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Seeing Into The Future - Parent's Mental Health And Expectations For Their Child With Autism

What is this research about?

A parent's expectation of their child's future is linked to how they will act toward the child. For instance, in families living with autism, parent expectations in high school predicted the child's employment more than other factors, such as child's independence skills, social communication skills and access to services.

Also, affecting a child's future outcomes is the parent's own mental health (e.g. symptoms of depression, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, hostility). There may be more stressors that influence mental health in families with autism and since children with autism typically rely more on their parents in adulthood, understanding these dynamics are important for the child to thrive. Researchers in this study looked at the relationship between parent mental health and expectations of child outcomes, and if autism severity levels change that relationship.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 29 parents from local schools and autism community organizations. Surveys were done online. Five survey responses were removed since less than 90% of the questions were answered. The remaining were, on average, 43 years old, ranging from 31-59 and 75% Caucasian. The children averaged 10.1 years old, ranging from 5-18 years old.

What you need to know:

Parent mental health and child autism severity both predict parent expectation of their child's future. Addressing parent mental health is important when supporting all families living with autism.

Researchers measured parent's own mental health, their child's autism severity, and their expectations for their child. Expectation was measured with a scale, ranking questions like, "My child with autism will get married", "My child with autism will attain highest education possible" and "My child with autism will be safe from physical harm". The researchers compiled the scores and mapped out how these factors were related.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that poor parent mental health, and higher autism severity in a child were related to lower expectations. Together, these two variables accounted for 51% of the differences in expectation among the parents. The specific mental health concerns that were related to parent expectation included interpersonal sensitivity and anxiety.

Parent mental health and child autism severity contributed to parent expectations independently – meaning that having combinations of a very high score in one or both did not additionally

influence parent expectation. At the same time, the researchers found that parent mental health was not related to autism severity. That means having higher scores on one did not always mean higher scores on the other.

How can you use this research?

This research suggests that caring for the caregiver is very important. Specifically, since parent mental health has such a negative impact on parent's expectations of a child, special care needs to be taken to support parents and their needs related to raising their child with autism. Further research can look at which mental health concerns influence expectation more closely.

About the Researchers

The research team was from the Department of Psychology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA. Under the supervision of Nelson-Gray (PhD), a Professor in the department, Thomas and King were researchers and Mendelson was a Clinical Psychology trainee and graduate student at the university.

Citation

Thomas, P.A., King, J.S., Mendelson, J.L., Nelson-Gray, R.O. (2017) Parental psychopathology and expectations for the futures of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 1-8.

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Family Dynamics, Parent Mental Health, Caregiver, Future Expectation, Child Outcomes

This research summary was written by 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](#) 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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