Title: Parent and Teacher Reports of Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior Problems in Children with ASD: The impact of Child, Parent, and Teacher Characteristics

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Introduction: Despite the high rates of behavior problems in children with ASD (Simonoff et al., 2008; van der Meer et al., 2012), there are frequently inconsistencies between informants on behavioral rating scales, particularly when rating internalizing behavior (De Los Reyes et al., 2015; Stratis & Lecavalier, 2015). Studies investigating multi-informant discrepancies in children with ASD have focused on identifying parent and child characteristics that effect rater agreement, but few have examined teacher characteristics which may influence discrepancies in parent-teacher ratings. This study will examine parent and teacher discrepancies in ratings of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems in a sample of young children with ASD, identifying teacher, parent, and child characteristics that impact rater consistency.

Method: Participants included 94 children with ASD ages 6 to 8 years old (74 boys, 20 girls), and their parents and teachers, who completed the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment Child Behavior Checklist and corresponding Teacher Report form (CBCL and TRF; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). This study examined parent-teacher informant discrepancies on the Internalizing and Externalizing behavior scales, using $D^2$ distance to quantify the discrepancy between parent and teacher behavior ratings. The $D^2$ coefficient is the sum of the squared differences between the item scores provided by informants and is a commonly used metric, sensitive to the level, shape, and dispersion of the child’s item-level profile (Youngstrom et al., 2000). We then correlated parent characteristics (i.e., level of education), teacher characteristics (i.e., years teaching experience, student-teacher relationship - STRS, and parent-teacher relationship - PTRS), and child characteristics (i.e., age, autism severity on the SRS-2, IQ on the WPPSI-III) with the discrepancy between parent and teacher ratings on both the internalizing and externalizing scales (STRE: Pianta 2001; PTRS: Corrigan, 2002; SRS-2: Constantino & Gruber, 2005; WPPSI III: Wechsler, 2002).

Results: When rating both internalizing and externalizing behaviors, parent and teacher reports were uncorrelated (Internalizing: $r = .12, p = .31$; Externalizing: $r = .15, p = .23$). Parent, teacher, and child characteristics were then correlated with the $D^2$ coefficient, which quantified parent-teacher discrepancies. The $D^2$ discrepancy metric for both the internalizing and externalizing scales was positively associated with autism severity (Int: $r = .46, p < .001$; Ext: $r = .31, p = .01$). Child IQ and years of teaching experience were positively correlated with parent-teacher discrepancy on externalizing behavior ratings (IQ: $r = .26, p = .04$; Yrs Teaching: $r = .27, p = .03$). Age, parent education, parent-teacher relationship quality, and student-teacher relationship quality were uncorrelated with parent and teacher discrepancies on either scale.

Discussion: These findings suggest that parent-teacher agreement in behavioral ratings is low. Higher autism severity scores and higher IQ indicated greater discrepancies between parents and teachers. Teacher experience also plays a role, with those more experienced appearing more tolerant of externalizing behavior problems than teachers with less experience. The failure of parents and teachers to agree on the child’s behavior problems may have implications for how these informants can work together on decision making about intervention.

References/Citations:


