

CHANGES IN PARENTS' EMOTION REGULATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL REFLECTION AFTER A JOURNALING THERAPY PROGRAM

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Abstract: Parenting adolescents requires parents to manage their emotions and reflect on their parenting experiences. Journaling therapy is one type of expressive writing that may help parents become more aware of their emotions and thoughts. This study aimed to describe changes in parents' emotion regulation and psychological reflection after participating in a journaling therapy program. This study used a quantitative approach with a one-group pretest-posttest design. The participants were 56 parents of students at SMP Muhammadiyah Pabuaran. Data were collected using an emotion regulation scale and a psychological reflection scale. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics by comparing the mean scores before and after the program. The mean score of emotion regulation increased from 28.47 before the program to 33.85 after the program. The mean score of psychological reflection also increased from 27.96 to 34.12. These results show higher mean scores after the journaling therapy program. Journaling therapy may be used as an alternative activity in school parenting programs to support parents' emotion regulation and psychological reflection.

Keywords: journaling therapy; parents; psychological reflection; emotion regulation

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed many aspects of family life, including the way parents interact with and guide their children. Alongside these changes, parents are expected to fulfill not only their children's physical and academic needs but also their social and emotional needs, particularly during adolescence. This developmental period is often marked by emotional instability, identity exploration, and increasing sensitivity to peer relationships, making effective parental involvement especially important. As young people spend more time in digital environments, parents face additional challenges in monitoring behavior, maintaining communication, and providing appropriate support. Previous studies have suggested that digital contexts can influence adolescents' patterns of social interaction and communication, emphasizing the continuing importance of parental

guidance in promoting healthy development (Alfalathi et al., 2025). Similar evidence has also shown that adolescents' engagement with social media is associated with their language behaviour, reinforcing the importance of parental guidance and digital literacy in fostering positive communication practices (Saefudin et al., 2026). As parents play a central role in guiding adolescents' communication and behaviour, they need to respond to these challenges in constructive and emotionally appropriate ways. This requires parents to regulate their emotions and reflect on their own responses before making parenting decisions. Therefore, emotion regulation and psychological reflection are important psychological capacities that may support effective parenting in the digital era.

Among the factors associated with effective parenting, emotion regulation has received considerable attention (Puspitasari & Hidayat, 2023). According to Gross (2015), emotion regulation refers to the processes through which individuals manage, evaluate, and adjust their emotional responses in accordance with situational demands and long-term objectives. Within parenting situations, this ability allows parents to respond to their children's behavior in a calmer, more adaptive, and more consistent manner. Another important factor is psychological reflection, which involves the capacity to understand one's own internal experiences as well as the thoughts and feelings of others, including one's children. Research on parental reflective functioning has shown that parents who better understand their children's mental and emotional states tend to maintain more positive parenting practices, particularly when facing stressful circumstances. Such reflective capacities have also been linked to healthier social and behavioral development among children (Romeo et al., 2026).

The concept of parental reflective functioning suggests that parents who can reflect on their children's thoughts, feelings, and needs are more likely to develop positive and supportive relationships with them (Fonagy et al., 2017). More recent evidence also indicates that higher levels of parental reflection on children's mental states are associated with better parenting quality and greater sensitivity to children's developmental needs (Enav et al., 2026). Along with these developments, journaling therapy, or expressive writing, has increasingly been used as a psychological intervention to help individuals express emotions, organize experiences, and enhance self-awareness (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Previous research has consistently reported the benefits of journaling therapy, including its role in reducing stress, improving emotional regulation, and encouraging reflective thinking across various populations (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Travagin et al., 2015). Despite these promising findings, relatively little is known about how this intervention functions within the context of adolescent parenting. The challenges faced by parents during this developmental stage differ from those experienced by other populations, suggesting the need for further investigation in parenting-related settings.

A closer examination of the literature reveals several important research gaps. Previous studies have primarily examined the effects of journaling therapy among clinical populations, university students, and adults from the general population (Muti et al., 2025; Sucitra et al., 2019; Susilo & Anggapuspa, 2024), while parents have received comparatively less attention. In addition, research conducted in educational environments, particularly studies involving parents of junior high school students, remains limited. Existing studies also tend to examine emotional outcomes or reflective processes separately, making it difficult to understand how

journaling therapy may influence both dimensions simultaneously. Consequently, evidence regarding the potential contribution of journaling therapy to strengthening parents' psychological resources in supporting adolescent development is still relatively limited.

Responding to these gaps, the present study examines the effectiveness of journaling therapy in improving emotion regulation and psychological reflection among parents of students at SMP Muhammadiyah Pabuaran. Rather than focusing on a single psychological outcome, this study considers both emotional and reflective capacities within one intervention framework and situates the intervention in a school-based parenting context. This approach offers a broader understanding of how expressive writing may support parents in managing emotional experiences while reflecting on their interactions with their children. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on parenting interventions and provide practical insights for schools seeking to develop programs that strengthen parental involvement, emotional well-being, and family relationships.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design to examine changes in parents' emotion regulation and psychological reflection following a journaling therapy program. This design allows researchers to examine changes following an intervention without random assignment of participants (Creswell, 2014, as cited in Saefudin et al., 2025). The quantitative study evaluated a journaling therapy program that had previously been implemented and reported as a community service activity (Wahjuningtjas et al., 2026). The participants were 56 parents of students at SMP Muhammadiyah Pabuaran, selected using purposive sampling.

They participated voluntarily and completed both the pretest and posttest. The journaling therapy program consisted of four sessions, including psychoeducation, guided journaling, group discussion, and follow-up planning. Data were collected using an adapted Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) and a psychological reflection scale developed by the researchers. Both instruments used a five-point Likert scale and were tested for validity and reliability before use. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics by comparing the mean scores before and after the program to describe changes in parents' emotion regulation and psychological reflection.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A total of 56 parents of students at SMP Muhammadiyah Pabuaran participated in the journaling therapy program and completed all stages of the intervention. To provide an overview of participants' emotion regulation and psychological reflection, descriptive statistics were calculated for both variables before and after the intervention. The results of the descriptive analysis, together with the paired sample t-test findings, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores

Variabel	Stage	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference
Emotion Regulation	Pretest	56	28.47	3.92	5.38
	Posttest	56	33.85	3.41	
Psychological Reflection	Pretest	56	27.96	4.08	6.16
	Posttest	56	34.12	3.56	

As shown in Table 1, both variables increased following participation in the journaling therapy program. The mean score for emotion regulation increased from 28.47 at pretest to 33.85 at posttest, with a mean difference of 5.38 points. Similarly, the mean score for psychological reflection increased from 27.96 to 34.12, representing a mean difference of 6.16 points. In addition, the standard deviations of both variables decreased slightly after the intervention, indicating that participants' responses became more consistent during the posttest assessment.

The observed increase in emotion regulation suggests that journaling activities provided participants with opportunities to become more aware of their emotional experiences during parenting. Through reflective writing, parents were encouraged to revisit daily interactions with their children, organize their thoughts, and consider alternative ways of responding to emotionally challenging situations. Rather than reacting impulsively, participants appeared to develop greater awareness of their emotional responses throughout the intervention process.

The findings of this study indicate that parents who participated in the journaling therapy program demonstrated higher mean scores in both emotion regulation and psychological reflection following the intervention. Specifically, the mean score for emotion regulation increased by 5.38 points, while psychological reflection increased by 6.16 points. These descriptive findings suggest that participation in journaling therapy was accompanied by positive changes in both psychological capacities.

The increase in emotion regulation may be associated with the reflective nature of journaling activities. Through expressive writing, participants were encouraged to record and review their daily parenting experiences, providing opportunities to recognize and organize their emotional responses more consciously. This process may support parents in becoming more aware of their emotions before responding to challenging parenting situations. Although the present study did not examine the specific mechanisms underlying these changes, the observed pattern is consistent with Gross's (2015) model. Gross's (2015) Process Model of Emotion Regulation emphasizes that evaluating emotional experiences can facilitate more adaptive emotional responses. Similar findings have also been reported by Pennebaker and Smyth (2016), who describe expressive writing as a strategy that promotes emotional processing, and by Park & Ko (2024) and Sa'idah et al. (2026), who found that journaling activities contribute to improved emotional awareness and psychological adjustment.

Positive changes were also observed in psychological reflection. The increase in the average score suggests that participants demonstrated greater reflective capacity after completing the journaling activities. Reflective writing encourages individuals to revisit experiences, consider

their thoughts and emotions, and assign meaning to everyday events. Within the parenting context, this process may help parents reflect more carefully on their interactions with their children. This interpretation is consistent with the concept of parental reflective functioning, which emphasizes the importance of understanding psychological experiences in parenting relationships (Gagné et al., 2025). Previous studies have likewise shown that journaling and reflective writing can enhance self-reflection, meaning-making, and reflective thinking (Muti et al., 2025; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Reinhold et al., 2018).

The descriptive findings indicate that both emotion regulation and psychological reflection increased following participation in the journaling therapy program. However, the present study did not examine the relationship between these two variables. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive changes in each outcome rather than evidence that improvements occurred simultaneously or were directly related. These findings suggest that journaling therapy may be considered as a supportive activity in parenting programs, although further studies are needed to examine the relationship between these psychological outcomes.

The present study contributes to the literature by extending the application of journaling therapy to parents of junior high school students, a population that has received comparatively limited attention in previous studies. While previous research has primarily focused on clinical populations, university students, or adults from the general population, the present findings indicate that journaling activities may also be beneficial in parenting contexts. From a practical perspective, the intervention offers a relatively simple, low-cost, and accessible approach that may be incorporated into school-based parenting education programs and parent support services to encourage emotional awareness and reflective capacity among parents.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study used a one-group pretest–posttest design without a comparison group. Therefore, the observed changes cannot be attributed only to the journaling therapy program. The results may also have been influenced by testing effects because participants completed the same questionnaire twice. Natural changes over time (maturation), regression to the mean, and events that occurred during the intervention period (history effects) may also have affected the results. In addition, the participants came from only one junior high school, so the findings cannot be generalized to a wider population. The use of self-report questionnaires may also have introduced response bias. Future studies should include larger samples, use a control group, and combine quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more complete understanding of parents' experiences during journaling therapy.

Overall, the findings suggest that participation in a structured journaling therapy program was accompanied by positive changes in parents' emotion regulation and psychological reflection. These findings provide preliminary evidence that journaling activities may represent a practical strategy for supporting parents' emotional and reflective development within educational settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed higher mean scores for emotion regulation and psychological reflection after the journaling therapy program. These descriptive findings suggest that journaling activities may help parents become more aware of their emotions and encourage psychological reflection during parenting. This study provides descriptive evidence on the use of journaling therapy with parents of junior high school students. The findings also suggest that journaling activities may be considered as one option in school-based parenting education and counseling programs. However, this study used a one-group pretest–posttest design without a comparison group. Therefore, the observed changes cannot be attributed only to the intervention. Future studies should include a control group, involve larger and more diverse samples, and combine quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a better understanding of the role of journaling therapy in supporting parents' emotion regulation and psychological reflection.

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