

Raising a child with autism

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Credit: University of Miami

Humans are resilient, even facing the toughest of life's challenges. How individuals and families deal with demanding and emotionally charged circumstances plays a large role in how they view and face the world and the possible outcomes of a difficult situation. There's no exception for the challenging Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and how families adjust and cope with the reported stress of raising a child with autism.

In the first known study of its kind, University of Miami (UM) College

of Arts and Sciences psychologists Dr. Michael Alessandri and Dr. Hoa Lam Schneider worked with Texas Christian University researchers to further the understanding of the relationship between optimism, [coping strategies](#), and depressive symptoms among Hispanic mothers and fathers of children with autism.

Most research on ASD tends to focus on the negative aspects of how parents handle having a child with the disorder, such as exhibiting [depressive symptoms](#) or maladaptive behaviors.

"Parents are really resilient and we wanted to learn the positive aspects of how they adjust when raising a child with ASD, as well as the specific coping strategies they are using," said Schneider, graduate student in the child clinical psychology program at UM's College of Arts and Sciences.

Focusing on the positive coping strategies and characteristics such as optimism is especially important for clinical psychologists in helping families adjust to raising a child with ASD.

"Our hope is that by identifying these stress-buffering qualities we may be able to tailor clinical interventions for families in a way that affords them the opportunity to strengthen these personal characteristics and responses," said Alessandri, clinical professor of psychology at UM and executive director of the UM-NSU Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD).

The psychologists also studied the gender and ethnic similarities and differences between Hispanic parents and the larger general population of non-Hispanic families.

Their reason for focusing on Hispanic families was two-fold - not only does South Florida provide a rich source of data on Hispanic parents but there is also a dearth of autism research that focuses on ethnicity.

Though there are many similarities between ethnic groups, there are some differences, particularly involving the use of [religious coping](#) strategies. Hispanics tend to rely more on their religious faith as a coping strategy compared to non-Hispanic families.

Hispanic families are in turn more likely to use religious coping styles positively and view the challenge of raising a child with ASD as a test of their faith and part of a divine plan. Whereas non-Hispanic families who use religious coping strategies tend to use these techniques more negatively, viewing their circumstances as divine punishment, and then often engaging in denial and substance abuse to avoid dealing with their circumstances.

The researchers also discovered that there were little to no gender differences between Hispanic mothers and fathers in this study.

The team hopes to further their research on autism by uncovering some of the nuances within ethnic and cultural differences, such as acculturation, ideas about mental health and its treatment, and country of ancestral origin. They also hope to gain insight into Hispanic families across the socioeconomic spectrum.

"The coping experience, we imagine, is even more impacted by socioeconomic factors than race or ethnicity factors, but it continues to be challenging to recruit these diverse samples," said Alessandri.

Though they are "just hitting the tip of the iceberg in understanding cultural and ethnic differences," said Schneider, the team is one of the few in the field diving deep to help answer some of these questions, with the ultimate goal of providing more targeted counseling and clinical support to families with children with ASD.

The study was first published online in March 2016 in the *Journal of*

Autism and Developmental Disorders and co-authored by Texas Christian University undergraduate student Kelcie Willis and assistant professor Naomi K. Ekas, a former UM postdoctoral researcher in psychology.

Provided by University of Miami

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