

When their parents fight: Autistic kids may have a harder time recognizing healthy vs. toxic arguments

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A new study suggests children on the autism spectrum may be more likely to misinterpret healthy arguments between their parents as being

negative, compared to children who aren't on the autism spectrum.

That means they may be missing out on an opportunity to learn from their parents how to handle [conflict](#) constructively, researchers Naomi Ekas and Chrystyna Kouros said.

"Children can learn how to best handle conflict from watching their parents," said Kouros, associate professor of psychology at SMU (Southern Methodist University). "Seeing parents respectfully problem-solve during a disagreement provides children with examples of how to resolve conflict in a healthy way. But children on the [autism spectrum](#) may be missing the chance to benefit from those interactions."

"Children on the autism spectrum reacted more negatively to interparental conflict that we generally think of as being less harmful to children's development, compared to non-autistic kids," said Ekas, lead researcher and an associate professor of psychology at Texas Christian University. "It is possible that these children are misinterpreting the conflict as being more negative than it is."

Kouros and Ekas have received a [grant](#) from the National Institutes of Health to further study this topic. They are conducting a larger study of 118 children on the autism spectrum and their parents.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects an estimated 1 in 54 children in the United States. The range and severity of symptoms can vary widely. Common characteristics include difficulty with communication, difficulty with social interactions and repetitive behaviors.

Based on their initial findings, Ekas and Kouros said parents of [autistic kids](#) may need to ensure their child understands when a conflict has ended and that their parents have resolved their difference. They also recommended teaching autistic children to recognize differences

between conflicts that are destructive, like ones that involve yelling, versus constructive ones, where parents talk through a disagreement.

"This may help them navigate conflict with peers as well," Ekas said.

For the study, Ekas and Kouros arranged for autistic and non-autistic children to watch videos of actors pretending to be parents. In one video, the "parents" were seen having a disagreement in a way that psychologists would consider constructive—they showed respect to each other, spoke calmly, and used problem-solving. The children also watched a video of a destructive argument, where the parents aimed insults or threats at each other.

After viewing the videos children answered questions about how they felt and what they would do if they were in the room. Researchers found autistic children reacted more negatively to parents who fought constructively than did children who were not diagnosed with autism.

There was no significant difference in how kids perceived the destructive arguments, according to a [study](#) published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Both groups rated destructive arguments very negatively.

The findings are particularly troubling because research shows that parents of children on the autism spectrum may have higher rates of marital discord compared to [parents](#) of children who don't have autism

The study is based on surveys taken by 21 children with autism and 29 non-[autistic children](#), who were recruited from the Dallas-Fort Worth community through schools, flyers, and online advertisements. Children in the study ranged from age between 8 and 13 years old.

To be included in the [autism](#) group, [children](#) had to be clinically-

diagnosed as having the neurodevelopmental disorder.

More information: Naomi V. Ekas et al. A Pilot Study of Responses to Interparental Conflict in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-020-04802-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04802-y)

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