

For parents of autistic children, more social support means better health

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About [one in 68](#) children in the United States has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their parents consistently report greater stress levels, caregiving burden and depression than parents of typically developing children.

Chronic caregiving stress has also been associated with poorer physical health—more pain, more disruptions from physical-health problems and lower overall health-related quality of life.

One powerful way to reduce their stress: [social support](#). That's according to a new study published in *Family Relations* by researchers from Concordia University in Montreal.

And that support is essential as children—and their [parents](#)—age. It could also have important consequences for health costs.

For the study, psychology professors Jean-Philippe Gouin and Erin T. Barker, as well as their co-authors, investigated whether social support can protect against stress-induced immune problems.

They asked 56 healthy parents of children with ASD to complete questionnaires on formal social support (provided by health or social services professionals), informal social support (provided by significant others, friends and family) as well as self-rated health and recent somatic symptoms.

Study participants also provided blood samples to check for inflammation—the automatic reaction of the innate immune system upon exposure to infection, injury or abnormal cells, or psychological stress. Chronic low-grade inflammation is also associated with greater risk for several age-related diseases, including cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, certain cancers, autoimmune diseases, frailty, dementia and early mortality.

The results indicated that greater informal social support was associated with lower inflammation, and that a higher number of formal [support services](#) received by the family was related to better self-rated health and lower inflammation.

Notably, the impact of support services on the parents' inflammation levels increased with the age of the affected child.

"The impact of chronic caregiving stress on health likely becomes more pronounced as the parents are aging and their immune system responds less efficiently to challenges," says Gouin. "The need for formal and informal support thus remains high even as the child with ASD is becoming an adult."

He adds that the study results emphasize the need for continued services for these families, who are experiencing lifelong parenting challenges.

"Given the reciprocal relationship between child and parental health and well-being, supporting the parents in coping with chronic caregiving stress might not only improve the child's outcome, but also may help maintain an optimal family environment for a longer period of time. Supporting the parents in providing care to their children with ASD might then represent a cost-effective strategy in the long-term."

Gouin is now continuing this research by following families during their

ASD-affected children's last years of high school and the first few years after graduation to examine the impact of social support services on parental health.

Currently, 120 families are participating, but Gouin hopes to recruit 100 more in the next two years. Interested individuals should contact the study research coordinator at Parents.FWB@concordia.ca or visit their website at http://psychology.concordia.ca/family/currentstudies_new.html.

Provided by Concordia University

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