Title: Examining Predictors of Parenting Warmth and Competence in Mothers and Fathers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be difficult, leading to high levels of stress and divorce among parents of children with ASD (Zablotsky et al., 2013). Belsky (1984) identified three domains of determinants of parental functioning – personal psychological resources of parents, characteristics of the child, and contextual sources of stress and support – which could serve as an effective model for considering the impact of parental depressive symptoms on parent-child interaction quality. Mothers of children with ASD have been studied extensively, with research indicating that mothers experience high levels of depression and low levels of perceived parental competence (Hartley et al., 2010; Katkic et al. 2017). However, studies that include fathers of children with ASD is scarce. This study aims to explore factors associated with parenting among mothers and fathers of children with ASD.

Method: A total of 69 heterosexual couples raising a child under the age of 10 with ASD participated in this online study. Parents individually completed a series of questionnaires online and were compensated for their time. The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale was used to measure parent mental health. Child behavior problems were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. The Couples Satisfaction Index was used to measure relationship satisfaction and a 3-item measure created for this study was used to measure work-family conflict. Parents also completed two questionnaires pertaining to parenting: (1) the Parent Behavior Inventory assessed parental warmth, and (2) the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale measured how well the parents’ rating their parenting ability.

Results: A series of separate moderation models were tested using the PROCESS macro in SPSS. Parent, child, relationship, and work variables were specified as separate predictors of parenting. Parent gender was specified as the moderating variable. Parent depressive symptoms were a significant predictor of parenting warmth, $b = -.87, p < .001$. This effect was moderated by parent gender, $b = .44, p = .002$, such that the negative association was only significant for fathers ($b = -.43, p < .001$). A similar finding emerged for parenting sense of competence (Fathers: $b = -.78, p < .001$). Child behavior problems and relationship satisfaction were not significant predictors of parenting for either parent. Work-family conflict was not a significant predictor of parenting warmth; however, a significant association was found for parenting sense of competence, $b = -9.55, p = .02$. This effect was not moderated by parent gender.

Discussion: There is a limited body of research that includes both mothers and fathers of children with ASD. In this study, we found that parent depressive symptoms were associated with parenting, but only for fathers. It is possible that fathers are less able to prevent the spill-over of their mental health problems. The extent to which work and family demands interfered with one another also predicted how competent mothers and fathers felt as parents. This may be particularly salient among families of children with ASD, as the children require substantial time and attention. However, parents may feel burdened to work harder to meet the financial demands of raising a child with ASD. Further research is needed to examine how qualities of the work environment impact parenting in this context.

References/Citations: