

80 percent autism-divorce rate debunked in first-of-its kind scientific study

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Having a child with autism can put stress on the parents' marriage, and a frequently cited statistic leads to a common perception that the divorce rate among these families is as high as 80 percent. But a study to be released at a news conference today by researchers from Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore found that a child's autism has no effect on the family structure.

Brian Freedman, PhD, lead author of the study and clinical director of the Center for [Autism](#) and Related Disorders at Kennedy Krieger Institute, said the findings seem to debunk a lot of the general understanding about high divorce rates among parents of children with autism. Dr. Freedman and his research team found that 64 percent of children with an [autism spectrum disorder](#) (ASD) belong to a family with two married biological or adoptive parents, compared with 65 percent of children who do not have an ASD.

Dr. Freedman will present results of the study in Philadelphia at the International Meeting for Autism Research, an annual scientific meeting convened to exchange new scientific progress among autism researchers from around the world.

Receiving the news of a child's autism diagnosis can be devastating, and Dr. Freedman said the pain is compounded as parents ponder what will happen to them as a couple. "In the work I've done with children with autism, I've come across many couples who quote this 80 percent divorce rate to me. They don't know what the future holds for their

child, and feel a sense of hopelessness about the future of their marriage as well - almost like getting a diagnosis of autism and a diagnosis of divorce at the same time," he said.

With very little empirical and no epidemiological research addressing the issue of separation and divorce among parents of children with autism, researchers sought to more scientifically examine the incidence. Using data from the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health*, they examined a nationally representative sample of 77,911 children, ages 3 to 17.

Previous research speaks to the fact that parenting a child with autism is stressful, and it puts pressure on the marriage. Dr. Freedman noted that past studies have found couples with a child with autism experience more stress in their marriage than couples with typically developing children or couples with children with other types of developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome. Mothers of children with autism report more depression than those with typically developing children, while fathers report they deal with the stress by distancing themselves and becoming less involved with the family.

"While there are indeed stressors in parenting a child with autism, it doesn't necessarily result in the family breaking up more often than would occur in another family," said Dr. Freedman. "And as someone who works with a team of health care professionals to treat and provide support for families of children with autism, it's important for us to make sure our patients' parents know that, and for our fellow clinicians to provide reliable, evidence-based information about the divorce rate among this population as well."

This analysis of the National Survey of Children's Health data showed there are certain factors in a family that can contribute to divorce, such as having a child with particularly challenging behaviors, with or without

autism. For some families, the challenges of parenting a child with special needs may indeed result in straining the marriage to the breaking point. Further research is needed to understand the relationships among in-tact families with [children](#) with autism to identify how they work through the challenges.

"I would hope this research drives home the importance of providing support to these families, and letting them know that their relationships can survive these stressors," he said. "We should continue to provide training for parents so that they can work through the stressors in their relationship to keep their family together and have a successful marriage."

Provided by Kennedy Krieger Institute

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