Title: Associations between Depressive Symptoms, Parent-Child Relationship Quality, and Marital Quality for Mothers and Fathers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can negatively impact parental well-being, specifically in the areas of marital quality and mental health (Benson & Kersh, 2011). Child problem behaviors associated with ASD can increase parental stress, leading to higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower marital quality (Benson & Kersh, 2011). Research in this area has shown that mothers with ASD typically report elevated rates of depression when compared to mothers of children with other developmental disabilities (Weitlauf, Vehorn, Taylor, & Warren, 2014). Previous research has focused only on mothers and few studies have included fathers when examining associations between depressive symptoms and marital quality.

Parents of typically developing children blame their child for the child’s problem behaviors and engage in harsher parenting practices as a result (e.g. Nix et al, 1998). There is little research on the quality of the parent-child relationship among families of children with ASD. It is possible that the elevated rates of depressive symptoms found among parents of children with ASD could negatively impact the quality of interactions they have with their child. The purpose of this study was to examine associations between depressive symptoms and relationship quality (marital and parent-child) in mothers and fathers of children with ASD.

Method: Participants for the study included parents (mothers n = 36; fathers n = 33) of children with ASD (between ages 4 and 10 years), who were recruited from the local community. All participants were in a committed relationship. The majority of the participants were white, non-Hispanic (n = 57), had at least a college-degree (n = 48) and whose household income was above $40,000 per year (n = 63). Participants completed online self-reported measures of personal and parenting characteristics, including depressive symptoms, relationship satisfaction, and parent-child relationships.

Result: A one-way between subjects ANOVA examined the differences in depressive symptoms between mothers and fathers. There was an effect of parent gender, F(1,67) = 4.36, p = .04, η² = .23, such that mothers (M = 16.03, SD = 10.12) rated their depressive symptoms higher than fathers (M = 11.15, SD = 9.19). A multiple regression was run on mother and fathers separately to examine the relationship between their depressive symptoms, child-parent conflict, and marital satisfaction. As depressive symptoms increase mothers, b = .76 (SE = .20), t = 3.73, and fathers, b = .76 (SE = .22), t = 3.51, reported more conflict with their child with ASD, p≤.01. Mothers showed a significant decrease in marital quality as their depressive symptoms increased, b = -.18 (SE = .05), t = -4.09, p ≤ .01, but fathers did not, p = .13.

Discussion: As indicated by previous research, depressive symptoms in parents of children with ASD can negatively impact various areas of their lives, including marital quality and parent-child relationships. For mothers, depressive symptoms was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction with their partner, but this result was not found in fathers. Consistent with the depression literature, mothers reported higher levels of depression than fathers which may account for why the results were not significant for fathers. For both mothers and fathers, higher levels of depressive symptoms were related to an increase in conflict with their child with ASD, suggesting that parent mental health may spill-over and impact their interactions with their child. Future research should examine these processes longitudinally and include observations of parent-child interactions.

References/Citations:
