

# ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG CAREGIVERS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN MELAKA, MALAYSIA

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**Abstract** - The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological well-being is gaining more important as it is believed that caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) who can achieve higher EI and greater psychological well-being will be more effective in caring and parenting children with ASD. This study aimed to explore the level of agreement on the EI and psychological well-being among caregivers of children with ASD in Melaka, Malaysia. The study employed an exploratory descriptive survey methodology, which involved a sample of 99 caregivers from selected children development centres. The participants were selected using a simple random sampling technique. The research employed a survey instrument comprising of questionnaires that have been adapted to include the items featured in the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT). Meanwhile, the psychological well-being instrument was adapted from Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWBS). Findings revealed that the highest mean on the level of agreement of EI was recorded for facilitating emotions. Meanwhile, the highest mean on the level of agreement for psychological well-being was for the component of purpose in life. As all the mean scores are above 4.00, it is concluded that they are all equally important to ensure greater EI and psychological well-being among caregivers of children with ASD. The findings in this study are envisaged to guide stakeholders and policy makers to provide program support for parents to share experiences and provide support among those caregivers of children with ASD.

**Keywords:** autism spectrum disorders, emotional intelligence, caregivers of children with autism, psychological well-being

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### INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence refers to the capacity to identify, comprehend, and regulate one's own emotions, and it has been shown to be a highly reliable indicator of an individual's psychological well-being (Singh & Kaur, 2019). Additionally, it assumes the function of influencing other emotions. Essentially, this refers to the recognition that emotions can influence an individual's actions and impact others in either a constructive or destructive manner, and the acquisition of skills to regulate these emotions (Singh & Kaur, 2019).

The difficulties associated with raising children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) encompass a range of factors, such as the need for caregivers to adjust their own behaviours and attitudes,

effective communication with the children, cultivating positive interactions, and managing the emotional well-being of the caregivers themselves. Additionally, the support of individuals in the immediate social network, acceptance of the condition, and maintaining a positive attitude are the most important aspects of manoeuvring the challenges of raising children with ASD (Lisut & Shuib, 2019). Researchers reported that caregivers experience high level of stress whereby this condition can disturb their emotion towards the children. Uncontrolled emotion can cause the children to have a low self-esteem and withdraw themselves from their environment. These negative impacts can be minimised when the caregivers have good emotional intelligence.

Caregivers often experience extra stress for caring a child with ASD and other issues related to the child's disability such as financial constraints in providing support for children with ASD. Other than that, caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders reporting a decrease in their psychological well-being (Sullivan, 2017) that differentiate them from caregivers of children with different disabilities (Amireh, 2019) and significantly more than caregivers of typical developing (TD) children (Basri & Nik Hashim, 2019; Porter & Loveland, 2019; Amireh, 2019; Lee, Ong, Lee, et al., 2017). Due to a lack of information regarding autism spectrum disorders, members of society have had to rely on traditional and lay beliefs to explain the cause of this type of disabilities.

Caregivers need support related to parenting such as knowledge (information need), social network (relational support), skills (parental guidance and daily management), material resources (material needs), and trust (emotional support) (Derguy, M'Bailara, Michel & Bouvard, 2015). Adequate acquisition of knowledge, social support, proficiency, material resources, and trust can enable caregivers to actively participate in enhancing a more pleasant family dynamic, enhancing positive emotions, minimising stress levels, and preventing the possibility of low or poor psychological well-being. Thus, the objectives of this study are to identify the level of agreement on the four components of emotional intelligence skills among caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders, and to identify the level of agreement on the six components of psychological well-being among caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

*Emotional Intelligence.* A pioneering model of emotional intelligence that is Reuven Bar-On, applied the term "emotional quotient" (EQ) in the 1980s (Bar-On, 1997). In 1990, Peter Salovey and John Mayer used the term "emotional intelligence" and defined as "a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action" (Salovey & Mayer, 1997, p. 190). Gardner's intrapersonal intelligence was included in Mayer and Salovey's (1997) Emotional Intelligence model. Mayer and Salovey (1997) described emotional intelligence as "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (p. 10).

Nevertheless, Daniel Goleman suggested that human intelligence is overly narrowly defined, disregarding abilities that influence how people perform in life. He transformed Mayer and Salovey's model of emotional intelligence into his own. Emotional intelligence, according to Goleman (1995), "refers to the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, motivating ourselves, and managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (p. 317). In the workplace, emotional intelligence complements and works in tandem with intellectual intelligence (p. 317).

People must be able to consider and make decisions in order to possess emotional intelligence. Additionally, they strive to behave in a manner that will benefit themselves and others (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). Thus, emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one's emotions through a subtle and rational process, including constructive thought, emotion differentiation, and attaining effective results. Consequently, the ability to self-direct and self-monitor the emotional mind is an essential component of emotional intelligence.

The Emotional Learning System was developed by Darwin Nelson and Gary Low (2003) to facilitate personally intentional change or behaviour. They stated that "without intelligent self-direction and monitoring, emotions naturally lead to a habit of reactivity" and that "practising the step-by-step process will help people change the emotional reactivity habit, rather than reacting to cues from others or the environment" (p. 4). Therefore, the role of emotional intelligence is important as it is believed that caregivers of children with ASD who can achieve higher emotional intelligence will be more effective in caring and parenting their child. This relationship was tested through the following hypothesis:

*The role of emotional intelligence is important among caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), H<sub>1</sub>*

*Psychological Well-Being.* According to Bradburn's (1969) definition, psychological well-being refers to an individual's positive psychological functioning and serves as an indicator of their psychological health. Ryff (1989) demonstrated that psychological well-being is positively associated with life satisfaction and happiness. Psychological well-being is a crucial factor that contributes to an individual's future happiness. This aspect is influenced by their experiences and level of education (Ryff, 2014). Additionally, Mock et al. (2019) suggest that an individual's ability to cope with challenges and adapt to their environment can also stimulate their psychological well-being).

The term of psychological well-being is originated from the belief that health encompasses more than mere absence of physical ailments (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The primary objective of individuals is to improve their psychological well-being, which entails the need to experience a sense of psychological enhancement. This is linked to an individual's perception of their personal emotional expression and daily routines, as highlighted in studies conducted by Duan, Guan, and Gan (2016) and Thomson, Lockyegianettr, Camic, and Chatterjee (2018). Ryff's (1989) theory of psychological well-being was founded upon a multidimensional framework of psychological well-being that was grounded in theoretical inquiry into the typical progression of personality development. It consists of six subscales such as autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life, personal growth, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989). Therefore, this study fills the gap empirically testing through the hypothesis below:

*The role of psychological well-being is important among caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), H<sub>2</sub>*

*Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Well-Being among Caregivers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders.* The concept of emotional intelligence has garnered significant interest as a subject of research and intervention due to its potential as a learnable skill set that can enhance coping mechanisms and foster positive mental health outcomes (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2014). The study conducted by Mehmood and Gulzar (2014) aimed to evaluate the relationship between emotional intelligence and two key variables of psychological well-being, namely depression and self-esteem. The findings of the study indicated a significant association between emotional intelligence and self-esteem, with a positive correlation being observed.

Conversely, a negative correlation was observed between emotional intelligence and depression. According to Ramya's (2014) research, there is evidence to suggest that emotional intelligence abilities and traits have a positive impact on both physical and psychological health. This is because emotional intelligence assists in making sound decisions during stressful situations, which in turn can indirectly improve one's psychological well-being (Rathakrishnan et al., 2019). Individuals possessing high emotional intelligence exhibit a greater capacity for understanding and controlling their emotions in a significant manner, thereby demonstrating an increased ability to mitigate the onset of psychopathologies, such as depression, anxiety, and other disruptive emotional and mental health issues (Mehmood & Gulzar, 2014).

Furthermore, Ugoani and Ewuzie (2013) posit that emotional responses such as joy, love, happiness, tenderness, enthusiasm, excitement, pleasure, fear, anxiety, and others, which have an impact on

the psychological well-being of caregivers, can persist for an extended period and shape their perspective on life. However, individuals with lack of ability to effectively manage their emotions may succumb to their emotional impulses. Besides, individuals who cause negative emotions or distress in others in specific circumstances may be perceived as uncultured or clumsy and consequently, be resented (Ugoani&Ewuzie, 2013).

In Malaysia, most interventions offered by psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists are aimed to improving children's behaviour or facilitating their development of skills. However, although research indicates that family-centred therapies with children are more successful than child-focused interventions, the needs of caregivers are frequently disregarded (McConkey, 2020). In addition, it is essential for these interventions that addressing the autism spectrum disorders in children not only prioritise the reduction of core symptoms, but also take into account the mental well-being of the family (Lee et al., 2017).

Some caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders have suicidal ideation due to lack of social support (Akram et al., 2019). Other than that, caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders reported that the challenges are daunting and often isolating, as their children can have meltdowns, outbursts, and intense needs. This scenario places caregivers in a state of ongoing challenges that can have a detrimental impact on their psychological well-being.

The significance of psychological well-being lies in its constituent skills and perceptions that are essential for effectively participating in important relationships, effectively navigating one's surroundings, and achieving one's full potential throughout the course of one's life (Bowman, 2010). Given the challenges and emotional strain experienced by carers of children with autism spectrum disorders, it is vital to study the extent to which caregivers that achieve higher in emotional intelligence experience better psychological well-being.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed an exploratory descriptive-survey research methodology, which involved a sample of 105 caregivers from selected child development centres. The participants were selected using a simple random sampling technique. Participants were requested to send completed questionnaires by personal and group WhatsApp or Telegram. Three respondents failed to return the questionnaires, and were excluded due to missing data. Therefore, ninety-nine (99) respondents were finally included in this study.

The independent variable of this study is the emotional intelligence of caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders. In order to measure emotional intelligence construct, 33 items developed by Schutte et al. (1998) were used. This construct consists of Managing Emotions (ME) (8 items), Perceiving Emotions (PE) (10 items), Understanding Emotions (UE) (9 items), and Facilitating Emotions (FE) (6 items). Respondents were asked to rate each item across a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.86, reported by Malinauskas and Malinauskiene (2018) which indicate that the reliability value of the variables tested is high.

Psychological well-being instrument consisting of 42 items developed by Ryff (1989) were known as Psychological Well-being Scale (RPWBS). The RPWBS consists of a series of items reflecting six components of psychological well-being (PWB) such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989). The participants were asked to rate each item on a 5 point-Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach alpha for the instrument is 0.84 (Malinauskas &Malinauskiene, 2018) which shows that the reliability value of the variables tested is high. The trust on charitable funding is the mediator of this study and consists of 5 items developed by Mat Isa (2018).

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 represents the demographic profile of the respondents for this study. Majority of the respondents were female with 83 (83.8%) while male respondents were 16 (16.1%). For the age of the respondents, there were four categories that include below 30 years old, 30 until 39 years old, 40 until 49 years old, and 50 until 59 years old. Age 30 until 39 years old were the highest respondents' group for this study with 52 (52.5%), followed by respondents below 30 years old with 24 (24.2%), respondents between 40 until 49 years old with 19 (19.2%) and respondents between 50 until 59 years old with only 4 (4.0%) respectively. Besides that, the researchers include the demographic background of marital status. Majority of the respondent's marital status were married with 90 (90.9%) followed by single with 7 (7.1%) and divorced with 2 (2.0%).

The researchers also include the education level of the respondents. 38 (38.4%) of the respondents hold Diploma/Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) level, followed by 32 (32.3%) respondents with a Bachelor Degree, 16 (16.2%) respondents with Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and 13 (13.1%) respondents with Master/PhD. Next, the demographic background of occupation sector of respondents. 36 (36.4%) of the respondents were working with the government sector. Meanwhile, 35 (35.4%) respondents were unemployed, 15 (15.2%) of the respondents were working with the private sector and 13 (13.1%) of the respondents were self-employed. Finally, the household income of the respondents. Majority of respondents' household income between RM2,500.00 to RM5,000.00 (35.4%) and followed by 34 (34.3%) of the household income that below RM2,500.00 and 7 (7.1%) of the respondents with household income above RM10,000.00.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile

VARIABLES	FREQUENCIES	PERCENTAGE
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	16	16.1
Female	83	83.8
<b>Age</b>		
Below 30 years old	24	24.2
30 - 39 years old	52	52.5
40 - 49 years old	19	19.2
50 - 59 years old	4	4.0
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	90	90.9
Single	7	7.1
Divorced	2	2.0
<b>Education</b>		
Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia	16	16.2
Diploma/Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia	38	38.4
Bachelor Degree	32	32.3

Master / PhD.	13	13.1
<b>Occupation Sector</b>		
Government	36	36.4
Private	15	15.2
Self-employed	13	13.1
Unemployed	35	35.4
<b>Household Income</b>		
Below RM2,500.00	34	34.3
RM2,500.00 - RM5,000.00	35	35.4
RM5,000.00 - RM7,500.00	12	12.1
RM7,500.00 - RM10,000.00	11	11.1
Above RM10,000.00	7	7.1

Source: Authors

The result for normality shows that all data are normal since the value for skewness and kurtosis are within the range as suggested by Pallant (2005). The detail of the normality test for the variables is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Normality Test

Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis
Managing Emotions	.003	-.711
Perceiving Emotions	.242	.172
Understanding Emotions	-.462	.362
Facilitating Emotions	-.515	.182
Autonomy	-.228	.704
Environmental Mastery	.418	.401
Personal Growth	.179	.411
Positive Relation with Others	.261	.300
Purpose in Life	.518	.723
Self-Acceptance	.475	.773

Source: Authors

The descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data by calculating the mean scores and standard deviations of the components of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. Table 3 and Table 4 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the components of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being respectively. The components of emotional intelligence include managing emotions, perceiving emotions, understanding emotions, and facilitating



emotions. Meanwhile, the psychological well-being components include autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

**i. Perception Level of Agreement of the Four Components of Emotional Intelligence among Caregivers of Children with ASD**

The mean scores as displayed in Table 3 shows that the highest perception on level of agreement for caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders on emotional intelligence was for facilitating emotions (M = 4.97, SD = .62) followed by understanding emotions (M = 4.54, SD = .56). The lowest mean was perceiving emotions (M = 4.06, SD = .59).

**Table 3:** Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Four Components of Emotional Intelligence Among Caregivers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Variables	M	SD
Managing Emotions	4.14	.68
Perceiving Emotions	4.06	.59
Understanding Emotions	4.54	.56
Facilitating Emotions	4.97	.62

Source: Authors

**ii. Perception Level of Agreement of the Six Components of Psychological Well-Being among Caregivers of Children with ASD**

The mean scores as displayed in Table 4 shows that the highest perception on level of agreement for caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders on psychological well-being was for purpose in life (M = 4.61, SD = .64) followed by self-acceptance (M = 4.53, SD = .62). The lowest mean was positive relations with others (M = 4.08, SD = .75).

**Table 4.** Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Six Components of Psychological Well-Being Among Caregivers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Variables	M	SD
Autonomy	4.50	.67
Environmental Mastery	4.37	.68
Personal Growth	4.28	.72
Positive Relations with Others	4.08	.75
Purpose in Life	4.61	.64
Self-Acceptance	4.53	.62

Source: Authors

The interpretation of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being scores in the form of the average score was based on Best’s principles (Thaoprom, 2004). The maximum-minimum scores were divided by three ranges of score such as high, medium, and low that is,  $5-1 / 3 = 1.33$ . The results are as follow:

- Scores 1.00 - 2.33 = Low
- Scores 2.34 - 3.67 = Medium
- Scores 3.68 - 5.00 = High



Based on the above scores, it can be concluded that the caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders level of agreement on the mean scores for all the respective components of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being were at a high level of agreement. For the components of emotional intelligence, majority of the respondent agreed that they can perceive and correctly express their emotions and other people’s emotions. Besides that, they have the capacity to understand emotions, emotional signals, and emotional language. They also agreed that they can use emotions in a way that facilitates thought with the highest mean ( $M = 4.97, SD = .62$ ).

Next, for the components of psychological well-being, majority of the respondent agreed that they have a clear direction in life, feel that they have their own meaning from their present and previous life experiences, believe in certain beliefs that give their life direction, and have a purpose in their life with the highest mean ( $M=4.61, SD=.64$ ). Furthermore, the results from the reliability analysis in Table 5 showed that all items of this instrument were reliable since Cronbach’s alpha value for all items is above 0.8. Therefore, all items are considered reliable.

**Table 5:** Result of Reliability Analysis

Variables	Cronbach’s Alpha (n=99)	N of items
Managing Emotions	.844	8
Perceiving Emotions	.860	10
Understanding Emotions	.818	9
Facilitating Emotions	.841	6
Autonomy	.853	6
Environmental Mastery	.861	6
Personal Growth	.850	6
Positive Relations with Others	.866	6
Purpose in Life	.850	6
Self-Acceptance	.848	6

Source: Authors

The survey results presented in this paper indicate that the variable of facilitating emotions received the highest mean score for the perception level of agreement regarding emotional intelligence. This was closely followed by the variable of understanding emotions. The lowest mean is for perceiving emotions of caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders. All the components are important to ensure successful in handling and caring for children with autism spectrum disorders. As all the mean scores for the four components of emotional intelligence are above 4.00, it is concluded that all the components are deemed equally important to ensure the caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders have a greater psychological well-being.

Additionally, the results of the survey indicate that the highest mean on the perception level of agreement for psychological well-being is for the variable of purpose in life followed by self-acceptance. The lowest mean is for positive relations with others among caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders. Each component is considered equally significant in guaranteeing success in managing and providing care for children with autism spectrum disorders, as well as in ensuring the well-being of caregivers. The present study suggests that the six components of psychological well-being show equal significance in promoting a higher level of psychological well-



being among caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders. This conclusion is drawn based on the observation that all six mean scores exceed 4.00, indicating their comparable contribution towards enabling caregivers to effectively manage the needs of their children.

### CONCLUSION

Studies have shown that the caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders are experiencing a high level of stress (Rosli et al., 2020; Catalano et al., 2018) significantly more than caregivers of typical developing (TD) children (Basri & Nik Hashim, 2019; Porter & Loveland, 2019) and children with other disabilities (Amireh, 2019). The presence of elevated levels of stress has been found to have a negative effect on the psychological well-being of caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders. Consequently, the significance of emotional intelligence in everyday life cannot be overstated as it plays a crucial role in fostering mental wellness and psychological well-being among caregivers across the lifespan.

Acquiring knowledge, particularly in emotional intelligence, is crucial for caregivers as it can enhance their self-concept and equip them with the ability to manage hardships and challenges in a more efficient and astute manner, ultimately resulting in a more contented life (Mehmood & Gulzar, 2014). Nonetheless, this facet has not been sufficiently examined among caregivers of children with autism in Malaysia. Caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders are aware of their psychological well-being that essential for effective handling and caregiving the child. However, the challenge is to ensure that all components of psychological well-being become a caregivers' repertoire of effective practice. The way to deal with this is by designing appropriate training, consultation services, workshop on handling special needs children and others that are closely related to the principles and behaviours of psychological well-being.

The findings suggest that caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders should use various techniques to enhance their effectiveness in caregiving and achieve better outcomes. There is a great need to improve purpose in life to enable them to maintain healthy relationships with their child and ensure progress or development according to the milestone. Therefore, caregivers need to be a positive individual with specific goals that directed towards the feeling of having a meaningful life. Aside from that, caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorders should have the sense that they have their own meaning from the current and past life experience, and that they have a goal or purpose in their lives.

On the other hand, individuals who do not have a purpose in life only have a few desires and goals, do not have a clear direction in life, did not learn from their experiences in the past, and do not have special abilities that make their lives meaningful. Acquiring emotional intelligence skills is a crucial factor in enhancing psychological well-being by enabling caregivers to manage negative thoughts and emotions. Failure to do so may result in adverse outcomes such as physical symptoms and mental health issues, including stress and impaired psychological well-being. The effective management of emotions, including but not limited to anger, anxiety, and happiness, is essential for promoting optimal psychological well-being. A positive correlation exists between the emotional intelligence of caregivers, and their ability to promote psychological well-being and effectively manage their children.

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