

# Studying the Efficacy of Teaching Positive Parenting to Autistic Children's Mothers in Reducing Children's Behavioral Problems

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of teaching positive parenting to autistic children's mothers on reducing their children's behavioral problems. Research method was quasi-experimental using pretest-posttest design with control group. Thirty mothers participated in this study. This sample was randomly selected among autistic children's mothers from Mehrju School in 2013. Data collection was done before and after the beginning of training sessions using Rutter Behavioral problems Questionnaire. Positive parenting was presented in eight two-hour sessions. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics methods, ANOVA, and T-test. Results indicated that the effect of parenting interventions on reducing autistic children's behavioral problems were generally significant (0.001). Significant decrease was also seen in the scores of hyperactivity disorder, aggression, anxiety, and depression (0.001). Yet, no significant difference was observed in the scores of social maladjustment, antisocial behaviors, and attention deficit disorder (0.001). In general, results showed that teaching positive parenting to autistic children's mothers is effective in reducing children's behavioral problems.

**KEYWORDS:** Autistic Children's Mothers, Behavioral Problems, Teaching Positive Parenting

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Autism is a kind of neural development disorder where child does not pass developmental stages similar to his peers. This disorder usually appears with a set of triple qualities: damage in social interactions, damage in relationship, limited interests, and repetitive behaviors [1]. Behavioral problems are a variety of immoderate, chronic, and deviated behaviors ranging from aggressive acts or abrupt excitement, depression and seclusion behaviors. Observer does not expect to see them and wishes them to be stopped [2]. Today, the term 'behavioral disorder' is no longer applied. Rather, behavioral problems are classified into two groups including internalizing and externalizing behaviors. This classification has paved the way for more accurate examinations. Problems like attention deficit, hyperactivity, behavioral disorders, general anxiety, depression, disobedience, phobia, etc. which can be manifested in terms of making noise, brawl, quarrel, clamor, sabotage, threat, truancy, educational failure, and non-participation. If these are spontaneous and permanent, they can be treated as behavioral problems. Each of these problems can set the scene for another one. In adulthood, they can also appear in different forms. Usually, child manifests these behavioral signs in different places; for instance, in institute, at home, and in social situations. These behaviors lead to serious problems in social, educational, and familial performance [3].

Developmental delays in these children can have negative effect on other developmental areas. This in turn provides the scene for the settlement of behavioral problems such as felling, crying, beating head, and making noise. Hence, child manifests these behaviors to draw adults' attention and avoid undesirable situations [4]. As a result, alleviating behavioral problems in children suffering from autism is the main component in therapeutic interventions for children [5].

One of the most effective interventions regarding children's behavioral and emotional problems is to teach parents skills for controlling child behavior and creating effective parenting styles. Emotional relationship between parent and child is effective in the process of therapy. By teaching therapeutic skills, parents can be effective for their children like a therapist and perhaps more [6].

Among parents' training plans is "positive parenting plan". It was developed by Sanders et al and based on family's behavioral therapies regarding social learning principles. This plan has five different levels due to the existence of various levels concerning family performance and diverse mother and child needs. Its administration is suggested for mothers with children between 2 and 3 years of age who already suffer from and (or) are susceptible to behavioral and emotional disorders [7].

All therapeutic levels in this method are aimed to enhance mothers' self-autonomy and self-efficacy in managing and controlling behavior. It is possible to pave the way for achieving competency and self-esteem via teaching mothers how to enhance child's development. In the last 30 years, many evidences were obtained regarding the efficacy of positive parenting plan. This efficacy has been shown in a wide spectrum of cultures by means of experiments in Hong Kong, Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. (8).

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Teaching method is collective. This enriches children's protective factors and reduces risk factors related to children's behavioral and emotional problems [8]. Shafiabadi [9] puts it that parents' collective teaching is a type of collective education including extensive training. It helps parents to desirably expand their knowledge and abilities regarding children's education and nurturing. In these situations, parenting teaching plan can teach parents how to play a more positive role for their children by presenting suitable patterns, how to learn healthy life style, and how to transfer them to their children. Then, children's behavioral problems can be reduced by enhancing parents' abilities.

Teaching positive parenting can lead to positive changes in parents' problematic skills and behaviors [10]. Positive parenting plan regarding autistic disorder, teaching the estate of mother-child relationship, and parenting skills can be used for reducing serious behavioral, emotional, perceptual problems and enhancing the quality of mother-child relationship [11].

Based on previous studies concerning the efficacy of parents' training in decreasing autistic children's behavioral signs and problems in some countries and the lack of research in the same regarding in Iran, the present study intends to answer this question: Does teaching positive parenting skill to autistic children's mothers affect the reduction of their children's behavioral problems?

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research method was quasi-experimental using pretest-posttest design with control group. Participants were randomly selected among autistic children's mothers from Mehrju School in 2013-2014 using accessible sampling technique. Thirty mothers participated in this study randomly divided into two test and control groups. Each group consisted of 15 mothers.

### Data Collection Tool

**Rutter Behavioral problems Questionnaire:** This test was developed by Michael Rutter (12) to distinguish between normal children and children with behavioral problems. In Rutter questionnaire, parents' form consists of 18 questions scored by Likert scale (0-2). Cut-off score is 7 in this scale. Children scored  $\geq 7$  are diagnosed as children with behavioral disorder. This test measures behavioral problems such as aggression and hyperactivity (questions 1-2-3-4-8), depression and anxiety (questions 6-7-9), social maladjustment (questions 5-13-14-15), antisocial behaviors (questions 12-15-16), and attention deficit (questions 1-2-14). Rutter (12) reported retest and internal reliability of questionnaire in a pretest-posttest study (with 2 months interval) as 0.74. Correlation between fathers and mothers' responses is 0.64. Studies regarding the validity of this questionnaire showed that its internal consistency is 0.79. In this research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.606 and 0.709 for pretest and posttest, respectively.

## 3. RESULTS

Studying participants' demographic information indicates that %40 mothers under study were below 30 years of age, %53.33 were between 31 and 40, and %6.67 were above 40 years of age. Among them, %73 participants were employed and %27 housewives. Again, %20 mothers were diploma, %43.33 associate, %30 BS, and %6.67 MS. As seen in the Table 2, a comparison between test and control groups regarding variables under study shows that level of significance is  $<0.5$  for both of these variables. As a result, there is insignificant difference between test and control groups.

**Table 1.** Mean and SD of variables in terms of groups under study

Variable	Group	No.	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Aggression and hyperactivity pretest	Control	15	0	10	4	2.788
	Test	15	0	10	4.9	1.969
Aggression and hyperactivity posttest	Control	15	0	36	12	4.853
	Test	15	0	36	12.6	4.221

**Table 2.** Independent t-statistic test results for variables under study

Variable	T	Sig. level
Aggression And Hyperactivity Pretest	-0.834	0.4
Behavioral Disorders Pretest	-0.295	0.7

**H1: Teaching parenting skill to mothers affects the reduction of autistic children's behavioral problems.**

Results of ANCOVA for children's behavioral disorders are presented in the above table regarding test and control groups. Mean autistic children's behavioral disorder was 12.20 for control group and 8.7 for test group. This indicates that the extent of behavioral disorders in test group was smaller as compared to control group. Regarding F value and level of significance ( $p=0.001$ ), this situation indicates that teaching parenting skills to mothers ( $r=99\%$ ) is effective in reducing autistic children's behavioral disorders. Statistical results also show that the extent of mothers' parenting skill effect on alleviating autistic children's behavioral disorders was  $80\%$ .

**Table 3.** ANCOVA results for test and control groups regarding the effect of teaching parenting skill to mothers on reducing autistic children's behavioral problems

Group	Mean	SD	No.	Sum squares	Mean squares	fd	F	Sig. level	Parabolic coefficient
Control	12.20	5.245	15	79.838	79.838	1	16.699	0.001	0.800
Test	8.70	3.301	15						

## **H2: Teaching parenting skill to mothers affects the reduction of autistic children's aggression and hyperactivity.**

Results of ANCOVA for children's aggression and hyperactivity are presented in the above table regarding test and control groups. Mean autistic children's aggression and hyperactivity was 4.4 for control group and 2.8 for test group. This indicates that the extent of aggression and hyperactivity in test group was smaller as compared to control group. Regarding F value and level of significance ( $p=0.0001$ ), this situation indicates that teaching parenting skills to mothers ( $r=99\%$ ) is effective in reducing autistic children's aggression and hyperactivity. Statistical results also show that the extent of mothers' parenting skill effect on alleviating autistic children's aggression and hyperactivity was  $82.4\%$ .

**Table 4.** ANCOVA results for test and control groups regarding the effect of teaching parenting skill to mothers on reducing autistic children's aggression and hyperactivity

Group	Mean	SD	No.	Sum squares	Mean squares	fd	F	Sig. Level	Parabolic coefficient
control	4.4	2.951	15	27.051	27.051	1	24.043	0.0001	0.824
test	2.8	1.398	15						

## **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The first hypothesis was concerned with teaching parenting skill to mothers affects the reduction of autistic children's behavioral problems. Results of H1 testing showed that teaching parenting skill to autistic children's mothers is significantly effective in reducing these children's behavioral disorders. That is, teaching parenting skills to mothers was  $80\%$  effective in explaining the reduction of behavioral disorders. These results correlated with results reported by Houlding et al. [13], Roberts and Pickering [14], and Aghebati [15]. These studies showed that teaching positive parenting skills lead to the reduction of behavioral disorders in autistic children.

Results from testing H1 can be explained as follow: many factors are effective in the manifestation of behavioral disorders in autistic children. Since autistic children's mothers are also their main teachers, they must possess suitable parenting skills for coping with their children's problems. Hence, methods which can target and improve mother's parenting style are among the effective methods in treating behavioral problems. One of the best therapeutic interventions is parents' behavioral training. Accordingly, teaching skills to these mothers can be effective in improving their behavioral disorders.

The second hypothesis was concerned with teaching parenting skill to mothers affects the reduction of autistic children's aggression and hyperactivity. Results of H1 testing showed that teaching parenting skill to autistic children's mothers is significantly effective in reducing these children's aggression and hyperactivity. Results correlated with findings reported by Jaafari et al. [16], Moharreri et al. [17], and Tehranidoust et al. [18]. These studies showed that teaching positive parenting skills lead to the reduction of aggression and hyperactivity in autistic children.

Results of H2 testing can be explained as follow: As said above, mothers are the main nurturing factor for children. Aggression and hyperactivity require appropriate nurturing control and guide which can be implemented best via family. One of the causes of autistic children's behavioral problems is their lack of control on their emotions. This leads to aggressive behaviors and hyperactivity. As a result, that the mothers know how to control and guide their children's emotional activities will be significantly effective in appropriately controlling and manifesting emotions and rehabilitating these children best.

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