Title: Leisure Time and Family Functioning in Families Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Authors: Alayna Borowy, Gabrielle Tiede, Katherine Walton

The Ohio State University

Introduction: Family leisure is an important component of family life that provides opportunities for family members to interact, communicate, and learn together during enjoyable family activities. The core and balance model of family leisure (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001) categorizes family leisure activities into two main types, core activities (promoting family cohesion) and balance activities (promoting family flexibility) (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). Multiple studies have indicated that family leisure is related to multiple other components of family life, such as cohesion, adaptability, communication, and satisfaction with family life (Agate et al., 2009; Poff, Zabriskie, and Townsend, 2010; Smith, Freeman, and Zabriskie, 2009; Zabriskie and McCormick, 2001). Families of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may experience multiple barriers to engaging in satisfying family leisure activities. However, it is unclear to what extent problems with family leisure may be related to family functioning difficulties within families living with ASD, as little research has systematically examined leisure in this population. The current study aims to explore family leisure, family functioning, and satisfaction with family life in families that include a child with ASD, as compared to families with only typically developing (TD) children.

Method: This study surveyed parents of children aged 4-18 with ASD (n=112) or typical development (n=123) to examine relationships among family leisure involvement, leisure satisfaction, family functioning, and satisfaction with family life. Data collection is complete. The survey included measures of family leisure involvement, leisure satisfaction, family functioning, satisfaction with family life, and demographics. For ASD group participants, diagnosis was supported by parent completion of the Social Communication Questionnaire. ASD group participants were excluded if the child did not score ≥12 on the Social Communication Questionnaire.

ANCOVA analyses were conducted to probe for group differences in leisure and family functioning variables using a main effect model controlling for child age, family income, and parental education level. Four separate PROCESS models were used to examine the impact of: core leisure involvement on family cohesion, core leisure involvement on family flexibility, balance leisure involvement on family cohesion, and balance leisure involvement on family flexibility. For each model, satisfaction with leisure and family communication were included as serial mediators, and ASD status was tested as a moderator of each serial mediation or direct path in the model.

Result: Parents of children with ASD reported a similar amount of leisure involvement as families of typically developing children. However, they reported lower leisure satisfaction, poorer family functioning, and less satisfaction with family life. Mediation models suggested that low leisure satisfaction was related to less effective family communication, which in turn led to poorer family functioning and less satisfaction with family life. Amount of time spent in leisure made relatively small contributions to predicting other family variables.

Discussion: These findings suggest that many families living with ASD struggle to engage in fulfilling family leisure, and that these difficulties may relate to negative outcomes such as poorer family functioning and lower satisfaction with family life. Interestingly, few differences emerged in patterns of leisure involvement between families living with ASD and TD families, and amount of time spent in leisure was only weakly related to other family functioning variables. These results suggest that leisure-focused interventions for families of children with ASD should focus on improving quality, rather than quantity, of family leisure time.

References/Citations: