The Impact of a Behavior Support Intervention on Parenting Stress Among Families of Children with Autism
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Background

- Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) historically report higher levels of parenting stress than parents of children with other disabilities (Hayes & Watson, 2013).
- Challenging behaviors in children with ASD have been listed as among the largest contributors to parenting stress in this population (Estes et al., 2013; Mandell & Salzer, 2007).
- It has been argued that severe challenging behaviors are the leading cause of residential placement among children with ASD (Mandell & Salzer, 2007).
- Due to the deleterious nature of challenging behaviors, many interventions for children with ASD focus on reducing these behaviors (Hutchins & Prelock, 2014; Moes & Free, 2002).
- These interventions necessarily document the reduction in challenging behavior over time, but less emphasis has been placed on examining the reduction in parenting stress that may occur when a child’s challenging behaviors subside (Zaidman-Zait et al., 2014).
- The present study sought to evaluate the impact of a targeted behavior support intervention program for reducing parenting stress among families of children with ASD.

Method

Participants
- The sample consisted of fifteen families from New York’s Capital Region, all of whom had a child with a confirmed diagnosis of ASD who was between the ages of three and sixteen years at the time of participation (mean age = 6.6 years).
- Thirteen of the children enrolled in the program were male and two were female.

Program Information
- All families participated in a multidisciplinary behavior support program, funded by the New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, aimed at reducing disruptive behavior among children at risk of being placed outside of the home.
- The program utilizes a contextualized-treatment planning approach that is carried out in the families’ homes by a licensed clinical psychologist and a licensed clinical social worker over a three month period.

Measure
- The Parenting Stress Index, Fourth Edition, Short-Form (PSI-4-SF; Abidin, 1995) was completed before program enrollment and after program completion.

Data Analysis
- Descriptive statistics were calculated to assess the normality of the data, as well as the demographic characteristics of the sample.
- t-tests were used to assess changes in total PSI scores following program completion.
- Subscales of the PSI (i.e., Defensive responding, Parental Distress, Parent–Child Dysfunctional Interaction, and Difficult Child) were assessed to evaluate specific areas of improvement.

Results

- Results demonstrated a significant reduction in parenting stress following participation in the multidisciplinary behavior support program (from the 96th percentile to the 84th percentile).
- The score on the Difficult Child domain of the PSI decreased significantly, suggesting parents detected noticeable changes in their children’s challenging behaviors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting Stress Index Means and Standard Deviations</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSI Total Score**</td>
<td>108.77 (12.18)</td>
<td>96.4 (21.82)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSI Defensive Responding</td>
<td>21.3 (5.14)</td>
<td>18.93 (8.37)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSI Parental Distress</td>
<td>35.93 (7.49)</td>
<td>32.6 (10.48)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSI Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction</td>
<td>29.87 (6.47)</td>
<td>29.87 (7.03)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSI Difficult Child** **p &lt; .01</td>
<td>42.97 (7.28)</td>
<td>36.27 (8.37)</td>
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Discussion

- The results of the present study suggest that interventions aimed at reducing challenging behaviors among children with ASD are beneficial for both the child and the larger family system.
- Parents of children enrolled in the current study appeared to perceive noticeable changes in their children’s behaviors according to the significant change on the Difficult Child subscale.
- Future data should focus on the "active ingredients" of multidisciplinary behavior support programs, such as the one evaluated in the current study, to determine the source of the reduction in parenting stress.