

# research snapshot

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## Emotion Regulation In Children with Autism

### What is this research about?

Emotion regulation is an area of difficulty for children with autism. A child's ability to use mental, physical and behavioural strategies to gain awareness and alter their own feelings and expression is key to navigating the social environment and goal-directed behaviour. Meltdowns, aggression, overexcitement or frustration are possible early signs of emotional dysregulation, and may lead to more internalizing and externalizing symptoms, such as withdrawal or aggression, later in life. In this study, the researchers wanted to see if emotional regulation changes over time in young children with autism, and if emotional regulation scores would predict changes in social and behavioural functioning later on.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 108 children with autism and their caregivers through community agencies, schools, and autism-specific events. The participants (average age = 5.7, average IQ of 90.3, ranging from 43-123) were assessed twice, one school year (i.e. ten months) apart. The researchers measured the child's emotional regulation capacity, behavioural functioning, social, language, and academic skills. Autism severity was also measured.

### What you need to know:

Poor emotional regulation abilities predict social and behavioral difficulties later on, making it a possible domain to target earlier in development that may benefit other domains of functioning later on.

### What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that emotional regulation ability did not change over time. Emotional regulation was not related to cognitive and language skills, but it did vary with autism severity, social skills and behavioural functioning. Social skills and behavioral functioning did not change much over time, however, having more ability to label and express fitting emotions in social settings did predict better social skills and less externalizing behaviours 10 months later. Further, the inability to keep mood constant (e.g. having rapid fluctuations, being overexcited) predicted more internalizing behavioural problems 10 months later.

### How can you use this research?

Emotional regulation may be an earlier target for intervention that could benefit other domains. Since emotional regulation abilities are stable in early school years without any targeted intervention, focused efforts in this area are needed to bring about change. Also, IQ scores did not protect against difficulty with emotional regulation, meaning that children with all levels of cognitive ability may benefit from such support.



## About the Researchers

Berkovits (PhD) is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Psychology at the University of California in Los Angeles.

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Blacher (PhD) is a Professor and Chair of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California in Riverside.

## Citation

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## Keywords

Emotion Regulation, Children, School, Social, Behaviour, Function, Intervention

This research summary was written by Dr. Jonathan Lai for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at [asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries](http://asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries)

## About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at [asdmentalhealth.ca](http://asdmentalhealth.ca)

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