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Local Coherence, Emotional Empathy and Cognitive Empathy of Children with High Functioning Autism

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Abstract

The current study investigates the impact of mediated local coherence perception on emotional and cognitive empathy in children with High-Functioning Autism (HFA), aged five to seven, attending special education programs in Israel. Based on the Weak Central Coherence Theory (Happé & Frith, 2006), Theory of Mind (Osterhaus & Koerber, 2021), and Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) and Structural Cognitive Modifiability (SCM) theories (Feuerstein et al., 1981), the research explored how children with HFA process information and express empathy while reading stories in which different social situations are described. Twenty-six children (18 boys, 8 girls) who are diagnosed with HFA, aged five to seven, participated in the program, divided into intervention and control groups. The intervention group received mediation during a local coherence test, while the control group completed the test independently. Two main tools were used: the Children Local Coherence Test (CLCT) Questionnaire (Tzuriel & Groman, 2013) and the RAMA Empathy Questionnaire (Russo-Zimet & Sagie, 2017), both administered pre- and post-intervention. Results demonstrated a significant positive correlation between cognitive empathy and local coherence perception, as well as between responses to social situations and local coherence perception. While emotional empathy showed significant improvement in the intervention group post-mediation, no significant differences were found between groups in other measures. The findings highlight the potential of mediation in enhancing social understanding in children with HFA.

Keywords: High-Functioning Autism (HFA); Mediated Learning Experience (MLE); Local Coherence; Empathy ; Social Understanding