

Effects of experiential avoidance and family emotional support on the parental psychological flexibility of mothers of preschoolers

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Abstract

Background: This study examined the main and interactive effects of experiential avoidance and emotional support from families of origin and in-laws on the parental psychological flexibility (PPF) of mothers of preschoolers. PPF is a key component of parenting quality and is closely linked to child development. Although experiential avoidance has been identified as a psychological factor, few studies have examined the role of family emotional support, and none have distinguished between support from family of origin and in-laws.

Method: This study used self-reported data from 335 Chinese mothers of preschoolers and hierarchical regression analyses.

Results: Higher experiential avoidance was associated with lower PPF. Emotional support from family of origin was positively associated with PPF, whereas support from in-laws was negatively associated with it. A significant interaction showed that among mothers with high experiential avoidance, greater support from in-laws was related to lower PPF.

Conclusion: This study provides a comprehensive examination of factors—both psychological and environmental—related to PPF. It highlights the complexity of family support systems by showing that support from family of origin may be beneficial, but support from in-laws may not.

Abbreviations: ACT, acceptance and commitment therapy; KMO, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin; PF, psychological flexibility; PPF, parental psychological flexibility; PPFQ, parental psychological flexibility questionnaire; SIFOS, support and interference from family of origin scale.

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Implications: Interventions to enhance PPF should address both individual psychological factors and the source of family support.

KEYWORDS

emotional support, experiential avoidance, family systems theory, mothers of preschool children, parental psychological flexibility

Parenting quality is essential for the psychological well-being of children, especially in early childhood. Compared with children in later developmental stages, preschoolers are more physiologically and psychologically dependent on their caregivers, which may explain the stronger associations between parenting quality and child outcomes during the preschool stage (Kılıç et al., 2024; Taraban & Shaw, 2018). While most research on parenting quality has focused on parental warmth and control (Pinquart, 2017), in recent years, parental psychological flexibility (PPF) has emerged as an important dimension (Burke & Moore, 2015). Higher PPF was found to be related to better mental health and a lower prevalence of problematic behavior among preschool children in a large U.S. study (Brassell et al., 2016).

In traditional Chinese culture, mothers are typically the primary caregivers for preschool-age children and, unlike fathers, bear the majority of childrearing responsibilities (Zhao et al., 2020). Therefore, mothers' PPF is especially important for the adjustment of children during this stage (Wang et al., 2022). Indeed, low maternal PPF has been identified as a risk factor for problematic behaviors in preschoolers (An & Zhang, 2023; Fluja-Contreras et al., 2023). Interestingly, recent evidence suggests that paternal PPF does not have a significant effect on children's behavioral problems, highlighting the unique role of maternal PPF (Pan et al., 2024). Despite growing evidence of its importance (Fluja-Contreras et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2024), limited research has explored what predicts PPF, especially in the context of early childhood. Given the developmental sensitivity of this period (Taraban & Shaw, 2018), knowledge of such predictors is essential for the development of interventions designed to improve parenting practices. According to Belsky's (1984) process of parenting model, both the psychological characteristics of mothers and available support in their environment contribute to their parenting quality. There is some evidence that experiential avoidance is a psychological characteristic that matters for PPF (Wu et al., 2018), but the role of the social environment has not yet been examined. Based on evidence that family social support can help reduce parents' stress and improve their parenting (Dunst, 2022), we chose to investigate the effect of receiving support from family, both family of origin and in-laws. Thus, the present study examines, in a sample of Chinese mothers of preschoolers, the main effects of a psychological factor—experiential avoidance—and of two contextual factors—emotional support from family of origin and from in-laws—on mothers' PPF. In addition, it tests whether the effect of experiential avoidance depends on the support that mothers receive from their own family and from their spouse's family.

THE EFFECT OF EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE ON MATERNAL PPF

Drawing from acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), a behavioral therapy grounded in functional contextualism and relational frame theory, psychological flexibility (PF) refers to the capacity to stay in contact with the present moment and act in accordance with personal values, even in the face of difficult thoughts and emotions (Hayes et al., 1996, 2006). PPF, as a context-specific application of this concept in the parenting domain, refers to parents' ability to accept their own distressing internal experiences related to childrearing (e.g., frustration, guilt, anxiety) while continuing to engage in effective and value-driven parenting practices. It is commonly

operationalized as comprising three interrelated processes: cognitive defusion—the ability to step back from unhelpful thoughts and emotions so that the parenting behavior is not governed by them; committed action—the ability to enact parenting behaviors that both align with one's values and are adjusted to specific contexts; and acceptance—the ability to allow painful thoughts and emotions to be present without attempting to change or avoid them (Burke & Moore, 2015; Wang et al., 2021).

One central concept of ACT is experiential avoidance, defined as the tendency to rigidly avoid or suppress internal psychological experiences—such as distressing thoughts, emotions, or sensations—even when doing so is ineffective or interferes with pursuing meaningful goals (Bond et al., 2011; Hayes et al., 1996). Individuals with low experiential avoidance are better able to accept and remain open to their internal experiences without attempting to control or avoid them. This openness should allow parents to engage more fully with their children and respond adaptively to the challenges they encounter in their parenting practices—that is, to be more psychologically flexible as parents (Brassell et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). Only two studies (from China and the United States) have examined the link between experiential avoidance and PPF in mothers of preschoolers, and both found a negative association (Brassell et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). However, the small number of studies, which relied on relatively small samples of mothers with preschoolers, limits the strength of the evidence, and further research across diverse cultural settings is needed to confirm the robustness and generalizability of this link. Based on existing evidence, we hypothesize that low experiential avoidance is associated with increased PPF among mothers of preschoolers.

THE EFFECT OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM FAMILY OF ORIGIN AND IN-LAWS ON MATERNAL PPF

A large body of research shows that mothers' perceived social support is positively related to the quality of their parenting (Green et al., 2007; Hong & Liu, 2019). Social support includes instrumental support, which focuses on providing practical help, and emotional support, which focuses on meeting an individual's psychological and emotional needs through empathy and comfort. Emotional support was found to be more strongly associated with reduced parenting stress than instrumental support (Trute et al., 2008). Given that emotional support consists of helping people in distress process their feelings and promoting self-acceptance, it should help them cope more flexibly with stressful events (Burlinson, 2003). Therefore, receiving emotional support should facilitate PPF. This association has never been tested, however.

Family systems theory recognizes the family as a unit where each member influences each other member (Cox & Paley, 1997). For mothers, both their family of origin (i.e., their own parents) and their in-laws are potential sources of emotional support. Receiving more emotional support from their family should be associated with higher maternal PPF via different mechanisms. First, receiving higher emotional support is associated with lower anxiety, depressive symptoms, and parenting-related stress in mothers (Popp et al., 2019; Roohafza et al., 2014), all of which have been shown to be negatively associated with PPF (Fonseca et al., 2020; Li, 2019). Receiving support from family and friends was also found to be associated with better maternal adaptation (Ni & Lin, 2011). Second, receiving less social support was found to be associated with more difficulties in mothers' emotion regulation abilities (Brandão et al., 2024). Mothers who are better able to regulate their emotions tend to exhibit more positive parenting behaviors and higher levels of PPF (Brassell et al., 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2022). These associations suggest that emotional support may be indirectly linked to PPF via its association with emotion regulation.

Other research suggests that high levels of support might also be harmful, however. It has been theorized that excessive social support, particularly if controlling or intrusive, can make

recipients feel pressured and exacerbate rather than alleviate the negative effects of stressful events (Palant & Himmel, 2019; Thoits, 1995; Williamson et al., 2019). In the context of parenting, receiving high levels of family emotional support may be experienced as stressful by mothers and thereby diminish their PPF. Therefore, we formulated two competing hypotheses regarding the effect of family emotional support on mothers' PPF. This dual-hypothesis approach allows us to test not only the traditionally assumed beneficial role of support but also to consider its potentially harmful effects, which have been noted but insufficiently tested in prior research.

MODERATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM FAMILIES OF ORIGIN AND IN-LAWS

According to the parenting process model (Belsky, 1984; Taraban & Shaw, 2018), quality of parenting depends both on personal characteristics of the parent (e.g., their psychological well-being) and on contextual factors (e.g., sources of stress and support). In line with this model, a recent review on the moderating role of social support in the association between parental mental illness and parental behavior found that the negative effect of psychological difficulties on parenting quality was buffered by high levels of social support (Seeger et al., 2022). Social support strengthens mothers' emotion regulation (Brandão et al., 2024), which should enable them to manage mental distress more effectively, thereby reducing its negative impact on parenting quality (Zitzmann et al., 2024). Research indicates that maternal experiential avoidance is closely associated with multiple forms of mental distress and that reduced experiential avoidance can serve as an important indicator of mothers' mental health (Fonseca et al., 2018; Shea & Coyne, 2011; Spinhoven et al., 2014). At the same time, higher levels of PPF are associated with more responsive parenting practices, as well as higher overall parenting quality (Brassell et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2021; Fonseca et al., 2020). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the negative effect of experiential avoidance on maternal PPF is mitigated for mothers who receive high levels of emotional support from their family of origin and their in-laws.

However, the parenting literature also suggests that receiving high levels of support might worsen rather than alleviate the effects of psychological distress on parenting quality. Indeed, in a sample of mothers of preschoolers, the link between mothers' depressive symptoms and their reduced parenting quality was stronger when they reported higher levels of social support satisfaction (from intimate relationships, friendships, and community; Taraban et al., 2017). It is presumed that high levels of social support can lead mothers to become overly reliant on external resources, which may reduce their chances of learning to maintain high-quality parenting during times of psychological distress (Taraban et al., 2017). Although those findings focused on depression and not on experiential avoidance, research has demonstrated that the two constructs are positively correlated (Schut & Boelen, 2017) and that low PPF is associated with poor parenting quality (Leeming & Hayes, 2016). These conceptual links suggest that emotional support might also play a similarly complex moderating role in the relation between experiential avoidance and PPF. Therefore, in the present study, we formulate competing hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of emotional support from family on the relationship between experiential avoidance and maternal PPF. On the one hand, the PPF of mothers with high levels of experiential avoidance can be expected to be higher if they receive high emotional support from their family of origin and in-laws compared with mothers who receive low levels of family support (buffering hypothesis, grounded in the buffering model of social support; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Seeger et al., 2022). On the other hand, the PPF of mothers with high levels of experiential avoidance can be expected to be lower if they receive high emotional support from families of origin and in-laws (exacerbation hypothesis, based on findings suggesting that excessive support may increase psychological dependence and reduce opportunities for

developing autonomous parenting skills; Taraban et al., 2017). Notably, these competing hypotheses have not yet been empirically tested in relation to PPF. The present study aims to clarify whether emotional support from family of origin and from in-laws functions as a protective or a risk factor.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN FAMILY OF ORIGIN AND IN-LAW SUPPORT

Although some studies have generally examined support from both family of origin and in-laws under the umbrella of “family support” (Andresen & Telleen, 1992; Green et al., 2007), there are contextual and relational factors that may shape how mothers experience support from these two sources. Specifically, support from the family of origin may provide mothers with a deeper sense of emotional security, helping them face parenting challenges with greater confidence and flexibility (Lorén et al., 2024). In contrast, mothers’ relationship with their in-laws, who are not blood relatives, is often less close, intimate, and stable than their relationship with their family of origin (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Previous studies have indicated that support from in-laws may be more complex, especially within traditional cultural contexts. In traditional Chinese culture, in-laws may hold culturally influenced authority over the mother’s roles and responsibilities in family life, and they often exert pressure on their daughters-in-law to follow their own ideas or family traditions (Mao, 2008), which could lead daughters-in-law to see support from in-laws as interference or control rather than actual help. In this case, it could have a negative effect on mothers’ parenting (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Research has also suggested that social support was only beneficial when it matched the personal needs of the recipient (Leahy-Warren et al., 2018; Taylor, 2011), which implies a close relationship with the recipient. The mother’s own parents may be more likely than her in-laws to be in tune with her specific needs, and their support might therefore be more likely to be associated with positive outcomes.

Given these potential differences, this study examines emotional support from the family of origin and in-laws separately. However, because we did not directly assess whether mothers perceived support differently (e.g., as more useful or more intrusive) depending on the type of family it originated from (origin vs. in-laws), these analyses are exploratory rather than hypothesis driven. By distinguishing between these two sources of support, this study provides a novel perspective on the role of family dynamics in PPF, particularly within the context of Chinese cultural expectations regarding family roles, thereby addressing a critical gap in the existing literature.

CURRENT STUDY

The present study first tests the main effects of experiential avoidance and emotional support from family of origin and in-laws on the PPF of mothers of preschool children. We hypothesize that mothers with higher experiential avoidance will have lower PPF. Regarding the main effect of family support on mothers’ PPF, we propose two competing hypotheses. On the one hand, findings of positive associations between social support and parenting quality (e.g., Green et al., 2007) lead us to expect that higher perceived emotional support will be positively associated with mothers’ PPF. On the other hand, research suggesting that social support can be experienced as controlling or intrusive (Thoits, 1995) leads us to expect that higher emotional support may be a source of stress associated with lower PPF (Flujas-Contreras et al., 2023). Given possible differences between the family of origin and in-laws in terms of relational

stability, implicit expectations, and family dynamics, this study will explore whether the effects of support from these two sources differ.

Second, this study investigates the interactive effects of experiential avoidance and emotional support from families of origin and in-laws on maternal PPF. Due to inconsistencies in the literature on whether social support helps those with psychological difficulties, we formulate competing hypotheses regarding the moderating role of family support on the negative link between experiential avoidance and maternal PPF. On the one hand, in line with a *buffering hypothesis*, mothers with high experiential avoidance may exhibit greater PPF when receiving higher levels of family emotional support. On the other hand, in line with an *exacerbation hypothesis*, mothers with higher experiential avoidance may exhibit lower PPF when they receive higher levels of emotional support. Given that support from family of origin and support from in-laws may differ in nature, their moderating effects may also differ. Therefore, the present study explores whether the possible moderating effect of family support on the association between experiential avoidance and PPF differs depending on the source of the support.

METHOD

Procedure

Four private kindergartens located in Shuozhou City, Shanxi Province, China, were approached to participate in the study through personal acquaintances in January 2022. All were situated in urban areas, with two charging high tuition fees (approximately 18,000 RMB per year) and the other two charging moderate fees (approximately 12,000 RMB per year), based on directors' reports. Regarding the broader socioeconomic context, the average per capita disposable income in Shuozhou in 2022 was 30,513 RMB (urban residents: 41,009 RMB; rural residents: 18,449 RMB; Shuozhou Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2023). One kindergarten (with moderate tuition fees) declined to participate, while the directors of the other three expressed strong interest in parenting-related research and agreed to collaborate. As part of the collaboration, the first author also offered a public talk to parents on the importance of PPF for child development.

The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (a) being married, (b) having both parents alive, and (c) having both parents-in-law (their spouse's parents) alive. The director of each kindergarten arranged for the teachers of 24 classes to distribute and collect the questionnaires. In each class, teachers put the questionnaires into children's school bags before the end of the school day and, at the same time, provided parents with an electronic version of the informed consent form and instructions for completing the questionnaires—including the inclusion criteria—through the WeChat group (a mobile messaging and social media platform commonly used in China for communication between teachers and parents) of each class. Parents were informed that participation was anonymous, voluntary, and confidential. Teachers were explicitly instructed not to encourage or remind parents to complete the questionnaires or to review the completed questionnaires. Given institutional restrictions in Chinese kindergartens, the researchers were not permitted to join the WeChat groups. Thus, communication with parents could only be conducted through the teachers, who served as neutral distributors of materials. Parents were instructed to fill out the questionnaire and put them back into their child's school bag within 2 days. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (ethics review approval no. H21090).

Sample

A total of 407 questionnaires were distributed, and 390 were returned. Among them, 55 were excluded due to missing data, patterned or blank responses, or not meeting the inclusion criteria (e.g., the respondent was the father, was divorced, or had left blank items related to either the family of origin or in-laws), resulting in a final sample of 335 mothers who were married, with both parents and both parents-in-law alive. This corresponds to a response rate of 95.8% and a valid completion rate of 82.3%. The mothers' mean age was 32.72 years ($SD = 3.03$), with the following distribution: Most mothers (301; 89.85%) were aged 30 to 39, 22 (6.57%) were aged 20 to 29, and 12 (3.58%) were older than 40. With regard to highest education level, 148 (44.18%) had obtained education below bachelor's degree, 162 (48.36%) had obtained a bachelor's degree, and 25 (7.46%) had obtained a postgraduate degree. All mothers lived with their spouse, and 70 (20.9%) also lived with at least one older-adult parent; 179 (53.43%) mothers had one child, and 156 (46.57%) had more than one child. For 329 (98.21%) of the mothers, it was their first marriage, and six (1.79%) were remarried.

Measures

Experiential avoidance

Maternal experiential avoidance was assessed with the seven self-report items of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire—Second Edition (Bond et al., 2011) using the version translated into Chinese and culturally adapted by Cao et al. (2013). Mothers were asked to report how true the seven statements were for them (e.g., “My painful experiences and memories make it difficult for me to live a life that I would value,” “I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings,” and “It seems like most people are handling their lives better than I am”). Responses were given on a 7-point scale from 1 (*never true*) to 7 (*always true*), with higher total scores representing higher levels of experiential avoidance. This scale was found to have good reliability and validity in previous research, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of .88 (Cao et al., 2013). The Cronbach's α in this study was .87.

Emotional support from family of origin and in-laws

The Support and Interference From Family of Origin Scale (SIFOS) including a subscale measuring emotional support (Yuan et al., 2015a) was used to measure the level of emotional support mothers receive from their family of origin and from their in-laws (their husband's family of origin). All items were administered in Chinese, and we used the original Chinese scale (Yuan et al., 2015a). Mothers were first asked the extent to which the four following statements applied to their family of origin: “Giving us comfort and encouragement when we are in trouble,” “Listening to our worries and concerns,” “Expressing confidence that we can cope well with difficulties or problems” and “Putting themselves in our shoes and understanding our difficulties.” Next, they were asked to what extent the same statements applied to their family of in-laws. Each of the four items was scored on a 4-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*), with higher total scores indicating higher levels of emotional support. In previous research, this scale had good reliability and validity, with Cronbach's α coefficients of .86 and .88 for emotional support from family of origin and from family of in-laws, respectively (Yuan et al., 2015a). In the present study, the Cronbach's α coefficients were .88 and .91 for emotional support from family of origin and emotional support from family of in-laws, respectively.

Parental psychological flexibility

The Parental Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire (PPFQ) was used to measure mothers' PPF (Burke & Moore, 2015; Li et al., 2018). All items were administered in Chinese, and we used the validated Chinese revision by Li et al. (2018). Mothers were asked the extent to which a series of 16 statements applied to them. The items captured three dimensions: cognitive defusion, committed action, and acceptance. Each item was scored on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Cognitive defusion was assessed with eight items (e.g., "I worry about not being able to control my emotions toward my children"). Items in this subscale were reverse-scored, with higher scores indicating better cognitive defusion skills. Committed action was assessed with three items (e.g., "I don't allow my children to do things that worry me"). These items were also reverse-scored, with higher scores reflecting stronger committed action. Acceptance was assessed with five items (e.g., "No matter how I feel, it will not affect how I treat my child"). Higher scores on this dimension represented greater acceptance. Higher total scores represented higher PPF for mothers. The Cronbach's α for the full scale was found to be .85 in a previous study (Li et al., 2018), where the scale had good reliability and validity. The Cronbach's α in this study was .88.

Analysis plan

All analyses in this study were conducted using SPSS and were based on the mean scores of each scale. Because all variables were collected using self-report questionnaires completed by mothers, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess the presence of common method variance, as this approach is widely used in studies with single-source, self-reported data (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Before hypothesis testing, we screened demographic covariates (maternal age, education, family structure—i.e., coresidence with at least one parent, number of children, marital status) for bivariate associations with PPF using Pearson correlations, independent-samples *t* tests, and analysis of variance as appropriate. Variables associated with PPF at $p < .05$ were to be entered as covariates in the hierarchical multiple regression models.

To test our hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression models were conducted with PPF as the dependent variable. The three predictor variables (experiential avoidance, emotional support from family of origin, and emotional support from in-laws) were mean-centered before being entered into the models. In Step 1, we examined the main effects of experiential avoidance, emotional support from family of origin, and emotional support from in-laws (entered as independent variables) on mothers' PPF (dependent variable). In Step 2, we tested the moderating effect of each type of family support on the association between experiential avoidance and maternal PPF. Specifically, we added two interaction terms: between experiential avoidance and emotional support from the family of origin and between experiential avoidance and emotional support from in-laws. The significant interaction terms were probed using simple slope plots to visualize the moderation effects.

RESULTS

Common method variance test

Harman's single-factor test was used to detect possible common method variance because data on all variables were self-reported. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test value was 0.89, and the *p* value for the Bartlett's spherical test was $< .01$, indicating suitability for factor analysis. An unrotated exploratory factor analysis of all entries showed that the explanatory rate of the

first common factor was 26.68%, which was less than the critical value of 40%, and therefore the data in this study were considered free of serious common method variance.

Covariate screening

Covariate screening found no demographic covariates associated with PPF: age ($r = -.016$, $p = .777$), education ($F = .039$, $p = .962$), family structure ($t = .284$, $p = .777$), number of children ($t = .689$, $p = .491$), and marital status ($t = .630$, $p = .529$). Accordingly, no additional covariates were entered in the hierarchical multiple regression models.

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficients for all study variables are presented in Table 1. PPF was positively correlated with emotional support from both the family of origin ($r = .29$, $p < .001$) and the family of in-laws ($r = .12$, $p = .02$) and negatively correlated with experiential avoidance ($r = -.60$, $p < .001$).

A Fisher's r -to- z test was conducted to compare the correlation coefficients of maternal PPF with emotional support from family of origin ($r = .29$) and emotional support from in-laws ($r = .12$). The results showed a statistically significant difference between these two correlations, $z = 2.29$, $p = .022$ (two-tailed), indicating that emotional support from family of origin was more strongly correlated with maternal PPF than support from in-laws.

Main and interactive effects of experiential avoidance and family support

The results of the linear regression analyses are presented in Table 2. The three independent variables explained 38.8% of the variance in maternal PPF. In Step 1, experiential avoidance had a statistically significant negative effect on maternal PPF ($\beta = -.59$, $p < .001$). The emotional support from the family of origin had a statistically significant positive association with maternal PPF ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$), whereas the emotional support from the family of in-laws had a statistically significant negative association with maternal PPF ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .009$).

In Step 2, the interaction between experiential avoidance and emotional support from family of origin was not statistically significant ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .380$), suggesting that the negative effect of experiential avoidance on mothers' PPF did not vary depending on the amount of emotional support they reported receiving from their own family. However, the interaction between experiential avoidance and emotional support from family of in-laws was statistically significant ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .030$), suggesting that the negative association between experiential avoidance and PPF was stronger for mothers receiving high levels of emotional support from in-laws than for mothers receiving low levels of emotional support from in-laws (see Figure 1

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Observed range	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional support from the family of origin	3.12 (0.81)	[1.00–4.00]	1			
2. Emotional support from in-laws	2.63 (0.94)	[1.00–4.00]	.47**	1		
3. Experiential avoidance	2.63 (1.12)	[1.00–7.00]	-.29**	-.29**	1	
4. Parental psychological flexibility	5.12 (0.97)	[1.36–7.00]	.29**	.12*	-.60**	1

* $p < .03$. ** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Main and interactive effects of experiential avoidance and family support on parental psychological flexibility.

	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
Step 1						.39**	.39**
Experiential avoidance	-.50	-.59	-12.79	<.001	[-.58, -.43]		
Emotional support from the family of origin	.22	.18	3.65	<.001	[.10, .33]		
Emotional support from the family of in-laws	-.13	-.13	-2.64	.009	[-.23, -.03]		
Step 2						.40**	.01*
Experiential avoidance	-.53	-.62	-13.15	<.001	[-.61, -.45]		
Emotional support from the family of origin	.23	.19	3.83	<.001	[.11, .35]		
Emotional support from the family of in-laws	-.14	-.14	-2.79	.006	[-.24, -.04]		
Experiential Avoidance \times Emotional Support From Family of Origin	-.04	-.04	-.88	.380	[-.12, .05]		
Experiential Avoidance \times Emotional Support From Family of In-Laws	-.09	-.10	-2.18	.030	[-.17, -.01]		

Abbreviation: CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .03$. ** $p < .001$.

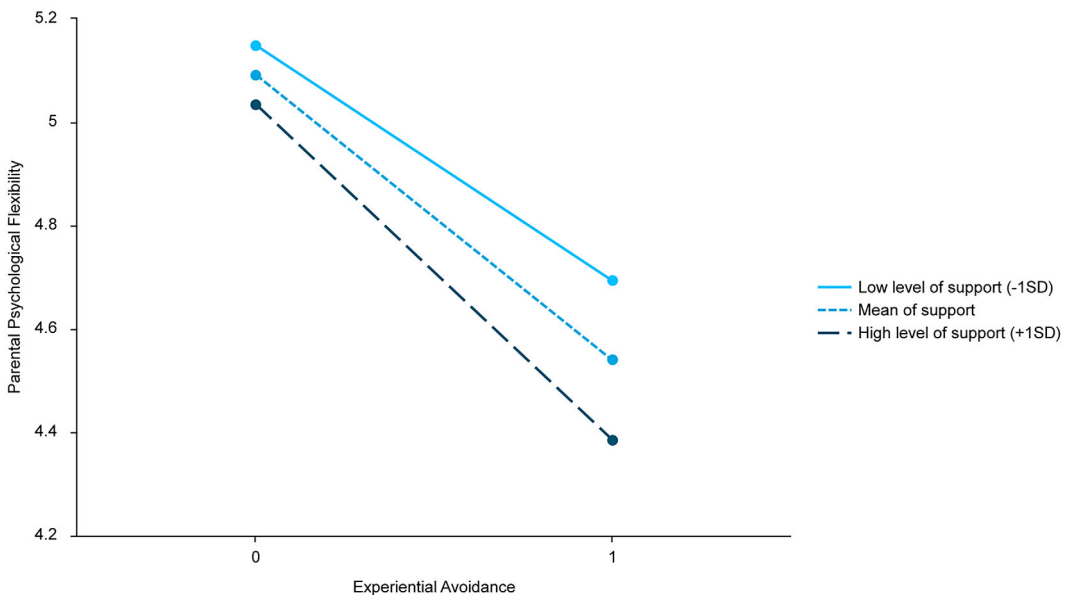


FIGURE 1 Simple slope test of emotional support from family of in-laws on the association between experience avoidance and parental psychological flexibility. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

for the plotted simple slope). Simple slope analyses showed that the association between experiential avoidance and PPF was significant at all levels of emotional support from in-laws: at the average level ($B = -0.55$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -13.79$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.63, -0.47]), at high support (1 SD ; $B = -0.64$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -10.79$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.76, -0.53]), and at low support (-1 SD ; $B = -0.46$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -9.77$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.55, -0.37]).

Specifically, among mothers with high levels of experiential avoidance, their PPF was lower for those reporting high levels of emotional support from their in-laws than for those reporting low levels of support from their in-laws.

DISCUSSION

Informed by Belsky's (1984) parenting process model, this study investigated how both psychological (experiential avoidance) and contextual (family emotional support) factors relate to PPF among Chinese mothers of preschoolers. Recognizing that not all forms of support are perceived or experienced uniformly, and drawing on prior research suggesting that mothers may interact differently with their family of origin and in-laws due to relational and cultural dynamics (Mao, 2008; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009), we examined these two sources of support separately.

The main effects of experiential avoidance on PPF

Our findings provide further evidence that mothers with higher levels of experiential avoidance have lower PPF. This is consistent with Belsky's (1984) process of parenting model as well as prior research conducted both in China and the United States (Brassell et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). By confirming this association in a prefecture-level city outside China's major metropolitan areas (i.e., Shuozhou, Shanxi Province), this study extends previous findings that were primarily based on major metropolitan areas, such as Beijing, thus contributing to a more contextually grounded understanding of the link between experiential avoidance and PPF across different levels of urban development in China. This observation aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of ACT, which posits that experiential avoidance prevents individuals from engaging meaningfully with their internal experiences, ultimately undermining their PPF (Hayes et al., 2006). Conversely, mothers with lower experiential avoidance may be better equipped to accept their negative thoughts and emotions, enabling them to maintain effective parenting behaviors even under stress.

Importantly, these findings further highlight the potential of interventions targeting experiential avoidance in enhancing PPF. ACT is well established and has been shown to effectively reduce experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 2006). A recent study further indicated that ACT interventions effectively enhance maternal PPF by reducing experiential avoidance and increasing acceptance, reinforcing their role as a valuable approach for fostering greater flexibility in parenting-related cognition and behavior (Flujas-Contreras & Gómez, 2018).

The main effects of emotional support from family of origin and in-laws

Consistent with Belsky's process of parenting model and family systems theory (Belsky, 1984; Cox & Paley, 1997), our findings indicate that mothers who reported receiving more emotional support from their family of origin had higher levels of PPF. This aligns with prior research suggesting that emotional support fosters positive emotional experiences, which are positively associated with PPF (Burlison, 2003; Li, 2019). Mothers generally perceive their family of origin as a source of security (Lorén et al., 2024). The emotional support provided by their family may not only foster a sense of belonging and psychological safety but also empower them with greater confidence and strength when facing parenting challenges, thus enabling them to respond with greater flexibility and ease (Lorén et al., 2024), maintaining a more positive mindset (Haga et al., 2012) and ultimately developing a high level of PPF (Li, 2019).

In contrast, our findings revealed that mothers who reported receiving more emotional support from their in-laws had lower levels of PPF. Although prior research has suggested that emotional support from extended family members can be a valuable resource for parents (Trute et al., 2008), our results indicate that such support may actually be detrimental rather than beneficial. Compared with the family of origin, in-law relationships are often built on marriage alliances rather than emotional history, representing the union of two distinct and independent families, each with its own family identity (Fingerman et al., 2012; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009), and may be accompanied by more complex interpersonal dynamics and potential conflicts (Bryant et al., 2001; Yuan et al., 2015b). The mother's own parents can be expected to know her better than her in-laws and therefore to be more attuned to her specific needs (Leahy-Warren et al., 2018). This might mean that support from in-laws hinders rather than promotes maternal PPF. In traditional Chinese culture, this relationship is rooted in the traditional patriarchal family system, where in-law parents typically hold a certain degree of authority and influence over daughters-in-law, emphasizing the one-way obedience of daughters-in-law to the in-law family. Within a cultural context that emphasizes family harmony, daughters-in-law may feel obligated to conform to their in-laws' expectations (Mao, 2008; Wu et al., 2010). However, with the infiltration of modern values, more and more women are seeking to establish an equal status in the family. This tension between cultural values may intensify conflicts between daughters-in-law and parents-in-law, especially in specific family matters (Mao, 2008). In such relationships, lacking mutual understanding, even when in-laws perceive themselves as offering emotional support, daughters-in-law may interpret it as control or interference, reducing the positive value of such support (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). From the perspective of self-determination theory, such perceived intrusiveness may diminish mothers' sense of autonomy, making them more reliant on external expectations rather than their own internal values and goals, and more likely to adopt avoidant coping strategies when responding to life challenges (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011), limiting their PPF (Brassell et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). These findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between different sources of family support.

The interactive effect of experiential avoidance with emotional support from families of origin and in-laws

Contrary to our hypothesis, experiential avoidance did not interact with emotional support from the family of origin in predicting PPF. This indicates that the negative effect of experiential avoidance on maternal PPF does not vary depending on the levels of emotional support mothers receive from their family of origin. However, we did observe a statistically significant main effect of emotional support from the family of origin on maternal PPF, suggesting that such support may still have a generally beneficial role. One possible explanation is that support from the family of origin tends to be perceived as more accepting or empathetic (Lorén et al., 2024), which may foster a supportive emotional climate for flexible parenting, regardless of the mother's level of experiential avoidance.

In contrast to the findings on support from the family of origin, the effect of experiential avoidance did interact with emotional support from in-laws in predicting PPF. Specifically, among mothers with high levels of experiential avoidance, those who reported higher levels of emotional support from in-laws demonstrated lower PPF compared with those with lower levels of such support. This finding aligns with our proposed exacerbation hypothesis. One possible explanation for this finding is that in some cultural contexts, in-law families may often carry implicit expectations regarding a mother's family role, responsibilities, and parenting style (Yang, 2011). This could, in some cases, create external pressure even when support is offered. For mothers with high experiential avoidance, such support may be more likely to be perceived as controlling or intrusive, thereby increasing their psychological stress rather than providing

genuine buffering effects. This phenomenon can be explained by relational regulation theory, which suggests that the effects of social support depend on individual characteristics (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Studies have shown that individuals with mental health difficulties tend to perceive social support as less valuable and struggle to benefit from it (Xiao, 2006). This effect may be particularly pronounced in family structures that emphasize intergenerational power dynamics, where mothers may face stronger pressures to conform to in-law expectations of the “ideal daughter-in-law” (Mao, 2008). When mothers already exhibit high levels of experiential avoidance, such external pressure may further reinforce their rigid coping patterns and make it more difficult for them to adjust their behaviors and respond flexibly to parenting challenges (Flujas-Contreras et al., 2023).

According to relational frame theory, individuals’ responses to others in social interactions are often influenced by preexisting relational frames in their minds—patterns of relating events that are acquired through extensive histories of language learning and cultural experience, and which can sometimes become highly rigid (Hayes et al., 2001; Hughes & Barnes-Holmes, 2015). In certain cultural contexts, such as traditional Chinese families, in-laws are often implicitly regarded as authority figures, and the role of mothers may be closely linked to obedience and hierarchical expectations (Mao, 2008; Yang, 2011). Within such frames, supportive behaviors from in-laws may be interpreted as control or pressure. For mothers with high levels of experiential avoidance, these relational frames may have become particularly rigid, making them more likely to construe such behaviors as controlling rather than caring. This interpretive style reinforces psychological inflexibility (Hayes et al., 1996, 2006), making it more difficult for mothers to respond adaptively in parenting contexts where value-guided flexibility is required (Burke & Moore, 2015; Li et al., 2018).

Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the temporal dynamics of experiential avoidance, emotional support, and PPF. Second, the reliance on maternal self-reports for all variables may introduce shared method as well as social desirability bias. Participants may respond to items such as “No matter how I feel, it will not affect how I treat my child” in a way that aligns with socially desirable parenting norms rather than reflecting their actual experiences. Future research could consider employing observations, implicit measures or social desirability scales to better control for these biases. Third, the study was conducted in China, and cultural differences may limit the generalizability of the results to other contexts. Future research should replicate these findings in diverse cultural settings to explore potential cross-cultural variations. Finally, this study focused on only a limited set of variables. Future research should expand the range of factors examined by investigating, for example, the mother’s own childhood experiences (e.g., abuse) or current family situation (e.g., the number of children she has) and her current employment status. These factors may affect mothers’ PPF to the extent that they place additional burden on them.

Conclusions and implications

Our findings indicate that mothers have higher PPF when they have lower levels of experiential avoidance and report receiving more emotional support from their family of origin. In contrast, emotional support from in-laws was associated with lower PPF, especially for mothers with high levels of experiential avoidance, suggesting that such support may carry external pressures that undermine mothers’ autonomy in parenting decisions.

This study contributes significantly to our understanding of PPF by integrating psychological and contextual factors, providing a comprehensive examination of the factors associated with parenting processes. By investigating the emotional support from families of origin and from in-laws separately, we demonstrated the nuanced role of different family support systems. The negative effect of experiential avoidance on PPF was exacerbated by support from the mothers-in-law but not by support from their own parents. Theoretically, our findings contribute to parenting process models and family systems theories because they specify the conditions that support helps or harms PPF. The type of relationship the recipient has with the source of support appears to be a crucial factor. From research and clinical perspectives, our findings demonstrate the importance of assessing support from families of origin and support from in-laws separately, as well as the necessity for interventions aimed at enhancing PPF to reduce maternal experiential avoidance, strengthen support from families of origin, and promote autonomy-supportive in-law involvement. Regarding policy implications, this study suggests that parenting education and community programs incorporate culturally attuned guidelines for multigenerational involvement and brief screening of experiential avoidance and PPF in maternal–child health contacts. Finally, these implications should be interpreted in light of the study’s limitations—its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reports, and a China-based urban kindergarten sample—which limit causal inference and generalizability.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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