Title: How Parent, Child, and Contextual Factors Impact Behavior Problems in Children and Adolescents with ASD: The Mediating Role of Parenting Behaviors

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Introduction: Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are faced with a number of parenting challenges. They often experience increased parenting stress (e.g. Morgan, Robinson, & Aldridge, 2002; Hayes & Watson, 2013), which is a significant predictor of child problem behaviors (Bauminger, Solomon, & Rogers, 2010). In addition to negative child outcomes, parenting stress may lead to lower quality parent-child interactions (McKay, Pickens, & Stewart, 1996). While several studies have examined the direct effects that parent, child, and contextual factors have on child problem behaviors, few studies have examined the mediating role of parenting, linking Belsky's (1984) determinants of parenting to child problem behaviors in children with ASD. Moreover, while previous research tends to focus on factors that promote negative outcomes (i.e., increased stress, negative parenting behaviors), some parental characteristics may act as a protective factor that lead to better parenting behaviors (Halstead, Ekas, Hastings, & Griffith, 2018). This study aims to examine parent, child, and contextual factors of families with children with ASD to determine their associations with parenting quality and child problem behaviors.

Method: Seventy-one families with children with ASD between the ages of 10 to 17 years participated. The majority of the children were male (n = 62). All of children had a community diagnosis that was confirmed using the ADOS and ADI. Mothers and fathers completed a series of questions at a follow-up laboratory visit about their mental health and relationship satisfaction. The ADOS was used as a measure of child symptom severity. The Parental Bonding Instrument assessed the warmth and acceptance of mothers’ and fathers’ parenting behaviors. The Child Behavior Checklist was used to assess child problem behaviors.

Results: Two separate mediation models were conducted using the MEDIATE macro in SPSS to examine the effects of parent mindfulness or psychological flexibility, child symptom severity, and marital satisfaction on child externalizing behavior as mediated by parenting quality. Higher levels of maternal psychological flexibility was associated with greater parenting warmth and acceptance, $b = .105 \ (SE = .04), p = .004$. Increased parenting quality was then associated with fewer child externalizing behaviors, $b = -1.03, \ (SE = .44), p = .022$. In the parent mindfulness model, higher levels of maternal mindfulness predicted greater parental warmth, $b = .08 \ (SE = .04), p = .054$, which in turn predicted less child externalizing behaviors, $b = -.95 \ (SE = .43), t = 2.22, p = .030$. For both models, child symptom severity and maternal marital satisfaction were not significant predictors of parenting quality, $ps \geq .594$, or child externalizing behaviors, $ps \geq .06$. For fathers, these models were non-significant.

Discussion: The quality of parent-child interactions can have a positive impact on child outcomes. Thus, it is important to understand the factors that might influence the parenting quality. The current study used Belsky’s (1984) determinants of parenting model to examine the influence of parent, child, and contextual factors on parenting quality to determine its effects on child externalizing behaviors. Maternal psychological flexibility and mindfulness were significant predictors of higher parental warmth, which were each associated with a decrease in child externalizing behaviors. Results suggest that it may be important for researchers to explore interventions that may provide support for parents to increase these characteristics, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. As the results of this study were non-significant for fathers, future research should explore additional factors that may influence their parenting quality.


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