

# Expressed Attitude of Mental Health Professionals Towards Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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## Abstract

**Background:** The expressed attitude is a psychological component that represents a mental and emotional entity that inherent or characterizes a person. The positive and negative attitude that we express represents who we are and how we are connected to ourselves and society. An attitude is usually formed based on the individual's past and present events in life. Also, social environment and lifestyle play a role in attitude formation. Studies indicate that mental health professionals hold mixed attitude such as positive and negative towards mental illness hence this study was carried out to find out the expressed attitude of mental health professionals towards children with autism spectrum disorder.

**Method :** Attitude Questionnaire by (Sethi et al., 1982) was modified for the study and the responses were collected from 21 mental health professionals (5 psychologists, 5 psychiatric nurses, 4 psychiatrists, 4 psychiatric social workers, 3 special educators). The collected data was computed with descriptive statistics, t-test and ANOVA by using SPSS version 20.

**Result :** The outcome of the study indicate, the significant difference between the positive and negative attitude of mental health professionals towards children with autism spectrum disorder and also it provides the supporting data on positive emotionality of mental health professionals towards children with an autism spectrum disorder.

**Keywords :** Attitude, Autism, Emotion, Mental health professionals

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## Introduction

The concept "attitude" has a range of meaning in psychological and social science research. Attitude has been identified as relatively continuing beliefs, feelings and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols. <sup>1</sup> Studies indicate that an attitude is a form of social behaviour which has been experimentally studied in the laboratory and

also in a social situation. It is believed that attitudes are the precursor to changes in behaviour.<sup>2</sup> It is generally acknowledged that attitude is a hypothetical construct with a verbal and non-verbal form of response.<sup>3</sup> It was studied that when comparing to the general population mental health professionals show a higher positive attitude towards an individual with mental illness especially in the case of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).<sup>4-5</sup> It is due to the reason that mental health professionals play a major role in identifying the most common presenting problems in children with ASD and reporting them. The therapeutic techniques that are used by the therapists have much valued in the evidence-based practices for children with ASD.<sup>6</sup> Although, the empirical evidence in regards to the emotional expressiveness is limited in the individual with ASD, they exhibit negative and positive emotion intensely.<sup>7</sup> The caregiver's role is very crucial in the development of children's social and personal identity. Caregivers can do effective parenting only when their emotional well-being is cared for; similarly mental health professionals exhibit care and affection towards the individual with ASD only when their emotional state is regulated more positively.<sup>8</sup> Mental health professionals are health care providers who work in the inpatient facilities in general hospitals and psychiatric specialisation and outpatients care in the community set up, schools and private practices. They predominantly provide physical, mental health and social services to improve the individual's wellbeing. In the clinical and psychological treatment of the individual with ASD professionals like Psychiatrist, Clinical and Rehabilitation Psychologist, Psychologist, Psychiatric Social Worker, Physiotherapist, Occupational Therapist, Speech and Language Pathologist, Special Educator are significantly contributed to the positive therapeutic outcome.

### Objectives

1. To find the positive and negative attitude of mental health professionals towards children with autism spectrum disorder
2. To find the possible reasons for the expressed attitude of mental health professionals towards children with autism spectrum disorder

### Research Hypothesis :

1. There will be no significant difference between positive and negative attitude of mental health professionals towards children with autism spectrum disorder
2. There will be no significant difference within the expressed attitude on hostility, dissatisfaction, warmth, emotional overinvolvement among mental health professionals towards children with autism spectrum disorder

**Research Design :** Ex-post facto research design was adopted for this study

### Materials and Methods

#### Samples

Twenty-one mental health professionals (5 psychologists, 5 psychiatric nurses, 4 psychiatrists, 4 psychiatric social workers, 3 special educators) with a mean age of 24.05 years (SD=6.7) took part in this study. All the selected participants were closely working with the children with autism spectrum disorder.

#### Questionnaire

The participants completed the 30 item Attitude Questionnaire (Sethi et al., 1982)<sup>9</sup>, which measures the positive and negative attitude of a family member of schizophrenic patients. For the research purpose, the items in the questionnaire were not changed but the term "patient" was replaced with the term "child" and adapted for this study. The even numbers in the questionnaire were arranged to measure the positive attitude and scored as +2,+1 and 0 and odd numbers in the questionnaire to measure negative attitude, and scored as -2,-1 and 0. Scoring between +11 to +30 indicates highly and moderately positive attitude, -10 to +10 indicates a mildly positive and mildly negative attitude, +11 to +30 indicates highly and moderately negative attitude. The questionnaire also measures the five sub-dimension such as critical comments, hostility, dissatisfaction, warmth, emotional overinvolvement.

#### Procedure

The responses were collected via online form with

the consent form the participants. The purpose of the study was addressed by the researcher and anonymity, confidentiality was assured for their responses.

**Data Analysis:** The collected data was computed by descriptive statistics: Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD); Inferential statistics: Independent sample t-test and ANOVA by using SPSS version 20.

### Results and Discussion

**Table 1: Shows the difference between positive and negative attitude of mental health professionals (N =21)**

Expressed Attitudes	Mean	SD	t-Value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Positive Attitude	22.09	2.96	4.69*	.000
Negative Attitude	17.23	3.70		

P<0.01 \* t value is significant at 0.01 level

From table 1, it can be inferred that the t value 4.69 is significant at 0.01 confidence interval. Hence, hypothesis 1 is rejected and concluded as there is a significant difference between positive and negative attitude among mental health professionals towards children with ASD. People credence and perception towards mental illness such as autism set up the stage for how they interact, provide opportunities and help a person with ASD. Their expressed attitude outline how they experience and

express their own emotional issues and psychological stress and whether they unveil these symptoms and look for care. From the experience of working with children having ASD, these mental health professionals broke the stigma and developed compassion over the period of time. Their helping behaviour, treatment and support might have a contribution to the reason for a positive attitude to be higher when comparing to the negative attitude.

**Table 2 : Shows the dimension wise detail of the participant responses**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Critical Comments	21	4.00	9.00	6.62	1.20
Hostility	21	4.00	9.00	6.52	1.43
Dissatisfaction	21	3.00	11.00	6.80	2.16
Warmth	21	5.00	12.00	8.76	1.64
Emotional overinvolvement	21	6.00	14.00	10.52	1.96

**Table 3 : Shows the difference between the domains of the expressed attitude of mental health professionals. (N=21)****ANOVA**

		<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Hostility	Between Groups	7.599	5	1.520	.678	.647
	Within Groups	33.639	15	2.243		
	Total	41.238	20			
Dissatisfaction	Between Groups	7.683	5	1.537	.269	.923
	Within Groups	85.556	15	5.704		
	Total	93.238	20			
Warmth	Between Groups	12.393	5	2.479	.898	.508
	Within Groups	41.417	15	2.761		
	Total	53.810	20			
Emotional overinvolvement	Between Groups	24.933	5	4.987	1.430	.270
	Within Groups	52.306	15	3.487		
	Total	77.238	20			

$P < 0.05$  \* F value is not significant at 0.01 level

Critical comment is a form of making severe judgment which involves analytical evaluations and critics hence that has been considered as a factor in the ANOVA computation. The hostility, dissatisfaction dimensions indicate negative attitude and warmth, emotional overinvolvement represent positive attitude and considered as dependant variables for the ANOVA.

From the table 3, it can be inferred that there is no significant difference with in the expressed attitude on hostility, dissatisfaction, warmth, emotional overinvolvement among mental health professionals towards children with ASD. Hence, hypothesis 2 is accepted. The domains of hostility and dissatisfaction

are related to the negative aspect of the expressed attitude, which show lesser mean value when comparing to the positive domains of warmth and emotional overinvolvement. The questions pertaining to emotional overinvolvement in the assessment scale measures the feelings and behaviours of mental health professionals towards the children with ASD, which includes the protectiveness and self-sacrifice. It is evident that mental health professionals contribute more to the emotional development and overall wellbeing of the children with ASD.

**Result**

The expressed attitude on positive and negative

emotion was found to be significantly different among mental health professionals. There is no significant difference was found between the groups of expressed attitude on hostility, dissatisfaction, warmth, emotional overinvolvement.

### Conclusion

The study outcome emphasizes the fact that a positive attitude is predominant among mental health professionals towards children with ASD. The warmth and emotional overinvolvement that they exhibit towards children with ASD could be the reason for their positive attitude.

**Ethical Clearance :** The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee

**Conflicting of Interest :** None

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