

MEDIATING ROLE OF INTRAMARITAL PROBLEMS IN RELATION TO COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND MARITAL SATISFACTION DURING TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD: A PAKISTANI PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the mediating role of Intramarital Problems between Affectionate Communication and Marital Satisfaction among married couples during transition to parenthood, having parents with their first child aged between 3 months to one year. Correlational research design was used with a sample of 110 participants (with an equal proportion of 55 husbands and 55 wives) was approached from various family clinics. Data were collected using measures: Communication Pattern Scale (CPS; Subhan & Shafi, 2020), Intramarital Problems Scale (IPS; Shoaib & Khan, 2023) and Marital Satisfaction Scale (MSS; Ali et al., 2022). Pearson Product Moment Correlation and using Hayes' PROCESS macro-Mediation analyses was carried to determine the relationship among study variables and to evaluate the mediating role of Intramarital Problems between Affectionate Communication and Marital Satisfaction in married couples during transition to parenthood, respectively. Findings revealed that Affectionate Communication had significant negative relationship with Intramarital Problems and highly significant positive relationship with Marital Satisfaction. Moreover, Intramarital Problems had highly significant negative relationship with Marital Satisfaction. In addition, Intramarital Problems partially mediates the relationship between Affectionate Communication and Marital Satisfaction during the transition to parenthood.

Keywords: communication patterns, affectionate communication, intramarital problems, marital satisfaction, married couples, parenthood

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an interpersonal system which constantly changes throughout the life span as couples pass through both normative and non-

normative life changes (Siregar, 2025). Such a transition as the one between having partnership and having children is commonly cited as one of the most drastic and important stages of marriage.

As much as the birth of a child may be followed by a child-embrace of joy, fulfillment and emotional enrichment, it also comes along with new duties, role demands, and stressors that may jeopardize marital stability and fulfillment (Lessard et al., 2025). Current studies still indicate that the parenthood transition is a pivotal experience when marital relations, pattern of communication, and relationship satisfaction change significantly (Leonhardt et al., 2022; Williamson & Lavner, 2020).

Parenthood is a life-altering event that demands significant psychological, emotional, and relationship changes. Before birth, couples usually have more freedom, emotional closeness, as well as romantic actions. When a child is born, the idea of caring shifts to the daily practices of parenthood, leading to less time to spend with the partner, feeling more exhausted, and experiencing stress (Gordon, 2020). Such changes require interpersonal restructuring because couples have to renegotiate their roles, expectation and responsibilities in the relationship of a marriage. The identities of parents, their well-being, and gender-role attitudes are also transformed as they respond to their new roles as parents (Helgeson, 2020; Katz-Wise et al., 2010). Moreover, sexual, social interaction, and personal autonomy modifications, which are frequently accompanied by the lack of sleep and recreational time, further distress marital functioning (Asselmann & Specht, 2021).

The strains and stress of rearing a newborn often exacerbate the conflict and stress in marriage. Due to the overload with work, finances, and emotional exhaustion, couples can feel overwhelmed, which leads to irritability and decreased emotional availability to each other (Lavner et al., 2020; Wong, 2019). Though there are couples who report the enhancement of their relationships after having a child, according to a substantial number of recent studies, the idea of marital satisfaction tends to decrease throughout the early parenthood period, and it is specifically when the couples start to struggle to manage the growing number of these stressors (Araji et al., 2020; Baldwin et al., 2018). These findings highlight early parenthood as a sensitive time

during which the marital processes are highly vulnerable to the disruption.

There are a number of recent theoretical views that assist in explaining the impact of the shift to parenthood on the functioning of the marriage. Family systems theory models the family as a system of interdependence, where a change occurring in one subsystem will influence the whole system. The birth of a child changes the marry dyad into a more complicated triadic system and tends to cause a conflict between spousal and parental subsystems, as the challenges of the build-up result in incompatible demands (Rauch-Anderegg, 2020). On the same note, attachment-based models indicate that parenting stress can trigger attachment insecurities, especially in anxiously or avoidantly attached individuals, thus disrupting emotional bondage and relationship satisfaction (Lapoliche Theriault et al., 2022). Developmental and role perspectives also accentuate the idea that the role strain is a major outcome of early parenthood as the roles of partner and lover are reduced and the roles of parenting are enlarged, which often causes relational imbalance and dissatisfaction (Kuersten-Hogan & McHale, 2021).

In addition to shifts in relationships, there are significant biopsychosocial changes with the transition into parenthood. Mothers also have hormonal shifts, exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and physical discomfort that accompany the process of pregnancy and post-partum, potentially leading to emotional distress and reduced self-esteem (Chandra & Paray, 2024). Both mothers and fathers are at greater risk psychologically of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and difficulties in adjustment that have been reported to adversely influence the marital patterns of interaction and satisfaction (Jiménez-Barragan et al., 2024). On the social level, new parents usually become less in touch with friends and other relatives, which subsequently impairs social support in times when stress levels are high (Tavares et al., 2024).

The current literature argues that parenting stress is not inevitably linked to marital dissatisfaction but rather, communication patterns are probably the primary regulatory mechanisms that determine whether couples will change successfully or develop a decline in their

relationships (Martos et al., 2021; Williamson & Lavner, 2020). Couples are transitioning to child-centered interactions and are less preoccupied with partner-centered interactions, which causes communication to be more task-oriented and logistical (ter Kuile et., 2021; Trillingsgaard et al., 2014). This diminution of emotional responsive communication has been cited as a major mechanism that early parenthood stress erodes the marital quality.

A fundamental aspect of interpersonal communication is the process by which the couple shares thoughts, feelings and experiences in the effort of gaining a clear understanding of each other. Marital communication consists of verbal and nonverbal elements that determine intimacy, conflict management, and satisfaction in the relationship (Baucom & Baucom, 2021). Studies have shown that when married couples communicate positively, they experience pleasure and satisfaction in their relationship conversely, when they communicate negatively, they experience dissatisfaction (Choudary et al., 2024). Research has differentiated different types and patterns of communication which affect marriage functioning. Constructive and aggressive communication, which is characterized by openness, emotional validation and working jointly on a problem, is always related to the greater relationship satisfaction (Johnson et al., 2018; Birditt et al., 2010). On the other hand, the patterns of communication such as criticism, contempt, and demand-withdraw interactions that are destructive are closely associated with marital dissatisfaction and marital instability (Bonache et al., 2019; Holley et al., 2018; Schrodt et al., 2014). There has been a recent discovery that ineffective patterns of communication are a key channel in which parenting stress can be converted into intramarital issues (Erber & Erber, 2024).

Intramarital problems are those that are long term in nature and distress both or either of the marital partners. Some of the most frequent intramarital issues during the parenthood transition stage are less sexual intimacy, limited couple time, unequal distribution of household and childcare, sleep-deprivation, financial stress, and parenting working arguments (Landolt et al., 2023; Kushner et al., 2017). These issues are further worsened by

postpartum mood disorders and chronic fatigue that are other contributing factors to emotional disengagement and decreased marital satisfaction (Gross & Marcussen, 2017).

Marital satisfaction is a personal assessment of the worth and advantages of their matrimonial relationship and how much emotional, psychological, and bodily needs are satisfied (King, 2016). In longitudinal studies, the consistency is that marital satisfaction tends to decrease when a child is born, which is substantially because it contains more conflict, less intimacy, and poor communication (Seo, 2018). Notably, modern evidence indicates that partners that communicate freely, distribute duties equally, and support one another emotionally record greater marital satisfaction in the face of early parenthood (Molgora et al., 2022).

Combined, recent literature is conceptualizing the passage to parenthood as a stress-inducing situation where the communication patterns mediate the relation between external demands and marital outcome. Poor communication enhances issues within marriages, causing marital discontent, and positive communication adds resistance to stress and enhances relational resilience (Afifi et al., 2020).

Hypotheses

- It is hypothesized that Affectionate Communication Pattern will have significant negative relationship with Intramarital Problems and Marital Dissatisfaction in married couples during transition to parenthood.
- It is hypothesized that there would be significant positive relationship between Intramarital Problems and Marital Dissatisfaction in married couples.
- It is hypothesized that Intramarital Problems would significantly mediate the relationship between Affectionate Communication Pattern and Marital Dissatisfaction in married couples during transition to parenthood.

Method

Research Design

Correlational research design was used in this study in order to investigate the relationship between Affectionate Communication, Intramarital Problems and Marital Satisfaction in couples during transition to parenthood.

Sampling Strategy

The sample was comprised of ($N=110$) married participants who have first child (age= 3 months to 1 year). Data was collected from both male (husbands) and female (wives) participants. Purposive sampling strategy was employed to select the participants. The primary consideration in sampling strategy is the researcher's judgment as only those participants will be approached who have required information and are willing to share the information.

Participants

Total of 110 participants (with an equal proportion of 55 husbands and 55 wives) was approached from various family clinics. Sample was selected on the basis of the basis of following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion Criteria. Those participants were selected in present study who met the following criteria:

- Married participants who have first child (Darvill et al., 2010).
- Child age should be from 3 months to 12 months (Kreider et al., 2011).
- Participants should be living with their husband/ wife.

Exclusion Criteria. It included:

- Married couples who are having separation or divorce.
- Married participants with any disability or mental health problem.

Measures

Demographic Sheet

A demographic sheet was prepared by the researcher to assess general information about the participants. It was prepared in Urdu language and

it contains 15 questions. The information in general demographic sheet includes gender (men and women), age, education, occupation, working hours, religion, family origin (city or village), family system (nuclear or joint), no. of family members, duration of marriage, age of child, mode of marriage (love or arrange marriage), age at the time of marriage, age of child, relation of husband and wife before marriage, living system (husband and wife live with each other or husband and wife live with their in-laws).

Communication Pattern Scale (CPS; Subhan & Shafi, 2020)

Communication Pattern Scale is a forty-eight-item scale developed by Subhan and Shafi in 2020. It is a self-report measure designed to assess the style of communication that occurs between men and women in a marital relationship to share information, ideas, thoughts, needs, concerns and feelings. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert type scale ranging from 0 to 3. It has three subscales namely affectionate communication, hostile communication, emotionally distant communication. Internal consistency of the CPS is reported to be high. Cronbach's alpha for the affectionate communication subscale is 0.82, for hostile communication subscale is 0.78 and for emotionally distant communication subscale is 0.66 (Subhan & Shafi, 2020).

Intramarital Problems Scale (IPS; Shoaib & Khan, 2023)

It is a self-report measure used to assess the marital problems among married couples during transition to parenthood. It has 22 items rated on a 4- point Likert Scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). It consisted of two factors named as Adjustment Problems and Emotional Abonnement. The Cronbach's alpha of total of Intramarital Problem Scale showed higher internal consistency of 0.84.

Marital Satisfaction Scale (MSS; Ali et al., 2022)

Marital Satisfaction Scale was developed by Ali, Mahmood & Saleem in 2022. It is a self-report measure used to assess the benefits and costs a married person gets from the marriage. This questionnaire is comprised of 45-item. It is a self-

administered questionnaire answered on a Likert scale of 0 to 4. The internal reliability of this scale ranges from 0.84 to 0.89. This questionnaire is based on three factors namely; coordination and cooperation, mutual support and mutual respect.

Ethical Considerations

All the ethical points were fulfilled during the study. Permission letters were taken from the school of professional psychology, UMT to sought permission from various clinics. Permission was taken from the respective authors to use the instruments. Permission to recruit participants was taken from concerned administrative officials of clinic. Consent was taken from each participant on consent from before administering questionnaires to ensure participants about the confidentiality of their information. An information sheet was given to the participants to inform them about the purpose, duration and procedure of the study. They were informed regarding their right to withdraw from research at any time. Participants were informed that they can quit from research if they feel tired, overburdened or fatigued. The participants were informed about the availability of psychological services if any of the participants faces distress.

Procedure

For the purpose of data collection all the three scales together with the demographic form was administered on the participants. First of all,

researcher introduced herself to the participants and informed about the purpose of research. Informed consent was taken from all the participants. All those who agreed to participate were then presented with the final protocol for testing which includes three forms and demographic sheet. They were assured that their information will be kept confidential. All the instructions were given in Urdu. All the participants were asked to rate in front of each statement the extent to which they think that it relates to them. After completion, each participant was enquired about any questions or feedback. After collecting data from 110 participants (with an equal proportion of 55 husbands and 55 wives), the next step was to generate results.

Result

The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21version). Pearson Product Moment Correlation was run to find out the relation between independent variable (Communication Pattern and Intramarital Problems) and dependent variable (Marital Satisfaction). Hayes' PROCESS macro-Mediation analysis was administered to examine the mediating effect of mediator (Intramarital Problem) in the relationship between independent variable (Affectionate Communication) and dependent variable (Marital Satisfaction).

Correlational Analysis

Table 1

Inter-correlations among Communication Pattern, Intramarital Problems and Marital Satisfaction in Couples during transition to parenthood (N = 110)

Variables	Affectionate Communication	Intramarital Problems	Marital Satisfaction	M	SD
Affectionate Communication	-	-.22*	.71***	33.96	6.08
Intramarital Problems	-	-	-.42***	34.04	13.60
Marital Satisfaction	-	-	-	100.2	16.06

Note. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation

*p< .05, ***p< .001

Findings of Pearson Product Moment Correlation showed that Affectionate Communication had significant negative relationship with Intramarital Problems and highly significant positive

relationship with Marital Satisfaction. Moreover, Intramarital Problems had highly significant negative relationship with Marital Satisfaction.

Mediation Analysis

Figure 2

Mediation Model of Intramarital Problems (M) on the Relationship Between Affectionate Communication (X) And Marital Satisfaction (Y)

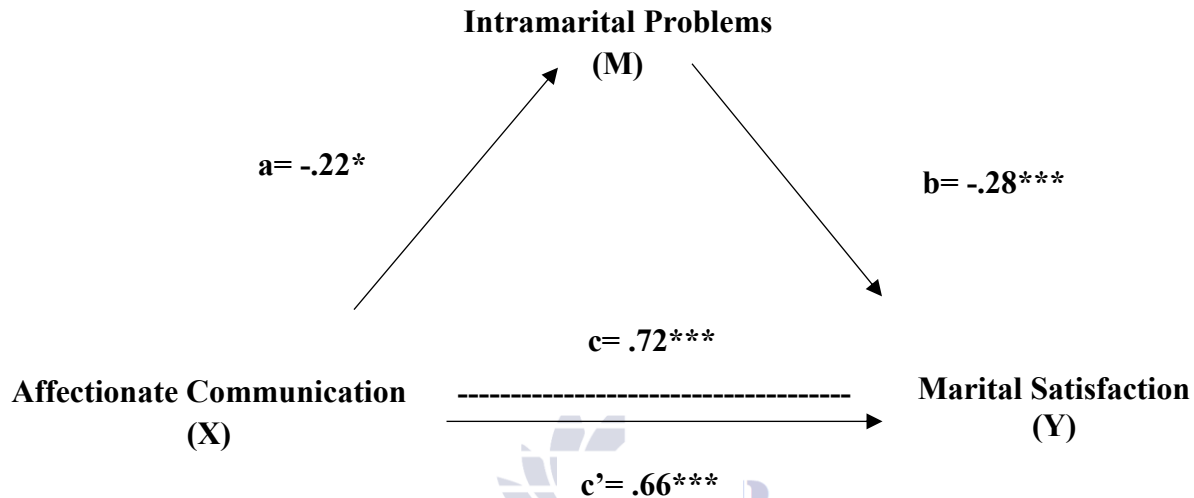


Table 2
 Regression Coefficients, Standard Error, and Model Summary Information for Affectionate Communication, Intramarital Problems and Marital Satisfaction (N = 110)

Antecedent	Consequent			M (IP)	Y (MS)			
		β	SE		p	β	SE	p
AC (X)	a	-.22	.21	.02*	c'	.66	.17	.001***
IP (M)					b	-.28	.08	.001***
Constant	i	51.08	7.29	.001***	i	52.51	6.87	.001***
		R ² = .05, F (1,107) = 5.58, p = .02*				R ² = .59, F (2,106) = 76.19, p = .001***		

Note. β = Standardized Coefficient, SE= Standardized error, R²= Coefficient of Determination, AC= Affectionate Communication, IP= Intra marital Problems, MS= Marital Satisfaction.

*p < .05, **p < .01

A mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro. Path a reveal that Affectionate

Communication significantly predicted Intramarital Problems ($\beta = -.22$, SE = .21, p <

.05). Path *b* depicts Intramarital Problems significantly predicted Marital Satisfaction ($\beta = -.28$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$). Path *c'* illustrate Affectionate Communication also had a strong and statistically significant direct effect on Marital Satisfaction when controlling for Intramarital Problems ($\beta = .66$, $SE = .17$, $p < .001$). Since the total effect (*c* path) significantly increased and the direct effect (*c'*) was significant but smaller, the findings supported that Intramarital Problems partially mediates the relationship between Affectionate Communication and Marital Satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. As the direct and indirect effect has positive values, indicating complimentary type of mediation.

Discussion

The birth of a first child is a difficult transition to married couples. This transition may be positively and negatively experienced, some couples claim to feel happy and fulfilled, whereas others report experiencing exhaustion, less time to devote to their personal lives, and heightened marital conflicts. Couples who move into the stage of parenthood tend to lose relationship satisfaction because of the heavy demands of infant care (Seyed et al., 2021). It has been shown that several stressors come with this shift, which negatively influences the patterns of communication between couples (Ruffieux et al., 2014). Parenthood is one of the areas in which research is so sensitive because most couples experience a lot of transformation and vulnerability especially during these early years (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). More specifically, sleep deprivation and a lack of time to connect with each other in the first year of parenthood are typical of that year (Reynolds et al., 2014), which may result in a decline in relationship quality. Thus, the main aim of the current study was to analyze how transition to parenthood could influence marital satisfaction of married couples.

The current research tested the hypothesis of the relation between affectionate communication styles, intramarital issues, and marital satisfaction of the married couples in their process of transitioning to parenthood. The first hypothesis was that affectionate patterns of communication

would be negatively corroborated with intramarital problems and marital dissatisfaction. Partially backed this hypothesis was the obtained findings that showed the significant negative relationship between patterns of affectionate communication and intramarital problems. This means that couples who communicate in an affectionate and positive way have fewer intramarital disturbances at this transitional period. In this way, the hypothesis was accepted, which presupposes that the application of affectionate communication is a protective variant against the development of marital conflicts. These results are aligned with earlier studies, which have shown that positive communication pattern is strongly negatively related to marital issues (Esere et al., 2011). On the contrary, such undesirable communication behaviors as criticism, withdrawal, and hostility were found to lead to poor marital relationships (Dainton, 2015). Culturally, especially in the collectivistic societies where extended families are the norm, the couples tend to have a problem in expressing themselves freely because they do not have as much privacy and their families interfere more. Under these conditions, husbands and wives might not find it easy to express their things and feelings and this might lead to conflicts with no solutions and emotional detachment. In the long term, this communication barrier can undermine the marriage and increase the tension, which will cause the irreversible damage to the relationship. On the other hand, when couples communicate well, they will be in a position to deal with their issues in a positive manner hence enhancing their full emotional attachment and marriage stability (Putri & Kusumaningrum, 2024).

Moreover, it was also assumed that intramarital problems would be negatively related to marital satisfaction. This hypothesis was supported by the results which showed that there was a strong negative correlation between these variables. This implies that the more intramarital issues, the less marital satisfaction in couples that shifted to parenthood. The results are empirically validated by the existing literature that consistently records that, those couples experiencing more marital issues are also the ones to report lower levels of marital satisfaction whereas couples with less

satisfaction are the ones to report a higher number of marital conflict (Lavner et al., 2017). When a couple becomes a parent, it undergoes significant transformations in its marriage relationships which are especially true in collectivistic cultures. Women tend to take more of the traditional housework such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and taking care of children. Their workload is augmented, as well as because of the need to feed an infant, couples are likely to have very little time to spend with their partners and their leisure activities are bound to change. Also, parenting disparities, family involvement, and the involvement of family or origin especially in-laws and decisions involving children can be the cause of conflict in a marriage. It is all of these factors that lead to the emergence of greater intramarital problems and eventual decrease in marital satisfaction.

Finally, the hypothesis of the present study included a strong positive correlation between the affectionate communication patterns and marital satisfaction. These results confirmed this hypothesis as it was found that an increased level of affectionate communication correlates with increased marital satisfaction among couples when they undergo transition to parenthood. This finding complies with the current literature, which highlighted the importance of such positive communication on improving the quality of marriage (Tan et al., 2017). It can be assumed that dependent and loving communication brings emotional proximity, harmonious understanding and conflict elimination, which lead to increased marital satisfaction. A prior study has also speculated that the poor communication style correlates with lower level of relationship satisfaction, and positive communication is associated with relationship wellbeing (Khezri et al., 2020).

To sum up, the conclusions of the current work indicate that the affectionate communication is essential to the minimization of the intramarital issues and the improvement of the marital satisfaction in the context of transition to parenthood. Communication skills improvement, resolution of marital conflicts and minimization of negative emotional exchanges are some of the measures that would help couples go through this

critical stage in life better. Thus, the interventions that should be focused on reinforcing communication patterns can be especially useful in facilitating marital adaptation and satisfaction in new parents.

Another hypothesis that was made in the present study was that intramarital problems would be a mediator between marital satisfaction and the pattern of communication in the married couple during parenthood transition. This hypothesis was verified, as the findings had shown that intramarital problems driven by a complementary partial mediation effect to determine the relationship between affectionate communication and marital satisfaction.

In line with the hypothesis, it was found that affectionate communication greatly forecasted intramarital problems so that more affectionate communication correlated with less intramarital problems. This finding is in line with the current body of literature which suggests that constructive communication patterns minimize misunderstandings, emotional withdrawal, and escalation of conflict between partners. Studies have found that warm and positive communication leads to emotional safety and understanding that reduces the possibility of unresolved marriage issues (Lavner & Bradbury, 2020). Likewise, Overall and McNulty (2021) found that warm and responsive communication cushions couples against relationship stress factors especially in the stressful times of transition in life like parenthood. Couples in this age are under more responsibilities, sleep deprived, and role transitions, so effective communication becomes essential in dealing with stress and avoiding intramarital problems (Bogdan et al., 2022).

The findings, in turn, showed that intramarital problems were a significant predictor of marital satisfaction meaning that more intramarital problems were related to less marital satisfaction. This relationship is supported by recent empirical data proving that marital issues (dissatisfaction with childcare, roles within the household, interference caused by extended family) are powerful predictors of lower marital satisfaction, especially during the initial parenthood stages (Hoffmann et al., 2023; Leonhardt et al., 2020). Moreover, the results of research indicate that

long-term intramarital stress disrupts emotional intimacy and relationship stability that cause dissatisfaction and emotional detachment among spouses (Huss & Pollmann-Schult, 2020). This set of issues can be even compounded by the influence of traditional gender roles and involvement of extended family in collectivistic cultural settings, further aggravating the state of marital strain and lowering marital satisfaction.

Notably, the results showed that affectionate communication had a direct large impact on marital satisfaction even with modifying intramarital problems, these results support a complementary partial mediation model, which suggests that affectionate communication positively affects marital satisfaction in a direct and indirect manner by decreasing intramarital problems. This trend is in line with the recent relationship studies, which emphasize that communication does not only reduce conflict but directly enhances emotional intimacy and satisfaction in relationship (Vijayan, 2024). Equally important is the fact that another study by Bodenmann et al. (2019) not only underscored the role of supportive communication in enhancing relationship satisfaction, but also discovered that the former helps lessen stress spillover and at the same time, encourages emotional proximity.

In the period of parenting, when the level of vulnerability is increased, the role of affectionate communication emerges as a crucial factor in retaining marital satisfaction by reducing issues in relationships and strengthening emotional commitment. Therefore, communication skills interventions can be especially effective at helping to minimize intramarital issues and increasing marital satisfaction in new parents.

A significant limitation of the study was the challenge in obtaining informed consent from participants to share their experiences of transitioning to parenthood. Many expressed concerns about the confidentiality of their personal information. Furthermore, in several cases, husbands were hesitant to allow their wives to participate, which restricted access to potential respondents and may have reduced the diversity of perspectives represented.

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion of the present study, it can be concluded that marital satisfaction among married couples during the transition to parenthood is often compromised. During this critical phase, many couples experience intramarital problems, limited or hostile communication, and reduced marital satisfaction. The study findings indicate that both intramarital problems and communication patterns significantly predict marital satisfaction. Consistent with previous research, the results suggest that effectively managing intramarital problems can enhance communication between partners, which in turn improves marital satisfaction. These findings also imply that the negative effects of intramarital problems and poor or hostile communication on marital satisfaction are not irreversible; with targeted interventions focused on communication and conflict management, couples may be able to restore and strengthen their marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood.

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