

Contribution to emotional regulation: The emergence of marital conflict in parents of children with special needs

Sumbangan regulasi emosi: Munculnya konflik marital orang tua dari anak berkebutuhan khusus

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ABSTRACT

Parents who have children with special needs face several challenges in the parenting process so that they require effective emotional regulation. The ability to regulate emotions affects marital conflicts that may arise. The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of emotion regulation on marital conflict in parents who have children with special needs. This type of research is a quantitative study with a population of parents who have children with special needs. The sampling technique used was accidental sampling and the number of research respondents amounted to 152 respondents. The research instruments are The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) and Kansas Marital Conflict (KMCS). The data analysis technique used simple regression analysis, it was found that there was an effect of emotion regulation on marital conflict in older adults who had children with special needs with a significance value of $(p) 0.03 < 0.05$. The implication of this study is that parents who have children with special needs need effective strategies to be able to maintain positive emotion regulation that has an influence on the management of marital conflict with a partner. This includes further research that can be developed in the form of training to help parents overcome marital conflicts that may arise in parents who have children with special needs.

ABSTRACT

Orang tua yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus menghadapi beberapa tantangan dalam proses pengasuhan sehingga memerlukan regulasi emosi yang efektif. Kemampuan meregulasi emosi berpengaruh terhadap konflik marital yang bisa jadi muncul. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah mengetahui pengaruh regulasi emosi terhadap konflik marital pada orang tua yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus. Jenis penelitian ini adalah penelitian kuantitatif dengan populasi para orang tua yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus. Teknik sampling yang digunakan yaitu accidental sampling dan jumlah responden penelitian berjumlah 152 responden. Instrumen penelitian yaitu The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) dan Kansas Marital Conflict (KMCS). Teknik analisa data menggunakan analisis regresi sederhana, didapatkan hasil terdapat pengaruh regulasi emosi terhadap konflik marital pada orang tua yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus dengan nilai signifikansi $(p) 0.03 < 0.05$. Implikasi penelitian ini orang tua yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus memerlukan strategi efektif untuk bisa mempertahankan regulasi emosi positif yang memiliki pengaruh terhadap pengelolaan konflik marital dengan pasangan. Termasuk juga penelitian selanjutnya bisa menyusun intervensi berupa pelatihan untuk membantu orang tua bisa mengatasi konflik-konflik pernikahan yang kemungkinan muncul pada orang tua yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Children with special needs have specific conditions that require parents and siblings to provide additional support. Parents and family members never imagined that their child would experience abnormal development inconsistent with typical milestones. Children with special needs bring about many changes and challenges for parents and family members—greater challenges in parenting compared to parents of children without disabilities (Raharja et al., 2020). Many parents face difficulties in accepting the reality that they must parent a child with special needs. Often, blame between husband and wife becomes a source of conflict in the family. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge and preparation among individuals who become parents of children with special needs causes many to feel confused about how to care for, nurture, and meet the needs of their children (Sukmadi et al., 2020).

Previous studies on parenting stress have reported high levels of stress among parents of children with autism (Hayes & Watson, 2013). Situations that cause high stress include health, child management and diagnosis, therapy and financial capability, social views and social suffering, emotional adjustment, and social support (Corcoran et al., 2015). Both fathers and mothers have different perspectives on child development, therapy, education, financial capacity, and perceptions of their child, which can influence the emergence of conflicts in the relationship. These situations lead to emotional exhaustion for parents. This condition is also caused by a lack of social support, workload, time pressure, and stress from their caregiving roles (Cristiani et al., 2021). Additionally, the presence of a spouse often becomes a medium for sharing stories and complaints about the fatigue of caring for a child, helping to reduce daily stress associated with parenting (Raharja et al., 2020). The emotional well-being of one partner in a family affects other components within the family. This occurs due to emotional or stress transfer from one individual to another. When one partner experiences negative emotions, it may affect the other partner, which in turn can disrupt their relationship (Ilias et al., 2018). Consequently, these problems can impact the overall functioning of the family (Mitchell et al., 2016).

If minor conflicts are not promptly resolved, they can escalate into marital conflict. Marital conflict occurs when a husband and wife are in situations where there is disagreement or opposition on various matters. This can include differences of opinion, arguments, or disputes. Such conflicts arise from differences in needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals between husband and wife (Agboola & Oluwatosin, 2018). Marital conflict is a situation in which couples are unable to reach mutual problem-solving (Muhid et al., 2019). In marital conflict, both parties struggle to maintain their own views or interests, which are often at odds with each other (Gentile et al., 2023). Married couples with children with special needs who experience stress, anxiety, or even depression due to ongoing marital conflict contribute to and face negative consequences in their marriage, which can lead to low marital satisfaction and ultimately, parental divorce (Rizvi & Batool, 2024).

There are several contributing factors to household conflict, as proposed by Johar & Sulfinadia (2020), one of which is the incompatibility of needs and expectations between partners. Difficulties in accepting clear differences—such as habits, needs, opinions, and values—can also trigger conflict. Financial issues, including how money is earned and spent, can be a major source of household disputes. Other conflict triggers include parenting issues, jealousy and possessiveness that hinder a partner's freedom, unequal division of responsibilities, poor communication, and mismatched interests and original life goals, all of which can potentially disrupt marital harmony.

Marital conflict refers to disagreements between partners that can significantly increase stress levels and emotional tension within the family. It is crucial for parents to possess effective emotional regulation skills to manage such conflicts. By developing emotional regulation abilities, parents can approach and resolve marital disputes more healthily, thereby enhancing relationship satisfaction (Colton, 2021; Todorov et al., 2023). This helps minimize negative effects on both the parents themselves and their children. Strong emotional regulation enables constructive communication, stress management, and the creation of a more harmonious and supportive family environment (Thummler et al., 2022). In this sense, emotional regulation is identified as a key factor influencing marital conflict.

Previous research exploring the relationship between emotional regulation and marital conflict includes a study by Frye et al. (2020), which indicated that the use of emotional regulation strategies—such as expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal—can affect how couples deal with marital disputes. Expressive suppression, such as hiding emotions or restraining them from being expressed to a partner, can lead to tension and misunderstanding in the relationship because genuine feelings remain unspoken. On the other hand, cognitive reappraisal, which involves viewing a situation from a different perspective or seeking deeper understanding behind the conflict, helps couples find more constructive solutions and reduces the negative impact of marital discord.

In addition, Tarifi et al. (2023) explained that good emotional regulation can significantly influence conflict levels in marital relationships, particularly among women. Specific to parents of children with special needs, Yahyapour et al. (2020) conducted a study on emotional regulation training for parents of children with autism spectrum disorders. The study found that such training significantly reduced marital conflict, improved emotional responsiveness between partners, and enhanced their support toward their children. Overall, these findings show the positive impact of emotional regulation on the marital relationships of parents with children who have special needs.

The limited number of studies specifically examining the influence of emotion regulation on marital conflict with a focus on parents of children with special needs is one of the reasons for conducting this research by analyzing these two variables. Previous studies have focused more on the influence of emotion regulation on marital relationships in general, without considering the context of parents who have children with special needs. In addition, there

are still few studies that comprehensively explain how the use of good emotion regulation strategies impacts how couples deal with marital conflict. This study is expected to fill the gap in the literature and provide deeper insight into how emotion regulation can affect marital conflict in parents of children with special needs.

This study differs from previous ones in terms of its more specific research focus. Previous research focused more on the influence of emotion regulation on marital relationships in general, and did not focus on the specific condition of parents who have children with special needs. This study specifically explores how emotion regulation affects marital conflict in parents of children with special needs, which includes the unique challenges and differences faced by parents in raising their children with special needs. Furthermore, this study also involves different participants, namely parents who have children with special needs, so the results can be more relevant and specific to this population. Meanwhile, previous studies mostly involved diverse participants without considering the specific conditions faced by parents of children with special needs.

Based on the explanation above, the aim of this study is to determine the influence of emotion regulation on marital conflict in parents of children with special needs. The hypothesis of this study is that there is an influence of emotion regulation on marital conflict in parents who have children with special needs. Theoretically, the benefit of this research is to provide additional literature in clinical and developmental psychology, especially related to children with special needs. In addition, the practical benefit of the research is to provide insights for parents on how good emotion regulation can positively affect marital relationships. By understanding the importance of emotion regulation in dealing with conflict, parents can work together to improve communication and problem-solving within the relationship, especially in matters concerning the upbringing of children with special needs.

2. METHODS

This study uses a non-experimental quantitative research approach involving the collection of numerical data and statistical analysis. There are two variables in the study: the independent variable (X) is emotion regulation and the dependent variable (Y) is marital conflict.

This study uses the accidental sampling method (convenience sampling), which means the research sample was selected by chance based on individuals who were easily accessible and met the research criteria. This approach was chosen because the exact number of the population that fits the research criteria is not yet known. Researchers can easily obtain research information using this method. The number of samples used in this study is the minimum recommended—at least thirty samples—so that the calculation results can be considered reliable (Sugiyono, 2017).

The researcher determined the sample criteria based on the following characteristics: 1) Male/Female, 2) have children with special needs (CWSN), and 3) children aged 6–15 years.

The study subjects consisted of 152 parents of children with special needs. The age of the subjects was divided into 25–30 years (7 people), 31–40 years (67 people), 41–50 years (74 people), and 51–60 (4 people). For the duration of marriage: 5–10 years (12 people), 11–20 years (108 people), 21–30 years (31 people), and 31–35 years (1 person). Lastly, the number of male and female participants was 76 each.

Next, the instrument for emotion regulation was measured using a scale called the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) by Gross & John (2003), consisting of 10 items. This scale contains two processes for observing individual emotion regulation strategies related to reappraisal and suppression. The cognitive reappraisal strategy involves cognitive processes, while the expressive suppression strategy emphasizes outward emotional expression. This scale was adapted in Indonesia by Radde et al. (2022). The scale uses a Likert measurement with values of 1 for “Never,” 2 for “Occasionally,” 3 for “Often,” and 4 for “Almost Always.” The researcher then conducted a validity test, with the emotion regulation variable having a validity range of 0.311–0.732 and a reliability index (Cronbach’s Alpha) of 0.847.

Marital conflict was measured using a scale instrument called the Kansas Marital Conflict Scale (KMCS), designed and developed by Eggeman et al. (1985) based on Gottman’s (1979) theory. It consists of 27 items that measure aspects of marital conflict, including Agenda Building, Arguing, and Negotiation. This scale has a reliability index (Cronbach’s Alpha) of 0.88–0.96 and uses a Likert scale with values of 1 for “Never,” 2 for “Occasionally,” 3 for “Sometimes,” 4 for “Often,” and 5 for “Almost Always.” The scale was translated by the researcher and validated through expert judgment by four experts—two Psychology lecturers who are also Clinical Psychologists with expertise in the topic of children with special needs, and two parents of children with special needs. The scale was then tested for validity, with results showing a validity range of 0.065–0.675 and a reliability index (Cronbach’s Alpha) of 0.887.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The research data was collected by distributing instruments to the research subjects, parents who have Children with Special Needs (ABK). The total sample obtained was 152 research subjects.

Table 2. Categorization of Emotional Regulation and Marital Conflict Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Categories	Intervals	Frequencies	%
Emotion Regulation	24,68	5,571	High	$x > 30,2$	30	19,8%
			Moderate	$19 \leq x \leq 30,2$	101	66,4%
			Low	$x > 19$	21	13,8%
			High	$x > 106,5$	25	16,4 %
Marital Conflict	93,53	12,996	Moderate	$80,5 \leq x \leq 106,5$	100	65,8%
			Low	$x > 80,5$	27	17,8 %

Table 2 describes the categorization of emotion regulation and marital conflict. In the marital conflict variable, the total scores obtained range from 66 to 127 and are divided into three categories, namely scores $x < 80.5$ as low category, $80.5 \leq x \leq 106.5$ as medium category, and scores $\geq 107-147$ as high category. The marital conflict variable has an average score (mean) of 93.53 with a standard deviation value of 12.996. Thus, it can be seen that parents of children with special needs (CWSN) experience high marital conflict as many as 25 people (16.4%), medium marital conflict as many as 100 people (65.8%), and low marital conflict as many as 27 people (17.8%).

In the emotion regulation variable, the total scores range from 11 to 35 and are divided into three categories, namely scores $x < 30.2$ as low category, $19 \leq x \leq 30.2$ as medium category, and scores ≥ 30.2 as high category. The emotion regulation variable has an average score (mean) of 24.68 with a standard deviation value of 5.571. Thus, it can be seen that parents of children with special needs (CWSN) have high emotion regulation as many as 30 people (19.8%), medium emotion regulation as many as 101 people (66.4%), and low emotion regulation as many as 21 people (13.8%).

Assumption Test

The normality test in this study was conducted by calculating the residual using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. The data obtained were normally distributed because both variables had a significance value of $0.200 > 0.05$.

Linearity Test

In a linearity test, there are two requirements to interpret whether the data obtained is linear or not. The first requirement is the Sig. Deviation from linearity value > 0.05 and the second requirement is the Sig. Linearity value < 0.05 . This study uses the second requirement, namely the Sig. Linearity value < 0.05 where the sig. Linearity value is obtained for both variables, namely $0.006 < 0.05$. Therefore, it can still be concluded that the two variables, namely emotional regulation (X) and marital conflict (Y), have a linear relationship.

Simple Linear Regression Analysis

Simple Linear Regression Test is conducted to test the hypothesis and determine whether there is an effect of the emotion regulation variable on marital conflict in parents of children with special needs (ABK). The results of the regression test can be seen in the table below:

Table 3. Simple Linear Regression Analysis Test

Variables	β	t	p	R	R ²
Emotion Regulation - Marital Conflict	-0,173	-2.153	0.033	0,173 ^a	0,030

Table 3 above shows how the hypothesis in this study is tested through simple linear regression analysis. The results show that the hypothesis is accepted with a α value of -0.173 and a significance value (p) of $0.033 < 0.05$. This analysis indicates that there is an effect of emotion regulation on marital conflict in parents of children with special needs (ABK). Additionally, the regression coefficient value is negative (-0.173), which can be interpreted as meaning that for every 1% increase in emotion regulation, marital conflict decreases by -0.173. This means that the higher the emotion regulation ability, the lower the marital conflict in the individual. Conversely, the lower the emotion regulation ability, the higher the marital conflict that will occur.

The coefficient of determination is an analysis used to measure the extent to which the independent variable affects the dependent variable. The regression model results show that the R^2 value is 0.03. This indicates that only about 3% of the marital conflict is influenced by emotion regulation. Meanwhile, 97% of marital conflict is influenced by other factors.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of emotion regulation on marital conflict in parents of children with special needs. The data analysis performed through Simple Linear Regression Testing shows that the hypothesis is accepted with a β value of -0.173 and a significance value (p) of $0.03 < 0.05$. This analysis indicates that emotion regulation has an effect on marital conflict in parents of children with special needs (ABK). The results can be interpreted to mean that the higher the emotion regulation ability, the lower the marital conflict in parents. Conversely, the lower the emotion regulation ability, the higher the marital conflict that will occur. These findings support research explaining that good emotion regulation can reduce emotional arousal, enabling couples to engage in effective communication, better problem-solving, and minimize the risk of marital conflict (Bloch et al., 2015; Todorov et al., 2023).

The results of this study also strengthen research conducted by Colton (2021), which explains that emotion regulation can influence marital conflict. When parents of children with special needs are unable to regulate their emotions, they tend to react impulsively or aggressively towards their partner. This can worsen conflict and make it more difficult for individuals to find solutions to problems. Furthermore, individuals who struggle to control their emotions will have difficulty expressing their needs and emotions effectively, leading to misunderstandings. This study also explains how emotional dysregulation can contribute to a cycle of negative conflict, where unresolved problems and negative emotions accumulate over time, resulting in more frequent and intense conflicts.

Another study found that the long-term risk of couples having good emotion regulation is that they can manage conflicts better in marriage and lead to higher marital satisfaction (Frye et al., 2020). Emotion regulation is also a key factor that can protect individuals and couples from the negative effects of marital conflict on physical and mental health (Frye-Cox et al.,

2021). Furthermore, from its impact, parents who are able to have good emotion regulation during marital conflict can contribute to the development of emotion regulation patterns and defense mechanisms in their children (Lindblom et al., 2016).

In addition to affecting relationships with partners, emotion regulation also plays a crucial role in managing conflicts within individuals. Conflicts essentially involve emotions, and the ability to manage emotions to respond to a situation constructively and productively is known as the emotion regulation process (McRae & Gross, 2020). Adaptive emotion regulation is needed to avoid conflict with others by reducing the intensity of emotional experiences or expressions (Wilms et al., 2020). Improving emotion regulation can prevent conflicts within the individual from turning into relationship conflicts (Ben-Naim et al., 2013). Therefore, individuals can use emotion regulation skills to manage emotions constructively and reduce the negative impact of intense emotions.

The research findings also reveal that parents of children with special needs (ABK) experience marital conflict as follows: 25 parents (16.4%) have high marital conflict, 100 parents (65.8%) have moderate marital conflict, and 27 parents (17.8%) have low marital conflict. Further analysis showed that the Agenda Building aspect had the highest score for parents of ABK who have moderate marital conflict. Agenda Building can be defined as the process in which individuals in a relationship focus on issues that need to be discussed further or decisions that need to be made (Gottman, 1979; Eggeman et al., 1985). Agenda Building involves identifying the main problems that cause conflict, prioritizing these issues, and deciding which problem to address first.

Although the majority of parents with ABK in this study had moderate marital conflict, the high Agenda Building aspect needs to be considered. This is because Agenda Building has the potential to worsen the conflict if not managed well. In marital conflict, agenda building occurs when partners attempt to avoid expressing their feelings in ways that may have a negative influence, such as mind reading. One partner assumes that the other can read their mind and has the same expectations. This can lead to misunderstandings when those expectations are not met. Furthermore, each partner may have different priorities or issues they want to resolve. If these priorities do not align, it can lead to disputes and conflict (McConnel & Savage, 2015). Therefore, good emotion regulation strategies are needed to change emotional responses to a situation by altering perceptions of it. For instance, viewing conflict as an opportunity for the marriage to improve and provide optimal care for the child with special needs (ABK) rather than seeing the conflict as a threat. This can help reduce negative emotions and promote healthier problem-solving (Chen & Liao, 2021).

Research by Tavassolie et al. (2016) explains that when fathers frequently experience marital conflict, it can add parenting stress and reduce warmth toward the child. This can impact the child's socioemotional development, as described by the mother. Fathers are much more influenced by the marital relationship than mothers, and the strength of the marital bond can affect a father's involvement in child care and the father-child relationship (Ali et al.,

2022). Previous studies have shown that fathers and mothers respond to conflict differently, and the impact of conflict on parenting can vary between them (Celik, 2020).

This study also supports research by Brien-Bérard & des Rivières-Pigeon (2023), which indicates that both individual and dyadic emotion regulation strategies can reduce stress and strengthen the marital relationship. The findings show that lower marital conflict is associated with better emotion regulation, which can be interpreted as evidence of the effectiveness of coping and emotion regulation strategies, both individually and dyadically. These strategies include personal stress management techniques, open communication between partners, and mutual support in parenting tasks.

This study shows that the contribution of the emotion regulation variable to marital conflict is 3%. Meanwhile, most of the variation in marital conflict (about 97%) is explained by other factors not included in this study's model. The small contribution of emotion regulation to marital conflict could indicate that parents of children with special needs (ABK) have very specific marital conflict patterns. Additionally, there are many factors that influence conflict, especially considering the characteristics of their children. Other factors that may influence marital conflict include communication issues such as ineffective communication, lack of cooperation, and differing viewpoints, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflict (Shifaw, 2022). Financial issues, such as financial stress and income-related problems, also significantly contribute to marital conflict (Singh & Gupta, 2023). The marital conflict patterns among parents of children with special needs are quite specific, as they are not solely influenced by one factor but by multiple factors. Previous research by Hoseinnejad et al. (2020) explained that happiness and the specific needs of the child are important factors that should be considered when studying marital conflict.

Furthermore, differences in opinions regarding household responsibilities, parenting styles, and related conflicts also contribute to marital conflict. A study by Zhu et al. (2022) found that marital conflict can negatively affect child development through its impact on parenting patterns. Marital conflict related to the mother's lack of sensitivity, negative interactions between parents and children, and harsh or neglectful parenting behaviors can have a detrimental effect on the child. Issues with trust, particularly if one or both partners come from divorced families, also influence marital conflict and make it more difficult to adjust to marriage (Bagheri et al., 2021).

As with any study, there are strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of this study include its focus on a specific population, making the research more relevant and providing deeper insights into how emotion regulation affects marital conflict in families facing the challenges of raising children with special needs. This study also offers a better understanding of the relationship between these two variables, which can serve as a foundation for future research. Additionally, the findings of this study provide practical insights for parents of children with special needs. By understanding the role of emotion regulation in managing marital conflict, parents can improve communication, problem-solving, and their overall

marital relationship. This can enhance family well-being and ensure that children with special needs receive better care. The limitations of this study include the fact that the researcher did not consider demographic factors such as parents' age, the length of the marriage, or the specific needs of the child, which could influence marital conflict among parents of children with special needs. Furthermore, the data collection process posed challenges, as not all parents were willing to openly complete the scales, and at the beginning of data collection, the research purpose had to be explained in great detail. Given that this is a sensitive issue, careful attention is needed during data collection.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the research hypothesis can be accepted, meaning that marital conflict influences emotion regulation in parents of children with special needs (ABK). This can be interpreted as follows: the higher the emotion regulation abilities of individuals, the lower the marital conflict they experience. Conversely, the lower the emotion regulation abilities, the higher the likelihood of marital conflict.

The implications of this research provide direct benefits for parents of children with special needs, as it emphasizes the importance of improving emotion regulation in the face of marital conflict that may arise at any time. Given the findings that show a contribution of emotion regulation to the occurrence of marital conflict, there is a need for the development of specific interventions that can help parents of children with special needs improve their emotion regulation skills. These interventions would be useful in training parents to better manage their emotions during times of marital conflict, which can lead to healthier relationships and improved well-being for both the parents and their children.

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