Title: The Concordance of Parent and Child Report of Anxiety Symptoms in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder versus Typically Developing Children

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Introduction: Adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often have elevated levels of anxiety when compared to the general public (van Steensel et al. 2011). Parent reports of anxiety are often used for diagnostic purposes, as it’s been suggested in previous literature that children with ASD cannot accurately assess their own anxiety symptoms (Bitsika et al. 2015b). Parents of children with ASD often report that their child has higher levels of anxiety than their child reports, while the opposite has been shown for parents of typically developing (TD) children, but there is little research examining why this is the case (Blakeley-Smith et al. 2012). The purpose of this study is to examine whether parent well-being influences the concordance of child and parent report of generalized anxiety symptoms.

Method: A parent and their child with high functioning ASD \( (n = 21) \) and a parent and their TD child \( (n = 29) \) completed the Screen for Childhood Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) parent report and child report, respectively. The generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) subscale was used in this study. Parent-child concordance was calculated by subtracting the SCARED GAD subscale child report from the parent report. Parents also reported on their well-being using the Inventory of Depression and Anxiety Scales.

Results: First, the concordance between parent and child ratings of anxiety symptoms was compared between groups (ASD vs. TD) and was found to be significantly different between parents of a child with ASD and parents of a TD child, \( F(1, 47) = 10.31, p \leq .01 \). Parents of children with ASD rated symptoms higher than their child \( (M = -1.81, SD = 5.41) \), while the opposite was found with parents of TD children \( (M = 2.89, SD = 4.81) \). Next, a moderated regression was performed where child diagnosis (ASD v. TD), parent well-being, and their interaction were entered as predictors of parent-child concordance. There was a significant interaction between diagnosis and parental well-being on parent-child anxiety symptom concordance, \( b = .54 \ (SE = .24), t = 2.30, p = .03 \). Parent-child differences were examined at 1 SD above and below the mean of parental well-being, with no significant difference found in the high-functioning ASD group when the parents reported low well-being or high well-being, \( b = -.57 \ (SE = .19), t = 1.21, p = .23 \). As well-being increased for the parents of TD children, so did the discrepancy between child and parent report of anxiety, \( b = .43 \ (SE = .14), t = 2.26, p = .03 \).

Discussion: This study shows that the well-being of parents of TD children affects how they rate their child’s generalized anxiety symptoms. However, parental well-being does not influence parent-child concordance of generalized anxiety ratings in ASD dyads. Parents of children with ASD may be miss-attributing the symptoms of ASD as anxiety symptoms (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2015a), while parents of TD children are overlooking them. Different anxiety measures may be able to separate parental well-being from their ratings of their child better than the SCARED scale. Future research should examine in more detail parental factors such as stress and anxiety and how they influence how parents perceive their child’s anxiety symptoms.

References/Citations: