

Predicting happiness of couples raising children with autism

July 7 2015



To understand what helps moms and dads of children with ASD strengthen their bond, researchers at the University of Miami (UM) are examining the individual factors that predict relationship satisfaction for these couples. Credit: University of Miami

Parenting can be stressful and parenting children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often means facing more challenges than those experienced by parents of typically developing children. The pressure can take its toll on the parents' relationship. To understand what helps moms and dads of children with ASD strengthen their bond, researchers at the University of Miami (UM) are examining the individual factors that predict relationship satisfaction for these couples.

The researchers analyzed the impact that individual traits, such as

optimism, social and spouse support, benefit finding and coping styles, have on the [relationship satisfaction](#) of parents who have children with ASD. The findings are shared in a study titled "The Power of Positivity: Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

The study shows that each of these traits was positively associated with better relationship satisfaction. However, only? seeking emotional support, spouse support and benefit finding—the ability to find the good during a bad situation—affected both mothers and fathers. This is the first time a study shows that the effects of positive traits, among parents of children with ASD, extend to parents' romantic relationships.

"In our day-to-day work with families of children with autism, we have been struck by the strength of the parents and the strength of the marital bonds of many families," said Michael Alessandri, executive director of the UM Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, clinical professor and assistant chair in the UM College of Arts and Sciences Department of Psychology, and principal investigator of the study. "Instead of perpetuating the 'doom and gloom' model of autism's effect on the family, we sought to look at families through a more optimistic lens."

Interestingly, optimism—an individual's expectation about the future—was associated with positive outcomes within the individual, but did not predict their partner's satisfaction, the study says.

For the study, 67 couples parenting a child with ASD answered questionnaires designed to measure the impact of five individual traits in relationship satisfaction. The researchers utilized a dyadic model to analyze the responses.

"We see, in our direct contact with the families of [children](#) with ASD,

that many are coping well, siblings are adjusting, and marriages are thriving," said Alessandri. "We want to highlight the reasons why those families do well," he said. "After all, it is the positive outcomes that will truly inform our clinical work and help shape more impactful treatments for families."

Other important findings of the study include:

- An individual's own strength predicted their own increased levels of relationship satisfaction.
- Fathers and mothers did not differ in reported partner support, optimism, or [relationship](#) satisfaction.
- Mothers reported higher use of social and instrumental support coping than fathers.
- Mothers reported greater levels of benefit finding compared to fathers.
- More perceived partner support was highly related to partner satisfaction for mothers than fathers.
- Greater satisfaction of one partner was related to greater satisfaction of the other.

"The findings imply that there are factors that could potentially enhance family functioning, marital quality and parenting, and that strengthening these qualities should be the target of family-focused interventions," Alessandri said.

Naomi V. Ekas is the first author of the study. She was a post-doctoral student at UM's Department of Psychology when she worked on the study, and is now an assistant professor at Texas Christian University (TCU). Other co-authors are Christine Ghilain, M.S., graduate student in the UM Department of Psychology and Lisa Timmons and Megan Pruitt, graduate students at TCU.

The researchers are now focusing their investigation on Hispanic families and siblings. They also hope to expand this work into their intervention research, in an effort to enhance parent training programs and their impact on overall family functioning.

Provided by University of Miami

Citation: Predicting happiness of couples raising children with autism (2015, July 7) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

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