

## THEORY AND IMPROVEMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

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### CONTINUOUS SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR ORGANIZING PSYCHOLOGICAL SESSIONS WITH PARENTS BEFORE AND AFTER CHILDBIRTH

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**Abstract.** Providing parents with psychological support before and after birth plays an important role in ensuring their emotional and psychological well-being. The goal of this process is to reduce parents' stress and emotional tension, develop parenting skills, and create a healthy emotional bond with the baby. The program organizes individual and group meetings, provides parents with practical advice, relaxation and stress management techniques, as well as advice on developing communication skills with the baby.

Continuous psychological support increases parents' self-confidence, strengthens family dynamics, and contributes to the preservation of the psycho-emotional health of both parents and babies. At the same time, this approach allows for the early identification and resolution of emotional difficulties that parents may encounter. Thus, the initiative enhances the social and emotional well-being of families and supports the healthy development of children.

**Key words:** well-being, stress, emotion, psychological support, health.

**Introduction.** Problem statement. Pregnancy and the postpartum period involve not only physical but also significant psychological changes in a woman's life. One of the most common conditions is postpartum depression. According to Ayran San's 2019 report, one in every ten women worldwide experiences postpartum depression. A 2022 study published in *The Lancet Global Health* reports that the prevalence of postpartum depression ranges from 24% to 30% in low- and middle-income countries, while in high-income countries it is approximately 10% to 20% (4). Such psychological difficulties not only disrupt women's daily functioning but also negatively affect mother-child relationships. A weakening of the emotional bond between mother and child can lead to early separation, which may result in delays in social and behavioral development. This situation can also cause emotional stress for children, parents, and close relatives, increase tension within family relationships, disrupt mutual understanding, and lead to long-term emotional problems. At this stage, women face serious emotional strains due to both hormonal changes in their bodies and new social roles and lifestyle adjustments. As a result of these pressures, women may develop postpartum depression, anxiety and fear, chronic stress, and burnout. In some cases, postpartum trauma (PTSD) develops, which negatively affects a woman's daily life and her ability to fulfill the maternal role. In addition, difficulties arise in establishing a healthy emotional bond between mother and child, and the breastfeeding process is often accompanied by stress and anxiety. Insufficient social and family support further increases the woman's psychological burden and weakens her emotional stability. In Azerbaijan, the situation resembles this global picture. According to data from the State Statistical Committee for 2023, approximately 135,000 births are registered annually in the country (Hasanova, R., 2021). Although the vast majority of these births occur under medical supervision, psychological support services for the postpartum period are not systematically organized. While a limited number of private psychological support centers exist in major cities, such services are almost nonexistent in the

regions. Although there are currently no comprehensive official statistics on postpartum depression in Azerbaijan, specialists in the field observe that the problem is widespread across the country, similar to international indicators. Estimates suggest that less than one-third of women who give birth receive psychological assistance from professionals. This means that tens of thousands of women each year are left to cope with postpartum psychological problems on their own. Not seeking psychological help or delaying it can further worsen the problem. Mothers may begin to feel inadequate, incompetent, and worthless. If these difficulties are not identified early and supported through psychological intervention, mother–child relationships may deteriorate, family conflicts may escalate, and even divorces may occur. According to official statistics for 2024 in Azerbaijan, family disagreements and emotional incompatibility are among the main causes of divorce. Changes in gender roles within the family, the absence of shared parental responsibilities, and the failure to address psychological tensions in a timely manner are among the primary sources of these problems. Therefore, establishing and systematizing psychological support mechanisms during pregnancy and the postpartum period, strengthening women emotionally during this time, and psychologically preparing them for parental roles are of vital importance not only for mothers but also for family cohesion and the healthy development of the child. In recent years, both globally and in Azerbaijan, an increase in psychological distress within family relationships and a rise in divorce rates have been observed, with these trends affecting postpartum care. Research has demonstrated on a broad scale that growing psychological concerns within families, increasing divorce rates, and their impact on parents’—especially mothers’—emotional well-being during the postpartum period are significant. Increased tension in family relationships, insufficient psychological preparation, and the sense of “inadequacy” often encountered in the early stages of parenthood negatively affect the psychological well-being of both women and men. Parents’ thoughts such as “I can’t cope” or “I am not a good enough mother or father” stem not only from individual psychological states but also from family conflicts, weak social support, and low levels of emotional intelligence.

**Purpose of the study.** The main purpose of this study is to systematize the psychosocial support process from pregnancy through childbirth and the postpartum period, and to evaluate the effectiveness of psychological services provided to parents and newborns. The research aims to ensure that pregnant women are assessed by a psychologist regardless of individual risk factors, that decisions regarding the mode of delivery are made in a consultation format in coordination with a gynecologist, that parents’ emotional states before and after childbirth are examined, and that psychological difficulties are identified and prevented at an early stage. To this end, comprehensive interventions are implemented to strengthen emotional preparedness during the prenatal period and to identify and address postpartum depression, anxiety, and bonding problems. At the same time, involving family members and close support networks in the process, strengthening the parent–child bond, and organizing pediatric psychological follow-up are among the core objectives of the study.

**Methodology of the study.** The study’s methodology is based on a comprehensive, stage-based approach. The first stage covers the pregnancy period and includes psychological assessment, psycho-educational activities, and individual and joint sessions with parents. The assessment tools used at this stage include the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), the Parenting Expectations Questionnaire, and the Wijma Delivery Expectancy/Experience Questionnaire (W-DEQ). In addition, mothers and fathers are provided with brochures on breathing techniques for childbirth preparation and self-calming strategies for panic situations. The second stage focuses on the postpartum period. During this phase, the Mother-to-Infant Bonding Scale (MIBS), the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), and the Postpartum Anxiety Scale are administered to assess the mother’s emotional state. At the same time, parent–infant observation is conducted and bonding exercises—such as skin-to-skin contact, eye contact, and vocal interaction—are applied. This stage aims to identify problems such as postpartum depression, anxiety, burnout, postpartum trauma, and lack of social support.

The third stage involves pediatric psychological follow-up. At this stage, parent and child observation is carried out between the ages of 6 months and 2 years, the child's psychological development is monitored, and coordinated support sessions are held with the participation of both a psychologist and a pediatrician. This methodological approach aims to ensure both individual and family-based psychosocial support, to help parents establish a healthy emotional bond with their child, to reduce risk factors during the postpartum period, and to support the child's healthy psychological development.

The Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) is used to identify postpartum depressive symptoms in mothers at an early stage and to determine the severity of depression. The Mother-to-Infant Bonding Scale (MIBS) assesses the mother's emotional bonding with the infant and identifies bonding difficulties early on. Infant bonding exercises—skin-to-skin contact, eye contact, and vocal interaction—strengthen the emotional connection between parent and infant. The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) measures the level of depressive symptoms in both mothers and fathers.

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) assesses depressive symptoms in both mothers and fathers and helps distinguish them from mild fatigue. The Postpartum Anxiety Scale identifies mothers' concerns related to feeding, health, sleep, and safety, and supports the development of individualized intervention plans. Bonding exercises with the infant—through skin-to-skin contact, eye contact, and vocal interaction—enhance mutual emotional connection between parents and infants. Meetings and seminars are conducted on the topic of “Maternal self-care and stress management.”

According to data published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019, more than 13% of women and approximately 10% of men experience postnatal depression or anxiety disorders during the postpartum period. These conditions may be accompanied by emotional distancing within family relationships, reduced emotional intimacy, weakened mutual understanding, and, ultimately, an increased risk of divorce. It is precisely during this period that ensuring emotional support for both partners, providing psychological education, and conducting individual counseling sessions become critically important. In Azerbaijan, these trends are also confirmed by statistical data. According to the State Statistical Committee's data for 2023, although 54,200 marriages were registered in the country, 21,688 divorces were recorded. This indicates that approximately one out of every three marriages ends in divorce, posing a serious threat to the stability of the family institution.

Finally, in the long-term perspective, such projects can be considered an investment in the psychological health of society. Preventing psychological problems through early intervention is extremely important in terms of reducing their subsequent social and economic consequences. A healthy family means a healthy child and a healthy future. As specialists working at Baku Medical Plaza and Diamond Center, we confidently state that we will continue to stand by families and provide them with psychological support at every stage before and after childbirth. Below, the short-term and long-term outcomes of the project are systematically outlined.

**Objectives of the study.** The objectives of the study are to identify women's emotional states, risk factors, and parenting expectations during pregnancy and the postpartum period. It is also intended to assess postpartum depression, anxiety, and bonding difficulties, as well as to observe parent-child interactions. In addition, one of the main objectives is to provide psychoeducational support to families by ensuring coordinated collaboration among psychologists, gynecologists, and pediatricians.

**Short-term outcomes.**

1. Reduction in maternal stress and anxiety

As a result of psychological support sessions conducted within the framework of the program, a reduction in emotional tension related to pregnancy and childbirth was observed. This had a positive impact on mothers' psychological well-being, supported their preparedness for the childbirth process, and facilitated the early formation of the mother-child bond.

## 2. Increased family resilience

Through individual and group psychological sessions, mutual understanding and emotional support between parents were strengthened. Families were observed to cope more effectively with daily stressors, and an improvement in joint decision-making skills was noted.

## 3. Awareness-raising

Training sessions and educational activities implemented within the framework of the project contributed to increasing psychological awareness among parents.

4. According to data published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019, more than 13% of women and approximately 10% of men experience depression or anxiety disorders during the postpartum period. These conditions may be accompanied by emotional coldness in family relationships, increased emotional distance, weakened mutual understanding, and, consequently, a higher risk of divorce. During this period, providing emotional support, psychological education, and individual exercises for both partners is of great importance. These trends are also confirmed by statistical data from Azerbaijan. According to the State Statistical Committee's data for 2023, despite 54.2 thousand marriages being registered, 21,688 divorces were recorded. This shows that approximately one out of every three marriages ends in divorce, posing a serious threat to the stability of the family institution.

5. The global picture is also concerning. For example, in low- and middle-income countries, the average prevalence of postpartum depression is 24.7%.

6. In the modern era, the social and psychological well-being of families is recognized as one of the key conditions for the healthy development of society. In particular, the emotional and psychological well-being of new parents is crucial both for their personal well-being and for the healthy development of their infants. Before and after childbirth, parents may face various psychological challenges, including stress, anxiety, tension, fear, and lack of self-confidence. The timely resolution of these problems and the establishment of appropriate support mechanisms create the necessary conditions for parents to raise their children in a healthier and more secure environment.

Psychological science has demonstrated that continuous support before and after childbirth provides emotional stability for parents, enhances their ability to express themselves, and strengthens family relationships. This period is important not only for mothers but also for fathers. Research in psychological sciences has shown that sustained support during the prenatal and postnatal periods ensures parents' emotional stability, develops their self-expression skills, and strengthens family relationships. This period is significant not only for the mother's psychological well-being but also for the father's, as the formation of a healthy emotional bond with the infant is more effectively achieved through the joint involvement of both parents (Aliyeva, S., 2020).

Through the organized psychological sessions, parents are provided with practical guidance on stress management, appropriate expression of emotions, establishing an initial emotional bond with the infant, maintaining harmony within the family, and developing parenting skills. These sessions are conducted in both individual and group formats, enabling parents to exchange experiences with one another and learn through mutual interaction.

Ensuring the continuity of such programs is of great importance, as not only short-term but also long-term psychological support enhances parents' quality of life, strengthens trust among family members, and supports infants' psycho-emotional development. Ultimately, such initiatives serve not only individual families but also the social well-being of society as a whole.

Providing psychological support to parents before and after childbirth is considered one of the most important directions in modern psychology. The sessions organized during this period are of great significance both theoretically and practically. Parenthood is not merely a biological process; it is a life stage that requires profound psychological, social, and emotional responsibility.

Before childbirth, the psychological state of parents—especially the mother—plays a crucial role in the healthy development of the infant. During pregnancy, mothers experience various changes—

hormonal, emotional, and social—that affect their psychological well-being. Stress, fear, anxiety, and feelings of uncertainty are commonly observed during this period. In psychological sessions, parents are informed that these feelings are normal and are taught ways to cope with them. Relaxation techniques, proper breathing methods, and emotional self-regulation skills are particularly beneficial for both mothers and fathers during pregnancy (Babayeva, N., 2019).

After childbirth, both mothers and fathers enter a new stage of life. During this period, mothers often experience postpartum emotional strain or depression. Fathers may also feel stress and anxiety when faced with new responsibilities. Continuous psychological support is essential to prevent and manage such conditions. During sessions with psychologists, parents are guided on reducing the emotional burden associated with childcare, strengthening communication within the family, and providing mutual support.

Establishing an emotional bond between parents and the child is of special importance for the child's healthy psychological development. In the first months of life, infants perceive their parents' behaviors, facial expressions, and emotions and respond accordingly. If parents are under constant stress and anxiety, this may negatively affect the infant's emotional stability. During psychological sessions, parents are taught how to build warm relationships with their infants and to understand the importance of body language and emotional expression in communication.

Such negative emotional environments may adversely affect infants' emotional well-being. Psychological counseling helps parents develop affectionate interactions with their infants and recognize the significance of body language and emotional expression in communication.

Another important component of prenatal and postnatal psychological support is maintaining healthy family relationships. Parents' mutual understanding and supportive behavior help preserve family unity. In group sessions, parents share their experiences with other families and learn how others cope with similar challenges. This process provides both social support and increased self-confidence.

Continuous psychological support has a significant positive impact on improving parents' quality of life. Regular sessions help maintain emotional stability, increase resilience to stress, and strengthen mutual respect and understanding among family members. This approach also has a long-term positive effect on children's psycho-emotional well-being.

Such psychological support provided to parents is important not only for the family but also for the healthy development of society as a whole. Children who grow up in a psychologically healthy environment are more likely to become balanced, socially active, and responsible citizens in the future. Therefore, this program serves the overall well-being of both individuals and society.

Providing psychological support to parents before and after childbirth is considered one of the most important fields of psychology. The main aim of this support is to maintain parents' emotional stability, strengthen their parenting skills, and positively influence the healthy development of the infant. Through such programs, both mothers and fathers become more resilient to stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges they may encounter, while harmony and mutual understanding within family relationships are reinforced. In the modern context, psychological support is no longer limited to individual counseling; it is increasingly enriched by group sessions and family-oriented approaches. This enables parents to exchange experiences, share similar problems, and learn effective coping strategies.

International research demonstrates that prenatal and postnatal psychological support programs are essential for the well-being of both parents and infants. For example, in the United States and European countries, "Parental Support Programs" implemented during pregnancy and the postpartum period are widely used to reduce parents' emotional stress and strengthen family relationships. In Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland, specialized psychological support centers operate as part of family welfare policies. In these centers, parents regularly participate in psychological consultations before and after childbirth, where they are taught stress management techniques, family communication skills, and ways to establish emotional bonds with their infants.

In Canada, measures to prevent postpartum depression among mothers are implemented within the framework of “Antenatal Mental Health Programs.” These programs offer both individual psychological counseling and group support. In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service (NHS) organizes specialized sessions for parents, providing both medical information and psychological support to help them better prepare for the childbirth process (Goodman, J. H., 2004).

**Problem statement.** International experience demonstrates that continuous support programs enhance not only the emotional health of families but also social stability. As a result of such initiatives, children grow up in healthier environments, their psychological stability improves, and future processes of social adaptation become easier. Providing parents with regular psychological support before and after childbirth is of strategic importance for both the family and society. Therefore, the expansion of similar programs, the training of psychological counselors, and the establishment of specialized centers with state support—drawing on international experience—can be considered an important necessity for Azerbaijan.

A comparative analysis of the Azerbaijani context and international experience shows that, although the provision of prenatal and postnatal psychological support to parents is recognized as important at both levels, there are differences in approaches and implementation mechanisms. Internationally, especially in developed countries, such support is regarded as a key component of public policy. In the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian countries, comprehensive programs for parents are implemented by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. These programs place particular emphasis on psychological counseling, methods for coping with stress and anxiety, strengthening intra-family relationships, and the prevention of postpartum depression.

Although certain steps have been taken in Azerbaijan in this direction, the large-scale implementation of systematic programs remains limited. Psychological support services are mainly provided through individual initiatives, private clinics, and some community-based efforts. However, unlike international practice, there is limited use of state-supported specialized psychological counseling centers and family welfare programs. This reduces parents’—especially mothers’—opportunities to seek psychological assistance during the postpartum period (World Health Organization, 2019).

One of the main advantages of international programs is that they are not limited to individual counseling but also include group sessions, family-based training, and educational activities. This enables parents to exchange experiences and build social support networks. In Azerbaijan, such group-based support models remain underdeveloped.

Another important difference is that in Scandinavian countries, parental support programs are an integral part of state social policy and are considered accessible to all families. In Azerbaijan, by contrast, psychological support largely depends on individual initiatives, which limits its reach. In this context, the application of international experience offers significant opportunities to strengthen family well-being in Azerbaijan (Guliyev, T., 2022).

Based on comparative analysis and international experience, the need to develop state-supported, specialized parenting programs in Azerbaijan becomes evident. Such programs could not only enhance parents’ emotional stability but also promote children’s healthy development. Most importantly, these initiatives have the potential to strengthen family relationships and social stability within society.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, the implementation of continuous support programs for prenatal and postnatal psychological consultations with parents is of strategic importance for family well-being and overall public health. Such programs contribute to reducing parental emotional stress, enhancing coping capacities in relation to stress and anxiety, and strengthening social adaptation processes. In particular, psychological difficulties experienced by mothers during the postpartum period require early identification and timely intervention.

Early diagnosis and appropriate psychological support play a crucial role in protecting the physical and mental health of both the mother and the infant, as well as in fostering a secure parent–child relationship.

International experience clearly demonstrates that sustained psychological support programs have a significant positive impact on individuals' social development, mental health, and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships. Successful models implemented in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian countries indicate that comprehensive psychological support initiatives represent one of the most effective instruments for enhancing societal well-being. The implementation of similar programs in Azerbaijan could facilitate the development of healthy social skills among parents and contribute to the creation of a supportive and nurturing social environment for children.

Therefore, the establishment and expansion of continuous psychological support programs serve not only individual well-being but also the broader social welfare of society. In this context, the expansion of existing initiatives, the creation of state-supported specialized centers, the strengthening of professional training frameworks, and the development of accessible support mechanisms for parents should be regarded as essential and urgent priorities in contemporary social and health policy.

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