

The Relationship between Parental Emotion Regulation Ability and Parental Burnout

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Abstract: This study investigated the association between parents' emotion regulation ability and parental burnout. Data were gathered through an online survey administered to 461 parents from various provinces in China. The findings showed a significant negative relationship between emotion regulation and parental burnout ($r = -0.139$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that stronger emotion regulation abilities were linked to reduced levels of burnout. Further regression analyses demonstrated that, after controlling for parental gender, education level, family income, and birth order, emotion regulation ability remained a significant negative predictor of parental burnout ($\beta = -0.104$, $t = -2.236$, $p = 0.026$). Additionally, parental gender was significantly positively correlated with parental burnout ($r = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$), with fathers reporting higher levels of burnout than mothers. These results underscore the importance of emotion regulation as a key psychological resource in reducing parenting stress and preventing parental burnout. Future studies should employ longitudinal approaches, utilize multi-source assessment methods, and include culturally diverse samples to enhance the generalizability and robustness of these findings. Overall, this study offers theoretical support for interventions aimed at mitigating parental burnout, highlighting the value of improving emotion regulation skills as an effective strategy.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, parenting has been regarded as a profoundly meaningful and joyful life experience [1]. Social and cultural narratives have long celebrated the parental role, emphasizing that raising children brings numerous benefits, such as enhanced life meaning, increased positive emotional experiences, and a stronger sense of social integration [2,3]. However, the realities of parenting often fall short of these idealized expectations. Many parents encounter substantial challenges and prolonged stress in the course of childrearing [4]. When the demands of parenting consistently exceed an individual's available resources, parents may develop a chronic state of emotional exhaustion known as parental burnout [5]. Parental burnout refers to a chronic psychological response resulting from prolonged and excessive parenting stress [6]. It is distinct from normal, short-term parenting stress-which reflects a temporary and adaptive reaction-and also differs from

occupational burnout, which arises in the context of long-term work-related stress [7,8]. Characteristic symptoms of parental burnout include overwhelming physical and emotional exhaustion, emotional detachment from one's children, and a profound loss of parenting accomplishment and self-efficacy [9]. In recent years, with increasing attention to mental health issues, parental burnout has emerged as an independent research domain and has garnered considerable academic interest. Previous studies have explored a range of potential antecedents of parental burnout, including sociodemographic characteristics, child-related factors, parental personality traits, and family functioning [5]. Further research has demonstrated that parental burnout is strongly linked to a range of psychological and social issues, including alcohol abuse, suicidal thoughts, family abandonment, marital conflict, relationship dissolution, and child neglect and abuse [5,10]. Moreover, it poses significant risks to parents' own physical and mental health.

Among the factors influencing parental burnout, emotion regulation has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in recent years. Emotion regulation refers to an individual's ability to modulate the intensity, frequency, and duration of their positive or negative emotional experiences [11,12,13]. Effective emotion regulation can reduce negative emotional experiences, enhance psychological resilience, and ultimately lower the risk of psychological distress and burnout. In contrast, ineffective emotion regulation may exacerbate negative emotions and even contribute to more severe mental health issues [14]. As such, emotion regulation serves as a core psychological mechanism that plays a crucial role in helping parents manage ongoing stress and maintain resilience throughout the parenting process.

Gaining a more nuanced understanding of the pathways by which emotion regulation affects parental burnout can inform which specific emotion regulation strategies may either heighten or reduce the risk of burnout. Such insights would provide a clearer theoretical foundation and practical direction for developing targeted psychological interventions. Currently, existing interventions for parental burnout seldom focus on training specific emotion regulation strategies. Investigating the nuanced relationship and underlying mechanisms between emotion regulation and parental burnout could not only enrich the theoretical framework of parental burnout but also inform the design of more precise and effective intervention programs. Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the influence of emotion regulation on parental burnout and clarify its underlying mechanisms, aiming to offer evidence-based psychological support and intervention strategies for preventing and managing parental burnout.

2. Methods

2.1 Subject

This study recruited parents from multiple provinces across China using an online random sampling approach. A total of 465 questionnaires were collected, and after excluding responses with abnormal completion times or uniform answering patterns, 461 valid questionnaires were retained, resulting in a valid response rate of 99.13%. Among the valid participants, 74 were male (16.1%) and 387 were female (83.9%). Regarding educational background, 3.6% had completed junior high school or below ($n = 17$), 8.2% had a high school education ($n = 38$), 76.5% held a university degree ($n = 353$), and 11.4% had attained a master's degree or higher ($n = 53$).

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Demographic Information

The first section of the questionnaire collected demographic information, including parental

gender, child's age, monthly household income, parental education level, and child's gender.

2.2.2 Emotion Regulation Scale

This study assessed emotion regulation using the short version of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) revised by Wang et al. (2001). The ERQ includes 10 items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10 measure cognitive reappraisal, while items 2, 4, 6, and 9 capture expressive suppression. The test-retest reliability coefficients were 0.82 for cognitive reappraisal and 0.79 for expressive suppression. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.85 and 0.77, respectively, indicating good internal consistency [15].

2.2.3 Parental Burnout Scale

This study employed the short version of the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA), adapted by Wang et al. (2021), to measure parental burnout. The scale comprises 7 items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = every day), with higher scores reflecting higher levels of parental burnout [16].

2.3 Data Analysis

Data processing was carried out using SPSS 26.0. Correlation and regression analyses were employed to investigate the association between parental emotion regulation and parental burnout.

3. Results

Table 1 Correlation Analysis between Parental Emotion Regulation and Parental Burnout (N = 461)

	1) Parental Gender	2) Educational Level	3) Monthly Household Income	4) Birth Order	Emotion Regulation
5) Emotion Regulation	-0.190***	0.013	0.081	0.005	--
6) Parental Burnout	0.194***	-0.003	-0.035	-0.113*	-0.134**

Note: ***P<0.001, **P<0.01, *P<0.05

As shown in Table 1, Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between parental emotion regulation and parental burnout ($r = -0.134$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that better emotion regulation ability was associated with lower levels of parental burnout. Additionally, parental gender was positively correlated with parental burnout ($r = 0.194$, $p < 0.001$) and negatively correlated with emotion regulation ($r = -0.190$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, birth order was negatively correlated with parental burnout ($r = -0.113$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2 The Effect of Parental Emotion Regulation on Parental Burnout (N = 461)

	Parental Burnout					
	Model1			Model2		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
1) Parental Gender	0.193	4.222	0.000	0.175	3.772	0.000
Educational Level	-0.009	-0.189	0.850	-0.010	-0.203	0.839
Monthly Household Income	-0.036	-0.742	0.459	-0.028	-0.593	0.554
Birth Order	-0.120	-2.596	0.010	-0.119	-2.574	0.010
2) Emotion Regulation				-0.098	-2.119	0.035
R2	0.052			0.061		
F	6.280***			5.960***		

Note:***P<0.001,**P<0.01,*P<0.05.

As shown in Table 2, linear regression analysis indicated that educational level and monthly household income did not significantly predict parental burnout ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, parental gender and birth order were significant predictors of parental burnout ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, parental emotion regulation was found to significantly and negatively predict parental burnout ($\beta = -0.098$, $t = -2.119$, $p < 0.05$).

4. Discussion

This study examined how parental emotion regulation ability influences levels of parental burnout. With data from 461 parents, correlation and regression analyses were used to systematically investigate the relationship between these variables. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between parental emotion regulation and parental burnout, suggesting that parents with stronger emotion regulation skills reported lower levels of burnout. This finding is consistent with existing theories on the protective function of emotion regulation for mental health and contributes new empirical evidence to the understanding of psychological mechanisms underlying parental burnout [17]. Furthermore, the study underscores the essential role of emotion regulation in mitigating parenting stress and preventing burnout. According to the emotion regulation process model, effective strategies such as cognitive reappraisal help individuals reinterpret challenges encountered during the parenting process, thereby reducing negative emotional experiences and enhancing adaptive responses [17]. In contrast, individuals who frequently rely on less effective strategies, such as expressive suppression, are more likely to accumulate negative emotions, increasing their risk of emotional exhaustion [14]. Second, emotion regulation serves as a core psychological resource that helps buffer the negative impacts of ongoing parenting challenges and promotes psychological recovery [18]. Consequently, parents with poor emotion regulation abilities are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion as parenting stress accumulates, leading to emotional detachment from their children and, ultimately, higher levels of parental burnout [6]. It is noteworthy that even after controlling for demographic variables such as parental gender, educational level, monthly household income, and birth order, emotion regulation ability remained a significant negative predictor of parental burnout. This finding underscores the independent and critical role of emotion regulation in explaining variations in parental burnout. It also suggests that interventions targeting parental burnout should not focus solely on enhancing external support or reducing parenting demands; strengthening parents' emotion regulation abilities should be considered an equally essential intervention strategy [18]. Additionally, this study identified a positive relationship between parental gender and burnout, with male parents reporting slightly higher burnout levels than their female counterparts. This result aligns with some prior studies and indicates that fathers may encounter distinctive challenges during parenting, such as navigating the gap between societal expectations and their actual caregiving involvement [6]. Future research should further examine how gender moderates the relationship between emotion regulation and parental burnout, which could inform more tailored and effective intervention strategies.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers empirical evidence supporting the critical role of emotion regulation in parental burnout, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the cross-sectional design used in this study restricts the capacity to make causal claims. To gain deeper insights into the long-term effects of emotion regulation on parental burnout, future research should employ longitudinal designs. Tracking changes in parents' emotion regulation abilities and levels of parental burnout over time would allow for a more accurate

examination of their causal relationship. Secondly, this study relied on self-report measures to assess emotion regulation, which may be susceptible to social desirability and recall biases, potentially affecting the objectivity of the results. Future research should utilize a combination of assessment methods-such as situational tasks and physiological measures (e.g., heart rate variability, cortisol levels)-to achieve a more objective evaluation of parents' emotion regulation abilities and enhance the accuracy of the findings. Moreover, although the study accounted for key demographic factors like gender, educational level, and household income, the sample was predominantly drawn from various provinces in China and included mostly female participants. This limits the generalizability of the results to parents from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Future studies should incorporate cross-cultural comparisons to better understand the universality and potential variability of the relationship between emotion regulation and parental burnout in diverse social and cultural contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between parental emotion regulation ability and parental burnout. The results indicated that stronger emotion regulation abilities were associated with lower levels of parental burnout, highlighting the critical role of emotion regulation in alleviating parenting stress and preventing burnout. Effective emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, were found to reduce negative emotional experiences, whereas ineffective strategies, such as expressive suppression, may exacerbate burnout. Despite certain limitations, particularly regarding causal inference and measurement methods, future research should employ longitudinal designs, incorporate multiple assessment approaches (e.g., physiological indicators), and further validate these findings across diverse cultural contexts. Overall, this study provides theoretical support for interventions targeting parental burnout, emphasizing the importance of enhancing emotion regulation skills-especially cognitive reappraisal and emotional acceptance-as effective intervention strategies.

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