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Predicting the Mental Health of Mothers of Children with Intellectual Disabilities Based on Emotion Regulation Strategies with the Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to predict the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities based on emotion regulation strategies with the mediating role of emotional intelligence.

Methods and Materials: The present study is applied in terms of its objective and falls under the category of descriptive-correlational research in terms of method and nature. The study population consisted of mothers attending rehabilitation centers in District 5 of Tehran. Based on the formula proposed by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), 215 individuals were selected as the sample, and questionnaires were distributed among the sample group using convenience sampling. The data collection instruments in this study included the Goleman Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (2000), the Gross and John Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire (2003), and the Keyes Mental Health Questionnaire (2002). Data analysis was performed using AMOS software.

Findings: The results indicated that the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities could be predicted based on emotion regulation strategies, with a coefficient of 0.32. Moreover, emotional intelligence played a mediating role in the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and mental health, with a coefficient of 0.57.

Conclusion: The obtained results can be utilized by family system policymakers to develop programs and interventions aimed at enhancing the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: children, intellectual disabilities, emotional intelligence, mental health, emotion regulation strategies, mothers

1. Introduction

Intellectual disability is one of the most significant, complex, and challenging issues affecting children and adolescents in contemporary societies (Taheri et al., 2022). Intellectual disability is a heterogeneous and lifelong disorder that is often associated with specific brain function and sensory impairments and includes genetic disorders that influence cognition and behavior (Wang, 2024). This condition is prevalent, affecting approximately 3% of the global population. A systematic review of studies from 1990 to 2019 has demonstrated significant regional disparities in the prevalence of intellectual disability (Nair et al., 2022). This disorder also poses risks to the mental health of both the individual and their family. A systemic perspective on family dynamics suggests that any change in one part of the family system affects the entire system, as the interwoven relationships within the family structure ensure that changes in one element inevitably lead to changes throughout the system (Alexander et al., 2021).

Parents of children with intellectual disabilities face numerous challenges that significantly impact their lives and place them at risk for poor mental health outcomes (Song et al., 2015). The World Health Organization (2023) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual recognizes their capabilities, effectively and productively utilizes them, and contributes positively to society. Mental health broadly refers to the promotion of psychological well-being through the prevention of mental disorders, controlling risk factors, early diagnosis, prevention of relapse, and the creation of a healthy environment that fosters proper human interactions. It also encompasses emotional and psychological well-being, enabling individuals to think critically, utilize their abilities, function effectively in society, and meet the demands of daily life (Tomičić, 2024; Yee Ching et al., 2024).

The mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities is a critical and complex issue that has garnered attention from researchers and policymakers in family systems. Accordingly, examining the factors influencing the mental health of these mothers is a subject of considerable research interest. Emotion regulation is a key factor in understanding individuals' attitudes and behavioral tendencies, and proficiency in managing emotions enables individuals to comprehend emotions in themselves and others, accurately predict their behavioral impact, and respond appropriately and timely to various emotional stimuli (Jafarpour et al., 2021; Tabrizchi & Vahidi, 2015).

Additionally, Studies identified emotion regulation strategies as predictors of mental health. Individuals with high emotional regulation capabilities can provide optimal responses to the needs and expectations of those around them, establish healthy and positive relationships, and ultimately experience lower levels of stress (Alipour & Karami, 2021; Khoshnoud et al., 2022; Mofakhari et al., 2023; Seyfivand Dezaki, 2023; Veysi & Moradian, 2023). In other studies, emotional intelligence was identified as a variable influencing mental health, which can itself be affected by emotion regulation strategies. Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, use, and manage one's emotions in a positive manner when interacting with others and to respond appropriately to emotional stimuli. Individuals with high emotional intelligence tend to have more successful social relationships (Forouzesh, 2021; Gadaf & Besar, 2017; Gonzales, 2022; Tam et al., 2020; Zamani & Ghorbani, 2020).

Regarding the role of emotional intelligence in the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, Studies suggest that emotional intelligence can help these mothers create an optimal environment for their children's growth and development while effectively managing the stressors and challenges associated with caring for a child with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, emotional intelligence helps individuals mitigate the negative effects of daily stressors and maintain their mental well-being (Koosha et al., 2021; Sharifi Daramadi et al., 2006).

Thus, enhancing emotional intelligence as a means of stress management is crucial, and examining its influential factors, such as emotion regulation, warrants discussion. Given the aforementioned considerations and the importance of factors influencing the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, a review of the existing literature reveals numerous studies on this topic. However, no study was found that specifically predicts the mental health of these mothers based on emotion regulation strategies with the mediating role of emotional intelligence. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question: Do emotion regulation strategies mediate the relationship between mental health and emotional intelligence in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is applied in terms of its objective and falls under the category of descriptive-correlational research

in terms of its method and nature. The study population consisted of mothers attending rehabilitation centers in District 5 of Tehran. Based on the formula proposed by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), the researcher collected 215 valid questionnaires for data analysis to enhance the generalizability of the results. The sampling method employed was convenience sampling. In this study, data were collected using the Goleman Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, the Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire, and the Keyes Mental Health Questionnaire.

For the present study, the researcher first obtained the questionnaires and visited rehabilitation centers in Tehran. After introducing themselves, the researcher provided the questionnaires to the facility management. Following a review of the questionnaires by the management, the centers expressed their willingness to collaborate. The questionnaires were then distributed to mothers who voluntarily agreed to participate. While the participants completed the questionnaires, the researcher monitored and supervised the data collection process. On average, each participant took approximately 25 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participants were assured that their information would remain strictly confidential and that there was no requirement to disclose their names.

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Goleman Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (2000): This questionnaire consists of 33 items that assess five components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness (7 items), self-control (8 items), self-regulation (7 items), empathy (6 items), and social skills (5 items). It is structured on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). The possible scores range from 33 to 165. In a study by Mansouri (2001), the reliability of the questionnaire was reported to be 0.85. In a study by Rahimi (2017), Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire was 0.782. In a study conducted by Austin et al. (2004) in the United Kingdom on 500 students, the reliability of the emotional intelligence instrument was estimated at 0.85. Findings from Nikpour et al. (2012) confirmed the construct validity and reliability of the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire. Furthermore, Bayani (2009) evaluated the validity of the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire using confirmatory factor analysis and demonstrated that all items had factor loadings above 0.50, indicating high validity (Valipour et al., 2024).

Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003): This questionnaire was developed by Gross and John (2003) and originally contained 16 items. The revised short form consists of 10 items that assess individual differences in cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. In the present study, the 10-item version was used. Matsumoto et al. (2005) reported moderate cross-cultural differences in both subscales. The questionnaire is structured on a seven-point Likert scale. The psychometric properties of the Gross and John Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire have been validated in both international and domestic studies. The reported reliability for this instrument is 0.923. Responses are scored on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire comprises two subscales: cognitive reappraisal (6 items) and suppression (4 items). Besharati (2016) reported a reliability coefficient of 0.803 for this questionnaire, and its validity was also confirmed in that study. A higher score indicates a higher level of emotion regulation ability (Roghani et al., 2022).

Keyes Mental Health Questionnaire (2002): This questionnaire consists of 14 items designed on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). It measures a single-factor construct of mental health. In a study by Badkhalqi-Varnakeshi (2015), its validity was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis and convergent validity, confirming the appropriateness of the items. Additionally, in a study by Kashmiri (2022), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was calculated as 0.891, indicating satisfactory reliability (Kashmiri, 2022). In the present study, the reliability coefficient was found to be 0.838.

2.3. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) with the AMOS software to examine the relationships between emotion regulation strategies, emotional intelligence, and mental health. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis, were calculated to assess the normality of data distribution. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed to confirm the normality of variables, ensuring the suitability of parametric tests. The reliability of measurement instruments was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the relationships between study variables. The significance of direct and indirect relationships was tested

through path analysis, and the Sobel test was employed to verify the mediating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and mental health. The goodness-of-fit of the structural model was evaluated using indices such as Chi-square/df, RMSEA, RMR, GFI, NFI, IFI, and CFI, with acceptable threshold values indicating the adequacy of the proposed conceptual model. The Variance Accounted For (VAF) statistic was also used to determine the strength of the mediation effect. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was considered for hypothesis testing.

3. Findings and Results

According to Table 1, among the variables in the Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire, the highest score was obtained by the cognitive reappraisal variable, with a mean of 20.84 and a standard deviation of 4.764, while the lowest score was obtained by the suppression variable, with a mean

of 13.70 and a standard deviation of 3.192. The overall emotion regulation strategies index had a mean of 34.55 and a standard deviation of 7.365.

Similarly, among the variables in the Mental Health Questionnaire, the highest score was recorded for the mental health component, with a mean of 20.51 and a standard deviation of 4.708, while the lowest score was observed for emotional well-being, with a mean of 9.85 and a standard deviation of 2.759. The overall mental health index had a mean of 47.63 and a standard deviation of 8.285.

Finally, among the variables in the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, the highest score was obtained by the self-control variable, with a mean of 29.71 and a standard deviation of 6.386, while the lowest score was recorded for social skills, with a mean of 17.66 and a standard deviation of 3.774. The overall emotional intelligence index had a mean of 120.22 and a standard deviation of 20.970.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
Cognitive Reappraisal	20.84	4.764	-0.415	-0.245	6	30
Suppression	13.70	3.192	-0.498	-0.385	5	20
Emotion Regulation Strategies	34.55	7.365	-0.405	-0.433	15	48
Mental Health	20.51	4.708	-0.206	-0.652	10	30
Social Health	17.27	3.082	-0.610	0.329	8	24
Emotional Well-being	9.85	2.759	0.253	-0.235	3	15
Mental Health Index	47.63	8.285	-0.142	-0.537	25	68
Self-awareness	24.66	5.266	-0.501	-0.458	9	34
Self-control	29.71	6.386	-0.493	-0.135	10	40
Self-regulation	26.55	5.394	-0.608	-0.336	12	35
Empathy	21.64	5.029	-0.798	0.044	9	30
Social Skills	17.66	3.774	-0.795	0.365	8	25
Emotional Intelligence	120.22	20.970	-0.551	-0.366	68	158

In this study, the significance level of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for all research indices was greater than 0.05. As a result, all research variables followed a normal distribution.

To assess the goodness-of-fit of the research model, goodness-of-fit indices were used. The following table presents the most critical fit indices, indicating that the conceptual model of the research is well-suited for explanation and fit.

Table 2

Goodness-of-Fit Indices of the Structural Model

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Threshold
Chi-square/df	3.953	< 5.00
RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation)	0.068	< 0.08
RMR (Root Mean Square Residual)	0.041	< 0.05
GFI (Goodness-of-Fit Index)	0.912	> 0.90
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	0.914	> 0.90

IFI (Incremental Fit Index)	0.913	> 0.90
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	0.912	> 0.90

The chi-square statistic is one of the most widely used goodness-of-fit indices in structural equation modeling. The smaller its value, the better the model fits the data. Ideally, a chi-square value of zero indicates perfect fit. A common criterion for assessing the suitability of this index is that the chi-square divided by degrees of freedom should be less than 3. In this model, the calculated value is 3.953, which indicates an acceptable fit.

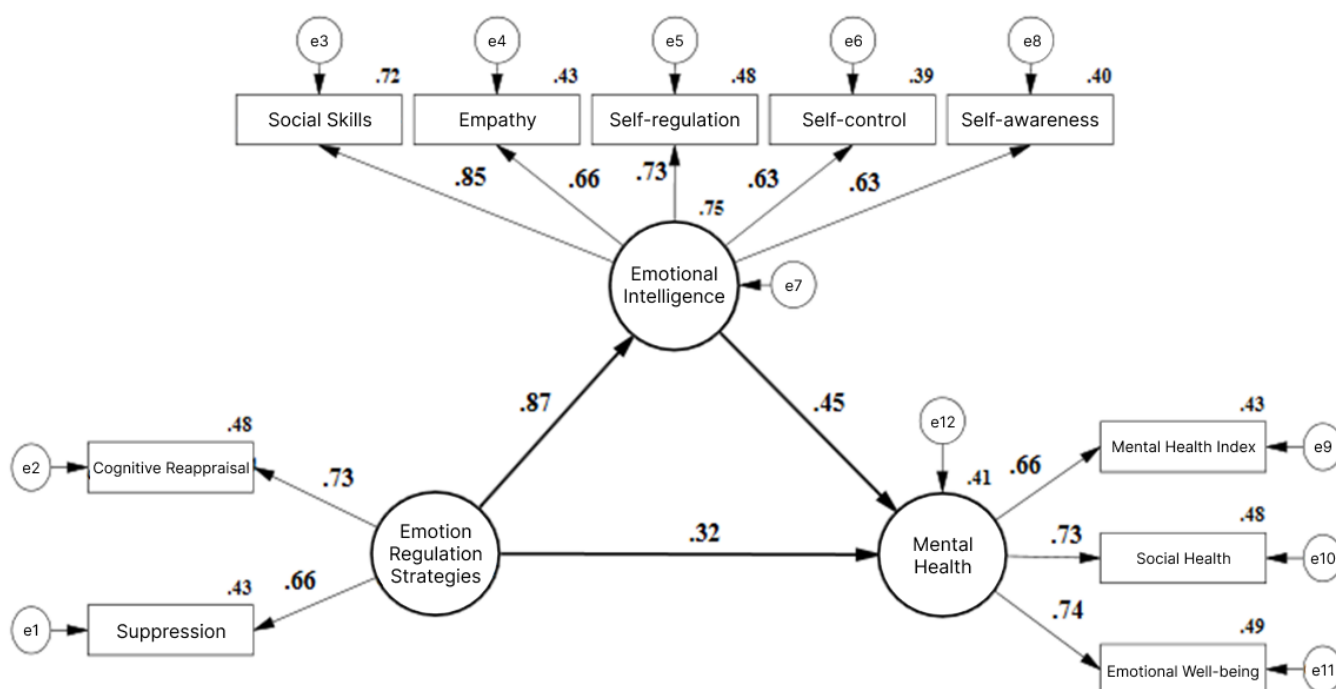
The RMSEA index is based on residual matrix analysis. Unlike other modeling indices that provide only a point estimate, this index can be calculated for different

confidence intervals. A value below 0.08 for this index suggests a good model fit. The RMSEA value for this research model was calculated as 0.068, confirming the model's adequacy.

The RMR index is computed based on the residual matrix, and values below 0.05 indicate a good model fit. In this study, the RMR value was 0.041, which is acceptable. Additionally, for indices such as NFI, CFI, GFI, and IFI, values above 0.90 confirm a strong model fit. Since all obtained values for these indices in this study exceed 0.90, the model demonstrates a satisfactory fit with the data.

Figure 1

Standard Path Coefficients of the Research Structural Model



The table below presents the results of the structural model evaluation.

Table 3

Results of the Structural Model Evaluation

Row	Path	Path Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	Test Result
1	Emotion Regulation Strategies → Mental Health	0.31	0.083	3.707	Confirmed
2	Emotion Regulation Strategies → Emotional Intelligence	0.86	0.051	12.583	Confirmed
3	Emotional Intelligence → Mental Health	0.48	0.145	6.233	Confirmed

Based on the corresponding t-value, it can be concluded that emotion regulation strategies significantly influence mental health, with a path coefficient of 0.31, which is statistically significant at an alpha level of 0.05. Similarly, the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and emotional intelligence is significant, with a path coefficient of 0.86. Additionally, the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health is significant, with a path coefficient of 0.48 at an alpha level of 0.05.

Next, based on the output of the conceptual model, the research hypotheses were examined.

To assess the mediating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and mental health, the Sobel test, a widely used method for testing the significance of a mediator variable, was applied. The Sobel test calculates a Z-value, and if this value exceeds 1.96, the mediation effect is considered statistically significant at a 95% confidence level. The Z-value obtained from the Sobel test was 4.013, which exceeds the threshold of 1.96. Therefore, it can be concluded with 95% confidence that the mediating effect of emotional intelligence on the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and mental health is statistically significant, confirming the research hypothesis.

In addition to the Sobel test, the variance accounted for (VAF) statistic was used to determine the intensity of the indirect effect through the mediator variable. VAF takes a value between 0 and 1, with values closer to 1 indicating a stronger mediating effect. The VAF statistic measures the proportion of the total effect that is explained by the indirect effect. In this study, the VAF value showed that 55% of the total effect of emotion regulation strategies on mental health is explained indirectly through the mediator variable of emotional intelligence.

Furthermore, since the direct path between emotion regulation strategies and mental health remains significant in the presence of the mediator variable, it can be concluded that emotional intelligence has a partial mediating role in the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and mental health.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this study was to predict the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities based on emotion regulation strategies with the mediating role of emotional intelligence. The findings of the data analysis indicated that the mental health of mothers of

children with intellectual disabilities is predictable based on emotion regulation strategies with the mediation of emotional intelligence ($p < 0.05$). In other words, emotional intelligence plays a mediating role in the relationship between emotion regulation and mental health. This finding is consistent with the prior (EsmaeiliShad et al., 2020; Guerra-Bustamante et al., 2019; Hussein, 2021; Ivcevic & Eggers, 2021).

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to control one's own emotions and those of others, differentiate between emotions, direct behavior and thinking based on emotional information, and regulate individual and interpersonal behavior. Therefore, it is expected that mothers with higher emotional intelligence possess the ability to appropriately interact with their children in various situations and consequently experience higher levels of mental health.

This study demonstrated that the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities is predictable based on emotion regulation strategies ($p < 0.05$). This finding aligns with previous studies (Hoseini Tabaqdehi et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2023). Emotion regulation refers to an individual's ability to manage and control emotions in a way that enhances positive emotions while reducing negative emotions when encountering different situations (Hoseini Tabaqdehi et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2024). This ability is particularly crucial for mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, as living with a child with such challenges often comes with additional stressors and difficulties. Most mothers must cope with daily problems arising from their child's intellectual disability. In these circumstances, the ability to regulate and control emotions can help them respond more effectively to various situations and improve their mental health.

In explaining these findings, emotion regulation strategies help mothers effectively cope with negative emotions and life stressors, allowing them to find healthier ways to manage their feelings. Emotion regulation enhances essential skills such as emotional awareness and emotional acceptance, enabling mothers to deal more efficiently with the challenges associated with raising children with intellectual disabilities. Managing emotions can improve family relationships, allowing mothers to maintain better interactions with their children and other family members by controlling their emotional responses.

The findings also showed that the mental health of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities is predictable based on cognitive reappraisal ($p < 0.05$). This

result is in line with previous studies (Nadeem et al., 2023; Ruan et al., 2023; Walker, 2023; Xue et al., 2023). Cognitive reappraisal refers to the process of re-evaluating and reassessing one's beliefs, perceptions, and interpretations of reality and events. This process is often consciously undertaken, as individuals seek to modify their perspectives and attitudes (Xue et al., 2023). Regarding parents of children with intellectual disabilities, cognitive reappraisal helps them shift from perceiving their child's condition as a threat or a source of despair to adopting a more positive outlook. This shift can reduce distress and psychological pressure, ultimately leading to better mental health. Additionally, parents of children with intellectual disabilities often experience high levels of stress and concern. Cognitive reappraisal can assist them in viewing their challenges from a new perspective, thereby reducing their stress and anxiety. Moreover, cognitive reappraisal enables parents to develop a deeper understanding of their emotions and find more effective strategies for managing them. This, in turn, reduces inappropriate emotional reactions and enhances overall life satisfaction and well-being, ultimately improving their mental health.

Another significant finding of this study was the predictive power of emotional suppression in determining mental health. This result is consistent with previous research (Chen et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2024; Wobeto et al., 2022; Zitzmann et al., 2024). Emotional suppression is an emotion regulation strategy in which individuals attempt to reduce or control negative or unwanted emotions (Zitzmann et al., 2024). This strategy is often employed when individuals believe that expressing their emotions may lead to negative or undesirable consequences, such as interpersonal conflicts or social disapproval. In emotional suppression, individuals seek ways to divert their attention from negative emotions or life stressors by focusing on other topics or activities. These actions can help individuals control unwanted emotions and prevent distressing thoughts from dominating their mindset.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that mothers with strong emotion regulation skills are generally better equipped to manage their emotions and serve as positive role models for their children. These mothers can more effectively cope with negative emotions such as stress and anxiety and impart these coping strategies to their children. Furthermore, emotional intelligence can assist mothers of children with intellectual disabilities in creating the optimal environment for their children's growth and development

while successfully managing the pressures and challenges associated with caregiving.

Authors' Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation. All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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