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Child Behaviour and Emotional Problems Are Associated With Parent Mental Health

What is this research about?

Individuals with autism have difficulties with social interaction and communication. They also display restricted and repetitive behaviours. From an early age, children with autism tend to have high levels of behavioural and emotional problems. These problems can impact parents' stress levels. Mothers and fathers of children with autism often report different levels of stress. This research investigated the relationship between behaviour problems and stress for parents of toddlers with autism.

What did the researcher do?

Researchers conducted assessments with 123 children aged 20-51 months in a child development clinic. Mothers and fathers each completed questionnaires about:

- child behavioural and emotional problems;
- family functioning;
- their own mental health;
- their parenting stress.

Researchers also measured the children's language and cognitive skills, adaptive functioning, and behaviour. Of the entire sample, 104 children were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (either Autism or Pervasive Developmental

What you need to know:

Child emotional and behavioural problems are related to mothers' stress, parent mental health problems, and family dysfunction. Interventions for children with ASD should address these problems, which may help improve family functioning.

Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)). The researchers then followed up with the families one year later and parents completed the same questionnaires.

What did the researcher find?

Children with ASD had more emotional and behavioural problems than children without ASD at the second time point. Across all the families (with and without ASD), fathers reported less parenting stress than mothers at both time points. When the researchers followed up with parents, they found that fathers of children with ASD were more stressed than fathers of children without ASD. Mothers of children with ASD did not report more stress than mothers of children without ASD.

The presence of child behavioural and emotional problems was important. This was related to more parental mental health problems, worse family functioning, and more parenting stress in mothers. Child emotional and behavioural problems had an

impact in families of both children with and without ASD.

How can you use this research?

It is important to pay attention to whether young children have emotional and behavioural problems, as these are related to more family problems a year later. The emotional and behavioural problems in young children with ASD should be a target for early intervention. Addressing these problems in children may reduce maternal stress, mental health problems, and family dysfunction.

About the Researchers

Dr. Sally Herring is a research psychologist with the Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre Brain Stimulation and Neuroscience Team.

Citation

Herring, S., Gray, K., Taffe, J., Tonge, B., Sweeney, D. & Einfeld, S. (2006). Behaviour and emotional problems in toddlers with pervasive developmental disorders and developmental delay: Associations with parental mental health and family functioning. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 50(12), 874-882.

Keywords

ASD, Children, Parental Stress, Behavioural Problems, Emotional Problems

This research summary was written by Jennifer MacMullin for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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