

Preliminary efficacy of a brief online self-compassion program for parents of Autistic children: a randomized controlled trial



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Introduction

Parenting an Autistic child can be rewarding and uniquely demanding, often placing parents at elevated risk for stress and poor mental health, compounded by stigma and systemic barriers. Self-compassion is a protective factor against stress and poor mental health.

Compassion Focused Therapy offers a framework for cultivating self-compassion and building emotional resilience, making it relevant for parents facing chronic stress. Higher self-compassion is consistently linked to reduced stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in parents of Autistic children and may buffer stigma's negative effects.

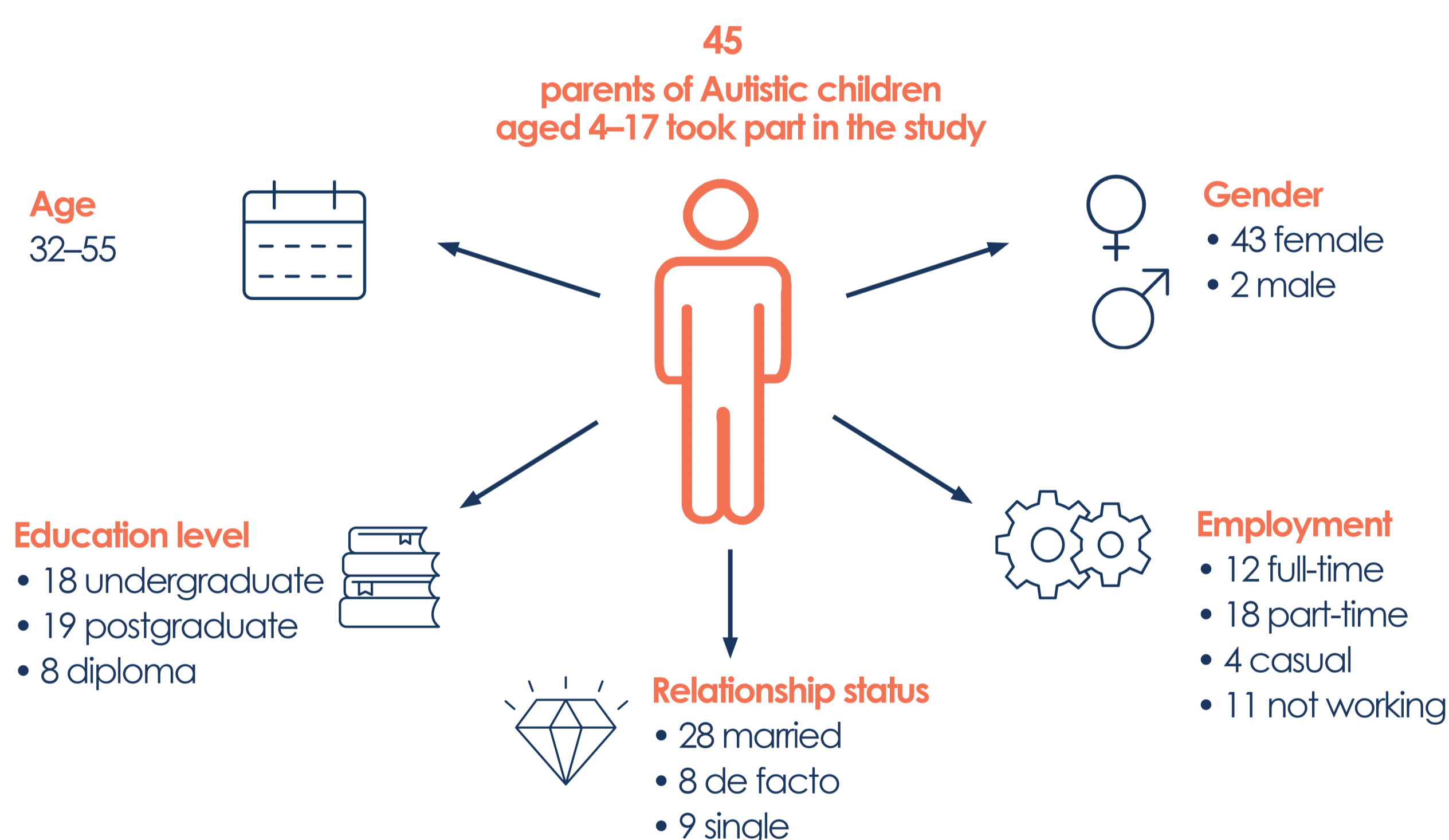
Although there is emerging evidence for the benefits of self-compassion training for parents of Autistic children, no affordable, accessible program exists that is scalable and suitable for remote delivery. Delivering a short, online workshop may help address these gaps.

Objectives

This study investigated whether a 2-hour compassion-based workshop (adapted from Kirby et al., 2022), delivered online, could enhance self-compassion and reduce self-criticism in parents of Autistic children aged 3 to 17. Secondary aims were to assess impacts on parental stress, affect, mental health, psychological well-being, and emotion regulation, and on children's social emotional, and behavioural outcomes.

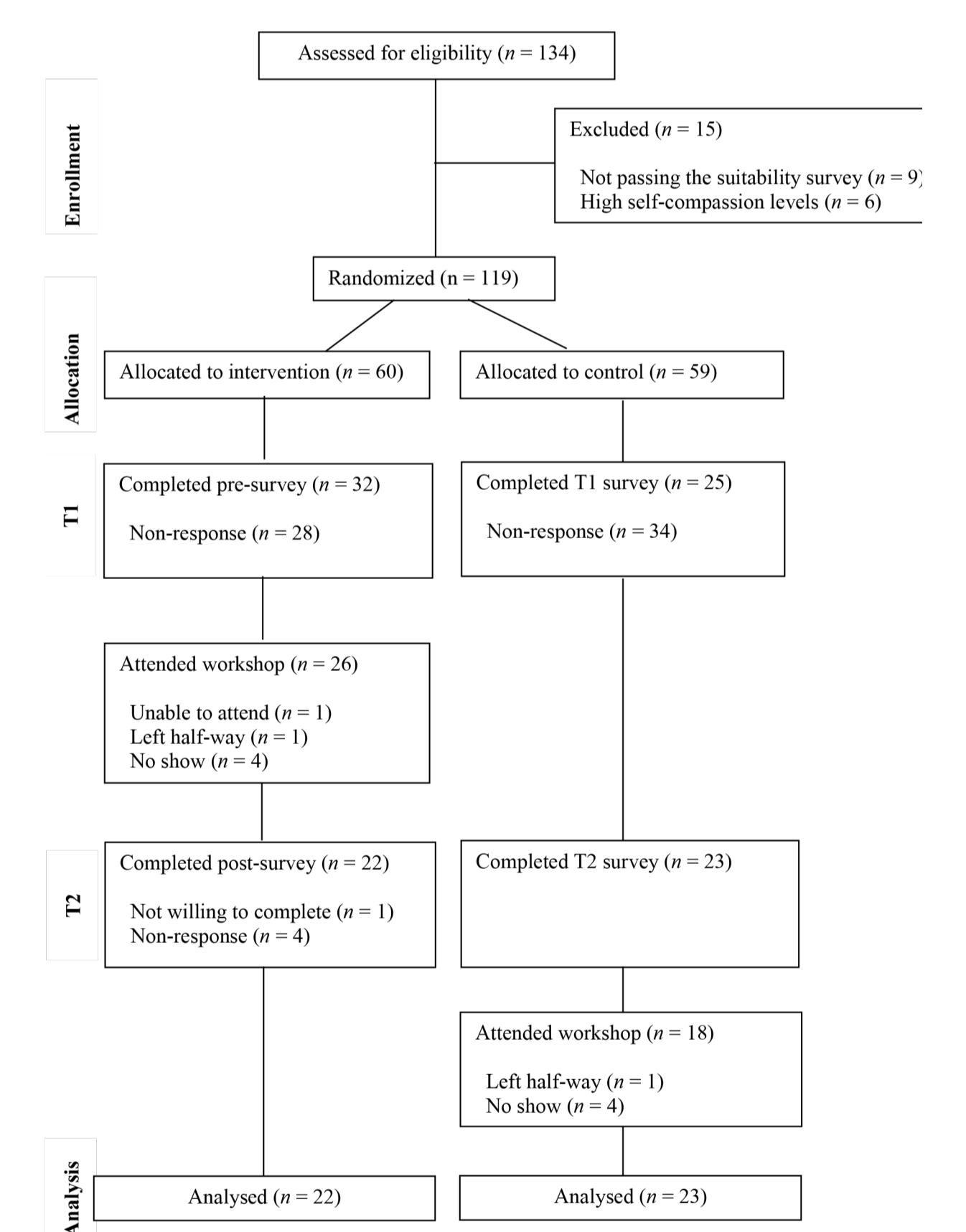
Method

- Workshops were facilitated over Zoom by a clinical trainer in Compassion Focused Therapy. Participants attended one of five workshops (same content).
- 45 parents ($M_{age} = 43.49$, $SD = 5.32$) of Autistic children completed pre- and post-surveys (block randomization; control: $n = 23$; treatment: $n = 22$). Parent-reported measures included self-compassion and self-criticism (Self-Compassion Scale; Forms of Self-Criticising/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale), stress and mental health (Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21), psychological well-being (Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale), emotion regulation (Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale), and child outcomes (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire).
- Data analyses:** Data were analysed using robust mixed ANOVAs (WRS2, R) with 10% trimmed means (bwtrim function; Wilcox, 2012). Each outcome was tested in a 2 (Group: treatment vs. control) \times 2 (Time: pre vs. post) mixed design. Significant group \times time interactions were followed up by calculating effect sizes from pre-post change scores. Benjamini-Hochberg FDR correction (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) was used to control for multiple comparisons.



Results

- After FDR corrections, significant Group \times Time interactions were observed for depression, $F(1, 35) = 17.32$, $p < .001$, $p_{adj} = .002$, and psychological well-being, $F(1, 32) = 12.71$, $p = .001$, $p_{adj} = .006$.
- Post hoc simple effects analyses indicate **depressive symptoms** reduced from pre- ($M_{trim} = 7.89$, 95% CI [5.90, 9.88]) to post-intervention ($M_{trim} = 4.39$, 95% CI [2.37, 6.41]) with a moderate-large effect, $t = 4.63$, $p < .001$, $\xi = 0.48$. **Psychological well-being improved** from pre- ($M_{trim} = 36.83$, 95% CI [34.00, 39.67]) to post-intervention ($M_{trim} = 42.67$, 95% CI [38.32, 47.01]) with a moderate-large effect, $t = -3.93$, $p = .001$, $\xi = 0.49$. No changes were found for the control group.
- Before FDR corrections, the following outcomes improved significantly for the intervention group:
 - Self-compassion
 - Reassured self
 - Stress
 - Emotion regulation
 - Negative affect
- Post FDR corrections, these outcomes were no longer significant
- No significant Group \times Time interactions were found for inadequate self, hated self, anxiety, positive affect, and child socioemotional outcomes.



Conclusion

- The present study provides preliminary evidence that a 2-hour online self-compassion workshop may improve mental well-being and reduce depression in parents of Autistic children. Exploratory findings also suggest potential benefits for self-compassion, self-reassurance, stress, emotion regulation, and negative affect, although these effects require replication in adequately powered studies.
- The brief, online format offers important advantages for reaching time-poor families who face barriers to accessing traditional support services. As such, compassion-based workshops may represent a scalable, low-intensity option for supporting the mental health of parents navigating the societal challenges of raising Autistic children.
- We developed a tip sheet for helping parents cultivate self-compassion. Scan the QR code to download it.

