

research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



The Relationship Between Maternal Well-Being and Child Behaviour Problems in Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is this research about?

High levels of problem behaviours present in children with ASD have been linked to lower levels of maternal well-being. It is difficult to tell if maternal well-being influences the amount of child problem behaviours or vice versa. Children affect their environment and environment affects children over time, but studies on this subject have varying findings.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used data from a birth cohort survey with 132 participants with ASD and randomly selected them to represent the population of the UK. These children were identified at age 5, then the researchers looked back at two earlier waves of data collection when they were aged 9 months and 3 years. Measurements of maternal mental health and child behaviour were collected through an interview with the mother. Participants were identified on the basis of availability of ASD diagnosis at age 5. Most participants were boys, and just under half had two or more siblings.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers did not find evidence of a bidirectional relationship between maternal mental health and behaviour problems of children with ASD. That is, they did not find that maternal well-being and child behaviour problems were impacting each other over time. Problem behaviours at age 3 did not lead to lower levels of maternal well-being 2

What you need to know:

Past studies have found inconsistent results about the nature of the relationship between maternal well-being and child behaviour problems. However, this study did not find evidence of a bidirectional relationship between the two. Instead, it found that maternal well-being led to less child behavioural problems over time.

years later, as one would expect in a bidirectional relationship. This may be because, with the young age of the children, mothers may not have been exposed to problem behaviours long enough to experience negative effects. Another explanation may be that the children's actions have not been serious enough to change their mother's mental health. At the same time, positive maternal mental health had a direct effect on lowering the level of child behaviour problems 2 years later. This suggests that mothers who have good mental health may raise children who are less likely to act out.

The authors caution that there are several limitations to this study:

1. There is little insight into the mechanism (e.g., parenting practices) through which maternal mental health and child problem behaviour affect each other.
2. Maternal mental health and child behaviour problems are very broad concepts. There may be better ways to measure what the researchers intended.

How can you use this research?

These findings suggest that addressing maternal well-being could be one way to improve child behaviour. Two ways to achieve this may be reducing psychological distress or focusing on resilience in parents. The authors mention a study that showed that an increase in parental satisfaction reduced behaviour problems of children with ASD. Any future interventions to improve parent well-being in ASD should look at changes in childrens' behaviours.

About the Researchers

The researchers work at and are associated with Bangor University, the University of Warwick and Lancaster University in the United Kingdom.

Citation

Totsika, V., Hastings, R.P., Emerson, E., Lancaster, G.A., Berridge, D.M., & Vagenas, D. (2013). Is there a bidirectional relationship between maternal well-being and child behavior problems in autism spectrum disorder? Longitudinal analysis of a population-defined sample of young children. *Autism Research*, 6(3), 201-211.

Keywords

Maternal, well-being, mental health, child, problem behaviour, autism spectrum disorder, bidirectional

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.

The Chair is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in partnership with Autism Speaks Canada, the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance, Health Canada, NeuroDevNet and the Sinneave Family Foundation. Additional funds from the Spectrum of Hope Autism Foundation and support from York University.

For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at asdmentalhealth.ca

Partners

