stress Index - PSI-SF Short Form: This questionnaire includes a 36-item short version of the main parenting stress index developed by Abidin (Abidin & Brunner (1995)). There are three subscales of parental disorder, dysfunctional parent-child interactions, and problematic child characteristics. The results of factor analysis of Fadai, Dehghani, Tahmasian, Farhadi (2011) research showed that the three-factor model has a good fit. In their study, Cronbach's alpha was used to examine the validity of the subscales and the results showed that the validity of the total parental stress score was 0.90 and for each of the subscales of parental disorder, dysfunctional parent-child interaction, and the characteristics of the problematic child were 0.80, 0.84, and 0.80, respectively. Also, the retest validity coefficient during 18 days after the first implementation is equal to 0.75 for the total parenting stress score; 0.82 for the parental disorder subscale; 0.73 for the dysfunctional parent-child interaction subscale; and 0.71 for the problematic child characteristics subscale. These correlation values indicate the stability of index scores over time. The results of correlation to evaluate the convergent validity of parental stress index with DASS test on 33 mothers showed that there is a significant positive relationship between DASS mothers' mental health characteristics and parental stress (fadaie et al., 2011).

Co-parenting Relationship Scale (CRS): This scale was designed by Feinberg, Brown, and Kan (2012) to comprehensively assess the quality of co-parenting in families with both parents (Feinberg et al., 2012). The Co-parenting Relationship Scale (CRS) is completed separately by parents and they are asked to choose the one that applies to their spouse. This scale (CRS) includes 35 items that cover seven areas of co-parenting (co-parenting closeness, co-parenting undermining, co-parenting support, endorsement of partner's parenting,

co-parenting solidarity, exposure to conflict, and division of labor). The first 30 questions of this scale are scored using a 7-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and the final five questions are done with a 6-point Likert scale (from never to many times). A high overall score indicates strong co-parenting. Some of the items in this scale are; "My spouse and I have similar goals for our children." and "My spouse and I have different standards for our children's behavior." Because CRS is a relatively new scale for assessing co-parenting, there are a handful of research studies that provide information on the psychometric properties of it. In the study of Feinberg et al. (2012), the 7-factor structure of the instrument (structural validity) was confirmed by structural equation modeling. Also, the criterion validity coefficient of this scale was obtained with the questionnaire of couple love (0.64 to 0.71), couple efficiency (0.61 to 0.65) and quality of marriage (64 to 71). McDaniel et al. (2012) calculated the reliability coefficient by Cronbach's alpha method from 0.91 to 0.93 and Feinberg et al. (2012) calculated it from 0.91 to 0.94(Feinberg et al., 2012; McDaniel & Teti, 2012). The Family Members' Humor Scale (FMHS): This scale was developed by Gonzales and Mierop (2004) to measure family members' humor and has 15 Likert items based on the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Purol

& Chopik, 2022). The higher the score on this scale, the more humor is perceived in the family context. Scoring is done using a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). This scale is used to measure items such as "humor is a common communication style in our family." In the study, the reliability of Cronbach's alpha method was 0.88, and in the study of Butterfield and Butterfield (1991), the retest reliability coefficient was 0.70 and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.89 and also reliability coefficient was 0.93. The one-factor structure of this scale was also confirmed(Booth Butterfield & Booth Butterfield, 1991).

### 3. Results

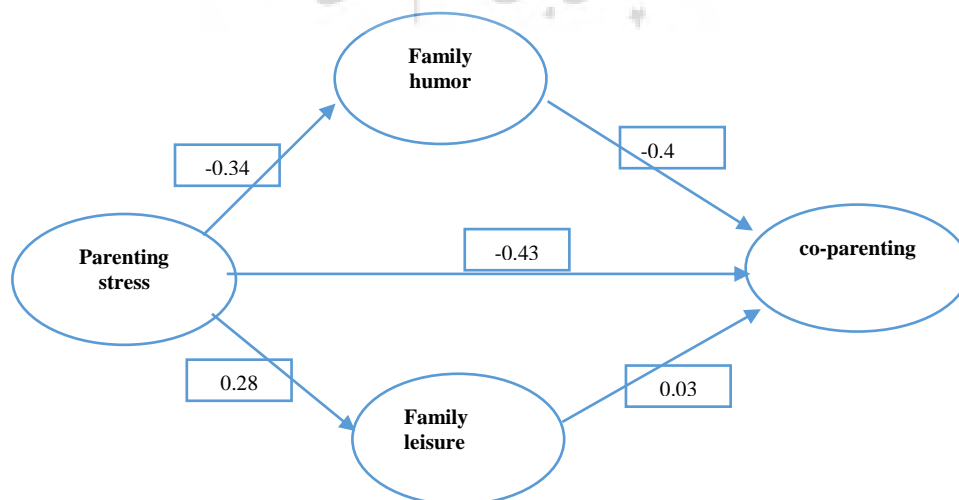
In the participating subjects, the highest frequency was related to the age group of 31 to 40 years and the lowest was related to those under 30 years old. Also, the highest frequency was related to female gender, which makes up 55% of the participants. In terms of education, most participants in the study had a diploma, which accounts for 42% of participants, and the lowest frequency was related to a PHD degree with one participant. In order to investigate the assumptions of the structural equation model based on the relationship between the model variables, Pearson correlation coefficient test was performed, the results of which are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Correlation matrix of variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4
1 Family Humor	1			
2 Family Leisure	0.3**	1		
3 Parenting Stress	-0.27**	-0.17**	1	
4 Co-parenting	0.3**	0.12**	-0.34**	1

As you can see in Table 1, Pearson correlation coefficients of the variables of this study (parenting stress, co-parenting, family humor and family leisure)

were significant at the level of 0.001 and 0.01. Then, the model was analyzed by path analysis.



**Figure 1. Model View**

**Table 2. Direct path coefficient of research variables**

	Non-standard estimates	Standard estimate	The standard error	Critical ratio	Significance level
parenting stress → family humor	-0.03	-0.34	-0.006	-4.18	0.001
parenting stress → family leisure	-0.76	-0.28	0.26	-2.9	0.004
parenting stress → co-parenting	-0.5	-0.43	0.09	-5.6	0.001
family humor → co-parenting	6.03	0.4	1.15	5.26	0.001
family leisure → co-parenting	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.37	0.72

In the structural equation model, after applying the covariance correction indices, the error of items 5 and 6; 6 and 8; 5 and 8; 89 and 12 of the family members’

humor scale and covariance error of subscales 2 and 5 of the co-parenting relationship scale were re-analyzed and fitting indices were extracted.

**Table 3. Model fit indices**

RMSEA	IFI	CFI	AGFI	GFI	df	CMIN/DF
0.047	0.91	0.91	0.88	0.9	261	1.67

The fit indices presented in Table 3 show that the model has a good fit. In the present research model, the significance of indirect relationships of variables was tested by bootstrap method with 1500 re-

sampling. Bootstrap results related to indirect relationships in the modified research model are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Significance test of indirect effect by bootstrap method**

	Standard estimate	Upper bound	lower bound	Significance level
parenting stress → family humor → co-parenting	-0.14	-0.006	-0.21	0.002

As shown in Table 4, the indirect path of parenting stress to co-parenting is mediated by humor in the family with coefficient (0.17) and level (0.002), and the indirect path of parenting stress to co-parenting mediated by family leisure could not be analyzed due to the lack of direct path of leisure to co-parenting. This means that the humor variable in the family can play a mediating role in the relationship between parental stress and co-parenting.

which in turn reduces depression in the family (Brooks et al., 1999).

**4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of data analysis showed that parenting stress has a negative and significant relationship with jokes in the family and parenting stress can explain 0.12 of the variance of humor in the family. Explaining this finding, it can be argued that when the level of stress in the family is high, the balance of the family system is disturbed, which causes a crisis in the family (Walsh, 2002, 2009). As daily stresses increase and accumulate, psychological problems such as depression occur between parents and family members (Puga et al., 2023). In a family with a sick or depressed member, the first thing that hurts is the sense of happiness and humor in the family context. In fact, the findings of the present study were consistent with the findings of Brooks, Guthrie and Gaylord (1999), on the effects of humor on reducing individual parental and family stress. It can be argued that humor in the family context reduces the stress of the family system,

The results of the analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between parenting stress and family leisure (Jonsdottir et al., 2010). According to the model proposed by Zabriskie (2000), to enter new, stressful and of course costly valleys, it is necessary to arrange balanced leisure activities. Children of families experiencing high levels of parenting stress have many socio-cognitive-behavioral problems (Neece et al., 2012). Parenting stress was also identified as the strongest predictor of behavioral and emotional problems in early childhood (Davis & Carter, 2008; Goldberg et al., 1997). Studies show that children in families with high levels of parenting stress experience many problems in cognitive and social development (Barroso et al., 2018; Danseco & Holden, 1998). Thus, families who are under the stress of parenting and face a large number of daily challenges have lost their physical and mental resources to engage in leisure activities. Therefore, leisure activities are reduced in these families. As a result, stress has a direct effect on reducing leisure activities.

The results of data analysis showed that there is a relationship between parental stress and co-parenting. These findings were consistent with some studies (Belsky et al., 1996; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2009). The findings are also consistent with Murray Bowen's theory of intergenerational family therapy.

According to this approach, one of the ways to neutralize anxious two-way relationships in the family is triangulation (Guerin Jr et al., 1996). It means the formation of a three-person interaction between family members. Triangulation, then, is the path that stressful two-way systems take to achieve stability (Bowen, 1993). Structuralists believe that the power of parental queuing often ends up in favor of parenting and restricting children. On the other hand, the alliance between parent and child against another parent can have a negative impact on family functioning (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2018). In short, a couple who are not united in parenting and have not been able to form a strong team to take care of their children's various affairs and agree on different parenting responsibilities usually have trouble interacting with each other and have strained relationships. As a result, in order to reduce the tension between them, they try to get the child into their dual relationship. Another explanation is that parenting stress is a very important and influential variable in the normal functioning of the family. The high level of this type of stress has many negative consequences such as reduced mental health and well-being of parents (Asberg et al., 2008), negative and long-term impact on children's health (Cooper et al., 2009), parental dissatisfaction, existence of symptoms of the disease, poor quality of marital relationships, poor performance and behavioral problems of children and depression (Nair et al., 2003). In fact, parental stress is so destructive that it disrupts the proper functioning of the family. Also, high levels of parental stress generally lead to inappropriate parenting (Hastings et al., 2005). According to the mentioned research findings, it can be inferred that sincere and allied parental relationships emerge in a context away from tension and stress. In families with high level of parental stress, family functions, intimate marital relationships and the mental and physical health of family members are affected. Also, one cannot expect united parental relationships. Therefore, with increasing levels of parental stress, one of the areas that is affected in the family is the unity of parents in parenting.

Findings indicate that there is a causal relationship between humor in the family and co-parenting. No studies were found that directly show the relationship between these two variables or are consistent or inconsistent with the findings of this study. Explaining the findings, it can be argued that humor in interpersonal relationships has many useful functions, including facilitating the establishment of constructive family relationships (Caughlin, 2006), promoting interpersonal competencies (Graham et al., 1992),

managing interpersonal conflict (Duran, 1992), reducing relationship distance (Graham, 1995), increasing marital satisfaction (Ziv & Gadish, 1989), dynamic parenting and reducing family conflicts (Garza & Pettit, 2010). As mentioned in the above researches, humor increases the intimacy and quality of interpersonal relationships. Since co-parenting is also a kind of interpersonal relationship, it can be inferred that humor can increase this union and partnership between parents to facilitate parenting. What can be deduced from the above researches is that the more intimate the atmosphere of the marital relationship and the more the couple can use their humorous capacities to deepen their relationship, the stronger the healthy boundaries around the sub-marital system and consequently the parental subsystem, as well as parental unity in parenting. Another explanation that can be deduced from the above researches is that humor makes couples and children spend more time together and in the meantime experience and exchange more positive emotions. This intimacy and closeness of the couple causes a better understanding of the needs of each other and as a result, more closeness and intimacy of the couple to each other, which increases the co-parenting between the parents.

Explaining that no significant causal relationship was found between family leisure and co-parenting, it can be said that balanced leisure activities require family distance from each other and a safe family environment. This type of leisure includes activities such as traveling and risky recreation. It is very clear that in a new and stressful situation, the possibility of disputes and tensions between parents is very high. In fact, these factors have prevented co-parenting from increasing in these situations. In balanced leisure activities, the level of tension and the possibility of disagreement and the fire of tension and conflict are high. As a result, the family's leisure could not strengthen co-parenting.

The results of data analysis showed that family humor and leisure can play a mediating role in the relationship between parenting stress and co-parenting. Explaining the results of statistical data, it can be argued that in situations where the level of stress in the family context is high, the psychological flexibility of family members is impaired (Bryan et al., 2015), levels of psychological flexibility are negatively related to stress. In fact, with increasing stress levels, psychological flexibility decreases, which makes it impossible for parents to correct their dysfunctional behaviors (Hayes et al., 2011) and this prevents parents from having a good conversation

about raising their children. For this reason, each parent engages in stereotypical parenting behaviors without the consent and cooperation of the other parent. Therefore, high parental stress reduces and weakens co-parenting. Research has also shown that humor has a positive effect on reducing stress and psychological tension (Lehman et al., 2001). Another study shows that humor is an effective mechanism for coping with the stresses and strains of everyday life. Many professionals also want to use humor to help cope with stressful life events (Sands, 1984). So humor can help promote psychological flexibility in parents because of its effect on reducing stress and improving performance in various areas of life (Smith et al., 1971). In fact, humor can moderate the negative relationship between parental stress and co-parenting.

#### Implications for Family Therapy/Practice

Findings of this study showed that humor in the family has a moderating role in the negative effect of parenting stress on parental unity. Humor is also an acquired and learned skill. The therapists who work with families with parenting problems can implement and design protocols, interventions, and homework to enhance the level of humor and laughter in the family. They are encouraged to design and implement programs to reduce parenting stress levels. It is also recommended for families to have a successful parenting, include more fun and enjoyable activities in your life plan.

#### Limitations

Doing this research was faced with obstacles and problems, including the non-cooperation of some school admins to fill out questionnaires, lack of proper ventilation in the halls where the questionnaires were filled, and restless children because parents fill out questionnaires faster.

#### Direction for Future Research

Researchers are suggested to deal with all kinds of common and effective jokes in their cultural context in future research with qualitative or quantitative methodologies. It is also suggested that future research examine other variables that can be effective in modulating the negative effect of parenting stress on co-parenting. Among these variables, we can mention spirituality and spiritual behaviors, strategies and skills for maintaining relationship and cultural components.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles were considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of

the research and its implementation stages. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information and were free to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the research results would be available to them.

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### Authors' contributions

All authors participated in the design, implementation and writing of all sections of the present study.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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