



# Parental emotional management benefits family relationships: A randomized controlled trial in Hong Kong, China



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## ABSTRACT

There is a shortage of culturally appropriate, brief, preventive interventions designed to be sustainable and acceptable for community participants in nonwestern cultures. Parents' ability to regulate their emotions is an important factor for psychological well-being of the family. In Chinese societies, emotional regulation may be more important in light of the cultural desirability of maintaining harmonious family relationships. The objectives of our randomized controlled trial were to test the effectiveness of our Effective Parenting Programme (EPP) to increase the use of emotional management strategies (primary outcome) and enhance the parent-child relationship (secondary outcome). We utilized design characteristics that promoted recruitment, retention, and intervention sustainability. We randomized a community sample of 412 Hong Kong middle- and low-income mothers of children aged 6–8 years to the EPP or attention control group. At 3, 6 and 12-month follow up, the Effective Parent Program group reported greater increases in the use of emotion management strategies during parent-child interactions, with small to medium effect size, and lower negative affect and greater positive affect, subjective happiness, satisfaction with the parent-child relationship, and family harmony, compared to the control group, with small to medium effect size. Our results provided evidence of effectiveness for a sustainable, preventive, culturally appropriate, cognitive behaviorally-based emotion management program, in a non-clinical setting for Chinese mothers.

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## 1. Introduction

Preventive interventions with universal targets and small effect size create a larger public health impact on the population than selectively targeted interventions with larger effect size (Spoth, Redmond, & Shin, 1998). However, there is a shortage of effective brief interventions that target risk factors that precede a host of common difficulties. Interventions that are effective in low income groups and in cultures outside North America are even more needed. Parental emotion management problems were identified by parents in Hong Kong as an important area of intervention. Poor

emotion management has been linked to numerous negative outcomes in children. We describe a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of an intervention to increase the use of brief cognitive behavioral emotion management strategies, decrease negative affect, and enhance positive affect, and increase subjective happiness, satisfaction with the parent-child relationship and family harmony among Hong Kong Chinese parents. The intervention was designed to be acceptable to local busy mothers and preventive for a healthy population to manage a self-identified risk factor that is associated with a broad range of negative outcomes. Our intervention is innovative in that it was developed and implemented in a non-western culture, and bridges the gap between psychology and public health by its brief, cost-effective and highly sustainable design intended to provide early interventions in healthy populations (Spijkers, Jansen, de Meer, & Reijneveld, 2010).

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### 1.1. Study aims

The aim was to test the effectiveness of an intervention to enhance the emotional management skills of the parents of Chinese children 6–8 years old in Hong Kong. Our study hypotheses were that, in comparison to control participants, parents receiving training in emotion management skills would report a) greater increases in the frequency and perceived use of emotion management skills (primary outcomes) and b) greater reductions in negative affect and greater enhancements in positive affect, satisfaction with parent–child relationship, subjective happiness and family harmony (secondary outcomes), from pre-to post-intervention and from pre-intervention to each of the follow-up assessments. After the first pre-intervention assessment, the intervention participants were randomized by group to receive either one, two or no boosters before the 3-month post-intervention assessment. We hypothesized that adding a strong (two boosters) or weak (one booster) booster would increase the long-term follow-up outcomes in comparison to the group with no booster session. From the result of our pilot trial above conducted on a similar population, we projected moderate effect sizes.

#### 1.1.1. Context of the study and the target of parental emotional regulation

The current study was part of a larger project whose overarching goal was to enhance health, happiness, and harmony among local Hong Kong families, the FAMILY Project. The aim was to develop and implement new preventive interventions that were not only locally relevant, but with the potential to reach and be acceptable to a large proportion of the Chinese community (see Stewart, Fabrizio, Hirschmann, & Lam, 2012 for details). Qualitative research done early in the development phase indicated that Chinese parents identified difficulties with regulation of their emotions as having a negative impact on their relationships with their children (Stewart et al., 2012). In the earlier phase of the project, semi-structured group interviews with parents of primary school-aged children in Hong Kong revealed that parents experienced a significant rise in negative emotions as a result of conflicts with their children entering primary school (e.g., conflict over schoolwork and academic performance), which posed a threat to overall family harmony. These parents reported a subsequent loss of control over their emotions which led to harsh parenting behaviors such as scolding, yelling, and even hitting. Parents told us that they wanted to learn positive (versus harsh/punitive) strategies to deal with their child's problem behaviors but did not want to compromise their child's academic success. In particular, they wanted help with managing their negative emotions and staying calm when dealing with their child's misbehavior. Moreover, many parents were very busy with their jobs and housework and could not find time for multiple and lengthy sessions.

The current intervention was developed therefore, with the aim to target parental emotional regulation, using the shortest possible time. Parents' ability to regulate their emotions is recognized as an important factor in parenting and the psychological wellbeing of the family (Dix, 1991). For parents, emotion regulation involves monitoring, interpreting and controlling emotions and their expression during interactions with their children. Ineffective regulation of emotions may lead parents to experience or express excessive or insufficient emotions, such as anger, which may in turn interfere with adaptive parenting practices. Parental anger,

harshness, or negative expressivity, has been associated with child behavior problems and poor adjustment in North America and in China (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Chen, Zhou, Eisenberg, Valiente, & Wang, 2011; Renk, Phares, & Epps, 1999). Furthermore, lack of control over negative emotions can increase the risk of child maltreatment (Mammen, Kolko, & Pilonis, 2002; Peterson, Ewigman, & Vandiver, 1994; Rodriguez & Green, 1997).

Given the importance of parental emotion regulation, many parenting programs have an emphasis on assisting parents to control their negative emotions during parent–child interactions in addition to skill training (e.g., STAR, Fox, Fox, & Anderson, 1991; RETHINK; Fetsch, Schultz, & Wahler, 1999; Fetsch, Yang, & Pettit, 2008). By enhancing parental emotion management skills, these programs reduced the intensity and frequency of parental anger and prevent the occurrence of harsh parenting practices, including physical aggression towards children. While many of these programs focused on at-risk or high-risk parents, there has been a recent shift towards a preventive approach (Spijkers et al., 2010; Spoth et al., 1998).

To our knowledge, all of these programs have been developed in the West. Even though the importance of developing an intervention from within a culture has been recognized (Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, & Misra, 1996), family-based programs are usually imported into the new culture, typically with translations and locally adapted examples (Lau, 2006) without taking into consideration cultural norms and values (Spoth, Kavanagh, & Dishion, 2002). For example, the willingness to take on an extended parenting program may be higher in cultures where mental health interventions are common and parents are well educated about their own role in their children's psychological outcomes. Furthermore, parents may be more willing to subordinate certain parental goals such as academic achievement and hard work, to others such as child's self-esteem and self expression, in some cultures, but not in others. These differences would have implications for the motivation enhancement and manualization of a program.

### 1.2. Culture's influence on the role of emotions in interpersonal relationships

According to Tsai's (2007) affect valuation theory, individuals from different cultures may place different values on emotional experience and expression. In Chinese culture, qualitative research suggests that strong emotions (both positive and negative) are considered disruptive and something to be controlled rather than expressed (Bond, 1993) and Chinese individuals, more than European-Americans, may place a higher value on positive affect states with low intensity such as calmness (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). Chinese individuals may be particularly motivated to regulate their emotions when interacting with their family members so as to maintain the all important value of family harmony (Bond, 1993). Maintaining harmony within the family and fulfilling one's social duties is considered the ideal (Kwan, Hui, & McGee, 2010; Leung & Au, 2010). People from the Confucian cultural tradition, such as in China and Hong Kong, tend to define themselves in the context of their relationships with others, such that the self cannot be separated from the social context (Kwan et al., 2010). Modulating and controlling the expression of intense emotions such as anger, sadness and anxiety is important culturally among Chinese individuals and may be one strategy used to maintain harmonious relationships with

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