Title: Co-parenting and Life Satisfaction of Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Parents of children with ASD report lower levels of life satisfaction than parents of children without a disability (Gau et al., 2012; Hoefman et al., 2014). Co-parenting is the way that two adults share the responsibilities of raising a child, and research in the general population suggests that a healthy co-parenting relationship is associated with better psychological well-being for parents (McHale et al., 2004). Unfortunately, there is no research examining the effects of co-parenting on life satisfaction within couples who have a child with ASD. In addition, most studies focus on mothers of children with ASD and do not include fathers. The purpose of this study was to examine how different aspects of co-parenting a child with ASD influences an individual’s life satisfaction and also their partner’s life satisfaction.

Method: Thirty-three couples completed a measure of co-parenting, with subscales on co-parent undermining, division of labor, support, agreement, endorsement, and closeness. All couples were either married (n = 32) or living together and had at least one child with a diagnosis of ASD. The average age of the parents was 37.51 (SD = 5.89). The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny et al., 2006) was used to test the study hypotheses.

Results: Within couples, the amount individuals report their partner supports their parenting (b = 2.31, SE = .65) and the partner’s report of how much they are being supported (b = 1.54, SE = .65) was associated with increased life satisfaction, ps ≤ .02. The same pattern is present for the individual’s endorsement of co-parenting (b = 4.44, SE = .97) and their partner’s report of endorsement (b = 2.90, SE = .97), ps ≤ .01. Conversely, the amount the individual reports their partner undermines their parenting (b = -3.43, SE = .97) and the partner’s report of how much they are undermined (b = -1.95, SE = .97) significantly predicts lower levels of life satisfaction, ps ≤ .05. The individual’s perception of the division of labor significantly predicts their life satisfaction (b = 1.30, SE = .63, p = .046), but their partner’s perception of labor division is not, p = .07. The individual’s rating of parenting agreement predicts their own life satisfaction (b = 2.15, SE = .74, p < .01), however their partner’s report of co-parenting agreement does not, p = .27. The same pattern arises for co-parenting closeness, the individual’s perception of closeness increased their own life satisfaction (b = 3.14, SE = .62, p ≤ .01), but their partner’s perception of closeness does not, p = .14.

Discussion: The characteristic of co-parenting that was most strongly associated with better life satisfaction was partner endorsement, which refers to how much one supports their partner’s parenting decisions. Co-parenting support refers to the individual’s own perception of parenting support received from their partner (Feinberg et al., 2012). Similar to endorsement, both an individual’s own report and their partner’s report of support was associated with increased life satisfaction. Support and partner endorsement are similar in that they help buffer some of the negative effects of co-parenting undermining and conflict. Reporting that one is undermined by their partner or that they undermine their partner’s parenting decreased life satisfaction. To improve life satisfaction, parents should be taught to avoid undermining each other’s parenting and instead, how to support and endorse co-parenting.

References/Citations: