Title: Child Autism Symptom Severity as a Moderator of Congruence between Parent-Child Perceptions of Parenting Behavior

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Introduction: Congruent perceptions of parenting behaviors between parents and children are associated with better child adjustment (De Los Reyes et al., 2010; Guion et al., 2009; Pelton & Forehand, 2001). A recent meta-analysis, however, found that parents’ and children’s reports of parenting are often incongruent, with parents rating themselves more favorably compared to their child (Korelitz & Garber, 2017). These findings have not been replicated in families with a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Previous studies have shown that parent-child discrepancies about children’s quality of life were similar among parents and children with ASD compared to parents and their neurotypically-developing child (Sheldrick et al., 2012; Yi-Frazier et al., 2017). The present study tested the extent to which mother-child and father-child dyads’ perceptions of parenting were congruent in a sample of children with ASD. We also assessed autism symptom levels as a moderator of agreement between parents and children. We hypothesized that children would rate parental acceptance and firm control lower, and psychological control higher, than parents’ self-ratings.

Method: Participants were recruited in the context of a larger study assessing family dynamics in families with a child with ASD. Preliminary analyses were conducted with 76 families (total anticipated N = 130) with a child with ASD (M_age = 12.83 years, SD = 2.23, 82% male). Children completed the Children’s Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965) separately for mothers and fathers. Parents completed the Parent Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965), and mothers reported on children’s ASD symptom severity on the Social Responsiveness Scale-2 (Constantino, 2012).

Results: Consistent with hypotheses, children rated parental acceptance significantly lower than mothers, t(70) = 2.84, p = .006, and fathers t(69) = 3.31, p = .001, and rated firm control significantly lower than mothers, t(70) = 6.07, p < .001. Children rated psychological control significantly higher than mothers, t(70) = 5.09, p < .001, and fathers, t(69) = 5.07, p < .001. ASD symptom severity significantly moderated parent-child congruency in their reports about parenting. Specifically, there was significant agreement between mothers and children about maternal acceptance for children with higher levels of ASD symptom severity, b = .006, SE = .003, p = .039. Interestingly, there was significant agreement between fathers and children about paternal acceptance for children with lower ASD symptom severity, b = .005, SE = .002, p = .027.

Discussion: A possible explanation for these findings is that social stigma associated with autism (Kinnear et al., 2016) is especially salient for mothers who have children with more severe ASD symptoms, causing them to increase parenting efforts or resulting in increased social desirability for positive parenting behaviors (Giarrusso et al., 2004; Morsbach & Prinz, 2006). Alternatively, fathers may have more success connecting with children with lower levels of ASD symptom severity, resulting in higher agreement between fathers and children. These findings extend literature on parent-child discrepancies about parenting to children with ASD and suggest that a child’s ASD symptom levels may play a role in parents’ and children’s agreement about positive parenting behaviors.

References:


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