Title: Emotional, Behavioral, and Physiological Reactions to Marital Conflict in Children with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder
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Introduction: Raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) poses additional stress on the family system, including lower marital satisfaction and higher divorce rates among parents compared to families of typically developing (TD) children (e.g., Hartley et al., 2010). Research suggests that the behaviors of children with ASD directly contribute to this heightened stress. However, there is a paucity of research examining whether these disrupted family relationships impact the well-being of children with ASD. Theories and empirical work with TD children have identified several mechanisms by which lower quality family relationships predict children’s outcomes. For example, emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994) proposes that children’s emotional insecurity about family relationships elicits regulatory responses – negative emotional distress, behavioral dysregulation, physiological reactivity, and negative representations about the family – that can turn into patterns of behavior that increase risk for internalizing symptoms. The current study provides an important first step in examining these relations by testing the extent to which children with ASD show similar patterns of reactivity (emotional, behavioral, and physiological) when exposed to marital conflict as compared to their TD peers.

Methods: Twenty-one children with high-functioning ASD (M age: 10.95 years) and 29 TD children (M age: 9.93 years) participated in this study. Children were predominantly White and from middle-class families. Children visited the lab where they were connected to sensors that measured their heart rate and skin conductance. A baseline assessment of their heart rate and skin conductance was collected while children watched a neutral video (i.e., nature scenes). Children were then shown two videos (order counterbalanced) of a male and female actor engaging in conflict that is typical in married couples (e.g., cooking, cleaning, paying bills). In one video the actors engaged in constructive conflict wherein they resolved their differences and the second video showed destructive conflict in which the conflict was unresolved and the actors shouted at each other. Heart rate and skin conductance was collected during each video. After the video, children’s self-reported mood was collected and children were asked to report on what they would do during the conflict (e.g., intervene in conflict, leave the room, etc.).

Results: After watching the constructive conflict video, children with ASD (M = 6.81, SD = 4.09) showed significantly greater negative emotional reactivity compared to TD children (M = 4.07, SD = 1.75), F(1, 48) = 10.43, p = .002. There were no significant differences between groups for negative emotional reactivity to the destructive conflict video, F(1, 48) = .02, p = .889. There were no significant differences between groups with respect to self-report behavioral responses to marital conflict. A repeated measures ANOVA (baseline-task) was conducted to examine whether there were group differences in children’s physiological reactivity to marital conflict. After watching constructive marital conflict, children with ASD showed a marginal increase in heart rate compared to TD children, F(1, 48) = 3.27, p = .077. There were no significant group differences in skin conductance reactivity.

Discussion: This study was the first to examine children with ASD’s reactions to marital conflict. The results of the current study suggest that children with high-functioning ASD show similar behavioral reactions to marital conflict as their TD peers. However, children with ASD showed heightened negative emotional reactivity and physiological reactivity (marginal) to constructive marital conflict. These findings have important implications for children with ASD’s mental health. Research with TD children has shown that heightened reactivity to marital conflict is one mechanism responsible for the link between marital conflict and children’s internalizing problems (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Given that children with ASD often report comorbid internalizing symptoms, their reactions to marital conflict warrant further examination. Given the variability that children with ASD showed in the current study, future research is needed to examine whether ASD symptom heterogeneity impacts children’s responses to marital conflict.

References/Citations:

1 Texas Christian University; 2 Southern Methodist University