Title: Comparing Mother-Child and Father-Child Relationships with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a challenging experience. It is well-acknowledged that mothers of children with ASD are more likely to experience depressive symptoms, have reduced social support, and experience lower overall well-being (Ekas, Lickenbrock, and Whitman, 2010). Although fathers of children with ASD experience stress, anxiety, and depression, researchers have a poor understanding of what elicits these experiences (Falk, Norris, & Quinn, 2014). One factor believed to heighten these experiences is the satisfaction rooted in the coparenting relationship. This includes adaptive (vs. maladaptive) parenting styles and the father’s involvement. Another factor influencing the presence of the father’s symptoms is the severity of the child’s symptoms. The purpose of this study is to examine how ASD symptoms, child’s behavioral problems, depressive symptoms, parental warmth, and coparenting each relate to the quality of parent-child relationships as well as how these differ between mothers and fathers.

Method: Thirty-two fathers and 35 mothers of a child with ASD completed online questionnaires about child symptom severity (SCQ-C), child behavior problems (SDQ), parental depressive symptoms (CESD), parenting style (PBI), coparenting (CRS), and the child-parent relationship scale (CPRS).

Results: For mothers, more behavior problems, \( r = .60, p < .001 \), and more depressive symptoms, \( r = .42, p = .01 \), were associated with greater mother-child reported conflict. For fathers, behavior problems, \( r = .44, p = .01 \), depressive symptoms, \( r = .55, p = .001 \), parenting style, \( r = -.49, p = .01 \), and coparenting undermining, \( r = .36, p = .04 \), were associated with greater conflict. For mothers, symptom severity, \( r = -.67, p < .001 \), behavior problems, \( r = -.35, p = .04 \), and parenting style, \( r = .44, p = .01 \), were associated with mother-child closeness. For fathers, only parenting style, \( r = .37, p = .04 \), was associated with greater father-child closeness.

Discussion: This study indicates the importance of including both mothers and fathers in research about parenting a child with ASD, because their relationships with their children appear to be impacted by different factors. The mother-child relationship appears to be negatively affected by child behaviors and the mother’s mental health. The father-child relationship is negatively impacted by these factors and also by the coparenting relationship. Therefore, it is important to include both individuals in interventions to ensure that their parenting is coordinated and supportive and to improve both individuals’ mental health. This study also highlights the importance of parenting style for positive parent-child interactions. Therefore, interventions should also emphasize teaching parents how to be warm and sensitive with their children.

References/Citations: