



Investigation of the Relationships between Perceived Marital Conflict, Parents' Irrational Beliefs, Anxiety and Children's Automatic Thoughts, Problem Solving Skills, and Children's Anxiety and Aggression *

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Abstract

In this study, it was examined whether the anxiety and aggression observed in children were predicted by the irrational beliefs and anxieties of the parents, the marital conflict perceived by the children, automatic thoughts and problem solving skills. The study group is comprised of 304 elementary school fourth-grade students (170 females and 134 males) attending a state school located in the city of İzmir, Turkey, during the 2016-2017 academic school year. Additionally, the study group includes the students' parents ($n = 608$), making a total of 912 participants. Within the context of the study, the "Trait Anxiety Scale" and "Parent Irrational Beliefs Scale" were administered to the parents, and the "Children's Perception of Marital Conflict Scale," "Problem Solving Inventory for Children," "Children's Automatic Thoughts Scale," "Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children," and "Little Aggression Scale" were administered to the students. The analyses conducted in the current study have revealed that except for the variables of father's trait anxiety and mother's irrational beliefs, the other variables have a significant contribution to the model; that father's irrational beliefs, marital conflict perceived by children, children's automatic thoughts and problem-solving skills significantly predicted anxiety in children, and that 55% of the total variance was explained. Moreover, the children's problem-solving skills and automatic thoughts were found to explain 27% of the total variance in aggression in children. On the other hand, mother's trait anxiety, father's irrational beliefs, and perceived marital conflict were found to have no role in the prediction of children's aggressive behaviors. The findings obtained as a result of the research are discussed according to the relevant literature within the scope of the Ecological Model, and suggestions are made for future research.

Keywords

Aggression
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Introduction

Individuals are influenced by the social structure in which they are a member, and which also affects the community in which they live. Humans need to establish interpersonal relationships to exist both biologically and psychologically and these processes play an important role in their development. In this context, the existence of the individual is supported by the presence of parents in the first years of life, and by the social milieu established through education, friends, marriage, and business life in subsequent years (Erok, 2013). The relationship of the individual with the environment has an important role in the formation of his / her perception of the world and himself/herself (Sezer, 2010). One theory explaining the systems that affect the individual's environment and also the individual himself/herself is Ecological Theory (Begum, 2007). The theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner, and emphasizes that the four intertwined sociocultural layers (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) affect the development of the individual through interaction with each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The system starts from the individual, expands to include family, home, school, social environment, public spaces and legal orders, which interact with each other in a cyclical fashion (DeVylder, 2012). In this cyclical interaction in which the individual is affected by the environment and the environment from the individual, the healthy development of the individual depends on the balanced and harmonious relationship established with the systems (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2014).

When analyzing problem behaviors observed in children, who are expected to interact with their environment in the development process, these behaviors are generally classified into two categories as internalization (e.g., anxiety, fear, etc.) and externalization (e.g., aggression, excessive mobility, etc.), in terms of the problem areas they may experience (Gimpel & Holland, 2003; Özbey, 2009). As an internalization problem area, anxiety is defined as the most common emotional state seen in children (Çengel-Kültür, Tiryaki, & Ünal, 2003; Karaceylan-Çakmakçı, 2005). Its frequency in children was found to vary between 8.6% and 17.7% (Leung et al., 2008) and 1.1%-12% (Tosun & Zorlu, 2019) according to different studies. Aggression, which is one of the externalization problem areas, is seen as a serious problem affecting the communication of children within their environment, especially in schools. In the existing research, it has been reported that 42% of children are annually subjected to physical aggression at school (Alikasıfoğlu et al., 2004), that the rate of exposure to emotional, physical, sexual, and verbal harassment among primary school fourth- and fifth-graders is 40% (Kapçı, 2004), that 39.3% of primary school students are involved in incidences of physical aggression and that 6% of them harm other students with sharp objects (Uz Baş & Topçu-Kabasakal, 2010), and that aggression has reached worrying levels in the general social life of children as well as at school (Dervent, Arslanoğlu, & Şenel, 2010; Lee, Baillargeon, Vermunt, Wu, & Tremblay, 2007). When these problem areas are broadly investigated according to both national and international literature, anxiety as the internalization problem area and aggression as the externalization problem area are seen to be more strongly emphasized; therefore, they are aimed to be examined as the dependent variables in the current study.

When the anxiety that arises in children is observed from the perspective of the Ecological Model, it should be evaluated within a wide framework that includes social, familial, and also cognitive factors. Anxiety is considered to be one of the most common emotional problems faced by individuals, commencing from childhood and right throughout their adolescence (Karaceylan-Çakmakçı, 2005). Anxiety state changes, however, and diversifies and increases as the child grows and his/her environment expands from just their immediate family towards a broader social environment (Geçtan, 2015). The anxiety experienced by the developing individual affects his/her educational life, academic performance and peer relationships (Tosun & Zorlu, 2019), mental health as well as physical health (Battaglia et al., 2017). In this aspect, anxiety, rather than being a temporary childhood problem, is a condition that negatively affects the psychosocial development of children both in the short and long term (Kapçı, İdil-Uslu, Sukhodolsky, Atalan-Ergin, & Çokamay, 2012). Therefore, the prediction of childhood anxiety, which is treated as a dependent variable in the current study, by familial, cognitive, and behavioral traits is expected to contribute to the effectiveness of interventions applied at early ages.

As the concept of aggression, which is associated with anxiety in many respects, refers to a serious problem exacerbated each day in Turkey just as it is in the world, research focusing on the issue has become significantly more important (Ercan, Ercan, Akyol-Ardıç, & Uçar, 2016). Aggression pertains to more than one definition and has a multidimensional structure. When evaluated within the

context of the Ecological Model, aggressive behavior is a product of both interpersonal and intrapersonal variables, and is shaped through the interaction of a child with his/her parents, peers, and socio-cultural environment (Kapçı, 2004). In addition to environmental factors and familial factors have been observed to play an important role in the emergence of violent behaviors on the part of adolescents (Avcı & Güçray, 2010). Referring to the role of parents in the behaviors exhibited by children, researchers have stated that aggression may be exhibited in the form of behaviors against authority as well as a reaction to the unrealistic expectations of a parent (Greydanus, Pratt, Greydanus, & Hoffman, 1992), and that aggression can develop when a child is physically or emotionally blocked by a parent who constantly attempts to mold a child's behaviors and desires into certain patterns (Kılıçarslan, 2010). In addition, it has been noted that children witnessing family conflicts or parent's aggressive behaviors (Tuzcuoğlu & Tuzcuoğlu, 2005), their being criticized, neglected or frequently punished, or their parents' approving or sanctioning their every desire (Aral, Ayhan, Türkmenler, & Akbiyık, 2004) can also lead to the development of aggressive behaviors in children. Another point to be considered here is that children who act aggressively or are exposed to aggressive behaviors can be adversely affected by these experiences both in childhood and in later years (Lee et al., 2007).

If different variables, either personal or environmental, that are thought to be affective on the aggressive tendencies and anxiety states of children are examined based on the Ecological Approach, it seems logical to also investigate the problem-solving skills and automatic thoughts of children which are believed to be influential on both anxiety and aggression. Depending on the difficulty level of the problem encountered, it can be considered normal for an individual to experience anxiety (Öztürk & Uluşahin, 2018), and as a result of intense exposure to such difficult problems, their level of anxiety can also be expected to increase (Endler & Kocovski, 2001). Research on this topic has revealed that those who are confident of their own problem-solving skills and perceive themselves as competent have fewer dysfunctional beliefs and thoughts, and feel less anxious overall (Şahin, Şahin, & Heppner, 1993). On the other hand, deficiencies in problem-solving skills can lead to aggressive behaviors. It has been found that children and adolescents who have deficiencies in problem-solving skills can start to use aggressive behaviors as a social coping method (D'Zurilla, Chang, & Sanna, 2003; Pakaslahti, 2000). In the relevant literature, children aged 7-12 years old with behavioral problems tend to capitalize upon violent rather than flexible solutions (Waschbusch, Walsh, Andrade, King, & Carrey, 2007), and focus more upon aggression rather than constructive and tenacious solutions (Arslan, Hamarta, Arslan, & Saygın, 2010). On the other hand, interpersonal problem solving skill positively affects social relations (Dinçer et al., 2019), it has been observed that primary school students who have received training in problem solving for a period of 1 year can demonstrate improved communication skills and reduced aggression by the end of their year of training (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).

Given that the most important factor that prevents individuals from coping with a problem or stressful situation is not the problem itself, but how it is evaluated by the individual, negative automatic thoughts can increase the level of anxiety of the individual, resulting in pessimism and depression, or other undesirable outcomes (Akbağ, 2000). In addition, cognitive therapists acknowledge that these thoughts are not inborn, but learned (Beck, 2014), and start to develop during early childhood and continue to develop throughout life (Sharf, 2000). In studies conducted on the subject, it was determined that cognitive processes are related to anxiety (Alfano, Beidel, & Turner, 2002), anxiety and negative automatic thoughts (Atalan-Ergin & Kapçı, 2017; Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2005; Demirhan, 2019; Ishikawa, 2015). Considering the effects on the life of the person, it is recommended that these thinking structures be noticed and intervened as early as possible (Atalan-Ergin, 2013). Within the framework of the Ecological Model, it is thought that understanding the role of automatic thoughts in children's anxiety and aggression behaviors in the current study will shed light for studies to be carried out on children.

In addition to personal variables such as automatic thoughts and problem-solving skills that are thought to impact on the emotional and behavioral problems that children exhibit, certain environmental factors are also thought to be influential as well. The family system, which is the first social environment encountered in life and surrounds the child from birth, is the primary environmental variable that affects the development of a child (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). In the family system, the relationship between parents and the child as well as the marriage relationship established as a

couple is an important factor in the development of the individual (Hakvoort, Bos, Van Balen, & Hermanns, 2010). Possible conflict within a marital relationship can negatively affect the emotional and social development of children, increasing their risk of developing behavioral problems and their experiencing emotional difficulties (Yavuzer, 2011). Depending on the intensity and severity of any conflict, children may become worried about being involved in the conflict, resulting in a deterioration of their relation with either or both of their parents (Hoşcan, 2010). In studies on the reflections of marriage conflict on children, it has been determined that conflicts experienced have a relation to the psychological incompatibility of children (Erden-Çınar, 2015; Hoşcan, 2010), that involvement in a conflict is considered a significant predictor of anxiety in children (O'Brien, Bahadur, Gee, Balto, & Erber, 1995) and that the children of parents experiencing conflict become more aggressive than those of parents not experiencing conflict (Öngider, 2006; Şendil & Kızıldağ, 2005). It has been observed that a relationship exists between the negative emotions displayed during parental conflicts and the levels of anxiety and aggression seen in their children (Shelton & Harold, 2007), and that children witnessing conflicts consequently experience problems in their peer relationships (Du Rocher-Schudlich, Shamir, & Cummings, 2004). In addition, aggression in the home can negatively impact a child's behaviors, even where the aggression is not specifically directed at or applied to the child (Kaplan, 2007).

Another factor that can cause anxiety in children is the anxiety of their parents. In general, the emotion regulation skills of the child are affected by the emotional regulation processes of caregiving adults (Dickstein & Leibenluft, 2006). According to Geçtan (2015), anxiety is contagious and can be transmitted from anxious authority figures such as parents to their children through perception or identification. Studies on parent-child interaction and anxiety show that anxious parents have children with high levels of anxiety (Bora, 2019; Muris & Merckelbach, 1998; Şahin, 2019), and that mothers of children diagnosed with anxiety disorder exhibit anxious attachment style (Özyurt, Öztürk, & Akay, 2017), that the mother's anxiety scores are related to the anxiety scores of the child (Alisinanoğlu & Ulutaş, 2003; Nazlıoğlu, 2019). When this situation is evaluated in terms of Ecological Theory, it becomes more and more important to examine the family dynamics and the emotional characteristics of the parents, which constitute the micro system with which the child interacts most and which directly affects the life of the child. Another situation related to parents that is thought to have an effect on the child is the irrational beliefs of the parents. Another situation connected to parents thought to have an impact on the child are the irrational beliefs that some parents may have, which children can be exposed to both directly and indirectly (Bernard, 2006). If a child significantly commits to such irrational thoughts, he/she may experience severe emotional disorders when subjected to challenges or stress in the future (Ağır, 2007). In studies conducted on this topic, it has been observed that for parents of children aged 7-12 years old, their irrational parenting beliefs can be related to their children's behavioral problems (Hamamcı & Bağcı, 2017). It is stated that children who are exposed to irrational thoughts of their parents may experience anxiety and low self-esteem problems due to their increased tendency to blame themselves (Bernard, 2006). Therefore, irrational thoughts of parents are thought to be an important variable in understanding parental effects in the microsystem in the Ecological Model.

In the current study, the aim is to investigate parents' beliefs and concerns about child-raising, children's perceptions of their parents' marital conflicts, and children's automatic thoughts and problem-solving skills within a single model, with the anticipated findings of the study believed to offer important contributions to the literature and for both parents and practitioners. Moreover, the importance of the current study is believed to increase considering that it is conducted with children aged 9-12 years old, that it is directed towards investigating children's early cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics, that the children's parents are also involved in the study, and that the close surroundings of the child are also evaluated within a holistic approach to the research. As a conclusion, on the basis of the concept that a significant role is played by the child's interaction with their own surroundings, particularly within the family in terms of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development, the following problem statement of the current study aims to explore the mediating relationships between the variables determined in light of the relevant literature: "Do children's problem-solving skills, automatic thoughts, perceived marital conflicts, and parents' anxiety and irrational beliefs predict anxiety and aggression in children?". The answer to this overriding question was sought in line with the following sub-problems, as depicted in the model shown in Figure 1.

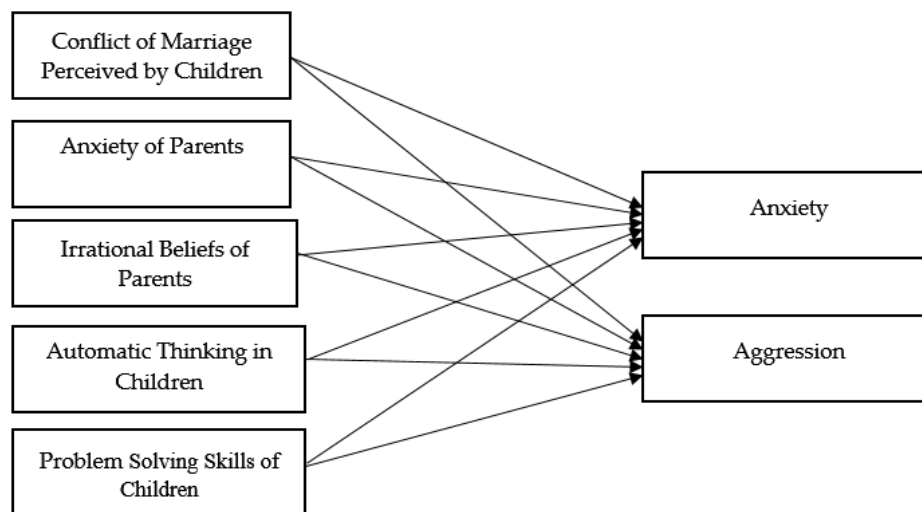


Figure 1. Predicted Model

Research Questions

The following two research questions led the current study:

1. Do children's problem-solving skills, automatic thoughts, perceived parental conflicts, and parents' anxiety and irrational beliefs predict anxiety in children?
2. Do children's problem-solving skills, automatic thoughts, perceived parental conflicts, and parents' anxiety and irrational beliefs predict aggression in children?

Method

Research Design

The current study was designed in the relational survey model, one of the quantitative research methods. The relational survey model is a research model that aims to determine the existence and degree of co-variance between two or more variables (Karasar, 2014). In the current study, marital conflict perceived by children, parents' irrational beliefs and anxiety, children's automatic thoughts, and their problem-solving skills are the independent variables, and anxiety and aggression in children are the dependent variables.

Participants

The population of the current study is comprised of fourth-grade primary school students attending state primary schools in the city of İzmir, Turkey, during the spring semester of the 2016-2017 academic school year. The study group is a state primary school selected according to the convenience sampling method. A total of 304 fourth-grade students attend the school and together with their parents (304 mothers and 304 fathers), a study group of 912 participants was formed. Of the child participants in the study group, 55.9% ($n = 170$) are female, whilst 44.1% ($n = 134$) are male; and are all within the age group of 9-12 years old, with the mean age of 9.51 years. In the study, 13.8% ($n = 42$) of the child participants were only children, 28.3% ($n = 86$) were the eldest children, 16.1% ($n = 49$) were middle children (i.e., not the eldest or youngest), and 41.8% ($n = 127$) were the youngest children in their immediate family.

The mean age of the parents was 41.8, the mean age of the mothers was 38.2, and the average length of marriage for the couples was 16.4. The percentages and numbers regarding the education levels of the mothers participating in the study are as follows; 43.10% ($n=131$) are primary school graduates, 8.88% ($n=27$) are secondary school graduates, 27.63% ($n=84$) are high school graduates, 20.39% ($n=62$) hold an associate's degree. The percentages and numbers regarding the education levels of the fathers participating in the study are as follows; 29.93% ($n=91$) primary school graduates, 9.54% ($n=29$) are secondary school graduates, 35.53% ($n=108$) are high school graduates, 25% ($n=76$) hold an associate's degree.

Data Collection Tools

In the current study, the "Trait Anxiety Scale" was used to determine the parents' trait anxiety; the "Parent Irrational Beliefs Scale" was used to determine the parents' irrational thoughts; the "Children's Perception of Marital Conflict Scale" was used to determine the degree of any marital conflict perceived by the children; the "Problem Solving Inventory for Children" was used to determine the children's problem-solving skills; the "Children's Automatic Thoughts Scale" was used to determine the children's automatic thoughts; the "Trait Anxiety Scale for Children" was used to determine the children's trait anxiety; and the "Little Aggression Inventory" was used to determine the children's level of aggression. The data collected in the current study was limited to the variables measured by the aforementioned instruments.

Personal Information Form

In the current study, a personal information was developed by the researcher in order to collect socio-demographic data of the study group.

Parent Irrational Beliefs Scale

The Parent Irrational Beliefs Scale was developed by Kaya and Hamamcı (2011) to determine mothers and fathers' irrational beliefs. The scale consists of 29 items in two sub-dimensions: expectations and perfectionism. The calculated test-retest internal consistency coefficient for the scale's reliability was calculated to be .80, and the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was calculated to be .86 for the dimension of perfectionism. For the expectations dimension, the test-retest reliability coefficient was found to be .84, and the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be .89. Moreover, in the factor analysis studies, the eigenvalue of the expectations dimension of the scale was found to be 6.06, which explained 20.9% of the total variance, while the eigenvalue of the perfectionism dimension was found to be 5.01, which explained 17.4% of the total variance (Kaya & Hamamcı, 2011). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be .90 for the mother's form and .91 for the father's form.

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) was developed by Spielberger, Gorsuch, and Lushene to determine two different types of anxiety separately: State Anxiety Inventory (SAI) and Trait Anxiety Inventory (TAI) (Demir, 2005). In the current study, only the TAI was applied. The measurement tool was translated into Turkish by Öner and Le Compte (1985) and reliability analyzes were made with three different techniques. As a result of these analyzes, item total score reliability coefficient was between .72 and .34, homogeneity and internal consistency coefficient between .87 and .83, and test-retest coefficient between .86 and .71 (Öner & Le Compte, 1985). The Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient calculated in the current study was found to be .79 for the participant mothers and .80 for the participant fathers.

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children

The original version of the scale, which examines the anxiety level of children in two different dimensions according to the current situation and generally the mood, was developed by Sipiellerger and adapted into Turkish by Özusta (1993). Within the scope of the study, only the trait anxiety sub-dimension of the scale was used to determine the anxiety experienced in their general emotional states instead of the momentary anxiety experienced by the children in a certain situation. Within the scope of the adaptation study conducted with children aged 9-12, the test-retest reliability coefficient for the trait anxiety factor of the scale was calculated as .65 and the internal consistency coefficient as .81 (Özusta, 1993). The internal consistency coefficient calculated within the scope of the study was obtained as .90.

Children's Automatic Thoughts Scale

The scale developed by Schniering and Rapee (2002) in order to evaluate the negative automatic thoughts of children; It is a measurement tool consisting of 40 items consisting of four sub-dimensions: personal failure, hostility, social and physical threat. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Çeçen-Eroğul (2013). As a result of the analyzes conducted within the scope of the adaptation study, the findings of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) show that the four-factor model produces acceptable fit values

for the Turkish sample ($\chi^2 = 6,180.028$; $df = 86$; $CFI = .852$, $TLI = .84$, $RMSEA = .063$). The Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated as .93 for the total scale, and the test-retest correlation coefficient between two months was calculated as .81 (Çeçen-Eroğul, 2013). The Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient calculated in the current study was found to be .94.

Children's Perception of Marital Conflict Scale

The scale was developed by Grych, Seid, and Fincham (1992) to determine how children perceive conflicts experienced between their parents. The internal consistency coefficients calculated for the original scale were found to be .85 for the self-blaming subscale, .83 for the characteristics of the conflict subscale, and .76 for the threat subscale. In the current study, the form of the scale adapted to Turkish by Ulu and Fıfılođlu (2004) was applied. The internal consistency coefficients calculated in the adaptation of the scale into Turkish were found to be .77 for the self-blaming subscale, .84 for the characteristics of the conflict subscale, and .78 for the threat subscale. The test-retest consistencies calculated at a 2-week interval were .77 for the self-blaming subscale, .88 for the characteristics of the conflict subscale, and .77 for the threat subscale. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be .86.

Little Aggression Scale

The scale was developed by Little, Henrich, Jones, and Hawley (2003), and represents the first scale that can measure both forms and functions of aggression. The scale consists of 36 items split equally between six dimensions; pure-overt aggression, reactive overt aggression, instrumental overt aggression, pure relational aggression, reactive relational aggression, and instrumental relational aggression. The construct of the scale was tested with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) by Little et al. (2003) in order to evaluate the overt, relational, instrumental, and reactive aggression dimensions of the scale, and it was concluded that the goodness-of-fit indices were at an acceptable level [$\chi^2(129, n=1,723) = 932.0$, $p < .01$; $RMSEA = .061$; $TLI = .95$]. The adaptation study of the scale into Turkish was conducted by Avci (2016). It was determined that the internal consistency coefficients of the inventory, which was produced values between .79 and .89 according to the sub-dimensions, and the construct validity with the original form was significant ($p < .01$). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be .93.

Problem Solving Inventory for Children

The measurement tool was developed by Serin, Bulut-Serin, and Saygılı (2010) to determine the personal perceptions of primary school students in solving the problems they encounter, and consists of 24 items and three dimensions (avoidance, self-control, confidence in problem solving skills). Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficients when the results of the analysis are ranked according to the sub-factors such as avoidance, self-control, and confidence in problem solving skills; While .66, .78 and .85, the variance rates explained obtained as a result of factor analysis are; It is 9.49%, 12.99% and 19.77%. In addition, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis results confirmed the three-factor structure $\chi^2 = 621.05$, $df = 249$, $\chi^2 / df = 2.49$, $RMSEA = .051$, $NNFI = .87$, $CFI = .90$, $GFI = .92$ and $AGFI = .90$ (Serin et al., 2010). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was calculated to be .81.

Procedure

First, all necessary permissions were obtained from Muđla Sıtkı Koçman University's Scientific Research and Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 6, Decision No: 6). After receiving approval from the ethics committee, permission was obtained from the Turkish Ministry of National Education. In the first stage of the application process, an "Informed Consent Form" was applied to ensure that the parents' participation in the current study was on a voluntary basis, and to ensure they were adequately informed about the study. Additionally, a "Parental Consent Form" was applied as an ethical and legal requirement for the participation of the children, who were not of full age in terms of being able to provide their own consent to participate in the current study. The Parental Consent Form was sent to the parents of the children by the teachers in sealed envelopes delivered via the children.

The administration of the scales was initiated by the school psychological counsellor within the classroom environment to the children of those parents who gave their approval for the participation

of their children, and who also themselves volunteered to participate in the study. At the application stage of the scales, first, the students were explained how to complete the scales, together with examples, their questions were answered, and those students who did not want to participate or whose parents had not provided the required permission were assigned alternative (reading) activities so that they would not be negatively affected due to their exclusion from the process. The scales were administered to the students on different days, with one scale applied each day. In this way, all of the scales were administered within a period of 1 week. The scales were also administered on different days so as to prevent the participant effect from posing a threat, as the participating children were of a young age, and thereby their attention could easily be distracted. However, the administration process was completed within 1 week in order to minimize the negative effects of maturation and time-induced threats.

In order to reduce the effects of factors such as implementer effect and social appreciation, the scales were administered to the children during class hours, except for the first and last class hours of the day, by the researcher with the assistance of the classroom teachers. The participants were explained the purpose of the study in such a way as not to create any bias, and they were also informed that no personal information would be collected about them, and that the collected data would be kept confidential. The parents' forms of the scales ("Personal Information Form," "Parent Irrational Beliefs Scale" and "Trait Anxiety Inventory") were sent home to the parents via the students in two separate sealed envelopes; one for the mother and the other for the father, and they were requested to be returned also in sealed envelopes. Finally, all of the children's and parents' completed forms were grouped according to family unit prior to the start of the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Prior to starting the analysis of the collected data, the scales completed by the children and their two parents were examined and matched. Then, a total of 121 forms were discarded from the analyses as they were not considered to be suitable for the study (e.g., forms of children whose parents were separated, or where one or more of the parent's or child's scales were found to be missing), or where the participants had responded incorrectly (e.g., systematically the same response had been given to each item, forms carelessly completed, or where some items had not been responded to). During the evaluation stage, reverse-coded items were corrected and the total scores for each of the scales calculated. Before initiating the analysis of the data, checks were applied as to whether the assumptions required for the structural equation modeling had been satisfied. The presence of outliers was checked, and the Z-values were found to be between -3 and +3. Moreover, the Mahalanobis distance coefficient was calculated for the data and no multivariate outliers were found. Then, Skewness and Kurtosis coefficients of the variables were analyzed in order to check for univariate normality values, and the distribution was found to be within the acceptable range of +2 and -2 (Byrne, 2010; George & Mallery, 2010). Then, in relation to the first research question of the study, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was employed. As none of the correlations between the variables were found to be .80 or higher, it was concluded that there was no multicollinearity problem (Çokluk, Şekerciöğlü, & Büyükoztürk, 2010). As all of the necessary assumptions were satisfied, it was deemed appropriate to proceed with the model path analyses.

Following the completion of the necessary normality and correlation analyses, model fit and path analyses were initiated. As the model estimation method, the Maximum Likelihood method was used. As a result of the structural model test, the structural model established with the latent variables was found to have not been confirmed. Therefore, the scale total scores were obtained and the model was rearranged and updated using the observed variables. During this stage, as the variables belonging to the parents; that is, parents' anxiety and irrational beliefs, did not yield a significant result when included together in the model, the data were separated according into two as mothers' and fathers'. After separation of the data into two parents, the fathers' trait anxiety and the mothers' irrational beliefs that did not yield good fit values were subsequently discarded from the model. The values of the excluded variables are presented within the Findings section.

Results

In the current study, in compliance with the determined variables, first the relationships between the scores of the scales administered to the participants were examined with Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. The obtained data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive and Correlation Values related to Total Scale Scores

Variables	\bar{x}	SS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1- Aggression	44.58	13.02	1						
2- Anxiety	34.90	8.86	.19**	1					
3- Problem solving	93.37	13.81	-.43**	-.32**	1				
4- Automatic thoughts	29.57	25.05	.39**	.67**	-.26**	1			
5- Perceived marital conflict	16.13	9.72	.26**	.56**	-.32**	.49**	1		
6- Parents' anxiety	39.60	6.35	.01	.19**	.02	.10	.15**	1	
7- Parents' irrational beliefs	84.08	16.65	-.04	.12**	.03	-.01	.05	.33**	1

** $p < .01$

As can be seen in Table 1, the marital conflict perceived by the children, automatic thoughts they have, their problem solving skills, anxiety and aggression are significantly correlated with each other. Similarly, irrational belief and anxiety, which are parents' variables, are significantly correlated with each other. On the other hand, the children's aggression, problem solving and automatic thoughts scores were found to be not significantly correlated with parents' anxiety and irrational beliefs. Similarly, it was observed that the marital conflict perceived by the children and the irrational beliefs of the parents were not significantly correlated.

Findings related to Structural Equation Modeling:

In the current study, first the theoretical model shown in Figure 1 was tested. As seen in the model, the variables belonging to the parents (parents' anxiety and irrational beliefs) are presented together as the mother-father total score. In the first stage, in which the variables belonging to the parents are included together in the model, the path coefficient between the parents' anxiety and children's anxiety ($\beta = .02$; $p > .05$) and the path coefficient between the parents' anxiety and children's aggression ($\beta = .01$; $p > .05$) were found to be insignificant, and it was decided to evaluate the variables belonging to the parents separately. As a result of the separation of the variables belonging to the parents, the path coefficients between the fathers' anxiety and children's anxiety ($\beta = .03$; $p > .05$) and between the fathers' anxiety and children's aggression ($\beta = .01$; $p > .05$) were found to be insignificant, and thus the fathers' trait anxiety was excluded from the model. Similarly, the path coefficients between the mothers' irrational beliefs and children's anxiety ($\beta = -.04$; $p > .05$), and also between the mothers' irrational beliefs and children's aggression ($\beta = -.03$; $p > .05$) were found to be insignificant, hence the mothers' irrational beliefs were excluded from the model. Moreover, as the path coefficients between the fathers' irrational beliefs ($\beta = -.02$; $p > .05$), the mothers' trait anxiety ($\beta = -.02$; $p > .05$), and the children's perceived marital conflict ($\beta = .01$; $p > .05$) and aggression were found to be insignificant, they were discarded from the model. After the paths not yielding significant values were excluded from the model, the new model constructed with the observed variables (see Figure 2) was found to have good fit values. The fit indicators and goodness-of-fit values for the final form of the model are given in Table 2.

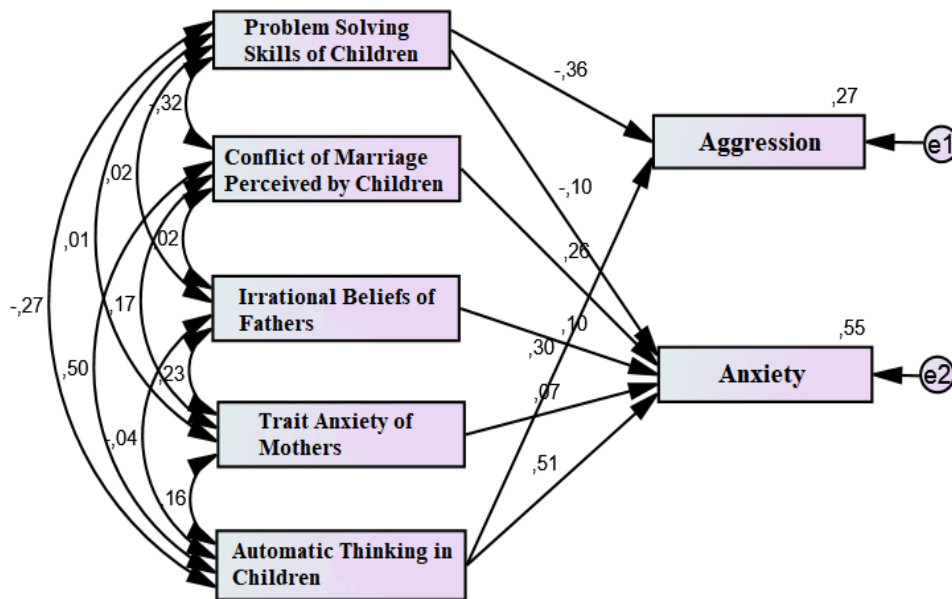


Figure 2. Path Coefficients of the Structural Model

The fit indicators and goodness-of-fit values of the model, whose path coefficients are given in Figure 2, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Fit Indicators and Goodness-of-Fit Values of the Structural Model

Fit Indicators	Fit Values	Goodness-of-Fit Values (Acceptable Fit)
$\chi^2 = 12.865$; SD = :4; p = .012		
χ^2/SD	3.216	≤ 3 (4-5)
GFI	.98	$\geq .90$ (.89-.85)
AGFI	.92	$\geq .90$ (.89-.85)
IFI	.98	$\geq .95$ (.94-.90)
TLI (NNFI)	.90	$\geq .95$ (.94-.90)
CFI	.98	$\geq .97$ (.95)
RMSEA	.08	$\leq .05$ (.06-.08)
SRMR	.02	$\leq .05$ (.06-.08)

In Table 2, the fit indicators of the constructed structural model are presented. In the evaluation of the fit indicators, first, the most frequently used fit index, Chi-square (χ^2) goodness-of-fit index and p -value were examined, and it was concluded that the model is significant. However, as Chi-square value is considered to be very sensitive to sample size, this value is not deemed sufficient by itself in the evaluation of the fit between the model and data. Therefore, other fit values were also examined. When the fit index values obtained for the measurement model are examined, it can be seen that they have good or acceptable fit values: χ^2/SD value is lower than 3; GFI and AGFI values are higher than .90; IFI, TLI, and CFI values are all higher than .90; RMSEA value is lower than .080; and, SRMR value is lower than .05. Fit values and path coefficients calculated for the tested model and their significance levels are grouped according to the sub-problems of the study and presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Path Coefficients and Significance Levels Belonging to the Model

			Regression Coefficient	Std. Regression Coefficient	Std. Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	R ²
Agg.	<---	PSSC	-.34	-.36	.048	-6.982	***	.27
Agg.	<---	ATC	.15	.30	.026	5.832	***	
Anx.	<---	PSSC	-.07	-.10	.027	-2.502	.012*	.55
Anx.	<---	CMPC	.24	.26	.042	5.701	***	
Anx.	<---	IBF	.05	.10	.019	2.518	.012*	
Anx.	<---	TAM	.09	.07	.051	1.692	.091	
Anx.	<---	ATC	.18	.51	.016	11.175	***	

* $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$

Agg: Aggression, Anx: Anxiety, PSSC: Problem Solving Skills of Children, CMPC: Conflict of Marriage Perceived by Children, IBF: Irrational Beliefs of Fathers, TAM: Trait Anxiety of Mothers, ATC: Automatic Thinking in Children

Findings related to Research Question 1:

“Do children’s problem-solving skills, automatic thoughts, perceived parental conflicts, and parents’ anxiety and irrational beliefs predict anxiety in children?”

When the structural equation model was examined within the context of the first research question of the current study, except for the path coefficient between children’s trait anxiety and mothers’ trait anxiety [Anx.<---TAM, ($\beta = .07$; $p > .05$)] all other paths were found to be significant. The paths having the greatest contributions to the model were determined through standard regression coefficients. When the standard regression coefficients were examined, the path coefficients having the greatest contributions to the model were found to be those between children’s trait anxiety and children’s automatic thoughts [Anx.<---ATC ($\beta = .51$; $p < .05$)], the children’s trait anxiety and perceived marital conflict [Anx.<---CMPC ($\beta = .26$; $p < .05$)], the children’s trait anxiety and problem-solving skills [Anx.<---PSSC ($\beta = -.10$; $p < .05$)], and the children’s trait anxiety and the fathers’ irrational beliefs [Anx.<---IBF ($\beta = .10$; $p < .05$)]. It was also determined that 55% of the total variance in the children’s anxiety variable was explained by the children’s automatic thoughts, perceived marital conflict, problem-solving skills, and the fathers’ irrational beliefs.

Findings related to Research Question 2:

“Do children’s problem-solving skills, automatic thoughts, perceived parental conflicts, and parents’ anxiety and irrational beliefs predict aggression in children?”

When the variables predicting aggression in the structural equation model were detected within the context of the second research question of the current study, it was found that while the children’s problem-solving skills negatively and significantly predict aggression in children [Agg.<---PSSC ($\beta = -.36$; $p < .01$)], the children’s automatic thoughts were found to positively and significantly predict aggression [Agg.<---ATC ($\beta = .30$; $p < .01$)]. As previously stated, while deciding on the final model, perceived marital conflict, the mothers’ trait anxiety, the fathers’ trait anxiety, and the fathers’ irrational beliefs were found not to predict aggression in children, and thus were discarded from the model. When the total rate of variance explained for aggression was examined, it was found that 27% of the total variance in aggression was explained by the children’s problem-solving skills and automatic thoughts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study investigated the phenomenon of anxiety and aggression in children on the basis of the Ecologic Model. From the findings, it was seen that anxiety in children significantly correlated with each of the variables addressed in the current study, whilst aggression in children was found to be significantly correlated with all variables belonging to the children, but not those belonging to the children’s parents. When the variables were examined in relation to their roles as predictors, it was seen that while children’s automatic thoughts and problem-solving skills predicted aggression in

children, marital conflict perceived by children, automatic thoughts, problem-solving skills, and fathers' irrational beliefs predicted anxiety in children.

Interpretation of the Findings Related to Research Question 1

When the results of the current study are examined in relation to the first research question of the study, anxiety in children was found to be predicted by children's problem-solving skills, automatic thoughts, perceived marital conflict, and fathers' irrational beliefs, but that parents' anxiety and mothers' irrational beliefs were not shown to be significant predictors. Thus, it can be argued that children experiencing difficulties in solving problems will have a higher risk of experiencing anxiety. Parallel to this finding, in other studies conducted on different samples, it has been reported that individuals with insufficient problem-solving skills face a higher risk of experiencing anxiety (Ağır, 2007; Bingham, 2004; Karataş, 2011; Kaya, Bozaslan, & Genç, 2012). In addition, adolescents who have inadequate problem-solving skills are more anxious than those who have adequate problem-solving skills, as well as lower levels of social interaction and increased levels of emotional problems (Danışık & Baker, 2005). It is known that leading a satisfactory life depends on one's ability to resolve the problems faced in life, and that involves solving different types of problems in many different areas of life (Saraçaloğlu, Serin, & Bozkurt, 2001). Thus, it can be said that children with effective problem-solving skills will not expect those around them to solve all their problem for them (Eroğlu, 2001), are able to produce alternative solutions, and will experience less emotional problems such as anxiety through being able to adapt to new situations.

Another personal variable included in the current study was the automatic thoughts of children, which was considered to be related to the anxiety experienced by children. The study's findings showed that the automatic thoughts possessed by children are a strong predictor of anxiety in children. In the literature, negative automatic thoughts have also been shown to be positively and significantly correlated with anxiety (Atalan-Ergin, 2013; Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2005; Leahy, 2010). In a study conducted on children who were clinically diagnosed with anxiety, their automatic thoughts scores were observed to be high (Schniering & Rapee, 2002). While the findings in the related literature support those of the current study, they also emphasize the importance of thinking structure in emotions. A child's interpretation of internal and environmental events as a constant threat may cause him/her to develop negative thoughts towards himself/herself, towards others, and towards the world around them in general, and that these thoughts can trigger negative feelings such as anxiety (Allen & Rapee, 2005).

In addition to personal factors such as problem-solving skills and automatic thoughts, one of the environmental factors; that of a child's perception of any marital conflict between their parents, was found to affect the children's emotional state. In similar studies, it was found that parental relationships and intra-family conflicts are related to anxiety and depression in children (Akıl, 2019; Fine, 1997), that conflicts predict anxiety observed in children (O'Brien et al., 1995), and that existing conflicts cause some physical problems as well as emotional problems (Fincham, 2003). In addition, the characteristic of the parents' conflict and the threat perceived by the child from the conflict were found to be related to emotional problems in the child (Kızıldağ, 2006; Ulu & Fışiloğlu, 2002). In addition, it has been observed that whether children who witness parental conflict experience emotional problems depends on their parents' conflict resolution styles (Sağkal & Türnüklü, 2017). The findings in the literature seem to parallel with those of the current study. The reasons proposed for this in the literature include the degradation of a child's feelings of security within the family environment as a result of having been witness to their parent's marital conflicts or having developed negative perceptions of such conflicts, thoughts about the destruction of their familial environment, or the child blaming themselves for such conflicts; all of which may create a sense of uncertainty about the child's own future (Fincham, 1998).

Besides the automatic thoughts of children, another variable investigated in the current study in relation to the children's thinking structures was the irrational beliefs of their parents. Parents' irrational beliefs were found to be correlated with the children's level of anxiety; yet, as they did not

yield path values within the model, they were divided into two, as the fathers' irrational beliefs and the mothers' irrational beliefs. However, only the fathers' irrational beliefs were found to have a predictor role in their children's anxiety state. Unlike the findings reported in some studies on the subject, as a result of the evaluation of parents as mothers and fathers separately, it was observed that while the perfectionist beliefs and expectations of the mothers were related to the anxiety of the children, such beliefs of the fathers were not related (Şahingiray, 2020). In similar studies that have investigated parents separately, although no significant difference was found between the mothers' and fathers' irrational beliefs, the correlation between the fathers' irrational beliefs and the child's stress level was found to be considerably higher than that of the mothers (Starko, 1991). Moreover, if irrational beliefs are evaluated according to their sub-dimensions of perfectionism and expectations, it is thought that children can feel concern in the face of higher expectations placed upon them and about not being able to meet such expectations, and thus not being felt to be fully appreciated by their parents. It is stated that the irrational beliefs of the parents exacerbate the controlling parental attitudes (Buğa, Çekiç, Türk, & Hamamcı, 2019), and the psychological problems of children are related to the irrational beliefs of the parents (Kudu-Arican & Sayal, 2020). Moreover, it has been emphasized that pressures within the family unit are predominantly related to the father in male-dominated societies, with the father often fulfilling the stricter or oppressive parental role, and that this may lead to the development of disharmonious behaviors in children (Bradburn, 1993). It is thought that the number of studies on the subject is limited and with the increase of descriptive and experimental studies dealing with different variables, this issue will be examined in more detail.

One of the familial variables examined as a predictor of the anxiety of children was parents' anxiety. Although the analyses conducted showed that parents' anxiety and children's anxiety are related to each other, it was also observed that when the mother-father scores were entered into the model together, the emerging path analysis did not yield acceptable fit values. Therefore, the parental data were separated between the two parents. For this reason, when the data were separated as mothers and fathers, it was observed that mothers' anxiety did not have a determining role on children's anxiety. Similarly, studies on different anxiety situations have found that there is no relationship between children's separation anxiety and mothers' anxiety (Çıkrıkçı, 2020). The result of this data separation was that the trait anxiety of the mothers was confirmed within the developed structural model, but that the anxiety of the mothers was found to have no significant mediating role in their children's anxiety levels. Unlike the current study, other studies in the literature have reported significant correlations found between mothers' anxiety and children's anxiety (Alisinanoğlu & Ulutaş, 2003; Aslan, Aslan, Alparlan, & Ünal, 1998; Muris & Merckelbach, 1998; Özdemir-Arslan, 2020). Moreover, in a study in which mothers were divided according to a cut-off point; as those who were anxious and those who were not anxious, the mothers who expressed higher levels of anxiety were also perceived by their children as being anxious, while this finding was not found for the children of mothers who were not reported to have felt anxious (Drake & Ginsburg, 2011; Nazlıoğlu, 2019). In the current study, the mothers' anxiety scores were not divided using any such cut-off point, with all data included in the analysis.

Interpretation of the Findings related to Research Question 2

In relation to the second research question, aggression levels in children were also investigated. The analyses results showed that aggression in children was predicted by their problem-solving skills and automatic thoughts, but not by their perceived marital conflict, mothers' trait anxiety, or fathers' irrational beliefs. When the findings were evaluated in relation to the children's problem-solving skills that were found to be a significant predictor, it was concluded that the children's problem-solving skills negatively predicted their aggression. In studies conducted on different sample groups related to the subject, similar results have been reported indicating that the constructive and persistent approach to the problem reduces aggression, while the negative, insecure and irresponsible approach increases the aggression (Arslan et al., 2010). Likewise, the findings indicating that difficulties experienced in problem-solving skills increase aggression (Vitaro, Barker, Boivin, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2006; Tel,

2002) coincide with the findings of the current study. In addition to descriptive studies, it was observed in experimental studies on the interaction between two variables that participation in activities for conflict resolution reduces aggression (Güner, 2007; Koruklu, 1998). When evaluated from the Ecological Model perspective, it is expected that the constructive solving of the problems faced by the individual will have a positive reflection on their interpersonal relations. Effective problem-solving skill is defined as being necessary in order to achieve success in various domains of modern life, and it has been emphasized that deficiencies in this skill can result in behavioral or social problems (Bingham, 2004). Based on these results, it may be stated that individuals who have the ability to solve problems effectively will more likely turn to constructive solutions rather than exhibit aggressive behaviors.

Automatic thoughts possessed by children was one of the personal variables examined within the scope of the current study. Based on the assumption that the variable has a relation to aggression, it was examined along with physical threat, social threat, personal failure, and hostility. It was observed that the two variables (problem-solving skills and automatic thoughts) were both significantly related and that the automatic thoughts of the children positively predicted aggressive behaviors. Related findings reported in the national and international literature seem to support these findings. Automatic thoughts related to hostility and revenge were found to be the strongest predictor of aggression by Fives, Kong, Fuller, and DiGiuseppe (2010), and Kurtoğlu, 2009; also by Schniering and Rapee (2004). In similar studies, it was found that children showed increased level of aggression both at home and at school due to decreases in their cognitive functionality (Erca, 2011). On the other hand, studies conducted on the mediating role of automatic thoughts showed that they had a full mediating role between aggression and self-esteem, and that automatic thoughts predicted aggression (Yavuzer, Karataş, Çivilidağ, & Gündoğdu, 2014). These findings concur with the results obtained in the current study and point to the importance of the cognitive aspect of aggressive behaviors. The cognitive model explains how different people react differently to the same events on the basis of intellectual processes and operations. When the findings of the current study and related findings reported in the literature are examined in this regard, it can be stated that as a result of evaluating the conditions encountered as more dangerous and threatening, the response to attack will develop as a behavioral trait, and that aggressive reactions will increase depending on the interpretation of events as being threatening (Burger, 2006).

As a result of the study, it was found that the marital conflict perceived by the children did not predict aggression. In line with this finding, other studies have reported that perceived marital conflict does not have any predictor role for aggression (Kızıldağ & Şendil, 2006; Sakız, 2011; Stocker, Richmond, Low, Alexander, & Elias, 2003). In addition, studies that have drawn attention to the frequency of conflict as well as parents' conflict resolution style have found that frequent but low-level parental conflicts are not associated with the child's behavior and adaptation problems, but that conflicts involving high-intensity of hostility and physical aggression are associated with the child's behavior and adjustment problems (Hoşcan, 2010; Şendil & Kızıldağ, 2005). At this point, it can be stated that it is not the conflict itself that is key, but the way that the parents approach such conflict, conflict's involving physical aggression directed towards people or objects, and the increased tone of voice, frequency, and severity of conflict that have a decisive role on the problem behaviors of children (Cummings & Davies, 2014). In the opposite direction of the current study findings, children's perceptions of marital conflict predicted their bullying behavior (Sayıl, Kindap-Tepe, & Kumrul, 2019). Ulu and Fışiloğlu (2002) found that children's blaming of themselves was related to internalization and externalization problems. Some studies have investigated the mediating role of different variables in the relationship between these two variables, and found that parents' attitudes (Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006) and parents' coping strategies (Shelton & Harold, 2007) have important predictor roles. In the current study, it was determined that the marriage conflict perceived by the children of their parents did not have a direct predictor role on the observed aggression in children. This finding may be due to the parents' attitudes, the type of conflict involved (physical and/or verbal), the frequency and/or severity of the conflict, and the style of resolving such a conflict.

Other familial factors in relation to the parents included in the study are the irrational beliefs and anxieties of the parents. As a result of the analyzes made, it was seen that both variables did not have a significant predictive role on children's aggression. In studies conducted with different variables, it was also found that there is no difference in children's aggressive behaviors according to parental attitudes (Gülay, 2008; Tuzgöl, 1998). Different from this finding, a relationship was found between parents' irrational beliefs and children's problem behaviors (Işıkol, 2019). When the studies on the subject were examined, it was observed that the number of studies conducted was quite insufficient. Thus, it is thought that there is a need to develop studies on parent-child interaction.

Limitations and Suggestions

The current study investigated the predictor variables of anxiety and aggression in children, but like most studies, it also had certain limitations. The selection of the study group from among the students attending a state school in the city of İzmir, Turkey, according to the convenience sampling method is considered a limitation in terms of its effect on the representative power and generalizability of the study. Similarly, not including students from different types of schools or age groups makes the findings of the current study limited to a specific group of participants. On the other hand, data from the current study were collected via self-reporting questionnaires; thus, representation of the truth in the collected data may be considered as a limitation. Moreover, given that the Ecological Theory addresses a much more comprehensive population, the current study may be considered limited in that it was conducted with only the determined variables and with certain accessible environmental factors. However, in spite of these assumed limitations, as the study collected data from both children and parents in relation to the prediction of anxiety and aggression, and integrated them within a model, the current study is believed to offer original contributions to the literature.

In light of the findings of the current study, the following suggestions are put forwards for researchers and practitioners: The current study showed that automatic thoughts in children and their problem-solving skills predicted both aggression and anxiety in children. Practitioners working in the field may therefore organize individual or group activities directed to reversing the negative thoughts of children to a more positive outlook, and to improving the problem-solving skills of children in order that their tendencies towards aggression and anxiety can be reduced. The current study shows that it is especially important for children exhibiting aggressive behaviors to develop their problem-solving skills; hence, further experimental studies are needed in order to impart these skills to children. As seen in the current study, besides personal variables, familial variables also have an influence on children's anxiety levels. Therefore, practitioners may be encouraged to involve families in the processes during their work with children with anxiety in order to inform them on how best to manage marriage conflicts, and also what can be done to help children not become negatively affected from such conflicts. In addition, practitioners could plan individual or group works to replace parents' irrational beliefs with more rational ones and for mothers to better manage their own levels of anxiety. In future studies, researchers could test different models in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between children's cognitive structures, problem-solving skills, aggression, and anxiety. In addition, whilst the current study was designed according to quantitative research methods, future studies could offer alternative interpretations with regards to the development of anxiety and aggression in children by conducting an in-depth analysis of data particularly related to familial variables using qualitative methods of research. Finally, in the current study, parental data was also collected in addition to that of their children. In future studies, variables such as the school environment, child-peer relations, and other median effects could be investigated according to the established Ecological Approach.

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