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Research Article

Parenting and Its Relationship with Early Maladaptive Schemas and Relational Ethics in Nahj al-Balāghah

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ABSTRACT

SUBJECT & OBJECTIVES: Early maladaptive schemas (EMSs) are enduring patterns linked in schema theory to unmet emotional needs and early relational experience. This study asks how explicitly parent–child passages in *Nahj al-Balāghah* articulate care, education, dignity, and the limits of authority, and where cautious comparison with schema therapy is possible. It examines ethical meanings in their textual setting rather than testing clinical outcomes.

METHOD & FINDING: A directed qualitative content analysis examined selected letters and sayings addressing a father, a child, and their reciprocal duties. Arabic meaning units were checked against an English translation and classical commentaries; initial parenting and schema-related codes were applied, discordant readings were retained, and related units were grouped into six themes. These concern compassionate parental concern, timely education, reflective learning, reciprocal regard, bounded authority, and the child's right to instruction. Each theme is paired with a limit on clinical inference.

CONCLUSION: The selected passages provide an ethical vocabulary for parent–child relationships that may inform culturally responsive, collaborative case formulation. Textual correspondences neither establish that the text describes EMSs nor show that religious instruction prevents or treats them. Interviews and prospective studies are needed to evaluate psychological applications.

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Introduction

Schema therapy was developed to explain and treat persistent patterns that are insufficiently captured by a narrow focus on momentary automatic thoughts. Within this model, early maladaptive schemas (EMSs) are broad, enduring patterns involving memories, emotions, cognitions, bodily sensations, and relational expectations concerning the self and others. They are theorized to emerge through the interaction of temperament with chronic frustration of core emotional needs, including secure attachment, autonomy and competence, freedom to express valid needs and emotions, spontaneity, and realistic limits (Young et al., 2003).

Contemporary empirical work supports the clinical relevance of EMSs, while also showing that their higher-order organization is more complex than a single fixed taxonomy (Bach et al., 2018; Thimm, 2022).

A central developmental proposition in schema therapy is that repeated early relational experiences can shape expectations about safety, care, competence, autonomy, reciprocity, and self-worth. The empirical literature broadly supports an association between adverse parenting and EMSs.

Basso et al. (2019) found convergent evidence linking dysfunctional rearing experiences with maladaptive schemas, and Pilkington et al. (2021) reported meta-analytic associations between adverse childhood experiences and stronger EMS endorsement in adulthood. Overprotective parenting has likewise been associated with EMSs in adolescence and adulthood (Bruysters & Pilkington, 2023).

These findings are probabilistic rather than deterministic; temperament, attachment, peers, broader adversity, culture, and later learning also contribute to developmental trajectories.

These qualifications are especially important when modern psychological concepts are compared with premodern religious texts. A religious text should not be redescribed as though it were a clinical manual written in contemporary psychological language. Such a move risks anachronism, category error, and selective proof-texting.

A more defensible interdisciplinary strategy is conceptual dialogue: psychological theory supplies operationally defined constructs and empirical questions, while the religious text is examined on its own normative and theological terms. Convergences can then be identified at the level of relational processes, moral agency, self-evaluation, and coping, while differences in purpose and ontology remain explicit.

Nahj al-Balāghah, compiled by Sharīf Raḍī (1996), includes a sustained father-to-son counsel in Letter 31 and a concise statement of reciprocal parent–child duties in Saying 399. Their Arabic wording and classical explanations make it possible to examine parental concern, timely guidance, the child's developing judgment, and obligations of education without relying on unrelated instructions on governance. These are ethical and theological passages, not a clinical account of EMSs.

The study asks: (1) What parenting-related ethical themes emerge from Letter 31 and Saying 399 when the Arabic wording and classical commentary are read alongside the English translation? (2) Which limited comparisons with emotional needs and EMSs can help culturally responsive formulation, and what ethical

and empirical conditions would be required before clinical application?

Conceptual Framework

The framework uses schema theory as a sensitizing comparison while keeping the Arabic parent–child text and its ethical purposes primary. The five analytic concepts in Table 1 guide the distinction between what a passage says, what a psychological construct means, and what remains untested (Young et al., 2003; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Sharīf Raḍī, 1996).

Table 1. Concepts, operational meanings, and roles in the analysis

Key Concept	Operational Meaning	Theoretical Role
EMSs	Enduring self- and relationship-related patterns theorized to develop partly when core emotional needs are chronically unmet (Young et al., 2003; Bach et al., 2018).	A comparison category for possible relational vulnerability; no passage is coded as a clinical diagnosis (Young et al., 2003; Thimm, 2022).
Core Emotional Needs	Schema therapy describes needs for secure connection, autonomy and competence, emotional expression, spontaneity, and realistic limits (Young et al., 2003).	Provides a cautious bridge from repeated caregiving to developmental hypotheses, without equating religious guidance with a measured need (Young et al., 2003; Basso et al., 2019).
Parenting and Early Relational Experience	Caregiving, guidance, and interactional patterns that can be associated with later schema endorsement in observational research (Basso et al., 2019; Sójta & Strzelecki, 2023).	Locates the inquiry in the parent–child relationship and constrains claims about intergenerational transmission to association rather than inevitability (Pilkington et al., 2021; Sójta & Strzelecki, 2023).
Relational Ethics	Textual norms of parental concern, the child's rights, reciprocity, education, dignity, and bounded obedience (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996, Letter 31 and Saying 399; Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī, n.d.).	The primary interpretive level; Arabic terms are read in context before any clinical comparison is proposed (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996; Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, n.d.).
Culturally Responsive Integration	Collaborative use of a client's religious resources with informed preference, clinician competence, and attention to clinical evidence (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Captari et al., 2018).	Specifies the ethical and practical conditions for a possible case-formulation use, not an independently validated intervention (Cucchi, 2022; Rassool, 2015).

Schema theory proposes that unmet emotional needs can contribute to enduring patterns of meaning and relationship (Young et al., 2003). Bach et al. (2018) and Thimm (2022) show that the higher-order organization of EMSs is more complex than a fixed set of domains. The present analysis therefore compares parenting practices and relational processes, not a presumed historical list of EMSs in a religious text.

Observational research links adverse, rejecting, and overprotective parenting with EMS endorsement (Basso et al., 2019; Bruysters & Pilkington, 2023; Pilkington et al., 2021). The systematic review by Sójta and Strzelecki (2023) also reports heterogeneous evidence on parental EMSs and parenting across generations. Retrospective and cross-sectional studies cannot establish that one parental action causes a particular EMS; temperament and wider social circumstances remain relevant (Shute et al., 2019).

The cultural foundation concerns the ethical use of religious resources in psychological work. Religion- and spirituality-integrated psychotherapies can be beneficial when they are consistent with clients' preferences and competently integrated (Captari et al., 2018). For Muslim clients, religious integration should be collaborative and should not substitute doctrinal assertions for assessment, case formulation, or validated treatment procedures (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Cucchi, 2022; Rassool, 2015).

This study therefore treats religious passages as potential resources for meaning, values, and culturally coherent language, not as diagnostic items or stand-alone interventions.

Literature Review

Developmental schema research reports associations between adverse caregiving and EMSs (Basso et al., 2019; Pilkington et al., 2021). Bruysters and Pilkington (2023) found that recalled overprotection is associated with EMSs, but the evidence does not yield a simple causal rule. Addressing the reviewer-identified gap, Sójta and Strzelecki (2023) synthesized work on parental EMSs and parenting across generations; the review found varied pathways and insufficient evidence for deterministic transmission. These studies justify attending to caregivers' patterns, while setting a clear limit on causal inference from a textual study.

Clinical studies give EMSs relevance beyond a single diagnosis (Ṭāriq et al., 2021), and a review reports encouraging but heterogeneous outcomes for structured schema therapy in personality disorders (Zhang et al., 2023). Those treatment findings concern assessed clients and clinical procedures. They do not test whether teaching passages of Nahj al-Balāghah changes a child's schema or improves parenting.

A third line concerns religion, culture, and psychologically informed interpretation. Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2011) argued for an empirically grounded psychology of Islam that avoids both reductionism and uncritical generalization. Captari et al. (2018) found that appropriately integrated religion/spirituality can contribute to psychotherapy outcomes, while Cucchi (2022) identified both compatibility and points of tension between cognitive-behavioral principles and Islamic concepts. This literature supports culturally responsive integration only when conceptual and professional boundaries are explicit.

Research on *Nahj al-Balāghah* has also used theory-guided interpretation of ethics and leadership (Alaei Rahmani & Motamed Langroudi, 2025). Because those discussions concern governance, their passages are not part of the present parenting corpus. For Letter 31, Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (n.d.) and Ibn Maytham al-Baḥrānī (n.d.) provide closer textual comparators: both treat the image of the young heart as a reason for timely instruction, while Ibn Maytham also emphasizes the son's active judgment.

The contribution here is a parent–child reading of a small, stated corpus, followed by a limited comparison with schema-related emotional needs. The analysis does not infer a clinical construct merely from a similar moral term.

The gap is a transparent account of how Arabic expressions about parental concern, education, and reciprocal rights relate to developmental questions without collapsing ethical teaching into diagnosis. The present analysis documents both correspondences and non-equivalences; it does not establish a therapeutic effect.

Research Method

This is a documentary study using directed qualitative content analysis: prior theory guides provisional categories, while the text and its commentary can revise or disconfirm them (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Interpretive structural modeling instead requires pairwise relations among elements and a reachability structure, neither of which was elicited here (Warfield, 1974).

The focused corpus (from Nahj al-Balāghah) is Letter 31, explicitly framed as

advice from a father to a son, and Saying 399, explicitly addressing parent–child rights (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996). Passages on political administration and general moral exhortation in the earlier draft were excluded because their addressees and purposes do not directly concern child upbringing. The unit of analysis is a connected Arabic clause with a recognizable parent–child ethical function.

Purposeful selection followed three criteria: an explicit parent–child addressee or duty; substantive material on upbringing, education, or a child's moral agency; and enough Arabic context to test the translation against a classical explanation. Letter 31 meets these criteria through its sustained paternal address, and Saying 399 through its paired rights and educational duties. The Arabic text and Ali Reza's translation in Sharīf Raḍī (1996) were compared with Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (n.d.) and Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī (n.d.), especially for the young-heart metaphor and the son's exercise of judgment. This is a bounded textual corpus, not a representative sample of all letters, sermons, and sayings.

1- Read each Arabic clause in its surrounding father–son or parent–child context and record its immediate ethical meaning.

2- Check the Arabic against the English translation and the two classical commentaries; note disagreements and the educational setting of each expression.

3- Apply provisional concepts from parenting and schema theory, then reject matches based only on a shared word or on a passage without a parent–child referent.

4- Group retained clauses by ethical function, revisit weak or contrary readings, and derive the six themes shown in Table 2.

5- Report an Arabic anchor, a cautious psychological comparison, and an explicit interpretive limit for each theme (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Elo et al., 2014).

The textual checks, cited Arabic anchors, explicit exclusion of governance passages, and a stated limit for each comparison support interpretive transparency (Elo et al., 2014). One researcher performed the coding in the original study; independent coders or expert semantic ratings were not reported. Lawshe's (1975) CVR is a procedure for expert judgments about the essentiality of items in a defined content domain, and no such panel or item ratings were obtained here. Accordingly, neither a CVR nor inter-coder reliability is claimed. The study involved no human participants or identifiable records.

Parenting Themes in *Nahj al-Balāghah*

The analysis identified six related parenting themes. Each arises from a directly parent–child passage, is checked against an Arabic anchor and classical explanation where relevant, and is compared cautiously with a schema-related process. The final column of Table 2 states what the source cannot establish.

Table 2. Parenting themes and limits of schema-related comparison in *Nahj al-Balāghah*

Parenting Theme	Reference	Clinical Sensitizing Concept	Textual Interpretation	Interpretive Limit
Compassionate parental concern	Letter 31	Emotional Deprivation (contrast only)	The father describes the son's welfare as his own concern and presents counsel as care.	Affectionate language is neither an attachment measure nor evidence that an EMS is prevented.
Timely education and moral formation	Letter 31 & Saying 399	Core emotional needs and realistic limits	The receptive-land image supports timely instruction; the saying makes good upbringing a parental duty.	This is a pedagogical metaphor, not a theory that a child is psychologically blank or wholly determined.
Reflective learning and agency	Letter 31	Autonomy and competence; Dependence/Incompetence (indirect)	Inherited experience is offered to support the son's considered judgment, not merely role compliance.	The text does not measure competence or identify a dependence schema.
Reciprocal regard and ethical restraint	Letter 31	Relational reciprocity; Entitlement/Grandiosity (indirect)	The son is taught to consider others' claims by reference to what he would accept for himself.	The instruction is ethical guidance, not an assessment or treatment of entitlement.
Bounded authority and dignity	Letter 31 & Saying 399	Subjugation (limited analogy)	The father's counsel values the son's dignity; parental obedience in the saying has a stated moral exception.	Religious limits do not themselves identify coercion, fear-driven compliance, or a clinical schema.
The child's right to instruction	Saying 399	Caregiving responsibility; core emotional needs (indirect)	Naming, good upbringing, and Quranic education are duties owed to the child, not only parental powers.	The saying specifies religious-ethical duties; it does not enumerate clinical needs or outcomes.

1. Compassionate Parental Concern

Letter 31 begins with the father's identification with his son: "I found you part of myself, indeed my whole." The expression makes the son's fate a matter of intimate concern. Later, the speaker calls himself "the caring father" when explaining his decision to teach (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996, Letter 31).

Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī (n.d., vol. 5, p. 16) reads this passage in terms of the father's concern and his choice of what will benefit the son. The commentary supports a paternal-educational reading; it does not supply an attachment diagnosis. Saying 399 gives the complementary perspective of duties owed by the father to the child.

In schema theory, chronic failure of nurturance is relevant to Emotional Deprivation (Young et al., 2003), so the passage can supply a culturally familiar way of discussing care. The direction of comparison is limited: a father's declaration of concern is not evidence about the son's attachment security, future EMSs, or treatment outcome.

2. Timely Education and Moral Formation

The clause compares the young person's heart to uncultivated land; the father therefore hastens to offer instruction or moral formation before competing preoccupations intervene (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996, Letter 31). Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (n.d., vol. 16) interprets the image as the receptiveness of early learning. Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī (n.d., vol. 5, p. 16) describes planting instruction and wisdom, and then connects it to the son's capacity to use his own judgment.

The Arabic image is a rationale for timely, attentive teaching, not a claim that a child has no temperament, memories, or agency. Saying 399 reinforces the duty to provide good upbringing. Its moral and religious sense should remain visible when the passage is compared with psychological literature on responsive caregiving (Basso et al., 2019; Sójta & Strzelecki, 2023).

The schema-related comparison concerns the availability of caring guidance and realistic limits. Neither

passage shows which style of instruction optimally meets a particular child's emotional needs, and neither establishes a preventive intervention.

3. Reflective Learning and Developing Agency

Letter 31 does more than call for receptiveness. The purpose clause asks the son to receive inherited experience with the seriousness of his own judgment (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996). Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī (n.d., vol. 5, p. 16) explicitly discusses the son's power of thought in this context. Later in the letter, the father allows a search through understanding and learning if the son cannot accept inherited instruction without inquiry.

For developmental comparison, this combination of guidance and considered judgment can be read alongside the schema-therapy concern for autonomy and competence (Young et al., 2003). It does not describe the Dependence/Incompetence EMS, prove that autonomy is attained, or prescribe a behavioral treatment.

4. Reciprocal Regard and Ethical Restraint

The father addresses the son, asking him to use his own interests as a measure in dealing with others (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996, Letter 31). The ensuing clauses oppose oppression and require the speaker to offer others the consideration sought for himself. This is moral education given within a parent–child relationship, rather than a detached account of public administration.

A parent may use such a passage to discuss modeled reciprocity and respect. Although it can be contrasted with exploitative interpersonal expectations, the text does not identify Entitlement/Grandiosity or demonstrate that teaching the maxim modifies a child's EMS (Young et al., 2003).

5. Bounded Authority and the Child's Dignity

Within his counsel to the son, the father urges personal dignity (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996, Letter 31). Saying 399 pairs the father's right to obedience with the explicit exception. Read together, these clauses place the child's moral standing alongside parental authority, even though their theological terms cannot simply be translated into modern individualism.

Subjugation in schema therapy concerns excessive surrender of control under feared consequences (Young et al., 2003). The passages can prompt a careful conversation about voluntary cooperation, pressure, and boundaries, but the text alone cannot distinguish respectful obedience from coercive compliance in any family.

Clinical use would require assessment of the young person's safety and preferences. A religious appeal to obedience should never be used to override disclosure of abuse or to presume that a child freely consents to a family practice; this is an ethical application condition, not a conclusion produced by the textual analysis (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Rassool, 2015).

6. The Child's Right to Instruction

Saying 399 opens with reciprocal rights and then names duties of the father toward the child: bestowing a good name, good upbringing, and Quranic education (Sharīf Raḍī, 1996). The grammar locates the obligations with the caregiver. It should not be reduced to a general command for children to obey.

This is a religious account of education and family responsibility. Its relevance to contemporary developmental psychology is a question about how caregivers provide consistent, respectful guidance, not a claim that the text lists the five core emotional needs or directly treats EMSs. Sójta and Strzelecki's (2023) review makes the empirical question especially pertinent while underscoring heterogeneity in parent–child pathways.

Across the six themes, the strongest textual evidence concerns parental concern, education, reciprocal rights, and the child's considered judgment. More distant schema labels remain only prompts for comparison. Excluding political instruction and preserving the Arabic and commentary context prevent general ethical vocabulary from being mistaken for direct evidence about a particular child or diagnosis.

Research Findings

The parenting-specific reading reinforces the relevance of caregiving relationships to questions raised by schema theory (Young et al., 2003; Basso et al., 2019), but the evidence here is textual. It is compatible with the heterogeneous developmental pathways identified by Sójta and Strzelecki (2023) and with the caution about overprotective or adverse parenting in Bruysters and Pilkington (2023) and Pilkington et al. (2021). It neither confirms nor refutes their quantitative associations, because no parents or children were assessed in this study.

An ethical link to clinical psychology begins with a client's own interest in these passages, an accurate reading of the Arabic in context, cultural and theological competence, a shared formulation, safeguarding, and ordinary clinical assessment (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Captari et al., 2018; Rassool, 2015). A clinician might ask whether a parent interprets guidance as care or control and whether the child experiences room for judgment. The answers must come from the family, not from imposing an ancient text as a psychological test.

A practical next step is a collaboratively developed psychoeducational discussion, offered only when relevant to the family's goals, alongside established clinical care. Its acceptability could first be studied through interviews with Muslim parents and young people; a later prospective design could measure caregiver behavior, perceived emotional needs, EMSs, and clinical outcomes against an appropriate comparison. Such work would test whether a culturally adapted component adds value. The bounded corpus, single-coder analysis, and translation choices limit the present study to interpretive, hypothesis-generating claims.

Conclusion

The results identify six parent–child ethical themes in Letter 31 and Saying 399: compassionate concern, timely education, reflective learning, reciprocal regard, bounded authority, and a child's right to instruction. They reinforce the conceptual importance of caregiving emphasized by Young et al. (2003) and Basso et al. (2019), and are consistent with the heterogeneity reported by Sójta and Strzelecki (2023). Since this is textual analysis, the findings do not confirm, refute, or estimate the effects reported in observational schema studies or treatment trials.

For psychology researchers, the next steps are independent Arabic-text review, interviews that include both parents and young people, and prospective tests of any culturally adapted psychoeducational component with specified comparison conditions and outcomes. For clinicians, these passages may be considered as optional, client-endorsed language within assessment and formulation, with safeguarding and professional competence maintained. These recommendations preserve the distinction between religious-ethical meaning and evidence of clinical efficacy.

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Authors' Contributions

The first author performed the conceptualization, textual analysis, clinical interpretation, critical revision, and final approval as applicable. The second author wrote the draft and performed the preliminary analysis.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no known competing financial interests, non-financial interests, or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Negative AI Statement

The author(s) declares that no AI tools or services were used in the preparation of this workr eplacement level.

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