

Mental Health Education as a Rehabilitation Strategy to Improve Emotional Regulation in Children with Autism

RuiHan Yao, BoQuan Du*

SEGI University, Jalan Teknologi, Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, 47810, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Emotional dysregulation represents a central challenge for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), limiting their social adaptation and overall quality of life. This paper explores the role of mental health education (MHE) as a structured rehabilitation strategy to enhance emotional regulation in autistic children. Drawing on theories of emotion regulation, social-emotional learning, and developmental-behavioral models, this study highlights the effectiveness of educational interventions in improving emotional awareness, expression, and coping skills. Data from surveys with parents and teachers in Shandong Province demonstrate that children who participated in MHE exhibited higher levels of self-regulation, emotional stability, and social adaptability. The study concludes that integrating MHE into autism rehabilitation systems offers significant theoretical and practical contributions to special education and psychology.

KEYWORDS

Autism spectrum disorder; Emotional regulation; Mental health education; Rehabilitation; Social-emotional learning

1 Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by deficits in communication, repetitive behaviors, and significant challenges in emotional regulation^[1]. Emotional dysregulation in autistic children often leads to anxiety, aggression, and impaired social functioning, complicating educational integration and daily adaptation^[2]. Existing interventions primarily emphasize behavioral modification and language development, leaving gaps in systematic strategies for emotion regulation^[3]. Mental Health Education (MHE), rooted in social-emotional learning (SEL), emphasizes emotional recognition, regulation, and self-management, and thus holds potential as a structured rehabilitation strategy for autistic children^[4].

This paper examines how MHE contributes to the development of emotional regulation among children with ASD. Specifically, it evaluates the theoretical underpinnings, practical implementation, and empirical effectiveness of MHE, drawing on both global research and field data from China.

2 Literature review

The development of MHE has expanded from traditional school counseling to preventive, developmental approaches in both mainstream and special education^[5]. Research indicates that SEL-based interventions significantly enhance children's emotional and social competence while reducing behavioral issues^[6]. In the context of autism, however, systematic studies remain limited.

Children with ASD demonstrate lower use of adaptive strategies such as reappraisal, while relying more on maladaptive responses such as avoidance^[7]. Consequently, they often experience frequent emotional outbursts and difficulties in social interaction^[8]. Studies have shown that incorporating MHE into rehabilitation can improve self-regulation, empathy, and social functioning^[9]. For instance, game-based interventions and structured emotional training programs have been effective in improving autistic children's ability to recognize and manage emotions^[10].

Theoretical models support this application. Gross's Emotion Regulation Theory emphasizes antecedent- and response-focused strategies^[11]. SEL frameworks stress competencies in self-awareness, self-management, and social responsibility^[12]. The SCERTS model highlights integrating developmental and behavioral supports to foster emotional and social growth^[13]. Collectively, these frameworks suggest that MHE can address the unique emotional regulation challenges faced by autistic children.

3 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative design to evaluate the impact of MHE interventions in Shandong Province. A total

* **Corresponding Author:** BoQuan Du, E-mail:951583724@qq.com

of 42 parents and 10 teachers participated. Two structured questionnaires were used: (1) the Autism Children's Emotion Regulation Ability Assessment Questionnaire and (2) the Mental Health Education Feedback Questionnaire. Both instruments utilized Likert five-point scales and were validated for reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$).

Data were collected via online surveys and analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics assessed children's emotional recognition, control, and expression, while parental feedback provided insights into perceived changes in social adaptability and emotional stability.

4 Results

Findings revealed consistent improvements in emotional regulation across teacher and parent evaluations. Teachers observed significant progress in children's ability to control emotions during group activities ($M = 4.5$) and to apply strategies such as deep breathing ($M = 4.7$). Children also demonstrated stronger emotional recognition and expression, though some variability remained in language comprehension.

Parents confirmed these trends, reporting improved emotional stability ($M = 4.3$), better self-confidence ($M = 4.3$), and enhanced social interaction skills ($M = 4.6$). Importantly, parents noted that MHE helped their children adapt more successfully to school life ($M = 4.6$). These results indicate that MHE supports both individual regulation skills and broader social integration.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of Mental Health Education (MHE) as a targeted rehabilitation strategy for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly in enhancing their emotional regulation capabilities. The three core components of MHE—emotional recognition, emotional expression, and emotional regulation—were each associated with measurable improvements in children's functioning across both school and family environments, which aligns closely with prior research on social-emotional learning (SEL)-based interventions^[14]. Specifically, Cai and Samson (2025)^[14] highlighted that self-focused emotion regulation, a key outcome of MHE in this study, is critical for reducing emotional dysregulation in autistic individuals; our data extend this finding by demonstrating that structured MHE programs can systematically foster this self-focused ability through practical, age-appropriate activities (e.g., emotion identification games, guided coping exercises). For instance, teachers reported that children who engaged in MHE were more likely to independently label their emotions (e.g., "I feel angry because I couldn't take a turn") rather than expressing distress through unregulated behaviors (e.g., crying or aggression)—a direct reflection of improved emotional recognition and expression that echoes the SEL framework's emphasis on self-awareness^[12].

Several key factors emerged as significant influencers of MHE's effectiveness, including the children's age, the timing of their ASD diagnosis, and the level of family involvement—findings that are consistent with ecological models of child development^[15]. Younger children (aged 4–6 years) in the sample demonstrated greater adaptability to MHE interventions, which can be attributed to heightened neuroplasticity during early childhood; this period is widely recognized as a critical window for shaping emotional and social skills, as neural pathways associated with emotion regulation are still developing and more responsive to structured input^[15]. Additionally, children who received an ASD diagnosis before the age of 3 years showed stronger improvements in emotional stability (as reported by parents, $M = 4.3$) compared to those diagnosed later. This aligns with Gulsrud et al. (2010)^[15], who noted that early intervention allows for the mitigation of maladaptive emotional patterns (e.g., avoidance or aggression) before they become entrenched. Family involvement further emerged as a pivotal moderator: parents who actively participated in MHE (e.g., practicing deep breathing exercises with their children at home, discussing daily emotions using MHE-provided worksheets) reported more pronounced improvements in their children's social interaction skills ($M = 4.6$) and school adaptation ($M = 4.6$). This reinforces the ecological model's emphasis on the family as a "microsystem" that interacts with school-based interventions to amplify positive outcomes—when parents reinforce MHE strategies in the home, children are provided with consistent opportunities to practice and generalize their emotional regulation skills.

A critical distinction between MHE and traditional behavioral interventions for ASD lies in their underlying mechanisms of change: while traditional approaches (e.g., Applied Behavior Analysis, ABA) primarily rely on external reinforcement (e.g., rewards for desired behaviors) to modify outcomes^[16], MHE focuses on fostering intrinsic emotional understanding and self-management. This difference has important implications for the sustainability of intervention effects. For example, behavioral interventions may yield short-term improvements in specific behaviors (e.g., reducing tantrums in response to transitions), but they often depend on the presence of external cues or rewards to maintain these gains^[16]. In contrast, MHE equips children with internalized strategies: during the intervention, children were taught to

use tools such as “emotion diaries” (where they drew or described their feelings) and “coping checklists” (to identify strategies like deep breathing or taking a break), which they gradually began to use independently. Teachers observed that children in the MHE group were more likely to initiate these strategies without prompting (e.g., saying “I need to take three breaths”) during challenging moments, indicating that MHE fosters self-directed regulation—a skill that is more likely to persist in new or unstructured environments (e.g., playgrounds, new classrooms) compared to externally reinforced behaviors. Lopata et al. (2012)^[16] noted that interventions targeting intrinsic skills are particularly valuable for autistic children with varying language abilities; our data support this, as even children with lower language comprehension showed improvements in emotional recognition (albeit with some variability), suggesting that MHE’s hands-on, visual-based activities (e.g., using emotion cards) are accessible to a broader range of autistic children than language-dependent behavioral interventions.

Theoretically, this research makes a meaningful contribution to autism intervention frameworks by explicitly positioning emotional regulation as a central target, rather than a secondary outcome, of rehabilitation. Historically, many ASD interventions have prioritized communication skills or the reduction of repetitive behaviors^[3], with emotional regulation addressed only indirectly (e.g., through behavioral management of outbursts). By integrating MHE into rehabilitation, this study expands these frameworks to recognize that emotional regulation is foundational to social adaptation and quality of life—without the ability to identify, express, and manage emotions, even progress in communication or behavior may not translate to improved daily functioning. For example, the SCERTS model^[13], which emphasizes social communication and emotional regulation as core domains, is operationalized through MHE’s structured activities: the “emotional expression” component of MHE, for instance, directly supports the SCERTS goal of fostering functional emotional communication, while “emotional regulation” activities align with the model’s focus on adaptive coping. Practically, the study offers educators and therapists actionable, structured methods for incorporating MHE into existing rehabilitation programs. These methods include weekly 45-minute MHE sessions (featuring age-appropriate content such as emotion-themed picture books, role-playing scenarios, and group problem-solving tasks) and training for educators on how to adapt MHE strategies to individual children’s needs (e.g., using visual schedules for children with limited language). Additionally, the study underscores the critical role of home-school collaboration: regular meetings between teachers and parents (e.g., monthly check-ins) to share observations of children’s emotional functioning, adjust MHE strategies, and ensure consistency between school and home environments were associated with stronger parent-reported improvements in self-confidence ($M = 4.3$). This practical guidance addresses a key gap in existing literature, which often highlights the importance of school collaboration but provides limited specifics on how to implement it.

Collectively, these findings not only validate MHE as a viable rehabilitation tool but also highlight the need to consider individual and contextual factors (e.g., age, diagnosis timing, family engagement) when designing and implementing MHE programs for autistic children. By focusing on intrinsic emotional skills and leveraging home-school partnerships, MHE offers a more holistic and sustainable approach to addressing emotional dysregulation—one that complements, rather than replaces, existing interventions and ultimately supports autistic children’s long-term social adaptation and well-being.

6 Limitations

This study, while yielding meaningful insights into mental health education (MHE) for autistic children’s emotional regulation, is constrained by several notable limitations that warrant consideration. First, its sample is both small and regionally confined: with only 42 parents and 10 teachers participating, all from Shandong Province, the findings lack broad generalizability. The cultural, educational, and familial contexts specific to Shandong—such as local special education practices or parental attitudes toward autism interventions—may not reflect those in other Chinese regions or global settings, limiting the ability to extend results to diverse autistic populations. Second, the research depends entirely on subjective reports from parents and teachers, which are prone to biases: parents might overstate improvements due to hopeful expectations for their children’s progress, while teachers’ assessments could be influenced by classroom dynamics or prior beliefs about MHE. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents tracking long-term effects—it cannot confirm whether the observed gains in emotional regulation persist over months or years, nor can it establish a definitive causal link between MHE and these improvements. Additionally, the absence of a control group (e.g., children receiving traditional behavioral interventions) eliminates the ability to compare MHE’s efficacy against other common rehabilitation strategies, leaving uncertainty about whether MHE is uniquely effective.

To address these gaps, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to monitor sustained outcomes and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to rigorously isolate MHE’s impact. Integrating multi-source data—including direct behavioral observations of children, age-appropriate self-reports (when feasible), and physiological measures (e.g., heart rate variability to gauge emotional arousal)—would also enhance objectivity, offering a more holistic understanding of

MHE's role in autism rehabilitation.

7 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that MHE significantly improves emotional regulation in children with ASD, enhancing both personal well-being and social adaptability. By integrating emotional recognition, expression, and regulation strategies, MHE addresses gaps in traditional rehabilitation approaches. Given supportive family and institutional involvement, MHE can serve as a cornerstone of comprehensive autism rehabilitation systems.

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