



Parental Characteristics and Coping among Parents of Autistic Children

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Background

It is well-documented that family members of individuals with autism display elevated autistic traits, known as the broader autism phenotype (BAP; Piven et al., 1997), which has been associated with comorbid mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression (e.g., Su et al., 2018). Independent of these traits, parental stress associated with raising a child with autism is higher compared to parents of typically developing children and those with other developmental delays (e.g., Hutton & Caron, 2005). Finally, recent work points to high rates of family accommodation (i.e., proactive modifications made by family members intended to decrease their child's distress, stemming from the child's psychopathology) of RRBs among parents of autistic children. Such accommodation is associated with elevated child symptomatology and reduced adaptive functioning, as well as increased parenting stress (Feldman et al., 2019; Koller et al., 2021). Given the above, it is important to examine how parents of autistic children cope with parenting stress and how such coping strategies associate with family accommodation.

Methodology

These data are part of a longitudinal study of children recently diagnosed with autism and their families. Participants were 31 children at time of diagnosis (26 males; mean age: 39.84 months).

Children received a gold-standard evaluation including measures of child development (Mullen Scales of Early Learning; Mullen, 1995) autism symptomatology (ADOS-2; Lord et al., 2000; RBS-R; Bodfish et al, 2000) and adaptive functioning (ABAS-3; Harrison & Oakland, 2015).

For the current study, data was analyzed from parental self-report measures of parental autistic traits (BAP; Hurley et al., 2007), coping strategies (Brief COPE; Carver, 1997) and accommodation behavior (FAS-RRB; Feldman et al., 2019).

Results

Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the association between family accommodation, the BAP, and Brief COPE measures. Significant negative correlations were found between mothers' and fathers' BAP scores and their coping strategies in stressful situations, including strategies to regulate emotional distress, $r(30)=-.507, p< 0.01$, $r(27)=-.402, p< 0.05$, try to solve problems $r(30)=-.403, p< 0.05$, $r(27)= -.449, p<0.05$, and receive emotional comfort and soothing $r(30)=-.484, p<0.01$ $r(27)=-.415, p< 0.05$. In addition, a significant positive correlation was found between mothers' maladaptive coping strategies and accommodation $r(31)=.425, p<0.01$, as well as a significant positive correlation between the two parents' reported accommodation behavior $r(26)= .684, p<0.01$.

	Problem solving	Emotion focused coping	Receiving emotional comfort	FAS-RRB DAD
BAP MOM	-.403*	-.507**	-.484**	
BAP DAD	-.449*	-.402*	-.415*	
FAS-RRB MOM	0.111	0.217	0.104	684**
FAS-RRB DAD	-0.146	0.318	0.209	

	Adaptive Coping	Maladaptive Coping
FAS-RRB MOM	-0.003	0.425*
FAS-RRB DAD	-0.22	0.26

Conclusions

This study sheds light on the relationship between parental autistic traits, accommodation, and coping strategies. These results indicate that parents with elevated autistic traits display fewer coping strategies in stressful situations. Mothers who rely on maladaptive coping strategies are also more likely to accommodate their child's RRBs. In two-parent families, co-parents display similar levels of accommodation. These findings contribute to our understanding of parents of autistic children who may benefit from targeted support.

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