

# research snapshot

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## Parental Expressed Emotion is Related to Externalizing Behaviours in Children and Adolescents With ASD

### What is this research about?

Expressed emotion is an attitude characterized by critical/hostile feelings and emotional over-involvement toward a family member with a disorder. Parents of children with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) may show higher levels of expressed emotion due to increased stress they often experience from their child's behavioural problems. It is widely known that stress often makes parents use more negative parenting techniques, including more expressed emotion. At the same time, expressed emotion may worsen the child's behavioural problems. This study examined the relationship between parental expressed emotion and child disruptive behaviours (e.g. tantrums, active disobedience, and aggression) in a group of children and adolescents with ASD.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited participants through website notices on autism-related community organizations throughout the United States. Interested parents were emailed a link to complete a survey. There were 111 parents who completed the study, from 20 different American states. The survey consisted of a series of questionnaires that asked about child behaviour characteristics as well as parent attitudes and stress levels and parenting styles. Researchers also asked about ASD clinical severity and demographic factors. Child behaviour was measured with questions about disruptive

### What you need to know:

When parents express their emotions through criticism/hostility, children with ASD show more disruptive behaviours (e.g., tantrums, screaming, hyperactivity, etc). It is important to understand the parental influences of these behaviours in order to develop interventions that are effective at reducing them.

problem behaviour (e.g. if their child argues a lot, doesn't feel guilty after misbehaving, and threatens people) as well as overall social behaviour. For parents, the questionnaires captured their feelings about the child, parenting practices (e.g. friendly talks with their child) and stress levels (e.g. unmet expectations, feeling alone in raising their child). Measures related to the parent's criticism, hostility, emotional over-involvement were identified.

### What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that expressed emotion through criticism and hostility from parents affected the amount of disruptive problem behaviours that the child showed. This effect remained even when differences in parental stress, emotional over-involvement, ASD symptom severity, and parenting practices were taken into account. Emotional over-involvement slightly decreased these problem behaviours. The strong effect of criticism and hostility on the child's problem behaviours supports the idea that the behaviour of children with ASD is

heavily influenced by the manner in which parents respond to them. A negative emotional reaction may make children's behaviours worse.

## How can you use this research?

This research provides information about the influences on children's disruptive problem behaviour. It can be used to support the management of a child's problem behaviours through parental training. The findings provide an important target for interventions in the future.

## About the Researchers

Dr. Stephanie Bader (PhD, BCBA) is a licensed behavioral psychologist in the Behavioral Psychology Program at the Westchester Institute for Human Development in New York. Dr. Tammy Barry (PhD) is an associate professor and the Director of Clinical Training in the Department of Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi. Dr. Jill Hann (PhD) is a clinical psychologist at Georgia Regents University in Georgia, USA.

## Citation

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## Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Expressed Emotion, Criticism, Over-Involvement, Externalizing Behaviors, Parenting

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](http://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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