



Well-being of autistic children is intimately linked to the parent's stress management skills.

How can the quality of life of autistic children be improved?

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Contributing to the quality of life (QoL) of autistic children is the aim of our clinical interventions. Assessing QoL is complex because it is both subjective and multidimensional. Moreover, the QoL of an autistic child depends on factors that are not necessarily the same as those of a typical child. Finally, obtaining an autistic child's assessment of their own QoL is a challenge compared to that of an adult due to the child's age and the fact that they often speak little or not at all.


In a study published in 2023, a team of researchers met this challenge by constructing a questionnaire to assess the QoL of young children with autism. The researchers asked parents of autistic children to assess their child's QoL using this questionnaire, while gathering a larger range of information such as the child's temperament, the parent's state of health, and the presence of other autistic children within the siblings. The researchers' aim was to gain a better understanding of what might influence the QoL of autistic children.

The results of this research showed that the more emotional difficulties a child had, the poorer their QoL was. The child's QoL also increased as the parent's psychological flexibility increased. Psychological flexibility is the parent's ability to accept their emotions in the 'here and now' in order to deal with them more effectively, if this is in the child's best interests. Some parents of autistic children, for example, may not allow themselves to go out to the park for fear of how others will look at them if their child displays inappropriate behaviour. In this example, a flexible parent will not stop themselves from going to the park, even though they are afraid. The flexible parent no longer tries to

hide from their emotions for the sake of their child's well-being. Another example of flexibility is this: faced with a child's incessant demands, the parent can either give in or refuse the child's request by getting angry. These two attitudes do nothing to help the child learn to regulate their own emotions.

The challenge for parents is thus to learn how to react less to their own emotions. They will have to behave in a way that seems fairest to their child and themselves. They must focus on their own behaviour before trying to change their child's behaviour, thereby helping to improve their feeling of parental competence.

To help parents achieve this, they will be offered psychoeducation on autistic functioning and criteria on their child's specific well-being. To develop psychological flexibility, a particular type of cognitive behavioural therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or Mindfulness Meditation, are used. The authors of this study not only found a relationship between mindfulness meditation and the reduction in parental stress, but also a reduction in their child's behavioural problems linked to uncontrollable emotions.

Clinical and research data has already identified that the well-being of autistic children is intimately linked to the parent's stress management skills. This new data adds to these findings, and suggests that parents could contribute to improving their child's well-being by helping them to regulate their emotions. Leo Kanner, looking back 30 years later at the 11 children he had diagnosed in 1943, had already noted that the most successful people were those whose parents had been "gently firm". 

Original article:

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