Title: Daily Parenting Stress and Couple Interactions in Families of Children with Autism using a Couple Framework

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Introduction: Growing evidence suggests that a stressful parenting context, such as that associated with child autism spectrum disorder (ASD), can take a toll on parents’ couple relationship. At an individual level there is evidence of such parenting to couple stress spillover; parents of children with neurodevelopmental conditions who report experiencing the highest levels of parenting stress report the lowest levels of couple relationship quality (e.g., Kersh et al., 2006). Building on this individual-level research, there is also a need to examine the impact of parenting stress on couple relationship interactions when jointly considering the experiences of both partners in a couple. At a couple-level, partner discordance in daily level of parenting stress (i.e., different levels of parenting stress between partners in a couple) may have implications for couple relationship quality. The specific study aims were to: 1) compare level of partner discordance in daily level of parenting stress in couples who have a child with ASD vs. a comparison group of couples who have a child without neurodevelopmental disabilities; and 2) examine the link between partner discordance in daily level of parenting stress and number of positive and negative couple interactions in the ASD group using a relative difference analysis and moderation analysis.

Method: In total, parents in 192 couples who had a child with ASD and 182 couples who had a child without neurodevelopmental disabilities, all aged 5-12 years, independently completed a 14-day daily diary. The majority of target children in both groups were male (ASD = 86% and comparison = 83%). On each day of the daily diary, parents reported on their level of parenting stress and number of positive (e.g., gave a compliment to partner, kissed or hugged partner) and negative (e.g., made critical comment to partner, frustrated with partner) couple interactions. Study aim 1 used a one-way multivariate analysis of co-variance to compare the mean amount of partner discordance in daily level of parenting stress between the two groups (ASD vs. comparison). Study aim 2 only involved the ASD group and examined the within-person, same-day, association between own and partner daily level of parenting stress and number of positive and negative couple interactions using multilevel models with HLM v. 7 software.

Results: Couples in the ASD group evidenced a higher mean level of partner discordance in daily level of parenting stress than couples in the comparison group ($\Lambda = 0.52$, $F(1, 343) = 81.72$, $p < .001$). When controlling for the between-person effects, at a within-person level, mother daily level of parenting stress was significantly associated with same-day number of positive (coefficient $=-0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .05$) and negative (coefficient $= 0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$) couple interactions. Father daily level of parenting stress was significantly associated with same-day number of negative couple interactions (coefficient $=0.17$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$). Partner discordance in daily level of parenting stress significantly negatively co-varied with same-day number of positive couple interactions for fathers of children with ASD (coefficient $=-0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .05$). Partner discordance in daily level of parenting stress significantly negatively co-varied with same-day number of negative couple interactions in mothers of children with ASD (coefficient $=-0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .05$). Finally, partner level of daily parenting stress moderated the association between one’s own level of daily parenting stress and number of negative couple interactions for mothers and fathers of children with ASD.

Discussion: Overall, findings indicate that the association between daily parenting stress and daily couple interactions is best understood when jointly considering both partners in the couple. Our evidence suggests that if only one partner feels highly stressed due to parenting activities, rather than both partners, this may help mitigate the adverse impact of a day with high parenting stress on couple interactions. Psychoeducational programs may be able to teach parents about the links between parenting and couple experiences and strategies for supporting each other.

References/Citations: