

# Family process and structure, attachment style, and emotional intelligence in runaway girls

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Received 4 Jan, 2018

Accepted 31 Jan, 2018

## Original Article

### Abstract

**Introduction:** The phenomenon of running away from home is taken into account as one of the highly sensitive and complicated issues in the field of social harms. According to a report released by the WHO, the annual rate of running away from home is more than 2.3 million. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to compare family structure and process, attachment style, and emotional intelligence among runaway and normal girls.

**Methods:** In this study, all runaway girls covered by social welfare organization of Iran in Bandar Abbas city were selected by using the convenience sampling method 40 individuals were selected including 20 runaway girls and 20 normal girls who were matched in terms of demographic characteristics. Two groups were compared with t-test and Pearson correlation coefficient was used for evaluating relationship between variables.

**Results:** According to the findings, there was a statistically significant difference between family structure, family process, attachment style, and emotional intelligence in normal and runaway girls ( $P < 0.001$ ). Moreover, there was a significant relationship between family structure and emotional intelligence.

**Conclusion:** Family structure and process, attachment style, and emotional intelligence can affect the phenomenon of running away.

**Key words:** Family Structure, Family Process, Attachment Style, Emotional Intelligence

**Citation:** Bakhshian F, Moayedi F. Family process and structure, attachment style, and emotional intelligence in runaway girls. *Hormozgan Medical Journal* 2017;21(4):241-249.

### Introduction:

The phenomenon of running away from home is considered as one of the highly sensitive and complicated issues in the field of social problems (1).

According to the report released by the World Health Organization (WHO), the annual rate of runaways is more than 2.3 million teens aged 13 to 19 years of which high significant percentage (74%) of it includes girls (2).

Similarly, the number of runaway adolescents in Iran is increasingly worrying. In this respect, the results of published reports have suggested a drastic rise in the phenomenon of runaway among Iranian girls in recent years (3).

Runaway is a multi-causal phenomenon whose roots can be traced back to failure to meet emotional needs and sense of safety at home (4).

Children who feel insecure at home cannot enjoy life and treat others with coldness and no

affection. They are also deprived of high self-confidence and have no obligations to stick to moral principles (5).

One of the local models that can display the psychological profile of a family is the family process and structure model (6).

Considering the factors influencing the control or exacerbation of family crises and conflicts, scientists developed a theoretical model and highlighted a set of family actions in this issue that were summarized into three dimensions: family process, family structure, and social context. The given dimensions constitute the foundations of life in each family. In this model, family process includes a series of actions used by each family to adapt to new conditions such as communication styles and skills, coping skills in decision-making and problem-solving, integrity, flexibility, and religious orientation. The second dimension, family structure refers to all things that form up the completely objective and tangible reality of life of family members and also mentions adequacy of family possessions in the domains of physical and mental health, occupation and education, financial resources, educational facilities, living space, time of togetherness, physical appearance, and social status. The third dimension of this model is social context. In this respect, the social context of family involves a collection of beliefs and values dominating a society where families are living in (7).

If a family is disrupted and fails to provide an appropriate environment for the growth and evolution of their own children's character, they can establish the foundations of social deviations among them. Thus; various crimes such as running away from home, escape from school, theft, illegitimate sexual acts, addiction, etc. can be established in broken and dysfunctional families. Conflicts in families whether between parents or between parents and children are also taken into account as the damaging factors affecting different types of social deviations (8).

The term attachment includes evolving components which can contribute to human survival. Tendency to create strong emotional bonds with particular individuals is likewise a main component of human nature (9).

Numerous forms of neuroticism, personality disorders, communication disabilities, and emotional problems are the consequences of depriving children of maternal care or lack of stable attachment with the attachment figures (10). Ainsworth concluded with three major attachment styles: secure attachment, ambivalent-insecure attachment and avoidant-insecure attachment (11).

Lots of studies have indicated that early attachment styles can influence later behaviors in life (12,13).

Emotional intelligence was introduced by Peter Salovey to express quality and understanding of feelings among individuals, sympathy with others' emotions, and ability to manage temperament effectively (14,15).

Scientists believe that people endowed with high emotional intelligence could cope more effectively with stress because they had an accurate perception and evaluation of their emotional states and they could easily control their emotions (16,17).

Given the increasing occurrence of running away from home by children especially girls as well as the decreased age in this respect, the present study was to compare family structure and process, emotional intelligence, and attachment style in runaway and normal girls.

## Methods:

According to the aim of the present study, a descriptive-correlation research design was adopted.

The statistical population of this study included all runaway girls covered by the social Welfare Organization of Iran in the city of Bandar Abbas along with normal girls. The study sample was comprised of 20 runaway girls residing in shelters affiliated with Social welfare Organization of Iran and 20 normal girls matched with the study group in terms of demographic characteristics (level of education and family's economic status) selected through convenience sampling method.

In order to collect the data and measure the variable of emotional intelligence, Bar-On questioner was used (18). To assess the two dimensions of family structure and family process and to measure the variable of attachment style, questionnaire of family structure and process (19)

and Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RASS) by Collins and Reid were employed (20).

### Statistical Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using the SPSS 16. In terms of descriptive statistics; minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation and considering inferential ones; Pearson correlation coefficient and independent t-test were used to compare the variables of family structure, family process, attachment style, and emotional intelligence in two groups. In this study, the confidence level was equal to 99% with a standard error of 0.01.

### Results:

In this study, 40 girls were studied in two groups of 20 including runaway girls and normal ones. The descriptive statistics for the study variables were presented separately for the given groups as follows.

According to the findings the highest mean was associated with the components of family structure and particularly the component of coping skills which was equal to 50.15 and 36.1 in normal and runaway girls, respectively.

Moreover; the highest and the lowest means among the components of emotional intelligence in normal girls were related to self-awareness and empathy with values equal to 25.85 and 24.15, respectively. The highest mean among runaway girls was associated with flexibility with a value equal to 20.05. The lowest mean in runaway girls

was also related to independence with a value equal to 18.6.

Among the components of attachment style; the means for the secure, avoidant, and anxious attachment styles in normal girls were 29.7, 18.05, and 20.05; respectively. Moreover, the means for the given styles in the runaway girls was equal to 7.35, 22.35, and 21.85; respectively.

The highest mean in normal girls was related to physical appearance and social status as one of the components of family structure with a value equal to 23.65 and occupation and education as one of the components of family structure with a value equal to 14.5. Moreover, the lowest means in normal girls (20.25) and runaway girls (12.95) in both groups were associated with the component of educational facilities.

According to Table 3, family structure, family process, attachment style and emotional intelligence in normal girls was statistically and significantly different from that of runaway girls with a 99% confidence level.

The observed correlation coefficient between family structure and emotional intelligence at a 0.0001 significance level of with a degree of freedom of 38 was equal to 0.737 which was greater than the critical value. As a result, this relationship was confirmed and it was concluded with a 99% confidence level that family structure and emotional intelligence were statistically and significantly correlated.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the study variables**

Statistic Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	
Family process	Normal girls	141	223	196	23.41
	Runaway girls	110	198	146	28.46
Emotional intelligence	Normal girls	280	435	371	5.95
	Runaway girls	194	401	290	7.31
Attachment style	Normal girls	51	87	67.8	10.5
	Runaway girls	31	69	51.5	12.77
Family structure	Normal girls	89	185	151	30.5
	Runaway girls	52	157	94.9	33.18

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all components of variables**

Statistic		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	
Variable						
Components of family process	Communication skills	Normal girls	33	49	42.3	4.83
		Runaway girls	22	44	35.34	6.57
	Coming skills	Normal girls	29	59	50.15	8
		Runaway girls	23	52	36.1	8.39
	Decision-making and problem solving	Normal girls	29	44	38.6	4.61
		Runaway girls	17	40	30.4	5.61
	Integration and flexibility	Normal girls	18	38	28.6	6.14
		Runaway girls	14	36	23.2	6.38
	Religious beliefs	Normal girls	14	37	25.25	7.41
		Runaway girls	13	33	22.55	6.45
Occupation and education	Normal girls	10	30	22.05	6.02	
	Runaway girls	7	26	14.5	5.75	
Time of togetherness	Normal girls	10	29	21.9	5.75	
	Runaway girls	7	23	13.6	4.81	
Financial resources	Normal girls	12	25	21.5	4.11	
	Runaway girls	7	20	13.45	4.71	
Components of family structure	Physical appearance and social status	Normal girls	13	29	23.65	4.5
		Runaway girls	7	26	13.7	5.64
	Physical and psychological well being	Normal girls	13	25	21.25	4.06
		Runaway girls	7	23	13.5	4.89
Living space	Normal girls	9	25	20.45	4.85	
	Runaway girls	6	20	13.2	4.93	
Educational facilities	Normal girls	10	25	20.25	4.54	
	Runaway girls	7	22	12.95	4.19	
Components of attachment style	Secure attachment style	Normal girls	26	30	29.7	0.97
		Runaway girls	6	10	7.35	1.34
	Avoidant attachment style	Normal girls	9	28	18.05	5.28
		Runaway girls	13	30	22.35	6.14
	Anxious attachment style	Normal girls	12	30	20.05	5.99
		Runaway girls	11	30	21.85	6.72
	Problem-solving	Normal girls	18	30	24.95	3.36
		Runaway girls	11	28	19.65	5.06
	Happiness	Normal girls	19	30	25.6	3.53
		Runaway girls	10	28	18.7	5.97
Independence	Normal girls	17	30	24.9	4.56	
	Runaway girls	10	27	18.6	6.04	
Stress tolerance	Normal girls	18	30	24.4	3.92	
	Runaway girls	11	29	19.75	5.33	
Self-actualization	Normal girls	19	30	25.15	3.43	
	Runaway girls	9	29	18.7	5.87	
Self-awareness	Normal girls	17	30	25.85	3.36	
	Runaway girls	10	28	19.85	6.18	
Realism	Normal girls	20	30	25.35	2.85	
	Runaway girls	12	28	19.6	5.43	
Components of emotional intelligence	Interpersonal relationships	Normal girls	17	30	24.95	4.24
		Runaway girls	12	27	19.5	5.29
	Optimism	Normal girls	14	30	25.45	4.01
		Runaway girls	9	28	19.05	5.56
	Self-respect	Normal girls	17	30	25.3	3.78
		Runaway girls	10	28	19.15	5.37
	Impulse control	Normal girls	15	30	24.3	4.23
		Runaway girls	10	27	18.95	4.83
	Flexibility	Normal girls	15	29	25.05	3.54
		Runaway girls	10	27	20.05	5.7
Responsiveness	Normal girls	15	30	24.65	4.71	
	Runaway girls	10	28	19.45	6.17	
Empathy	Normal girls	11	29	24.15	6.36	
	Runaway girls	9	27	18.95	5.67	
Self-disclosure	Normal girls	17	30	24.3	4.48	
	Runaway girls	9	28	19.05	5.26	

**Table 3. Results of independent t-test for the study variables**

Index Variable	t	Degree of freedom	Significance level
Relationship between family structure in normal and runaway girls	5.57	38	0.0001
Relationship between family process in normal and runaway girls	6.13	38	0.0001
Relationship between emotional intelligence in normal and runaway girls	4.03	38	0.0001
Relationship between attachment style in normal and runaway girls	4.39	38	0.0001
Relationship between family structure and emotional intelligence	Pearson correlation coefficient	38	0.0001
	0.737		

### Conclusion:

The present study investigated the status of the four variables of family process, family structure, attachment style, and emotional intelligence among runaway and normal girls.

Given the results of the present study, there was a significant difference between family structure among runaway and normal girls. Other research also indicated that familial factors including unstable family structure, rejection by parents, and socioeconomic problems were strongly correlated with mental health (21-23).

If children and teenagers cannot establish friendly relationships with family members or adapt themselves with family conditions, they choose runaway as the last resort (24,25). Economic conditions (poverty) can be also one of the reasons of runaway (26,27).

Considering the findings of the present study, there was a difference between runaway girls and normal ones in terms of family process. Other studies show that families with runaway girls were characterized with lack of emotional proximity, establishment of controlled social relationships or unwillingness towards them, no control over events, interactions along with conflicts among family members, as well as limited or strict rules (28). According to the Social Bond Theory developed by Hirschi, the weaker the bond between individuals, family members, and society, the more the possibility of deviations and crimes (29,30).

Children and teenagers may also leave home and run away due to numerous reasons including intrapersonal and interpersonal ones (coping skills and problem-solving), avoidance of constant blame and repeated humiliations, death of parents, parental violence, lack of relationship between members, rejection, and inconsistency with values. Thus, girls

my select streets as a way to run away from difficulties (religious beliefs), extremism by parents in terms of religion, parental control (cohesion, family respect, and communication skills), inefficient parent-child relationships, inappropriate emotional environment in family, severe conflicts and quarrels between parents, poor interpersonal relationships between parents and children, experience of physical and mental violence by parent, as well as a sense of alienation and loneliness at home (31-33).

Our study showed a significant difference between two groups in terms of emotional intelligence in a way that normal girls were endowed significantly with higher emotional intelligence. The results of several studies on a group of young people also suggested a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and behavioral problems. It was argued that if the youth could well manage their emotions and benefit from more social skills, they can experience lower behavioral problems such as aggression, crimes (34).

Furthermore, research studies have revealed that runaway girls are usually weak in terms of emotional intelligence as well as establishment of appropriate social relationships (3). Runaway girls experience more stress compared with normal ones and they also have more stressors. The point of importance is the assessments of such stress by girls and how to cope with it although about 93% of runaway girls employ non-adaptive methods such as emotion-oriented coping style to cope with tensions (35).

Other studies confirmed the relationship between the components of emotional intelligence and the risks of running away from home and also believed that avoiding realism was the foundation of this relationship (36,37).

According to the results of one study, mental vulnerability of runaway teens makes them feel negative about themselves and fail to establish supporting healthy relationships with others.

Therefore, they lose opportunities for the growth and development of intellectual and problem-solving skills (38).

Considering the results of this study, there was a difference between runaway and normal girls in terms of attachment style. In this respect, runaway girls had insecure or anxious attachment style while normal girls benefited from secure attachment style. The results of other investigation indicated that safe parents had safe children and parents with anxious attachment style among the insecure group had children suffering from attachment disorders more than others (39).

A difference was also observed between family structure and emotional intelligence in runaway girls and normal ones.

Other researchers also believe that attachment theory is correlated to some extent with emotional compatibility and coping with stress in a way that avoidant attachment style is associated with maintaining emotional distance from others and avoiding any coping with stress. Ambivalent-anxious orientation is also related to emotional escape in social interactions and excessive caution in coping with stress. On the other hand, secure attachment style is associated with appropriate compatibility and flexibility in the face of emotional experiences as well as analysis of stressful events (without any disruptions by them) (40,41).

According to the findings of the present study, it was concluded that the components of family structure, family process, attachment style, and emotional intelligence could affect runaway girls. Moreover, family structure may have an impact on emotional intelligence. As a whole, parents could affect the methods of coping with mental pressures in their children.

### Acknowledgments:

The researcher wishes to express his appreciation to the full cooperation of the patients and personnel who participated in this study and the Research Deputy of Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences, Bandar Abbas, Iran. We are

sincerely thankful to our counselors in clinical Research Development Center of Shahid Mohammadi Hospital.

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## ساختار و فرآیند خانواده، سبک دلبستگی و هوش هیجانی در دختران فراری

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### چکیده

**مقدمه:** پدیده فرار از خانه یکی از مباحث بسیار حساس و پیچیده در حوزه آسیب‌های اجتماعی می‌باشد. بر اساس آمار سازمان بهداشت جهانی میزان فرار از خانه بیش از ۲/۳ میلیون نفر در سال در نوجوانان ۱۳ تا ۱۹ ساله می‌باشد که حدود ۷۴ درصد آن را دختران تشکیل می‌دهند. این مطالعه با هدف مقایسه ساختار و فرآیند خانواده، سبک دلبستگی و هوش هیجانی در دختران فراری و عادی صورت گرفته است.

**روش کار:** در مطالعه حاضر، کلیه دختران فراری تحت پوشش سازمان بهزیستی در شهرستان بندرعباس از طریق نمونه‌گیری ساده انتخاب شدند. ۲۰ دختر فراری و ۲۰ دختر عادی که از نظر خصوصیات دموگرافیک یکسان سازی شده بودند با استفاده از ابزار ساختار و فرآیند خانواده، سبک دلبستگی و هوش هیجانی با آزمون تی مستقل مورد مقایسه قرار گرفتند.

**نتایج:** بر اساس نتایج این مطالعه، تفاوت آماری معنی‌داری بین ساختار و فرآیند خانواده، سبک دلبستگی و هوش هیجانی در دو گروه وجود داشت.

**نتیجه‌گیری:** ساختار و فرآیند خانواده، سبک دلبستگی و هوش هیجانی در دختران فراری و عادی متفاوت است.

**کلیدواژه‌ها:** ساختار خانواده، فرآیند خانواده، سبک دلبستگی، هوش هیجانی

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**نوع مقاله:** پژوهشی

دریافت مقاله: ۹۶/۱۰/۱۴ اصلاح نهایی: ۹۶/۱۱/۱۰ پذیرش مقاله: ۹۶/۱۱/۱۱

**ارجاع:** بخشیان فاطمه، مؤیدی فرح. ساختار و فرآیند خانواده، سبک دلبستگی و هوش هیجانی در دختران فراری. مجله پزشکی هرمزگان ۹۶(۴): ۲۴۹-۲۴۱.