



Exploring the Multifaceted Relationships Between Mindful Parenting, Family Relationships, and Mothers' Reflective Functioning with the Emotional Social Adaptation of Children with Autism

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Alhammashi, A.N.A., Yousefi, Z., Radhi, A.J., & Khayatan, F. (2024). Exploring the Multifaceted Relationships Between Mindful Parenting, Family Relationships, and Mothers' Reflective Functioning with the Emotional Social Adaptation of Children with Autism. *Health Nexus*, 2(2), 8-16.

<https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.hn.2.2.2>



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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the multifaceted relationships between mindful parenting, family relationships, and mothers' reflective functioning with the emotional social adaptation of children with autism. The research was descriptive and correlational. The population consisted of all mothers with autistic children in the city of Kut. The sample included 200 mothers of children with autism, selected through convenience sampling. The research instruments were: the Children's Social Skills Questionnaire (Payton, 2008), Reflective Functioning (Yousefi, 2023), Mindful Parenting (McCaffrey, 2017), and Family Relationships by Barnes and Olson (1987). For data analysis, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Pearson correlation coefficient and stepwise regression) were used. The results showed that among the predictor variables, mindful parenting and its dimensions, relationship with spouse, and balanced reflective functioning had a significant relationship with the emotional social adaptation of children with autism. Among the mentioned variables, mindful parenting, relationship with spouse, and acceptance of the child had predictive power for emotional social adaptation. Based on these results, it can be said that improving the variables of parenting is beneficial for enhancing the emotional social adaptation of children.

Keywords: Emotional Social Adaptation, Mindful Parenting, Family Relationships, Autism, Children, Mothers.

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a pervasive and long-term developmental disorder that significantly affects how an individual perceives the world around them and interacts with others. Some individuals with ASD may eventually live independently, while others, who suffer from learning disabilities, require lifelong specialized support. They may exhibit either hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sensory inputs (1).

Autism is rooted in neurophysiological dysfunction. Three key symptoms crucial for diagnosis among these individuals include: 1) Difficulty in social interactions (lack of eye contact, facial expressions, and inappropriate interactions with peers); 2) Restricted, repetitive behaviors and activities displaying inflexibility, characterized by an intense focus on limited and unusual interests; 3) Deficits in communication skills and language development, including delays or absence in expressive requests, inability for intimacy, maintaining and continuing discourse. These symptoms disrupt the child's development and learning (2).

These symptoms pose numerous challenges to social and emotional learning among these individuals. Social learning enables individuals to acquire skills and knowledge beneficial across various societies. Specifically, in social and emotional learning, an individual gains five key competencies crucial for managing their emotions, developing care and concern for others, responsible decision-making, establishing positive relationships, and managing challenging situations. Emotional social development is essential for achieving self-regulation and self-management in learning (3). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework (4), social and emotional skills encompass a set of abilities that facilitate care and concern for others, positive relationships, responsible decision-making, and effective, constructive, and ethical management of situations. Self-awareness is a cognitive capacity that plays a significant role in personal development. Students aware of their capabilities and emotions are reflective, recognize their states of being, and understand the reasons behind their emotional responses. Some consider social and emotional skills at two levels: intrapersonal and interpersonal. At the intrapersonal level, an individual's understanding and regulation of themselves

are crucial, while at the interpersonal level, understanding others, connecting with them, and making responsible decisions are important. Thus, in emotional social adaptation, five dimensions are critical: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making (1, 5).

Given that the challenges faced by these children are pervasive, their families, including their mothers, experience significant anxiety due to the demanding parenting responsibilities. Studies indicate that compared to other mothers, parents of children with autism experience higher parenting stress and lower self-efficacy (6). Thus, reflective functioning appears to be a crucial construct in reducing anxiety and finding optimal solutions for interpersonal issues.

Reflective functioning plays a key role in emotion regulation, self-control, and self-monitoring, describing an individual's capacity to interpret human behavior based on mental states such as intentions, desires, beliefs, and emotions. Hence, reflective functioning allows individuals to understand and predict their own and others' mindsets and behaviors, providing a basis for appropriate reactions and maintaining interpersonal relationships (7). Reflective functioning should not be confused with introspection or the ability to talk about mental states but rather described as a subconscious or automatic process associated with the individual's capacity to generate a sense of self and regulate behavior. Having reflective functioning capacity helps restrain impulsive behaviors in emotionally charged situations (8).

This concept has gained considerable traction in developmental psychology literature and is strongly associated with the attachment between parent and child and the quality of their interactions. Theorists argue that reflective functioning should have a meaningful relationship with the quality of intimate relationships throughout life. The concept of reflective functioning within a partner has been introduced, referring to the capacity to reflect on the thoughts and feelings of one's partner and consider their role in guiding one's own and the other's behavior (9). Mentalization theorists have consistently described the capacity to imagine one's own or another's mental states in the context of attachment, where thoughts and feelings are valued and meaningful within a secure relationship (10).

Thus, the focus of the early and subsequent environment on internal mental states is crucial for their development. Therefore, parents with high reflective functioning capacity report secure relationships in childhood with their parents and are more likely to have secure children. Additionally, mentalization capacity is associated with stronger secure attachment (or lower levels of avoidant and anxious attachment) in adulthood (9, 10). Simultaneously, parents' parenting styles and methods to foster appropriate behaviors in children can significantly influence emotional social adaptation.

Parenting is a complex activity involving various behaviors and methods that impact the development and interaction with the child. Essentially, the foundation of parenting styles is parents' efforts to control and socialize their child. Parenting styles refer to the emotional climate parents create to socialize their child. While parenting activities are a combination of parents' behaviors occurring in different situations, creating a consistent parenting atmosphere (11). Three main elements of parenting are acceptance and close relationships, adaptive control methods, and appropriate independence. In this context, one of the parenting styles is mindful parenting, where parents focus on the present moment and here and now without judgment about themselves and their child. Instead of being internally focused, the focus is outward, on the ongoing events in their surrounding environment. Research results show that attention skills such as concentration, awareness of thoughts, the ability to expand attention and awareness of outcomes, controlling behaviors, and unconscious thoughts significantly help reduce children's problems (12). This approach, by increasing trust and emotional involvement, reduces parenting stress and enhances children's satisfaction. Mindful parenting includes five dimensions: 1) Full attention to the child, 2) Non-judgmental acceptance of oneself and the child, 3) Emotional awareness of oneself and the child, 4) Self-regulation in the parenting relationship, and 5) Kindness towards oneself and the child (8).

What research shows is that students' attachment forms within the context of family relationships. Family relationships indicate that the family has always been considered the most interesting and important human system. No other context equals the power and breadth of influence of the family. Family creates unique bonds among

individuals. Children learn language, skills, and social and moral values of their culture within the family and turn to family members for help and enjoyable interaction at all ages. Intimate and satisfying family relationships bring physical and mental health. In contrast, family isolation or alienation often associates with problems (13). Most of a person's life is experienced within the family environment or in close connection with it, and any sense of happiness or misery can be considered a reflection of processes occurring in that family. In this regard, it is important to note that the place of human relationships in the family starts from the relationships between husband and wife. Establishing and maintaining human relationships with the spouse and family members is the most important factor in preserving and indicating family vitality. By adhering to the principles of human communication, such as mutual respect for each other's opinions and views, demonstrating and observing the principles of honesty towards each other, maintaining emotions towards each other, observing the principles of mutual loyalty, showing love to each other, and observing the principles of confidentiality and support for each other's resources, a peaceful environment is prepared, creating a suitable condition for nurturing the morale of family members. On the other hand, it cannot be overlooked that personality has a significant impact on family relationships (12, 14-16).

Various studies have addressed the situation of children with autism in relation to their parents (5, 14, 15, 17-19), and specifically emphasized the role of parenting in the psychological status of children with autism.

However, mothers of children with autism face more difficulties and complex issues in the socialization of their children than other mothers. Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to research in this area and determine how the states and characteristics of mothers can affect the emotional social development of their children, especially since no research has been conducted in this area in the city of Kut, Iraq. Research in this field can contribute to the development of adjustment packages for children with autism based on the characteristics of the mothers. Thus, the current research aims to answer whether anxiety, parenting adaptability, reflective functioning, mindful parenting, and family relationships of mothers can predict the emotional social adaptation of children.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The study was descriptive and correlational. The population consisted of all mothers with autistic children in the city of Kut, and the sample included 200 mothers of children with autism selected through convenience sampling.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional Social Adaptation

To assess emotional social adaptation, the Social and Emotional Skills Scale (4) was used, containing 14 questions rated on a five-point scale. This scale was designed for children and adolescents, and in this study, the questions were adapted for assessment by the mother, with the questions relating to the child being rated by the mother. For convergent validity, the correlation between math and reading scores with emotional social adaptation was positive and significant, and its internal consistency was obtained above 0.80.

2.2.2. Reflective Functioning

This questionnaire was developed by Yousefi (2023), consisting of 14 items rated on a five-point scale. The scale does not have a total score and contains three subscales: certainty, ambiguity, and balanced, each referring to a type of reflective functioning, with the first two dimensions indicating a lack of mentalization ability and the balanced dimension indicating the presence of this ability. The author confirmed its content and face validity, and internal consistency for each dimension was examined using Cronbach's alpha and reported above 0.80. Its convergent validity was also tested with the rumination questionnaire, finding significant positive relationships for certainty and ambiguity, and a significant negative relationship for the balanced dimension. Construct validity was examined through exploratory factor analysis by the author, and three factors were confirmed. In this study, internal consistency for all dimensions was examined again, and Cronbach's alpha was obtained above 0.81.

2.2.3. Mindful Parenting

In the current study, the Mindful Parenting Scale by McCaffrey et al. (2017) was used, consisting of 28 items rated on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). It includes two subscales: mindful discipline and acceptance of the child, each with 14 items. Its convergent validity with the Interpersonal Mindfulness Scale was examined and confirmed. These two factors showed a negative relationship with permissive and overly reactive disciplinary behavior. The lowest score is 28 and the highest score is 112, with higher scores indicating more mindful parenting. The scale creators reported internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha for the total score and subscales above 0.80. In Iran, this questionnaire was standardized by Zare and Mohammadi (2020), and its psychometric properties were examined and confirmed (8, 20). In this study, internal consistency for the total score and subscales was examined again and obtained above 0.70.

2.2.4. Family Relationships Questionnaire by Barnes and Olson

To measure family relationships, the Barnes and Olson (1987) questionnaire was used, consisting of 10 questions rated on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with a range of 1 to 5. This questionnaire does not have reversed items. The internal consistency of this scale based on a sample of 2465 people was 0.95, and the test-retest reliability was 0.86. The internal consistency of this questionnaire in Iran was confirmed in a study by Mojodi et al. (2018), with Cronbach's alpha reported as 0.92. In this research, this scale was adapted for the relationship with the spouse, with one's own family, and with the spouse's family (13). The internal consistency was examined again and obtained through Cronbach's alpha as 0.93.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data obtained from this research will be analyzed using statistics at two levels: descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential (correlation and multiple regression), using SPSS software version 23.

3. Findings and Results

To investigate the research question: Are mindful parenting and its dimensions, dimensions of reflective functioning, and family relationships and their dimensions related to the emotional social adaptation of elementary

school children with autism? Pearson correlation and stepwise regression were used. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the research variables.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Research Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation	Significance
Emotional Social Adaptation	25.64	5.89	1.00	.000
Acceptance of the Child	32.80	9.18	.240	.000
Mindful Discipline	105.70	7.04	-.129	.034
Mindful Parenting	120.86	8.07	.420	.000
Family Relationships	92.67	21.78	.044	.268
Relationship with One's Own Family	35.55	8.96	.057	.463
Relationship with Spouse	20.82	8.07	.243	.000
Relationship with Spouse's Family	35.87	10.68	.082	.123
Reflective Functioning - Certainty	18.77	5.48	.089	.106
Reflective Functioning - Uncertainty	24.50	6.19	.012	.435
Balanced Reflective Functioning	30.15	7.87	.146	.020

The mean and standard deviation for the emotional social adaptation of autistic children were 25.64 ± 5.89 ; the mean and standard deviation for the total score of mindful parenting were 120.86 ± 9.18 ; the mean and standard deviation for the mindful discipline dimension of mindful parenting were 105.70 ± 8.07 ; the acceptance of the child dimension from mindful parenting was 32.80 ± 7.04 ; the total mean and standard deviation for family relationships were 92.67 ± 21.78 ; the mean and standard deviation for the relationship with one's own family from family relationships were 35.55 ± 8.96 ; the relationship with the spouse from family relationships was 20.82 ± 8.07 ; the relationship with the spouse's family from family relationships was 35.87 ± 10.68 ; the certainty dimension from reflective functioning was 18.77 ± 5.48 ; the ambiguity dimension from reflective

functioning was 24.50 ± 6.19 ; and the balanced reflective functioning dimension was 30.15 ± 7.87 . As observed in Table 1, all predictor variables except for the variables related to one's own family and spouse, and certainty and ambiguity, had a significant relationship with the emotional social adaptation of autistic children. Among the predictor variables that had a significant relationship with emotional social adaptation, the mindful discipline variable had a significant negative relationship with emotional social adaptation, and the other variables had a significant positive relationship.

Table 2 shows the stepwise regression analysis results for emotional social adaptation based on mindful parenting and its dimensions, relationship with the spouse, and balanced reflective functioning.

Table 2

Stepwise Regression Analysis for Predicting Emotional Social Adaptation Based on Mindful Parenting and its Dimensions, Relationship with Spouse, and Balanced Reflective Functioning

Step	Variables Entered into Equation	Regression Coefficient	Squared Regression Coefficient	Net Share	F	df1	df2	Significance
1	Mindful Parenting	0.426	0.181	0.181	43.86	1	198	.000
2	Relationship with Spouse	0.479	0.230	0.048	12.33	1	197	.001
3	Acceptance of the Child	0.500	0.250	0.020	5.34	1	196	.002

As seen in Table 2, among the examined variables, in the first step, mindful parenting entered the regression equation with a regression coefficient of 0.426 and was capable of

predicting 18.1% of the variance in emotional social adaptation ($p < 0.000$). In the second step, the relationship with the spouse, with a regression coefficient of 0.479,

entered the regression equation alongside mindful parenting, capable of predicting 23.0% of the variance in emotional social adaptation and explaining 4.8% of the variance by itself ($P < 0.002$). In the third step, acceptance of the child

with a regression coefficient of 0.500 entered the model and, alongside mindful parenting and the relationship with the spouse, could predict 25.0% of the variance in emotional social adaptation and explain 2.0% of the variance by itself.

Table 3

One-Way ANOVA for Evaluating the Significance of the Share of Control, Parent-Child Anxiety, and Concern

Variable	N	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Mindful Parenting						
Relationship with Spouse						
Regression		1252.81	1	1252.81	83.86	.000
Residual		5655.26	198	28.56		
Total		6908.08	199			
Mindful Parenting						
Relationship with Spouse						
Regression		1586.13	2	793.06	29.35	.000
Residual		5321.94	197	27.01		
Total		6908.08	198			
Mindful Parenting						
Regression		1277.518	3	575.83	21.78	.000
Residual		5180.56	196	26.43		
Total		6908.08	199			

As observed in Table 3, the predicted shares at each stage are statistically significant and reliable ($p < 0.000$). Table 5 shows the regression equation coefficients for predicting

emotional social adaptation based on control, parental anxiety, and concern.

Table 4

Raw and Standardized Regression Coefficients for Predicting Emotional Social Adaptation Based on Control, Parent-Child Anxiety, and Concern

Variable	Raw Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	T	Significance
Constant	28.313	4.77	-	5.93	.000
Mindful Parenting	0.904	0.187	0.404	4.82	.000
Relationship with Spouse	-0.200	0.059	-0.225	-3.37	.001
Acceptance of the Child	0.347	0.170	0.165	2.036	.043

As seen in Table 4, the raw and standardized prediction coefficients of the regression equation for emotional social adaptation based on mindful parenting, relationship with the spouse, and acceptance of the child are presented and are statistically significant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to predict the emotional social adaptation of children with autism based on mindful parenting and its dimensions, family relationships and their dimensions, and the dimensions of reflective functioning. The results showed that all predictor variables, except for

variables related to one's own family and spouse, and certainty and ambiguity from the dimensions of reflective functioning, had a significant relationship with the emotional social adaptation of children with autism. Among the predictor variables that had a significant relationship with emotional social adaptation, the mindful discipline variable had a significant negative relationship with emotional social adaptation, while the other variables had a significant positive relationship.

No previous research with this title has been conducted to compare and contrast the results with those of other studies. However, various studies have emphasized the critical role

of motherhood and parenting in child development and the reduction of behavioral disorders (5, 14, 15, 17, 19, 21) that specifically highlighted the role of parenting in the psychological status of children with autism. The findings of this study are consistent with those studies that some parenting constructs are related to the social psychological status of children.

In explaining the relationship between mindful parenting and emotional social adaptation, it can be said that emotional social adaptation is the ability to form satisfying relationships and depends on the individual's acceptance of conditions. This condition is weak and flawed in children with autism (2, 16). On the other hand, mindful parenting means that parents, including mothers, are present with kindness and acceptance in daily interactions with their child. In this type of parenting, mothers feel more responsible, take steps one by one, live in the moment with their children, feel closeness and warmth, accept their parenting experiences, and pay attention to their children's needs (12); therefore, it seems that these parents, including mothers, prioritize and think about their children first; this provides a valuable opportunity for children with autism, who are weak in relationships, to experience more security alongside their mothers. Secondly, the children of these mothers show better emotional social development than other children, which can encourage the mother to practice mindful parenting and reinforce this state in mothers.

Explaining the significant positive relationship between the relationship with the spouse and emotional social adaptation, it indicates a positive, empathetic, supportive, and trustworthy relationship between the spouses, showing that spouses understand each other well and can solve their problems despite conflicts; their communications are intimate and cohesive. Therefore, in the context of their children's issues, they support each other and stand together (13); thus, problems may appear smaller to them, and they may better assess the emotional social development of their child, or the cohesion and strength of the marital subsystem may have helped them better manage their child's issues, resulting in better emotional social development for their child.

The results also showed that accepting the child, one of the dimensions of mindful parenting, plays an important role in the child's emotional social adaptation. Accepting the

child means not judging the child, their states, behaviors, and developmental stages; therefore, such a mother avoids less from her child's experiences, is well beside her child, accepts the difficult conditions of his life as part of life and has a plan for it (20); therefore, it is expected that the child's emotional social adaptation improves, and such a mother may assess her child's emotional social development better due to accepting the child.

The results further indicated that balanced reflective functioning in mothers also has a significant positive relationship with children's emotional social adaptation. Explaining these results, reflective functioning refers to individuals' capacity for internal attention to others and attention to themselves from others' perspectives. Some people consider others' views about themselves and their views about others as definite and indisputable, another group in reflective functioning are those who are ambiguous about themselves and others and have no proper understanding, thus both groups suffer from weak relationships with others. The third group are those who have a middle ground in understanding themselves and others, have hypotheses, and give themselves and others a chance to reach more precise understanding (El-Burley et al., 2020). Therefore, it's possible these mothers understand their child's suffering and, as a result, can better manage the situation. On the other hand, these mothers have good relationships, and thus their energy is spent on parenting instead of others and interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, appropriate communications in the form of social supports for these mothers may cause them to experience a better psychological state overall, which can affect their children's emotional social adaptation.

Overall, considering these results, it can be said that the states of the mother can affect the emotional social adaptation of children with autism. Changes in the mother's mindfulness, her relationship with her spouse, and acceptance of the child have the predictive power to improve emotional social adaptation.

Like other research, this study had limitations, such as the unclear effect of the disorder's severity, the mother's age, and the number of children on the relationships between predictor variables and emotional social adaptation, which could be subjects of future research. Also, the non-random selection of the sample was another limitation of this study.

Finally, the population of this study consisted of students with autism, so generalizations to non-autistic children should be avoided.

Authors' Contributions

K.P. led the concept and design of the study, as well as the drafting and critical revision of the manuscript. S.K. and S.S. were involved in the acquisition of data and the analysis and interpretation of the data. B.K. contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content and provided expertise in sports science. K.I. oversaw the statistical analysis, contributed to the study design, and played a key role in supervising the study. All authors contributed to the writing of the manuscript, reviewed the final version, and approved it for publication.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethics Considerations

The study placed a high emphasis on ethical considerations. Informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring they are fully aware of the nature of the study and their role in it. Confidentiality strictly maintained, with data anonymized to protect individual privacy. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for

research with human subjects as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

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