Title: Do Treatment Attitudes Moderate the Relationship between Behavioral Treatment Adherence and Stress Among Parents of Children with ASD?

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Introduction: It is well documented that parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) experience significant levels of stress, at even higher rates than parents of children who have other developmental disabilities or are typically developing (Hayes & Watson, 2013). Associated challenging behaviors (ACBs) in children with ASD have a strong correlation with parent stress (Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006). Recent research suggests that adherence to behavior treatment for ACBs may reduce parent stress (Shepherd, Landon, Goedeke, Ty, & Csako, 2018). However, this finding is not consistent across all parents, and the factors that moderate this relationship are largely unknown. To address this knowledge gap, the current study examines: 1) the relationship between parents’ adherence to behavioral treatments and parent stress, and 2) whether parents’ attitudes toward treatment moderate this relationship.

Method: Data were collected using a cross-sectional survey evaluating treatment adherence among parents of children with ASD in a southeastern state (N=202). Participants were mothers (n=175, M age= 37.80) and fathers (n=27, M age= 43.07) who have participated in some type of behavioral treatment [e.g., at home applied behavior analysis (ABA), behavioral therapy, etc.] with their child (M age= 7.49, SD= 3.35). The General Adherence subscale of the Medical Outcomes Study measured treatment adherence, whereas the Parental Stress Scale was used to measure parent stress. Both are self-report measures and use a five-item Likert-type scale. Both scales demonstrated good internal consistency (i.e., Chronbach’s alpha was .86 and .89, respectively). The attitudes towards treatment included treatment relevance, treatment burden, and treatment effectiveness; each were each measured by a single item (e.g., “I believe the behavior treatments are effective for my child”).

A linear regression model regressed treatment adherence on parent stress. Separate linear regression models were conducted for each of the three attitudes of treatment. For each of these models, treatment adherence, the attitude toward treatment, and the interaction term of those two variables were regressed on parent stress.

Results: Treatment adherence had a significant main effect on parent stress (β=.44, p<.001), such that higher treatment adherence was associated with lower parent stress. In addition, the interaction terms for each model were significant (p<.05), indicating that each treatment attitude impacted the strength of the relationship between treatment adherence and parent stress. Therefore, treatment relevance, treatment burden, and treatment effectiveness are moderators for the treatment adherence and parent stress relationship.

Discussion: High adherence to behavior treatment was associated with lowered levels of parent stress; however, attitudes toward treatment altered the strength of this relationship. Specifically, high treatment relevance, high treatment effectiveness, and low treatment burden had negative associations with parent stress. These findings have implications for clinicians and treatment providers who are well positioned to monitor and address parent attitudes toward treatment.

References/Citations: