



# Embodying a compassionate self through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for parents and children with eczema: A family-based eczema management programme



Yuen Yu Chong<sup>1\*</sup>, Wai Tong Chien<sup>1</sup>, Ho Yu Cheng<sup>1</sup>, Sui Ping Leung<sup>2</sup>, Oi Yin Wong<sup>2</sup>, Shu Yan Lam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Nethersole School of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

<sup>2</sup>Department of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine, Tuen Mun Hospital

\*Principal applicant and corresponding author; email: [conniechong@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:conniechong@cuhk.edu.hk)

## Introduction

- Eczema is a prevalent chronic inflammatory skin condition in Hong Kong which has a detrimental effect on the quality of life of pediatric patients and their families.
- Traditional eczema management usually prioritizes medical treatment, thus the psychological stress on parents and children is often neglected.
- **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)** has been advocated as a supplementary approach to address these psychological aspects and enhance overall management.

## Aims of the study

- This study investigated the feasibility, acceptability, and potential efficacy of a Family Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)-based Eczema Management Programme (FACT-EMP). It focused on outcomes such as childhood eczema severity (primary outcome for children), parental self-efficacy in eczema management (primary outcome for parents) parental psychological flexibility, psychological distress, self-compassion, and health-related quality of life over a 3-month post-intervention period.

## Methods

- A two-arm randomized controlled trial (RCT) with a repeated measures design was utilized. Cantonese-speaking parent-child dyads, with children aged 6-12 years diagnosed with eczema, were consecutively recruited from the pediatric outpatient clinics of the study hospital. The parent-child dyads in the ACT group received 4-weekly (each 2 hrs) of group-based FACT-EMP sessions (90 mins of ACT, 30 mins of eczema management) which was structured as follows:

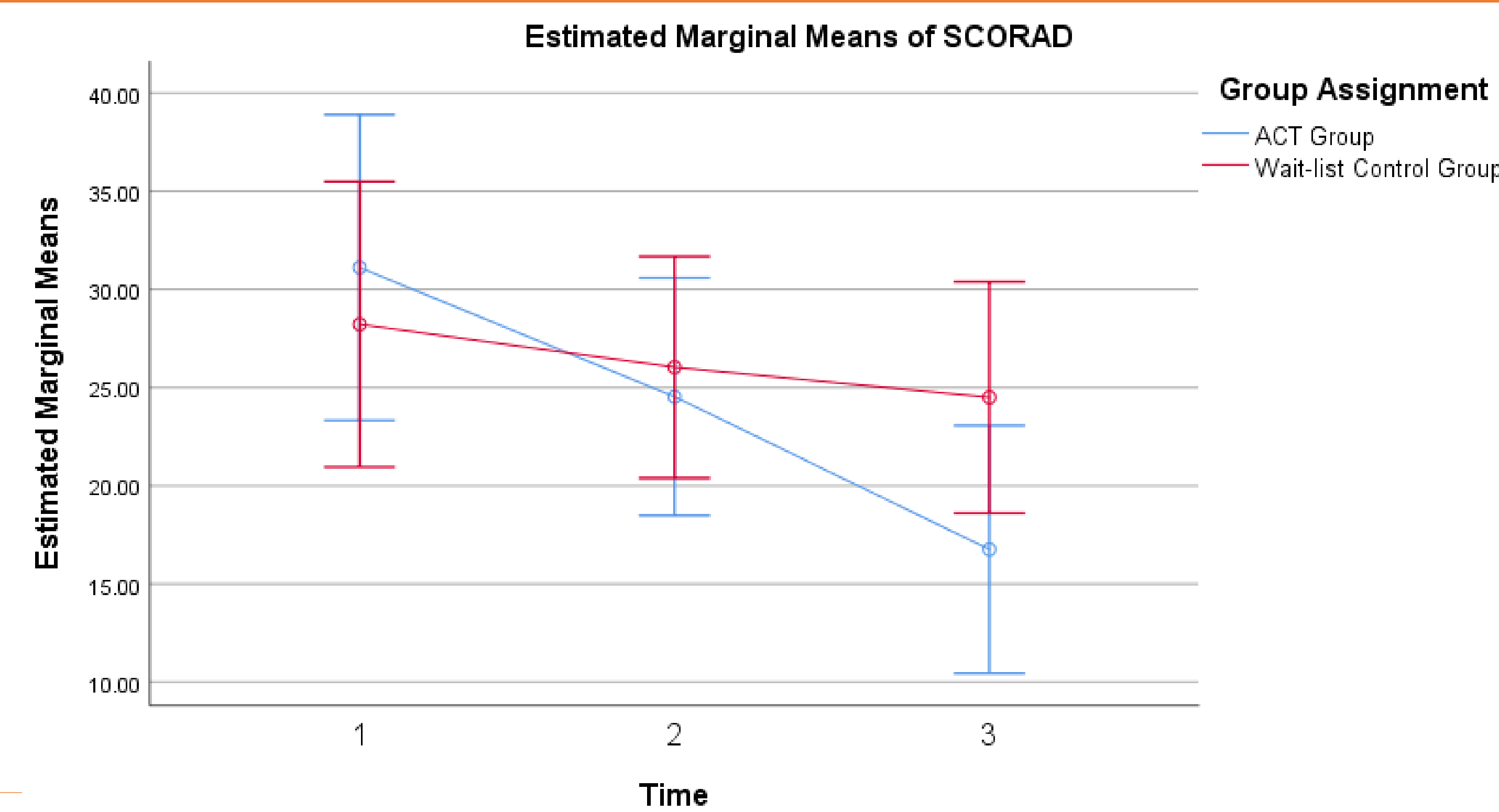
Session Theme	Session goal
Session 1. Orientation, engagement, and psychoeducation	To discover the long-term cost of struggling with psychological difficulties in response to eczema, such as body image concern, shame and self-criticism.
Session 2. Explore acceptance and common humanity	To weaken the fusion with self-criticism and self-conceptualization related to eczema. To build up the qualities of self-perspective taking when seeing one's experience as part of the larger human experience.
Session 3. The unavoidability of 'it' and values as self-kindness	To demonstrate the unavoidability of suffering as a parent and a child with eczema To explore self-kindness as values.
Session 4. Steps towards values – self-kindness and self-compassion	To strengthen their stands for their values related to self-kindness with acceptance of one's experience To take steps to act on values while practicing kindness and compassion.

- Adjusted generalized estimating equation models were used to examine the intervention effects between group across time. Focused group interviews were conducted to explore the parents' experience in participating the FACT-EMP.

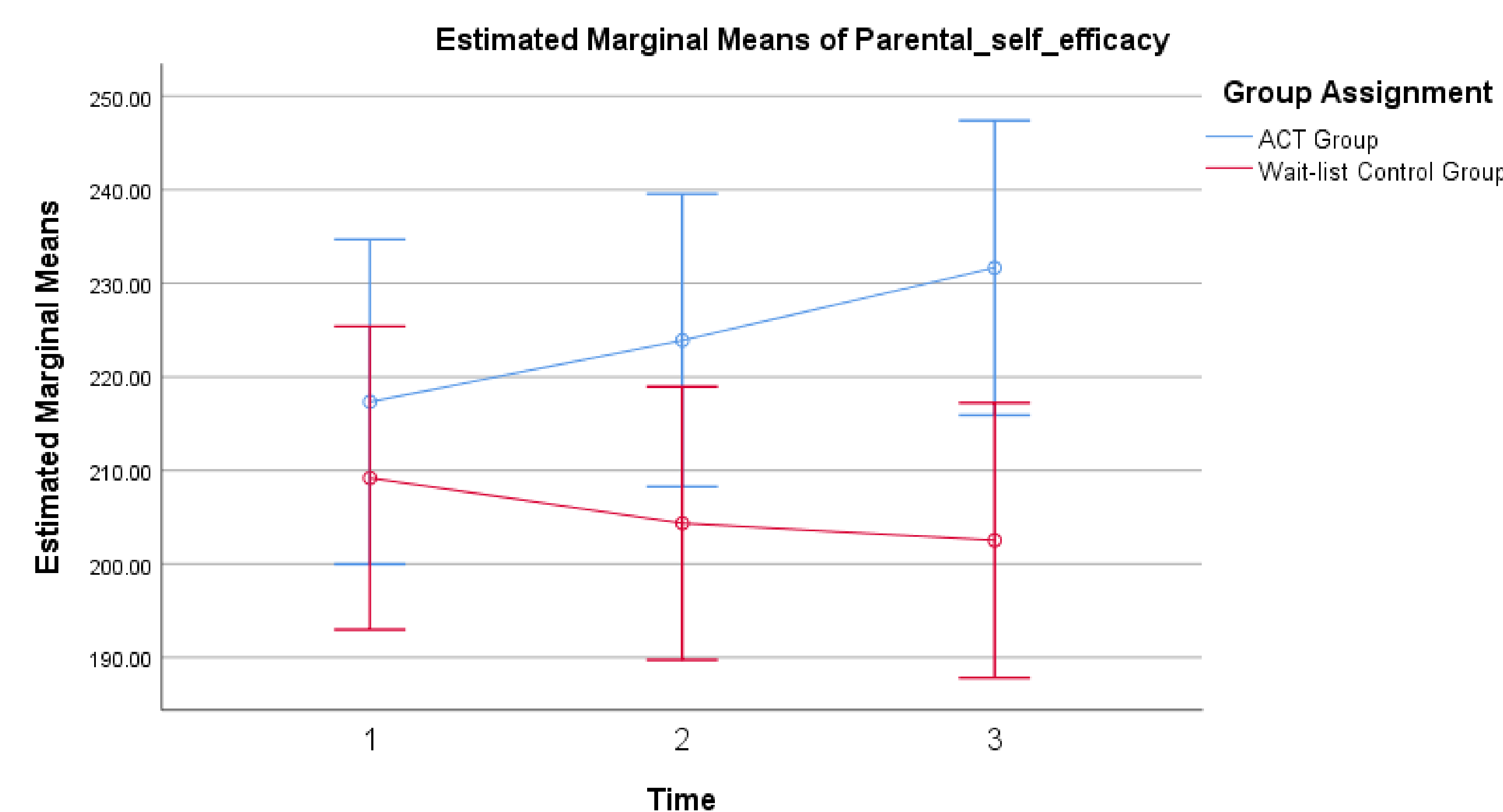
## Result 1 – Feasibility and acceptability

- A total of 944 parent-child dyads were assessed for eligibility, with 181 meeting the eligibility criteria. Of the eligible dyads, 78 were randomly assigned to FACT-EMP (n = 39) or usual care (n = 39), resulting in a **recruitment rate of 43.1%**
- Of those allocated, all completed baseline assessments, 75 completed post-intervention assessments (96.2%) and 68 completed the 3-month follow-up assessments (**retention rate of 87.2%**).

## Result 2 – Effects on Primary outcomes



- A decrease in the severity of child eczema shown by the decreased mean SCORAD score relative to the waitlist control group (aMD, -7.73; 95% CI, -13.92 to -1.54; P = .014), with a medium effect size (Cohen's d = -0.59).



- Parental self-efficacy in managing children's eczema significantly increased post-intervention (PASECI aMD, 18.69; 95% CI, 13.80 to 33.58; P = .014; Cohen's d =0.56) and was maintained at 3 months (aMD, 28.90; P < .001; d =0.85).

## Result 3 – Effects on secondary outcomes

- Parental outcomes exhibited significant time-by-group interaction effects, favoring the intervention group in psychological symptoms (P = .002), quality of life (P < .001), psychological flexibility (P = .010), self-compassion (P < .001), and child quality of life (P = .025). For child outcomes, notable time-by-group interactions emerged in psychological flexibility (P = .004) and self-compassion (P < .001). However, the effect sizes for child psychological flexibility were not significant at post-intervention or 3-month follow-up.

## Results 4 - Qualitative feedback

- 11 parents participated in our interviews, reflecting that the FACT-EMP was practical and relevant to their parental psychological needs when managing childhood eczema in their daily parenting life. Here are some examples of the feedbacks according to our analytical themes:

### Reframing a new relationship with internal experiences:

“... I've come to realize a different way to relay my feelings when I saw my son scratching! Somehow the feeling of anger will come but I know it is just a “come-and-go” thing, it is just a thought. Accept and take a deep breath and it's gone...”

### Fostering mutual understanding within a supportive community:

“When we all shared what we're going through, you can't help but feel connected to everyone else's experiences.”

### Learning to live by one's personal values:

“Before joining this program, I felt like I was always trying to please everyone else, whether it was my husband or my grandma. But now, I've discovered my own direction. I've started making plans that are really for me.”

### Improving self-compassion

“I've learned to treat myself with the same gentle understanding I give my child. When I miss a spot applying her cream and a flare-up happens, I remind myself, 'You're doing your best,' instead of falling into a guilt trap.”

### Challenges and benefits in therapeutic applications for parent-child dyads:

“It's a revelation for my child to see other kids with eczema too. It's a kind of understanding for him”

## Conclusion and implications

- The FACT-EMP program demonstrated high feasibility and acceptability, with substantial improvements in eczema outcomes and family psychological well-being. This supports the integration of psychological interventions into standard eczema care and invites further investigation into their long-term efficacy.

### Acknowledgement and reference

We thank the participating families for their invaluable contributions to the FACT-EMP program during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). Our appreciation extends to the clinicians and ACT counsellors, and the NICHE grant in bringing this FACT-EMP initiative to fruition.

Chong, Y. Y., Kwan, J. Y. M., Yau, P. T., Cheng, H. Y., & Chien, W. T. (2023). Roles of parental psychological flexibility, self-compassion, and self-efficacy in affecting mental health and quality of life in parents of children with eczema. *Healthcare*, 11(20), 2708. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11202708>