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Fathers' Verbal Responsiveness More Impactful Than Originally Thought On Language Skills Of Children With ASD

What is this research about?

Parental verbal responsiveness is important in developing the social communication skills of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). At the same time, there are differences in communication style between parents; fathers tend to use more complex and directive language than mothers. For example, fathers are more likely to pose “wh” questions rather than simpler “yes/no” questions more typical of mothers. This study examined the relationships between the auditory comprehension (the ability to understand what they hear) and expressive communication of children with ASD and the verbal responsiveness of both their mothers and fathers, as well as differences between mother and father verbal responsiveness.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers conducted the study using 12 boys and four girls with ASD and their mothers and fathers. The children were approximately 3-6 years old and lived with their biological parents consistently since birth. Each parent, in separate sessions, was given toys and instructed to engage in typical play with their child. Researchers videotaped and analyzed both parent’s verbal interaction with the child and the child’s language skills, using a measurement tool of the child’s auditory comprehension and expressive communication. The number of “child leads” – where a child would initiate touching a toy or look at a person or toy – was also measured.

What you need to know:

The language skills of a child with ASD are influenced by their father’s verbal responsiveness, perhaps more than their mothers. These findings could open the door to further research with fathers and their effect on the communication skills of children with ASD, and eventually shape the way they are encouraged to interact and communicate in order to aid language development.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers had three main findings. Firstly, they observed more child leads in sessions with the mothers than the fathers. The researchers thought this could be explained by a father’s greater tendency to actively redirect their child’s attention. Secondly, mothers were more verbally responsive than fathers – a key difference in verbal responsiveness between parents. Lastly, and most noteworthy, they found a greater association between father verbal responsiveness and child language skills than was found for mothers when differences in the cognitive skills of the children were accounted for. Therefore, despite the second finding showing lower levels of verbal responsiveness than mothers, a father’s verbal responsiveness is an important contributor to a child’s language skills. Indeed, fathers play a bigger role than originally thought in the language development of their child with ASD.

How can you use this research?

A father's role should also be considered, along with mother's, in the development of communication strategies for children with ASD. The results do not imply that fathers should mimic a mother's communication style or vice versa. Rather, strategies should be developed with mother and father differences in mind. Further research with larger sample sizes is needed to confirm these findings.

About the Researchers

Michelle Flippin (PhD) is an assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island in the Department of Communicative Disorders. Linda R. Watson (EdD) works at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine as a professor in the Department of Allied Health Sciences

Citation

Flippin, M. & Watson, L. R. (2015). Fathers' and Mothers' verbal responsiveness and the language skills of young children with autism spectrum disorder. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 24(3), 400-410

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Parental Differences, Verbal Responsiveness, Language Skills, Communication, Fathers

This research summary was written by Valerie Henderson and Dr. Jonathan Lai for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](http://blog.asdmentalhealth.ca) 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 support was provided by York University.

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