A Multimethod Assessment of Emotion Regulation in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Emotion regulation (ER) is an important aspect of emotional and social development. ER is particularly relevant for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Children with ASD have frequent emotional and conduct problems that are believed to derive from difficulties with ER (Mazefsky & White, 2014). ER is a multicomponent process (Thompson, Lewis, & Calkins, 2008) that should be studied as such. However, only a small proportion of studies have used more than one method to assess ER in children with ASD (Weiss, Thomson, & Chan, 2014). The main purpose of the present study was to, using a multimethod assessment, compare ER in children with ASD and typically developing (TD) children. Participants were 29 children aged from 5 to 12 years old. 17 children were diagnosed with ASD and 12 were TD children. ER was assessed by behavioural codings during a frustration-eliciting situation, parents’ reports of their child’s ER (Emotion Regulation Checklist – ERC; Shields & Cicchetti, 1997), and through the assessment of heart rate variability (HRV). Behavioural codings demonstrated that children with ASD used significantly less active self-regulation (U=58, p<.05), and significantly more disruptive behaviours (U=39.5, p<.01) as ER strategies than TD children. Parents of children with ASD reported their children as having a lower score on the ERC than parents of children with TD (U=22.5, p<.001). Finally, children with ASD had a significantly lower HRV than TD children (U=40, p<.01). Although the present study has a small sample, all three measures point towards more ER difficulties in children with ASD compared to TD children. These results are in agreement with the literature and point to a difficulty that is expressed at the behavioural and physiological levels and that is reported by parents. The present results can be relevant to developing interventions aiming at improving ER in children with ASD.