Title: Interparental Conflict and Depressive Symptoms among Typically Developing Children and Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Interparental conflict is characterized by threats, hostility, and withdrawal, and is related to higher levels of negative emotions in children (Cummings et al., 2003). Although destructive interparental conflict has been shown to correlate with more negative emotionality in children, depressive symptoms have been less of a focus, specifically in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Children with ASD have more social and behavioral difficulties than their typically developing (TD) counterparts (Ashwood et al., 2015). They often have other comorbid disorders, with depression being one of the most common (Ghaziuddin et al., 2002). Thus, destructive marital conflict may be associated with higher rates of depressive symptoms in children with ASD. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of interparental conflict on depressive symptoms in children with ASD versus TD children.

Method: Families with high functioning children with ASD ($n = 21$) and families with TD children ($n = 29$) participated in this study. The children completed the child depression inventory (CDI), and also reported on the level of interparental conflict in their home using the Security in the Interparental Subsystem scale (SIS).

Results: A moderated regression was performed on depressive symptoms as a function of diagnosis (ASD vs. TD) and destructive family representations. A main effect of diagnosis on depressive symptoms was found with children with ASD reporting higher depressive symptoms than TD children, $b = -3.27$ ($SE = .56$), $t = 2.86$, $p \leq .01$. Also, as scores on the destructive family representations subscale increased, so did the child’s report of their depressive symptoms, $b = .53$ ($SE = .19$), $t = 2.73$, $p \leq .01$. There was not a significant difference between slopes of the interaction of diagnosis and scores on the destructive family representation subscale, $b = -.08$ ($SE = .41$), $t = .22$, $p = .82$.

Discussion: Consistent with previous research (Ghaziuddin et al., 2002), this study shows that children with ASD report higher levels of depressive symptoms than their TD counterparts. Regardless of diagnosis, an increase in destructive family representations was associated with more depressive symptoms. For children with and without an ASD, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to reduce depression symptoms (McGillivray & Evert, 2014). It would be beneficial for both TD and ASD children who report high destructive family representations to partake in CBT to help lower depression symptoms. Future research should incorporate more measures of conflict, including parental and child reports as a predictor of child depressive symptoms.

References/Citations: