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Support Groups for Parents of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders: The Role of Beliefs and Coping Styles

What is this research about?

Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience unique challenges and stressors. Many of these parents also report a need for more social and informational support. Parent support groups (PSGs) can provide both these types of support. Previous research has demonstrated that participation in support groups is associated with lower stress and negative mood. Parent support groups (PSG) are a cost-effective and easily executed intervention that have been shown to be helpful for parents of children with developmental disabilities, however, relatively few parents of children with ASD participate in PSGs. This study investigated several factors that may be impacting the attendance of parents of children with ASD in PSG.

What did the researcher do?

One hundred and forty-nine parents, mainly mothers of children with ASD, ranging in age from 24-65 years old completed an online survey. Participants completed measures relating to anxiety, depression, their perception of mastery and control over their child's disability, available social support, and coping strategies. They were also asked about their views of support groups, their attitude toward participating in a support group, and their perceptions of others' beliefs about participation in support groups.

What you need to know:

This study had three groups of participants: those who were currently attending parent support groups, those who had attended in the past but were not currently, and those who had never attended. They found that some parents who attended PSGs used more adaptive coping strategies. Parents who had attended in the past but were not currently participating tended to see fewer advantages of PSGs than the other two groups of parents. Participants stated some barriers to attending PSGs, such as accessibility issues or lack of childcare.

What did the researcher find?

Parents who were participating in support groups at the time of the study reported stronger beliefs about potential benefits, greater support from others to participate in PSGs, and fewer difficulties with participating than parents who were not currently participating in a PSG. Additionally, parents who were currently attending PSGs reported using more adaptive coping strategies than those who were not. These strategies included seeking emotional and instrumental support, active coping, and planning. The authors suggested that there are two groups of parents who did not participate in PSGs:

1. Those who thought PSGs would be beneficial but experienced difficulties with attending (location,

meeting time, lack of child care);

2. Those who reported past negative experiences with PSGs.

How can you use this research?

While support groups are very effective for some people, the results of this research study suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting parents of children with ASD is not effective. Online support groups may be a good alternative to address some of the difficulties parents reported in terms of location or lack of childcare. Further research is needed to tailor support interventions to the individual needs of parents of children with ASD.

About the Researchers

Dr. Tessen Clifford is involved with Pathways for Children and Youth, a lead agency for the Southeast Region Autism Program.

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This research summary was written by Jordan Cleland 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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For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at asdmentalhealth.ca

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