Title: Sources of Social Support for Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities: Relations to Child and Parent Factors

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Introduction: Parents of children with developmental disabilities (DD) tend to have higher levels of anxiety, burnout, and depression compared to parents of typically developing children (e.g., Baker, Blacher, Crnic, & Edelbrock, 2002). However, social support may act as a protective factor in parent well-being (Dunn, Burbine, Bowers, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2001). Existing measures of social support typically combine helpfulness ratings of different social support sources (e.g., spouse, extended family, neighbors), even though these different support sources may have unique relations to child characteristics and parent cognitive processes. This study had two aims: 1) to compare the helpfulness of seven sources of social support, and 2) to investigate the associations among child characteristics (child age, adaptive and maladaptive behavior), parent well-being (parenting self-efficacy), and the helpfulness of seven social support sources.

Method: We combined data from two parallel projects focusing on the health, well-being, and social inclusion of Canadian children with DD and their families. A total of 278 participants completed the online survey. Parents were mainly married (77.34%, N = 215) mothers (91.01%, N = 253), and ranged from 22.00 to 57.91 years of age (M = 39.97, SD = 7.64). Children were 3.00 to 19.43 years of age (M = 8.97, SD = 3.96). The majority of children had intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder (ASD; 48.60%, N = 135) or intellectual disability without ASD (41.00%, N = 114). Child adaptive and maladaptive behavior were measured using the Scales of Independent Behavior-Revised (Bruininks, Woodcock, & Hill, 1996). As a measure of social support, parents rated the helpfulness of seven sources of social support (spouse, parents, in-laws, extended family, neighbors, religious or cultural groups, and other friends) using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from they make it more difficult (1) to they are extremely helpful, I depend on them (5); higher scores reflect more helpful support. Parenting self-efficacy was measured using the Family Empowerment Scale (Koren, DeChillo, & Friesen, 1992).

Results: Spouses (M = 3.88, SD = 1.04) and the informant’s parents (M = 3.29, SD = 1.15) were rated as the most helpful sources of social support. Neighbors (M = 2.59, SD = 0.85) and other friends (M = 2.59, SD = 1.13) had the lowest helpfulness ratings. Spousal support was not associated with any child characteristics, but it was significantly associated with parenting self-efficacy (r = .20, p = .002). Grandparent support was associated with child characteristics and parenting self-efficacy, although support from in-laws was only modestly associated with parenting self-efficacy (r = .13, p = .07). Support from other extended family, neighbors, and friends from religious or cultural groups was associated with child characteristics but not parenting self-efficacy. Lastly, support from other friends was only associated with child age (r = .31, p < .001).

Discussion: Different sources of social support were related to different child and parent factors. Social support from more proximal sources (e.g., spouse, grandparents) had the strongest associations with parent well-being, while support from more distal sources (e.g., neighbors, other friends) were more strongly associated with child characteristics. This study uses a novel measure of social support, and future research may investigate how social support sources may relate to other aspects of parent well-being.

References/Citations: