



Original article

## Evaluation of Family Relations in Custody Cases: Adapting The Structured Assessment Form for Children to Turkish Culture

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### Abstract

The main goal of the study was to adapt the Structured Child Assessment Tool for Family Relationships (SCARF) developed by Strachan et al. (2010) to Turkish culture and to develop an assessment tool for the evaluators working in custody cases to make a standardized assessment in child interviews. The study involved 130 children between the ages of 4 and 14 who were included in custody cases. For the reliability of the assessment tool, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were computed for dimensions and sub-dimensions by age and examined with the test-retest method. For construct validity, Spearman Correlation Analysis was conducted for the correlation between the scores given by the child and the evaluator to the parents. Independent samples t-test was applied to specify whether there was a statistically significant difference between the scores given by children to their parents. In the research, a significant positive relationship was established in the scores given to the mother in both assessment tools for construct validity. In the scores given to the father, a significant relationship was found in all dimensions except Negative Parenting and Co-Parenting ( $p < 0.01$ ). The comparison of the scores given by the child to the parents did not reveal any significant difference between the scores of the mother and father in all dimensions and sub-dimensions ( $p > 0.05$ ). As a consequence, it was established that the SCARF is a valid, reliable, and appropriate assessment tool for Turkish culture that can be used by the evaluator in child with custody cases.

**Keywords:** Divorce, Custody, Child custody, Evaluator, Family relationships.

**Received:** 10 September 2023 \* **Accepted:** 11 October 2023 \* **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.29329/ijiape.2023.605.2>

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Divorce is defined as the termination of the emotional, legal, and sexual relationship between married people. Divorce is not only the termination of the marriage union by incompatible spouses, but also a life-changing experience for the spouse, children, and the immediate environment (Çınar, 2015; Tatlıoğlu & Demirel, 2016). The consequences of divorce are a stressful situation that concerns children as well as the spouses who decide to divorce, their close environment and society (Bilici, 2014; Can & Aksu, 2016). For children, it is a stressful and traumatic process that brings along a series of changes such as separation from close family members, decreased parental support, conflicts between parents, financial difficulties, school, home, and lifestyle (Butler et al., 2002; Hovens et al., 2010; Spremo, 2020).

Following the divorce, the living order of the whole family and the daily routines that children are accustomed to change completely, and children are often forced to move away from one of their parents. Children's level of being affected by their parent's divorce varies according to their gender, age, developmental characteristics, parenting skills of their parents, the environment they live in, and the social support systems they have. However, all positive and negative experiences that children encounter during and after the divorce process shape their future lives. The decision to be made regarding custody also affects the child's welfare and healthy development.

In Turkey, it is seen that the rate of children in the process of divorce and custody evaluation continues to increase. When the divorce data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) (2022) is analyzed by years, it is determined that the number of divorces was 136,570 in 2020, 175,779 in 2021 and 180,954 in 2022. When the custody data of TURKSTAT is analyzed by years, it is seen that custody decisions were made for 125,948 children in 2020, 167,188 children in 2021, and 180,592 children in 2022. In other words, more and more children get involved in the custody evaluations every day.

If the spouses who apply to the court for divorce have joint children, the courts also decide on the custody of the child. The courts take into account the opinions of evaluators and decide the custodial parent and the child's relationship with her/his parents within a legal framework (Karadağ & Özdemir, 2021). Custody evaluation for evaluators includes the stages of being appointed by the court, examination, and data collection process, decision-making and evaluation, organizing the evaluator report, and reporting the decision. During the custody assessment process, the evaluator obtains information about the parenting capacities and skills of the parents, the psychological condition of the child and the parents, the cultural characteristics of the family, identifies risk factors for the child, and identifies strengths that can be utilized in creating a protective environment for the child (Karadağ & Özdemir, 2021; Karaman, 2018; Üner Altuntaş, 2010). In the evaluation and decision-making phase, the psychological state, weaknesses and strengths of the parents, the developmental state and psychological level of the child, and issues related to parent-child relationships are reviewed,

considering the best interest of the child (Stahl, 2010; Üner Altuntaş, 2010). In the final stage, the evaluator reports his/her opinion on custody to the court (Karadağ & Özdemir, 2021; Karaman, 2018).

The process related to custody can turn into a 'win-lose' situation for parents, interviews with parents can become open to manipulation and can negatively affect receiving accurate information on the subject (Aydos & Akyol, 2020). In this case, child interviews, which are another source of information about family relationships and parenting skills, come to the fore. In the national literature in Turkey, it is generally observed that child interviews are conducted during the custody evaluation process, it is difficult to communicate with young children, interviews are conducted with open-ended questions regardless of the child's age and developmental characteristics, and evaluators demand in-service training on interview techniques with children (Aydos & Köksal Akyol, 2020; Kılıç, 2013; Ünal Altuntaş, 2010). It is thought that there is a need for an assessment tool for child interviews that is fast and practical in practice and that will allow multiple family members and people who support the care of the child to be evaluated in different areas at the same time.

In Turkey, the lack of a scale or technique that can be used by evaluators in custody cases in interviews with children, the lack of a standardized method, and the use of open-ended questions and question-answer methods for each age group of children without considering the age and developmental levels of children are problems. For these reasons, it was aimed to adapt the Family Relationships Structured Child Assessment Tool developed by Strachan et al. (2010) to Turkish culture by conducting reliability and validity analyses in order to use it in child interviews for evaluators working in custody cases.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This reliability, and validity study, which aimed to examine the perceived family relationships and parenting skills of children between the ages of 4 and 14 who are in custody proceedings, includes the adaptation of the SCARF developed by Strachan et al. (2010) to Turkish culture. The study was quantitative in terms of its type and was conducted in a descriptive model. In the study, information was obtained both by applying the evaluation form to the children in the sample group and by interviewing their parents.

### **Setting and Participants**

Between January 2020 and June 2021, 130 children aged 4-14 years with normal development and 85 families whose custody cases were pending in Çanakkale province between January 2020 and June 2021 participated in the study. The 85 parents who voluntarily participated in our study were informed about the Structured Child Assessment Tool for Family Relationships and a written consent form was obtained. Children participating in the study were informed with the participant information

form. During the custody assessment process, the Structured Child Assessment Tool for Family Relationships was included as part of the usual assessment procedure.

### **Instruments**

#### ***The Structured Child Assessment Tool for Family Relationships (SCARF)***

One of the aims of the Structured Child Assessment of Relationships in Families developed by Strachan et al. (2010) was to improve a theory-based self-report assessment for children to be used as a reliable, valid, and developmentally suitable procedure. Another objective was to verify construct validity by examining the relationship between children's testimonies and evaluator assessment made with observational and supplementary data. There are 4 dimensions in the assessment tool (Positive Parenting, Emotional Security, Negative Parenting and Co-Parenting). There are 12 sub-dimensions including Safety, Closeness, Emotional Support, Practical Care, Supporting Development, Expectations and Rules, Setting Limits, Positive Reinforcement, Negative Behaviors towards the Child, Red Flags, Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent, Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent, and a total of 65 questions.

During the research, all items of the evaluation form were translated into Turkish by 3 different evaluators in the field of English language independently. The 3 different translations were examined by an evaluator and a field evaluator in both languages. The Turkish evaluation form was created by selecting the best statements. The original items of the evaluation form and the Turkish form were compared and evaluated for appropriateness by 3 different evaluators in the English language and it was concluded that the two forms were equivalent to each other. In the last stage, each item of the assessment tool, which was translated into Turkish, was evaluated in terms of its suitability for children's age-related developmental characteristics and cultural adaptation by two experts.

#### ***General Interaction Assessment Form for Parents***

During the research, all items of the evaluation form were translated into Turkish by 3 different evaluators in the field of English language independently. The 3 different translations were examined by an evaluator and a field evaluator in both languages. The Turkish evaluation form was created by selecting the best statements. The original items of the evaluation form and the Turkish form were compared and evaluated for appropriateness by 3 different evaluators in English language and it was concluded that the two forms were equivalent to each other. In the last stage, each item of the assessment tool, which was translation into Turkish, was evaluated in terms of its suitability for children's age-related developmental characteristics and cultural adaptation by two experts.

## **Procedure**

During the custody evaluation process, after the appointment of an evaluator by the Court, the relevant case file was examined, and the homes of both parents were examined. Individual interviews were conducted at different times with both parents and the people who supported the child's care. In addition, SCARF was administered to children between the ages of 4 and 14, whose custody cases were pending in the child interview room of Çanakkale Provincial Directorate of Family and Social Services, in the form of individual interviews. For test-retest analysis, the assessment tool was reapplied to children (n=30) selected by random sampling method 4 weeks after the first application. For construct validity, a different evaluator conducted individual interviews only with the parents. As a result of the individual interviews, the evaluator assessed fathers' and mothers' relationship with their children under the dimensions of positive parenting, emotional security, co-parenting, and negative parenting with the General Interaction Evaluation Table.

For reliability, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was computed for the dimensions and sub-dimensions in the assessment tool (.94 in the Emotional Security dimension, .89 in the Positive Parenting dimension, .83 in the Negative Parenting, and .57 in the Co-Parenting dimension). As a result of the calculations, the internal consistency coefficients for the dimension and sub-dimensions were reported to be high. As a result of the analysis, it was found that this assessment tool can be used to obtain consistent responses from children. To see whether the reliability was affected by age, the overall internal consistency coefficient was calculated for all age-related items. Cronbach Alpha coefficients were found to be .92 for 4-6 years old and .85 for children over 7 years of age. It was determined that this assessment tool was able to produce consistent responses for children aged 4-6 years. In order to determine the construct validity of the assessment tool, correlation analysis was made to examine the relationship between the SCARF scores and the scores of the General Interaction Assessment Form for Parents completed by the evaluator. As a result of the analysis, significant relationships were found in dimensions and sub-dimensions.

## **Data Analysis**

The data collected in the research were analyzed using the SPSS package program. The age and gender distribution of the children in the study group and the demographic characteristics of their parents were determined by frequency distribution. Descriptive analyses of the scores received by mothers and fathers in the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the assessment tool were tested with mean and standard deviation. Skewness and kurtosis coefficients were used to test the normal distribution of the data. In this context, it can be said that the dimensions and sub-dimensions in the SCARF are generally normally distributed.

Internal consistency and test-retest methods were used for the reliability of SCARF. In order to determine the reliability of the assessment tool, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient, which provides information in terms of internal consistency, was calculated separately for the 3 dimensions and 12 sub-dimensions (n=130). In order to determine whether the reliability was affected by age, the internal consistency coefficient was calculated for all items for children aged 4-6 years and children over 7 years. The test-retest method was used to determine whether the scores obtained in the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the assessment tool were consistent over time. For the test-retest analysis, the assessment tool was reapplied to the children (n=30) selected by random sampling method 4 weeks after the first application. Since the data were normally distributed, the results were analyzed with the test-retest method (Pearson correlation test).

In order to determine the construct validity of the assessment tool, in parallel with the original study, Spearman Correlation Analysis, a nonparametric test, was used to correlate the scores of the SCARF completed by 30 children and the scores of the General Interaction Assessment Form for Parents completed by the evaluator for the parents of the same children (30 mothers and 30 fathers). In addition, an independent sample t-test analysis was conducted to assess whether there was a statistically significant difference between the scores given by 130 children to their mothers and fathers.

## RESULTS

**Table 1.** Age and Gender Distribution of the Children Participating in the Study.

Category	GIRL		BOY		
	n	%	n	%	
Age		61	46.9	69	53.1
	4-6	19	31.1	23	33.3
	7-10	27	44.3	25	36.2
	11-14	15	24.6	21	30.4

According to Table 1, 46.9% of the children participating in the study were girls and 53.1% were boys. There were 19 girls and 23 boys in the 4-6 age group, 27 girls and 25 boys in the 7-10 age group, and 15 girls and 21 boys in the 11-14 age group.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Data on Mother and Father Scores Obtained from the Structured Child Assessment Tool for Family Relationships.

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Parents	n	Min.	Max.	$\bar{x}$	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Emotional Security	Security	Mother	130	0	5	3.18	1.98	-0.541	-1.341
		Father	130	0	5	2.43	1.84	-0.061	-1.399
	Closeness	Mother	130	0	5	3.18	1.63	-0.574	-0.835
		Father	130	0	5	2.23	1.68	0.142	-1.185
	Emotional Support	Mother	130	0	5	2.31	1.86	0.108	-1.403
		Father	130	0	5	1.68	1.61	0.550	-0.890
	Total Emotional Security	Mother	130	0	5	8.67	5.00	-0.418	-1.204
		Father	130	0	5	6.34	4.58	-0.019	0.422
Positive Parenting	Practical Care	Mother	130	0	5	2.72	1.83	-0.338	-1.342
		Father	130	0	5	2.57	1.65	-0.357	-1.159
	Supporting Development	Mother	130	0	5	2.45	1.74	-0.033	-1.313
		Father	130	0	5	2.17	1.50	0.025	-1.005
	Expectations and Rules	Mother	130	0	5	3.16	1.77	-0.509	-1.144
		Father	130	0	5	1.92	1.42	0.269	-0.610
	Setting Limits	Mother	130	0	3	1.77	1.15	-0.371	-1.314
		Father	130	0	3	1.62	1.08	-0.120	-1.277
	Positive Reinforcement	Mother	130	0	3	1.67	1.15	-0.221	-1.391
		Father	130	0	3	1.64	1.27	-0.178	-1.662
Total Positive Parenting	Mother	130	0	21	11.76	6.84	-0.400	-1.278	
	Father	130	0	21	9.93	5.71	-0.414	-1.108	
Negative Parenting	Negative Behaviors towards the Child	Mother	130	0	6	0.76	1.32	1.940	3.221
		Father	130	0	6	1.05	1.44	1.646	2.172
	Red Flags	Mother	130	0	7	0.84	1.26	2.047	5.096
		Father	130	0	7	1.34	1.65	1.194	0.443
	Total Negative Parenting	Mother	130	0	13	1.60	2.25	2.170	5.779
		Father	130	0	13	2.39	2.91	1.542	1.495
Co-Parenting	Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent	Mother	130	0	3	0.59	0.83	1.217	0.508
		Father	130	0	3	0.66	0.88	1.131	0.257
	Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent	Mother	130	0	3	1.02	1.10	0.623	-1.015
		Father	130	0	3	0.87	1.04	0.805	-0.715

The mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis analyses of the scores of mothers and fathers in the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the SCARF are given in Table 2. Skewness and kurtosis coefficients were used to evaluate the normal distribution of the data. According to Kalaycı (2006), when the skewness and kurtosis coefficients are between -3 and +3, the data are considered to be

normally distributed. In this context, the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the SCARF scale generally show a normal distribution.

The mean score of mothers in the Emotional Security sub-dimension was determined as  $(3.18 \pm 1.98)$ , the mean score of fathers was  $(3.43 \pm 1.84)$ , the mean score of mothers in the Closeness sub-dimension was  $(3.18 \pm 1.63)$ , and the mean score of fathers was  $(2.23 \pm 1.68)$ . In the Emotional Support sub-dimension, the average score of mothers was determined as  $(2.31 \pm 1.86)$  and the average score of fathers was determined as  $(1.68 \pm 1.61)$ . In the Emotional Security Dimension, the mean score of mothers was  $(8.67 \pm 5.00)$  and the mean score of fathers was  $(6.34 \pm 4.58)$ . The mean score of mothers in the Practical Care sub-dimension was found to be  $(2.72 \pm 1.83)$ , the mean score of fathers was  $(2.57 \pm 1.65)$ , the mean score of mothers in the Supporting Development sub-dimension was  $(2.45 \pm 1.74)$ , the mean score of fathers was  $(2.17 \pm 1.50)$ , the mean score of fathers was mothers' average score was found to be  $(3.16 \pm 1.77)$  and fathers' average score was  $(1.92 \pm 1.42)$  in the Expectations and Rules sub-dimension. The average score of mothers in the Setting Boundaries sub-dimension was determined as  $(1.77 \pm 1.15)$ , the average score of fathers was determined as  $(1.62 \pm 1.80)$ , the average score of mothers in the Positive Reinforcement sub-dimension was  $(1.67 \pm 1.15)$ , and the average score of fathers was determined as  $(1.64 \pm 1.27)$ . In the Positive Parenting Dimension, the average score of mothers was  $(11.76 \pm 6.84)$  and the average score of fathers was  $(9.93 \pm 5.71)$ . The average score of mothers in the Negative Behaviors Toward the Child sub-dimension was determined as  $(0.76 \pm 1.32)$ , the average score of fathers was determined as  $(1.05 \pm 1.44)$ , the average score of mothers in the Red Flags sub-dimension was determined as  $(0.84 \pm 1.26)$ , and the average score of fathers was determined as  $(1.34 \pm 1.65)$ . In the Negative Parenting dimension, mothers' average score was found to be  $(1.60 \pm 2.25)$  and fathers' average score was  $(2.39 \pm 2.91)$ . The average score of mothers in the Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension was  $(0.59 \pm 0.83)$ , the mean score of the fathers was  $(0.66 \pm 0.88)$ , the mean score of the mothers in the Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension was  $(1.02 \pm 1.10)$ , and the mean score of the fathers was  $(0.87 \pm 1.04)$ .



**Table 3.** Internal Consistency Coefficients for Children's Scores and Ages.

Dimension - Sub-Dimension	Number of Items/N	$\alpha$ <sup>a,b</sup>
Emotional Security		
Security	5	.73
Closeness	5	.73
Emotional Support	5	.73
Total Emo. Sec.	15	.72
Positive Parenting		
Practical Care	5	.72
Supporting Development	5	.72
Expectations and Rules	5	.72
Setting Limits	3	.74
Positive Reinforcement	3	.74
Total Positive Parenting	21	.70
Negative Parenting		
Negative Behaviors towards the Child	7	.76
Red Flags	9	.77
Total Negative Parenting	16	.79
Co-Parenting		
Supporting the relationship with the father	3	.74
Supporting the relationship with the mother	3	.76
Weakening the relationship with the father	3	.76
Weakening the relationship with the mother	3	.75
Age		
4-6 age	42	.76
7 and over age	88	.75

For the reliability analysis, internal consistency coefficients were calculated in terms of dimensions, sub-dimensions, and age group. It was seen that the coefficients calculated according to the criteria specified by Özdamar (2015) were evaluated as follows; 0.60-0.69 is sufficient reliability, 0.70-0.89 is high reliability, and 0.90-1.00 is very high reliability. In the research, the Cronbach alpha coefficient calculated for the dimensions and sub-dimensions was found to be within the range of 0.70-0.79, while the Cronbach alpha coefficient calculated for the ages of children was 0.76 for 4-6 years and 0.75 for 7 years and over. When these values were considered according to the criteria stated by Özdamar (2015), it was concluded that the reliability level was high. The findings regarding the calculated internal consistency coefficients (n=260, excluding co-parenting n=130) are given in Table 3.

According to Table 3, in the internal consistency analysis conducted to test the reliability of the questions in all dimensions and sub-dimensions, the Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be .75. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients of the sub-dimensions of the Emotional Security Dimension sub-dimensions were .73 for the Security, .73 for the Closeness, .73 for the Emotional Support and .72 for the total Emotional Security dimension. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients of the sub-dimensions of the Positive Parenting Dimension were .72 in the Practical Care, .72 in the Supporting Development, .72 in the Expectations and Rules, .74 in the Setting Boundaries, .74 in the Positive Reinforcement and .70 in the total Positive Parenting Dimension. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients of the sub-dimensions of the Negative Parenting

dimension were .76 in the Negative Behavior Towards the Child, .77 in the Red Flags and .79 in the total Negative Parenting dimension.

The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients for the reliability of the sub-dimensions of the Co-parenting Dimension were .74 for Supporting Relationship with Father, .76 for Supporting Relationship with Mother, .76 for Weakening Relationship with Father, and .75 for Weakening Relationship with Mother. Since only one parent's score totals were obtained for these dimensions (n=130), the internal consistency coefficient for the Total Co-Parenting Skills was not calculated. As a consequence of the analysis based on the age groups, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient for the children aged 4-6 years (n=42) was .76, while it was .75 for the children aged 7 years and above (n=88).

**Table 4.** Reliability Coefficients of Dimensions and Subscales Calculated by Test-Retest Method.

Dimension	Sub-dimension	(Mother) r	(Father) r
Emotional Security	Security	.993**	.988**
	Closeness	.987**	.939**
	Emotional Support	.951**	.980**
	Total Emotional Security	.994**	.990**
Positive Parenting	Practical Care	.965**	.948**
	Supporting Development	.981**	.984**
	Expectations and Rules	.979**	.995**
	Setting Limits	.987**	.967**
	Positive Reinforcement	.964**	.979**
	Total Positive Parenting	.997**	.994**
Negative Parenting	Negative Behaviors towards the Child	.987**	.967**
	Red Flags	.982**	.875**
	Total Negative Parenting	.995**	.956**
Co-Parenting	Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent	.935**	.886**
	Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent	.939**	.923**

(\*\*p<0,01)

For the test-retest analysis, the assessment tool was reapplied to the children (n=30) selected by random sampling method 4 weeks after the first application. Since the data were normally presented, the results were analyzed with test-retest method (Pearson correlation test). For the findings obtained, the evaluation criteria put forward by Büyüköztürk (2016) were taken into consideration. Accordingly, the correlation coefficients are interpreted as “.00-.30 is a low relationship, .30-.70 is a moderate relationship, .70-1.00 is a high relationship”. In other words, if there is a high correlation between the scores obtained from two applications, it can be stated that the scores obtained are reliable. In this

context, it can be stated that the values obtained are significant at 0.01 level and vary between .875 and .997. The test-retest reliability coefficients of the assessment tool between the two applications are given in Table 4.

In the test-retest reliability study of the Emotional Security dimension, .994 (mother) and .990 (father) correlation coefficients were found for the whole dimension. In the sub-dimensions, .993 (mother) and .988 (father) were found for the Security sub-dimension, .987 (mother) and .939 (father) for the Intimacy sub-dimension, and .951 (mother) and .980 (father) for the Emotional Support sub-dimension. These results indicate that the Emotional Security dimension is sufficiently reliable.

In the test-retest reliability study of the Positive Parenting dimension, the correlation coefficient for the whole dimension was .993 (mother) and .994 (father). In the subscales, the correlation coefficients were .965 (mother) and .948 (father) for the Practical Care subscale, .981 (mother) and .984 (father) for the Supporting Development subscale, .979 (mother) and .995 (father) for the Expectations and Rules subscale, .987 (mother) and .967 (father) for the Setting Boundaries subscale, and .964 (mother) and .979 (father) for the Positive Reinforcement subscale. These results indicate that the Positive Parenting dimension is sufficiently reliable.

In the test-retest reliability study of the Negative Parenting dimension, .991 (mother) and .956 (father) correlation coefficients were found for the whole dimension. In the sub-dimensions, .987 (mother) and .967 (father) were found for the Negative Behaviors Towards Children sub-dimension and .982 (mother) and .875 (father) for the Red Flags sub-dimension. These results indicate that the Negative Parenting dimension is sufficiently reliable.

As a result of the test-retest reliability analysis for the sub-dimensions of the Co-Parenting dimension, the correlation coefficients were .935 (mother) and .886 (father) for the Supporting Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension and .939 (mother) and .923 (father) for the Weakening Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension. These results indicate that the sub-dimensions are highly reliable.

**Table 5.** The r values found as a result of the correlation analysis between the scores of the evaluator, child, mother, and father in the dimension of emotional security.

		Child's Scores							
		Mother				Father			
		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<b>Evaluator's Mother Scores</b>	Security	.810**							
	Closeness		.842**						
	Emotional Support			.679**					
	Total Emotional Security				.803**				
<b>Evaluator's Father Scores</b>	Security					.832**			
	Closeness						.804**		
	Emotional Support							.758**	
	Total Emotional Security								.870**

\*  $p < .01$ .

Within the frame of the construct validity study, the relationship between the mother and father scores of 30 children who completed the SCARF and the scores of the General Interaction Assessment Form for Parents completed by a different evaluator for each parent of these children was examined. Since the data did not meet the normal distribution conditions, the nonparametric analysis method was used to calculate the relationship between the evaluator and the child's mother's scores and between the evaluator and the child's father's scores. Therefore, the Spearman Rank Difference Correlation Analysis was preferred as correlation analysis. In terms of the strength of the correlation, the absolute value of r is considered to be low if it is between .00-.29, moderate if it is between .30-.70, and high if it is between .70-1.00, and the sign of the correlation coefficient (+,-) shows the direction of the relationship (Büyüköztürk, 2016).

According to table 5, it was determined that there is a significant positive correlation at the level of  $p < .01$  between the scores of the child and the evaluator's mother in the Emotional Security dimension and the sub-dimensions of Security, Closeness, and Emotional Support. It was determined that there was a significant positive relationship at the  $p < .01$  level between the Emotional Security dimension and the scores of the child and the evaluator's father in the sub-dimensions of Security, Closeness, and Emotional Support.

**Table 6.** The r values found as a result of the correlation analysis between the evaluator and the child's, mother's, and father's scores in the Positive Parenting Dimension.

	Child's Scores											
	Mother						Father					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Evaluator's Mother Scores</b>	Pract.Care	.880**										
	Supporting Development		.848**									
	Expectations and Rules			.860**								
	Setting limits				.661**							
	Positive Reinforcement					.534**						
	Total Positive Parenting						.853**					
<b>Evaluator's Father Scores</b>	Pract. Care						.727**					
	Supporting Development							.827**				
	Expectations and Rules								.858**			
	Setting limits									.688**		
	Positive Reinforcement										.595**	
	Total Positive Parenting											.740**

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

According to Table 6, it was determined that there was a significant positive relationship between the Positive Parenting dimension and its sub-dimensions at the level of  $p < .01$  between the child's mother's scores and evaluator, and a significant positive relationship at the level of  $p < .01$  between the child's father's scores and the evaluator.

**Table 7.** The r values found as a result of the correlation analysis between the scores of the evaluator and the child, mother, and father in the dimension of negative parenting.

		Child's Scores	
		Mother	Father
		1	1
<b>Evaluator's Mother Scores</b>	Negative Parenting (Negative Behaviors towards the Child and Red Flags)	.644**	
<b>Evaluator's Father Scores</b>	Negative Parenting (Negative Behaviors towards the Child and Red Flags)		.235

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

According to Table 7, it was determined that there was a significant positive relationship between the child's mother's and the evaluator in the Negative Parenting dimension at  $p < .01$  level. There was no significant relationship between the scores of the child and the evaluator's scores given for fathers in the Negative Parenting dimension.

**Table 8.** The r values found as a result of the correlation analysis between the evaluator and the child's, mother's and father's scores in the co-parenting dimension.

		Child's Scores			
		Mother		Father	
		1	2	1	2
<b>Evaluator's Scores Given for Mothers</b>	Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent	.644**			
	Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent		.487**		
<b>Evaluator's Scores Given for Farthers</b>	Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent			.073	
	Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent				.338

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

According to Table 8, it is found that there is a significant positive relationship between the child's and evaluator's mother scores in the sub-dimensions of Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent and Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent at  $p < .01$  level, while no significant relationship was found between the child's and the evaluator's father scores.

**Table 9.** The t Test Results for Parents' Scores in All Dimensions and Subdimensions.

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Parents	n	$\bar{x}$	SD	DF	t	p
Emotional Security	Security	Mother	30	2.67	2.09	58	-.064	.949
		Father	30	2.70	1.95			
	Closeness	Mother	30	2.67	1.80	58	.228	.821
		Father	30	2.57	1.59			
	Emotional Support	Mother	30	2.67	1.80	58	.228	.821
		Father	30	2.57	1.59			
Total Emotional Security	Mother	30	8.00	5.55	58	.125	.901	
	Father	30	7.83	4.74				
Positive Parenting	Practical Care	Mother	30	2.30	1.86	58	-1.146	.257
		Father	30	2.83	1.74			
	Supporting Development	Mother	30	2.50	1.73	58	.386	.701
		Father	30	2.33	1.60			
	Expectations and Rules	Mother	30	2.93	1.89	58	1.69	.095
		Father	30	2.13	1.75			
	Setting Limits	Mother	30	1.77	1.10	58	.785	.436
		Father	30	1.53	1.19			
	Positive Reinforcement	Mother	30	1.63	1.12	58	-.767	.446
		Father	30	1.87	1.22			
Total Positive Parenting	Mother	30	11.13	7.00	58	.244	.808	
	Father	30	10.70	6.75				
Negative Parenting	Negative Behaviors toward The Child	Mother	30	1.40	1.85	58	1.554	.126
		Father	30	.77	1.25			
	Red Flags	Mother	30	.87	1.52	58	-.379	.706
		Father	30	1.00	1.17			
	Total Negative Parenting	Mother	30	2.27	2.93	58	.746	.459
		Father	30	1.77	2.20			
Co-parenting	Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent	Mother	30	.60	.885	58	-.311	.757
		Father	30	.67	.802			
	Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent	Mother	30	1.10	1.24	58	1.673	.100
		Father	30	.63	.890			

$p < 0.05$ .

To detect the statistical difference between maternal and paternal values in children's SCARF scores, t-test analysis was performed for independent samples. The findings are shown in Table 10 for the mother and father scores for the 4 dimensions and 12 sub-dimensions.

There was no significant difference between the scores of evaluator's scores given for mothers and fathers in all dimensions and sub-dimensions. In the Emotional Security dimension, evaluator's scores given for mothers ( $\bar{x} = 8.00$ ) were higher than evaluator's scores given for fathers ( $\bar{x} = 7.83$ ), in

the Positive Parenting dimension, mothers' scores ( $\bar{x} = 11.83$ ) were higher than fathers' scores ( $\bar{x} = 10.75$ ), in the Negative Parenting dimension, mothers' scores ( $\bar{x} = 2.27$ ) were higher than fathers' scores ( $\bar{x} = 1.77$ ), in the Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension, fathers' scores ( $\bar{x} = .67$ ) were higher than mothers' scores ( $\bar{x} = .60$ ), and in the Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension, mothers' scores ( $\bar{x} = 1.10$ ) were higher than fathers' scores ( $\bar{x} = .63$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

A review of the literature showed that there are a few assessment tools to determine children's emotions and their perceptions about their parents and other family members in the custody evaluation process abroad, and none in Turkey. In Turkey, evaluators working in custody cases often try to obtain data from children through the question-answer method by determining some strategies without taking into account criteria such as the child's age group, developmental level, and interests. This situation can often negatively affect the decision to be made about custody.

This study aimed to adapt the SCARF developed by Strachan et al. (2010) to Turkish culture by conducting reliability and validity analyses in order to use it in child interviews for evaluators working in custody cases. From the evaluator's point of view, it is thought that it will enable a standardized evaluation in the case process, be fast and practical, evaluate more than one family member at the same time, and obtain information about the people who provide care for the child in different areas. From the child's point of view, since it is in a game format, it will provide the opportunity to maintain the child's interest during the interview process and to express the child's thoughts, experiences, and feelings about family members. The assessment tool evaluates children's subjective feelings and experiences such as emotional safety as well as positive, negative, and co-parenting skills towards family members based on the situation children have experienced in the family.

Strachan et al. (2010) developed the SCARF and calculated the Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the dimensions and sub-dimensions in the assessment tool for reliability. As a result of the calculation, it was found that the internal consistency coefficients for all dimensions and sub-dimensions were between 0.57-0.94 and these results supported high internal consistency. The Cronbach Alpha coefficients of the SCARF tool adopted in our study were found to be between .70-.79 in the dimensions and sub-dimensions. These results provided that the assessment tool was highly reliable.



In the original research, in order to examine the effect of age on reliability, the overall internal consistency coefficient was calculated based on age. The internal consistency coefficient for children aged 4-6 years was found to be .92 and .85 for children aged 7 years and over, and these coefficients supported high internal consistency. The internal consistency coefficient of the SCARF tool in our study was .76 for children 4-6 years and .75 for children aged 7 years and older. These results indicate that the assessment tool is highly reliable for children older than 4 years. The test-retest method was applied to assess reliability. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that the test-retest reliability coefficients of SCARF in all dimensions and sub-dimensions were between .875 and .997. In this context, it can be stated that SCARF is a completely reliable assessment tool.

In the original study in which the assessment tool was developed, the relationship between the scores of the “Structured Child Assessment of Relationships in Families” and the scores of the 'General Interaction Assessment Form for Parents' completed by the evaluator was examined by correlation analysis to determine construct validity. As a result of the analysis, significant relationships were found in the Emotional Security dimension and its sub-dimensions, Positive Parenting dimension and its sub-dimensions of Practical Care, Supporting Development, Expectations and Rules, Positive Reinforcement, and Negative Parenting dimension and its sub-dimensions. No significant relationship was found in the sub-dimensions of Setting Boundaries, Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent, and Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent. The lack of a significant relationship in the Limit-Setting sub-dimension was explained as a result of low levels of Limit-Setting in divorced families or families in the process of divorce based on clinical experiences. In our study, a significant relationship was found in the Security dimension and its sub-dimensions (mothers' and fathers' scores), Positive Parenting dimension and its sub-dimensions (mothers' and fathers' scores), mothers' scores in the Negative Parenting dimension, and mothers' scores in the Co- Parenting dimension of the adapted SCARF tool. No significant relationship was found between the child's and the evaluator's scores given for fathers scores in the Negative Parenting and Co-Parenting dimensions.

In the original study, independent samples t-test analysis was applied to compare the mothers' and fathers' scores of the sample in the validation study and covariance analysis was performed to investigate the constructs showing significant differences. According to the results of the independent samples t-test analysis, it was found that there was a significant difference

between the scores of mothers and fathers only in the Practical Care and Expectations and Rules sub-dimensions. In order to investigate this situation, an analysis of covariance was applied for the duration of custody of the child. As a result, it was stated that some differences between mothers and fathers could be attributed to the gender effect and the duration of custody. In our study, no significant difference was found between the scores of mothers and fathers in all dimensions and sub-dimensions of the adapted assessment tool. It was found that mothers scored higher than fathers in the Emotional Security dimension, Positive Parenting dimension, Negative Parenting dimension, and Weakening the Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension, while fathers scored higher than mothers in the Supporting the Relationship with the Other Parent sub-dimension. Covariance analysis was not applied because the custody practices abroad differed from those in Turkey and there was no significant difference between the scores of mothers and fathers in all dimensions and sub-dimensions.

Jiménez-Etcheverría and Palacios (2020) used Strachan et al.'s (2010) SCARF to examine differences in the socio-emotional and cognitive functioning of 102 children aged 4-9 years who were adopted and fostered in Chile and to identify factors associated with psychological adjustment and cognitive abilities of adopted children. In the study, the SCARF was administered to 52 adopted children and 50 children in foster care. It was investigated whether the perceptions and feelings toward adoptive parents were different for adopted children and biological parents for children under protection. The study concluded that adopted children had better perceptions of parenting quality than foster children.

Jones (2019) applied SCARF to children aged 3-6 years of 127 families living in the United Kingdom and staying at home during the pandemic. The aim of the study was to examine parental well-being and family functioning in families where the father was unemployed and stayed at home, the mother was unemployed and stayed at home, and both parents worked during the pandemic. The study demonstrated the importance and value of including children as a source of information in family research and drew attention to the two-way nature of parent-child relationships.

Zorbaz and Owen (2013) developed the Family Relationships Scale for Children in order to determine the perceptions of 10-12-year-old children about family functioning based on the characteristics of healthy families and completed the validity and reliability study. The scale consisted of two dimensions (Supportive and Hindering Family Relationships), and a total of 20 question items. It was concluded that the Family Relationship Scale for Children is a reliable

and valid measurement tool that can be used to measure children's perceptions of their families. In the study, it is emphasized that there is no scale study on family functions that can be used for younger age groups in the literature in Turkey. However, there is no information in the study that it can be used in the custody evaluation process and it is thought that in a special case such as the custody process, it may be limited in reaching the information researched in terms of the evaluator.

In another study, Skoczeń et al. (2015) developed a computer-based family relationship test. It was administered to children aged 8-13 years and 404 children participated in the study and questions were asked in 6 dimensions (restrictiveness, justice, love, tenderness, sensitivity, gratitude, and trust). As a result of the internal consistency coefficient and test-retest reliability analyses, it was stated that it was an applicable test for children in this age group. In this study, which partially overlaps with our study, family relationships were evaluated through the questions asked to the child about the mother and father. However, our study is considered to be a preferable assessment tool because it can be applied to children aged 4 years and older, information can be collected about all extended family members who support the child's care in addition to the parents, negative behaviors such as neglect and abuse against the child can be evaluated in addition to the child's emotional safety dimension, and a wide range of information can be collected about supporting or weakening the relationship with the other parent. In addition, no information was found in the study that it could be applied to the population of children whose parents were in the process of divorce.

Stahl (2010) stated that intellectual tests such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children and reflective personality tests such as Rorschach are the most frequently applied psychological tests for children in the custody evaluation process. However, psychological tests applied to children are insufficient in obtaining information on the divorce and custody process, family relationships, and parenting skills (Quinnell and Bow, 2001). Although children's adjustment and psychological functioning are an important part of custody evaluation, personality tests are unlikely to provide information directly related to custody decisions.

For this reason, in the literature, studies that can be used by evaluators in custody evaluations in a special case process such as divorce during their interviews with the child are important. In this context, the Family Relation Test developed by Anthony and Bene (1957) regarding the custody process was also analyzed. The Family Relations Test can be applied to children between the ages of 8-13. In the study, the child's positive and negative feelings toward

family members, family members' positive and unemotional feelings toward the child, and feelings of attachment are evaluated. In the study, it was stated that some problems may be encountered in the use of standardized scoring, question-wording, and with different ethnic groups (Parkin, 2001).

The Relationship Perception Test, developed by Bricklin specifically for child custody, is designed to assess children's unconscious preferences and closeness to each parent. The test is scored according to human figure drawings and their placement. It consists of seven drawing tasks. It is defined as suitable for use with children aged 3 years and older. Children's drawings of themselves, their parents, and their families are scored in such a way that the parent who is primarily performing the task can be identified. However, it is stated that it does not have the potential to detect domestic violence, child neglect, or abuse. Therefore, it is reported in the literature that there are significant limitations in the use of this tool (Otto et al., 2000).

Ünal Altuntaş (2010) examined the evaluator reports in the cases in which custody decisions were made at the Family Court in Istanbul. When the evaluator reports were examined, it was found that there were deficiencies in home and school visits, the application of psychological tests during interviews, and obtaining information from third parties, child interviews were generally conducted by asking open-ended questions, and there was no structured system for child interviews. He stated that this issue would negatively affect the standardization of the custody evaluation process, the report prepared, and the opinion of the evaluator. Kılıç (2013) found in his study that the evaluators working in family courts wanted to receive practical information about interview techniques with children and that they especially wanted to learn how to interviews with play and projective tests in interview techniques.

In another study, Aydos and Köksal Akyol (2020) examined the opinions and practices of evaluators in the custody process decision. Accordingly, the evaluators determined that the developmental status of the child was an important factor in determining the custody status, that they did not use materials such as tests and inventories in their interviews with the child, and that they elaborated the interview with open-ended questions instead. At the same time, the evaluator stated that they could not conduct many interviews with children of this age group due to their difficulties in communicating with young children, that they tried to recognize the child by having the child draw pictures, and that the child could not be reached during the interviews in the current working system. Similarly, Kayma (2023) and Kesen & Bilgin (2023)

emphasized in their studies that the training of evaluators on custody evaluation should be increased, and practice standards should be developed on the subject.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the custody evaluation process, while prioritizing the best interests of the child, it is very important to be able to correctly analyze the qualities of family interaction, parenting skills, feelings, and perceptions of young children about the family, to be aware of other sources about emotional family forces that may distort the child's perception, to create an environment where the child can express himself/herself and to present the information obtained to the Court in an objective and clear manner. In this context, standardized methods are needed to provide better information to the Courts in custody disputes and to make a correct decision in the best interests of the child.

As mentioned before, the custody evaluation process consists of many components. One of these components is child interviews. Child interviews are not the sole factor for the evaluator to make a decision on custody. However, child interviews become an important part of the process in terms of providing consistent information for the courts, making decisions by considering the best interests of the child, and giving the child the opportunity to express his/her feelings and thoughts in the decision to be taken.

Child interviews in the custody evaluation process, which is also the starting point of our study, are a sensitive and important point for evaluators working in the field. Evaluator witnesses shape the lives of the family and the child and make serious decisions that will directly affect the future of children. This situation creates conscientious, professional, and ethical concerns for the evaluators to carry out the process in the best way possible and to make the healthiest decision for the family, especially for the child. In addition, considering the work intensity and working conditions of the evaluators, it is thought that there is a need for an assessment tool for child interviews that is fast and practical in practice and that will allow multiple family members and people who support the care of the child to be evaluated in different areas at the same time. In addition, other studies related to the original study show that the Family Relationships Structured Child Assessment Tool can also be used with children who have been adopted, have healthy parents, or are under protection.

In conclusion, in this research, it was revealed that the Family Relationships Structured Child Assessment Tool is suitable for Turkish culture and is a reliable and valid assessment tool that can be used by the evaluator for children whose custody cases are being heard. When the literature in our country was reviewed, it was seen that there are a few studies on the subject, but it was determined that there is no assessment tool to obtain information on issues such as parenting skills and family relationships perceived by children during the custody evaluation process. For this purpose, it may be an assessment tool that can be used both to fill this void in the literature, to contribute to the collection

of accurate information by evaluators who indicate the need for in-service training in child interviews, and to serve as a resource for researchers who want to conduct scientific studies on the subject. This study is limited to 85 families and 130 children residing in Çanakkale province and whose custody cases are pending. For this reason, it is thought that it will be more generalizable if it is conducted with a larger sample, with different groups of children, and with study groups from different provinces and regions.

### **Acknowledgement**

This study was supported by Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University The Scientific Research Coordination Unit [Project Number: 2019-SYL-3130].

Ethical approval was granted for the study by Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Social Sciences and Educational Sciences Ethics Committee with the decision dated 10.10.2019 and numbered 2019/57. An informed consent form was obtained from the participants and no identifying information was included. This research is based on a master's thesis. In addition, the assessment tool used in the study was presented in an abstract at the 1st International Congress on Infant, Child, and Adolescent Psychology.

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