

Mindfulness-based program for children with autism spectrum disorder and their parents: Direct and long-term improvements

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Background. Children with autism experience difficulties in social interaction, restrictive behavior patterns, and neurocognitive deficits. Also, they are more stressed and suffer from comorbid anxiety, depression, and attention problems. In addition, their parents experience increased parenting stress, which leads to mental health problems and deteriorated parenting behavior. Previous research shows that mindfulness-based programs could decrease mental health- and attention problems in various populations, and is hypothesized to improve social communication. We examined the effects of a mindfulness-based program for children with autism and their parents. More specifically, long-term effects, effects on social communication and common comorbid problems, as well as parenting stress were assessed, in addition to objective computerized testing of attention.

Methods. Forty-five children with autism (aged 8-19) and their parents participated. The 9-weeks mindfulness-based program MYmind, with specific adaptations for autism, consisted of parallel sessions for children and parents. Repeated measures were conducted at pre-and post-intervention, and at 2-month and 1-year follow-up.

Results. Children's social communication problems decreased over time, and their emotional and behavioral functioning improved. However, children did not report significant changes in mindful awareness. Results were inconsistent across occasions; improvements reported by children were most substantial at 2-month follow-up and only partly remained at 1-year follow-up, while children's improvements as reported by parents were present on all occasions. Parents reported improved emotional and behavioral functioning, improved parenting, and increased mindful awareness on all occasions for themselves. Further, parents' own social communication problems were reduced at post intervention. Preliminary results showed an increase for the alerting score, a reduction for the executive score, and no change for the orienting score of an attentional network test.

Conclusions. This study suggests that children with autism with a wide variety of ages and their parents can benefit from a mindfulness-based program by improving children's autism symptoms and common comorbid problems, parents' mental health problems, parenting, and parental mindful awareness. Most improvements seem to last on the long term. However, differences in the attention network are conflicting. Overall, the results imply that a mindfulness-based program may support families in coping with the demanding consequences of autism.