Adaptive Behavior Deficits in Children with Autism as Predictors of Parenting Stress and Family Quality of Life

Stephanie A. Fox, Kristin V. Christodulu, & Melissa Rinaldi

UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

BACKGROUND

**Parenting Stress**
- Previous research has suggested that parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) experience higher levels of stress than parents of typically developing children or children with other disabilities (LeCavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006).

**Family Quality of Life (FQOL)**
- Defined as family members' abilities to share enjoyment and meet each other's needs (Davis & Gavidia-Payne, 2009).
- Disrupted by various forms of child disorder, including ASD (Mugno, Ruta, D'Arrigo, & Mazzone, 2007)
- Numerous factors have been proposed as potential causes of elevated stress levels and reduced FQOL including stigma, lack of support, and notably, child characteristics (Dawson et al., 2013)
- Literature on the exact contribution of child deficits to increased stress and decreased FQOL has been mixed; with some arguing that challenging behaviors play the largest role, while others point to the role of daily living skill deficits.
- There is a dearth of research examining the relative ability of specific domains of adaptive behavior deficits in children with ASD to predict parenting stress and FQOL.

OBJECTIVES

1. To discover which domain of adaptive behavior is most predictive of parenting stress and FQOL in parents of children with ASD.
   - **Hypothesis**: Communication deficits will be most predictive of parenting stress and FQOL

2. To use the findings from this study to draw conclusions regarding which child behaviors are the most worthwhile targets for intervention

METHOD

**Participants**
- Recruited as part of the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities’ (CARD) Parent Education Program for Families of Children Newly Diagnosed with Autism.
- 17 mothers and 10 fathers who reside in New York’s capital district, all of whom had a child aged 19 months to 10 years
- The overwhelming majority of children whose parents participated in the program were male (n=18)
- All children were diagnosed within twelve months of their parents' participation.

**Measures**
- Parenting Stress Index, Fourth Edition, Short-Form (PSI-4-SF; Abidin, 1995)
- Family Quality of Life Survey (FQOLS; Hoffman, Marquis, Poston, Summers, & Turnbull, 2006)
- Demographic Information Form

**Data Collection and Analysis**
- Data was collected prior to participation in CARD’s Parent Education Program
- General demographic information was computed with descriptive statistics
- Two multiple linear regressions were used to identify which child adaptive behavior deficit domain from the Vineland-II (communication, socialization, daily living skills, maladaptive behaviors) was most predictive of parenting stress and FQOL
  - **Note**: The daily living skill domain was removed from the model due to high levels of multicollinearity with both socialization and communication.

RESULTS

**Parenting Stress**
- The three predictor model was able to account for 44% of the variance in parenting stress
  - $F(3,23)=6.07, p=.003$
- Contrary to the research hypothesis, socialization accounted for the most variance in parenting stress ($\beta=-1.167, t=-3.561, p=.002$)

**Family Quality of Life**
- The three predictor model was able to account for 34% of the variance in FQOL
  - $F(3,23)=4.029, p=.019$
- As expected, communication accounted for the most variance in parent-reported FQOL ($\beta=-.919, t=-2.584, p=.017$)

DISCUSSION

- Socialization is the adaptive behavior domain that is most predictive of parenting stress, according to the present study.
- Social deficits are a core feature of the ASD diagnosis, which may explain why parenting stress is reported to be higher among parents of children with ASD than parents of TD children or children with other disabilities.
- Communication deficits are most predictive of reduced FQOL
- In light of these findings, it appears that child social and communication interventions should be implemented in order to reduce parenting stress and increase overall quality of life among families of children newly diagnosed with autism.