Title: Feasibility, Acceptability, and Preliminary Impact of a Pilot Parent Support Intervention for Parents of Children with Autism and ADHD

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Introduction: Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) face significant levels of parenting stress (Harrison & Sofronoff, 2002; Rao & Beidel, 2009). Because parenting stress is part of a cycle in which parenting stress impacts parent behavior, which impacts child behavior, that can in turn further impact parenting stress (Deater-Deckard, 1998), supports for parents of children with autism and ADHD become an essential part of services for families. However, given the significant existing demands placed on families given the nature of these disorders, supports should be feasible, acceptable, and effective.

Method: The current study developed, implemented, and evaluated a pilot parent support intervention using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach focused on the critical variables of parenting stress, parent wellness through parent support, and mindfulness strategies. These variables were first explored through a qualitative study (Phase One) that gathered parent perspectives on these constructs. This then informed a quantitative study with embedded qualitative components (Phase Two) that evaluated the feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary impact of an intervention that incorporated data from the first phase, relevant theory, and previous intervention literature. In Phase One (n = 15), focus group sessions were transcribed and qualitative data were analyzed using Nvivo (QSR International, 2014). First-level qualitative coding was based on themes generated from theory-related material and further codes were refined as themes arose in the data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In Phase Two, a new group of parents of children with autism and/or ADHD attended an eight-session intervention with themes of mindfulness (Bögels & Restifo, 2014; Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009) and parent support (Glidden, Billings, & Jobe, 2006; Resch, Benz, & Elliott, 2012). Preliminary impact of the intervention was evaluated using repeated measures ANOVAs to analyze change in parenting stress, parent wellness, and mindful parenting for those who completed measures at both the pre- and post-intervention time points (n = 7). Attendance was tracked to measure feasibility. Participants, including parents who only participated partially across the course of the intervention, also completed measures rating the acceptability of each intervention session attended (n = 20). Amongst the children of these 20 overall participants, nine children had parent-reported diagnoses of autism and eight children had comorbid diagnoses including at least both ADHD and autism; three children had diagnoses of ADHD with no diagnosis of autism.

Results: In Phase One, qualitative analysis yielded several themes, including 1) the hectic but valued experience of parenting a child with autism and/or ADHD, 2) sources of parenting stress, 3) contributors and barriers to parent wellness, 4) familiarity with and views of mindfulness, and 5) issues of feasibility and acceptability in developing programming that may meet parent needs. Among the seven parents who provided pre- and post-intervention data in Phase Two, parents did not report clinically significant change in parenting stress, parent wellness, or mindful parenting for those who completed measures at both the pre- and post-intervention time points (n = 7). Attendance was tracked to measure feasibility. Participants, including parents who only participated partially across the course of the intervention, also completed measures rating the acceptability of each intervention session attended (n = 20). Amongst the children of these 20 overall participants, nine children had parent-reported diagnoses of autism and eight children had comorbid diagnoses including at least both ADHD and autism; three children had diagnoses of ADHD with no diagnosis of autism.

Regarding feasibility and acceptability, attendance declined over the course of the intervention, but parents rated sessions they attended as 31.96 and above on a scale of 0 to 40. Participants reported that they most highly valued sessions using mindfulness components such as the three-minute breathing space and loving-kindness practice (wishing themselves, loved ones, and all human beings well with the goal of forming the intention to be kind, compassionate, and loving) and support components including a resource book developed as part of the intervention, as well as avenues for local advocacy and support.
**Discussion:** This mixed-methods study suggests the importance of engaging the families of children with autism and ADHD, specifically in regard to parent support and emotional and behavioral coping strategies for parents. The results indicate that a parent support group can be an important component of parenting a child with an EBD, as it addresses parents’ expressed need for accountability; strategies for accessing resources to help their child in the community, school, and at home; and a safe space to discuss a significant part of their lives with others who will be understanding and helpful. Further research may explore how to increase feasibility and effectiveness of acceptable interventions, such as parent support groups. Additionally, such studies should evaluate change at time points beyond the conclusion of the intervention, as parents may begin to implement strategies, but not note outcomes within a two-month span; consider the potential effectiveness of abbreviated interventions, which may lessen attrition over time; and consider increasingly accessible interventions (e.g. online and in-home supports).

**References/Citations:**