

# research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



## Do Mothers And Fathers Of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder Have Different Support Needs?

### What is this research about?

Parents of children with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) rely on formal and informal support networks to overcome the unique challenges of raising their child. Understanding the support needs of mothers and fathers is important because satisfaction with support services has been shown to improve the marital relationship and psychological well-being of parents. Currently, there is little information on the support needs of the father compared to what is known about the needs of mothers. This study compares how the support needs of fathers and mothers of children with ASD differ and also looks at how family and child characteristics influence their support needs.

### What did the researchers do?

Seventy-three married couples of children or adolescents with ASD in the U.S. were recruited for the study. Parents rated the importance of specific support needs and whether they were met or unmet. They also completed a questionnaire that assessed the social and communication skills of their child. An online diary was used by researchers to look at how parents perceived their child's behavioral problems in a typical day. Child and family characteristics including the number of behavioral problems, household income, and education were collected to see if they made a difference in support needs and having met needs.

### What you need to know:

Mothers and fathers have different support needs, with mothers having a higher number of support needs and a higher proportion of support needs that are not met. Specific child and family factors impact the type and number of support needs of mothers and fathers differently.

### What did the researcher find?

The researchers found a large overlap in support needs and unmet needs between spouses but key differences were also noted. Compared to their partner, mothers valued the qualities of professions (e.g. information about treatments) more whereas fathers valued social development of the child (e.g. child to have friends) more. Mother's unmet support needs were more related to their knowledge of ASD, assistance with household work, and connecting with other parents. In contrast, fathers emphasized parental well-being with unmet needs such as getting enough sleep and vacation.

Child and family factors impacted the number of support needs. Interestingly, increasing household income was associated with more support needs reported by fathers, but not by mothers. Unmet needs were higher in mothers compared to fathers. Higher unmet needs were also influenced by lower household education and more child behavioural problems. Lastly, having an intellectual disability was associated with more unmet needs in mothers,

but less in fathers – possibly because childcare responsibilities largely fall on mothers.

### How can you use this research?

These findings offer new insight into interspousal differences in support needs and can be used to develop specific support for fathers and mothers. This can help professionals tailor their care to the specific family characteristics to better meet the parental support needs.

### About the Researchers

Dr. Sigan Hartley (PhD) is an assistant professor of human development and family studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the Waisman. Haley Schultz (MSc) is a graduate student of Dr. Hartley in the rehabilitation psychology department and has a bachelors degree in Human Development and Family Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

### Citation

Hartley, S.L. and Schultz, H.M. (2015). Support needs of fathers and mothers of children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(6), 1636-1648.

### Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Support Services, Needs, Parents, Father, Mother

This research summary was written by Nathan Tam 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](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.

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.

For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at [asdmentalhealth.ca](http://asdmentalhealth.ca)

### Partners

