Title: Expressed Emotion and Behavior Problems in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Expressed Emotion (EE), or the emotional attitudes and/or tone of the caregiving environment, has a long history in the study of developmental psychopathology. Extensions to children and to individuals with disabilities have required revision of the original system. Nonetheless, key components of EE such as criticism have reliably related to behavior problems in adolescent and adult children with ASD (Baker et al., 2011). Less evidence exists for associations in younger children with ASD. Benson and colleagues (2011) adapted the system in an attempt to increase its validity for families of children with ASD. Although concurrent validity was established with several indices of family and child functioning, neither the overall EE scores nor the key criticism variable related to children’s behavior problems (Benson et al., 2011). More study is required on the new system and on relations between EE components and behavior problems in young children with ASD. The current study examined the association between the EE components of critical comments and warmth and an alternative index of child behavior problems, and considered potential unique and interactive effects among these predictors. With regard to the latter, was predicted that the presence of higher warmth might buffer any deleterious effects of criticism on the children.

Method: A culturally and economically diverse sample of 41 children aged 4 to 11 years (80% male; \( M_{\text{Age}} = 6.30; M_{\text{IQ}} = 84.73; \) range IQ 46-139) and diagnosed with ASD participated with their primary caregivers (two fathers). The visit included direct child assessment, several laboratory tasks (not used in the current study), parent completion of questionnaires, and the performance of the Five-Minute Speech Sample (FMSS), in which the primary caregiver is asked to speak uninterrupted for five minutes about the child and his or her relationship with the child. The samples were coded by trained raters for warmth (low, moderate, high) and number of critical comments, and reliability was good (\( K = .75 \) and ICC= .95, respectively). Internalizing and externalizing behavior problems were indexed by the relevant broadband scores of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), completed by the primary caregiver.

Results: Consistent with the few previous studies utilizing the AFMSS, parents were consistently moderate to high on warmth, with no parent rated as low. Despite this restricted range, warmth was significantly associated with externalizing problems, \( r = -.36, p < .05, \) as was critical comments, \( r = .48, p < .01. \) Warmth was unrelated to internalizing problems (\( r = -.07 \)ns) and associations between critical comments and these problems were not significant (\( r = .25, p = .11 \)). In a hierarchical regression controlling for ASD symptoms (ADOS-2), critical comments remained a significant predictor of externalizing problems, \( B = .41, p < .01, \) but warmth was not uniquely related (\( B = -.22, p = .12 \)). Neither component exhibited a main effect in the regression predicting internalizing symptoms, however, an interaction between warmth and criticism was present, \( B = -.49, p < .05. \) Follow-up analyses indicated that critical comments were related to increased internalizing symptoms in the context of moderate warmth, \( t = 2.40, p < .05, \) but no significant effect of criticism was observed in high warmth families, \( t = -1.43, p = .16 (\text{and, indeed, the latter association was in the opposite direction).} \)

Discussion: The current study provides further evidence that key components of Expressed Emotion relate to behavior problems in young children with ASD, and supports the validity of the AFMSS. Criticism appears to remain a reliable predictor, with warmth appearing less uniquely important for externalizing problems. However, warmth may play an important role in buffering and/or changing the nature of critical comments in relation to children’s internalizing problems. The need to continue to better understand the nature of EE-related constructs in families of children with ASD is discussed.

References/Citations: