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Comparing the Effectiveness of Positive-Oriented Resilience Training and Mentalization-Based Training in Improving the Components of Parent-Child Interaction in Mothers of Mentally Retarded Children

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Abstract

Parent-child interaction is central to child development, particularly for children with intellectual disabilities. The quality of this relationship can influence children's emotional, social, and behavioral development and may be especially important in families facing persistent caregiving challenges. This study compared the effectiveness of positive resilience training and mentalization-based training in improving parent-child interaction among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities. A quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test design with a control group was used. The study population included 4,500 mothers of children with intellectual disabilities in Tabriz. One of five welfare centers was selected through cluster sampling, after which purposive sampling was used to identify 45 eligible mothers who met the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria. Participants were then randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group. Parent-child interaction was assessed using the Pianta Parent-Child Interaction Questionnaire, which measures closeness, dependence, and conflict. Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance and Bonferroni post-hoc tests in SPSS version 26 to evaluate the effects of the interventions and compare the study groups. The findings showed that both positive resilience training and mentalization-based training significantly improved parent-child interaction. Both interventions increased closeness and dependence while reducing conflict, with statistically significant effects at $p < 0.01$. However, mentalization-based training was more effective than positive resilience training in increasing closeness and reducing conflict. These differences were statistically significant, with stronger effects observed for mentalization-based training in both components. Overall, the results demonstrate that both interventions can support healthier parent-child relationships in families of children with intellectual disabilities. Positive resilience training may strengthen mothers' coping abilities, communication, and adaptive parenting strategies, thereby improving relational functioning. Mentalization-based training appears especially effective in helping mothers better understand their children's thoughts, emotions, needs, and behavior, which may improve empathy, parental sensitivity, and mutual understanding. The study therefore suggests that mentalization-based approaches should be considered in programs designed to improve parent-child interaction, particularly when the primary goals are to enhance emotional closeness and reduce conflict. At the same time, positive resilience training remains a valuable intervention for supporting mothers in managing caregiving stress and promoting more positive, supportive, and adaptive parent-child dynamics in everyday family life.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Intellectual disability involves impairments in general intellectual abilities that affect adaptive functioning across conceptual, social, and practical domains and limit the ability to manage everyday tasks. Raising a child with intellectual disabilities can create distinctive challenges for families and caregivers. Mothers may experience difficulties in communication, behavior management, and meeting the child's specific needs, as well as psychological distress, social stigma, guilt, isolation, anxiety, and depression.

Parent-child interaction plays a crucial role in child development, particularly among children with intellectual disabilities. Its quality is an important predictor of emotional and social development and influences children's physical, emotional, social, and attachment-related growth. Difficult interactions may destabilize the caregiving environment, especially when children display challenging behaviors or parents experience persistent stress. Over time, disturbed interactions may contribute to insecure attachment and social, physical, and psychological difficulties. Mothers may also show heightened stress reactivity, making calm and effective interaction more difficult.

Effective psychological and educational interventions can therefore have important implications for the well-being and development of both parents and children in these families. Because the quality of the parent-child relationship is not fixed, appropriate training may improve important relational components and help mothers respond more effectively to continuing caregiving demands. Positive resilience training focuses on resilience, psychological well-being, positive emotions, personal strengths, optimism, adaptive coping, and social support. Mentalization-based training focuses on understanding one's own behavior and that of others through underlying mental states, including thoughts, emotions, beliefs, wishes, and intentions. This capacity is related to emotional regulation, parental sensitivity, secure attachment, and reflective functioning. This study compared the effectiveness of positive resilience training and mentalization-based training in improving parent-child interaction among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities.

Method

This research employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test assessments and a control group. The study population consisted of 4,500 mothers of children with intellectual disabilities in Tabriz. Cluster sampling was first used to select one of five welfare centers. Purposive sampling was then employed to select mothers whose children and circumstances aligned most closely with the research objectives. Forty-five mothers meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group.

The Pianta Parent-Child Interaction Questionnaire (1994), a well-established measure of parent-child relationships, was used to evaluate closeness, dependence, and conflict at the assessment stages. Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted using SPSS version 26 to assess the effects of the interventions on parent-child interaction components.

Results

Both positive resilience training and mentalization-based training were significantly effective in improving the examined components of parent-child interaction, specifically by

enhancing closeness and dependence and reducing conflict within the parent-child relationship. Both interventions significantly affected these components across the pre-test and post-test assessments ($p < 0.01$). However, mentalization-based training was more effective than positive resilience training in enhancing closeness and reducing conflict ($p < 0.001$ vs. $p < 0.01$ in both comparisons).

Discussion

The findings highlight the importance of tailored interventions for supporting parent-child interaction among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities. Both positive resilience training and mentalization-based training were effective in improving closeness, dependence, and conflict.

Positive resilience training may help mothers cope more effectively with stressful caregiving situations, strengthen positive communication, and develop adaptive parenting strategies. It may also support children's abilities and independence while maintaining appropriate guidance and emotional support. Improved communication and conflict-resolution skills may further reduce tension within the relationship.

Mentalization-based training showed greater effectiveness in enhancing closeness and reducing conflict. This advantage may reflect its emphasis on understanding the thoughts, emotions, needs, and intentions underlying the child's behavior. By improving empathy, parental sensitivity, and mutual understanding, it may help mothers respond more appropriately and build stronger emotional connections while reducing misunderstandings that lead to conflict.

These findings support incorporating mentalization-based approaches into intervention programs designed to improve parent-child interaction in families of children with intellectual disabilities. Overall, both interventions were effective, but mentalization-based training appeared more beneficial when the main goals were to strengthen emotional closeness and reduce conflict.

Author Contributions: Azmoudeh was responsible for overseeing the overall research process. Shadi Zavareh and Kashefi-Mehr were responsible for designing the study and collecting and analyzing the data. Mesrabadi discussed the results, and all authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethical Approval: This study was conducted with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch (Ethics Code: IR.IAU.TABRIZ.REC.1401.207). All stages of the research were carried out in accordance with ethical standards and principles in research.