

Efficacy, Mechanism, and Economic Evaluation of Mindfulness-Enhanced Behavioral Parent Training for Families of Autistic Children: A Randomized Controlled Trial

Autistic children often exhibit externalizing behavior problems that can affect their daily functioning and well-being. Early intensive behavioral interventions are crucial for improving their long-term outcomes, and Behavioral Parent Training (BPT) supports these intervention efforts by training parents to implement behavioral management strategies for their children in everyday life. However, many parents of autistic children experience significant stress, which can hinder their effective implementation of these strategies and impede behavioral improvements in their children. Conventional BPT primarily focuses on child behavior outcomes and does not directly address parental psychological well-being. However, child behavior problems and parenting stress often co-occur and influence each other reciprocally. Without addressing both concerns concurrently, families of autistic children may be trapped in a vicious cycle where parental stress reduces BPT fidelity and efficacy, while persistent child behavior problems further exacerbate parental stress. To break this cycle, it is essential to integrate psychotherapeutic support into BPT to promote parental mental health, enabling parents to effectively implement behavioral management strategies. A particularly promising psychotherapeutic approach to complement BPT is mindfulness training. As mindfulness emphasizes nonjudgmental awareness, acceptance, and non-reactivity, it can help parents alleviate stress and foster emotional equanimity. By enhancing mental wellness, parents can more calmly and consistently implement behavioral management strategies for their children. Given these potential benefits, mindfulness training is a valuable approach for integration into BPT to create synergy. The proposed project aims to establish an innovative, dual-focus intervention for families of autistic children by incorporating mindfulness training into BPT. While conventional BPT focuses on improving child behavior, Mindfulness-Enhanced BPT (ME-BPT) additionally targets reducing parenting stress to provide more comprehensive family support. Specifically, we will conduct a randomized controlled trial to investigate: (1) whether ME-BPT is more efficacious than BPT in reducing child behavior problems and parenting stress; (2) whether parental mindfulness mediates these effects; and (3) whether ME-BPT is more cost-effective than BPT. Theoretically, this project will create novel knowledge about the comparative efficacy of ME-BPT and BPT in improving child and parental outcomes. It will also advance understanding of the specific psychological mechanism through which ME-BPT provides distinct benefits compared to BPT. Practically, ME-BPT, if proven efficacious and cost-effective, can be applied as an evidence-based method to simultaneously address child and parental well-being, offering long-term benefits for families of autistic children. Supported by these favorable outcomes, we could promote ME-BPT to government and community organizations for incorporation into family support services.