

# Marital Intimacy and Parent-Child Closeness in Families with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder



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## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the fastest growing developmental disability, now estimated to occur in 1 in 68 children in the U.S. Having a child with ASD presents unique parenting challenges and is associated with an increased risk of negative marital outcomes. Little is known about how the quality of the marital relationship is related to the parent-child relationship within these families. In the present study, we examined one aspect of marital quality, sexual intimacy, and its association with closeness in the parent-child relationship in a sample of 187 married couples who have a child with ASD (aged 5-12 years). Satisfaction of intimacy predicted closeness in the parent-child relationship for mothers, but not for fathers. Results have important implications for potential family services.

## Study Objectives

1. Analyze the connection between parent-child closeness and parents' reported frequency of sex and sexual satisfaction.
2. Identify child, parent, and family variables that are associated with marital intimacy in parents of children with ASD.

## Methods

### Sample

- 187 married couples with a child with ASD
- Parents: Age ( $M = 39.60$ ,  $SD = 5.86$ ); 89.70% White, non-hispanic, 86.20% at least some college education
- Child with ASD: Age ( $M = 7.92$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ); 85.30% male; 34.80% Intellectual Disability (ID)
- Child Overall Behavior Problems (BP) ( $M = 64.82$ ,  $SD = 9.60$ )
- Child ASD severity ( $M = 76.98$ ,  $SD = 10.33$ )

### Measures

Parents independently reported on:

- Closeness in the parent-child relationship – Bengston (CITE)
- Frequency of sex – Reported number of days sex occurred during a 14 day daily diary
- Satisfaction with sexual intimacy – Sexual subset of the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships Scale (PAIR; Moore et al.,1998)

Parents jointly reported on the child's age and ID status

## Results

Table 1. Correlations of Key Variables

	Closeness in Parent-Child Relationship	Frequency of sex	Satisfaction with sexual intimacy	Presence of intellectual disability	Child age
Closeness in Parent-Child Relationship	.35**	0.01	.21**	-0.11	0.14
Frequency of sex	-0.02	.89***	.47**	0.00	0.01
Satisfaction with sexual intimacy	.16*	.37**	.50**	0.00	0.08
Presence of intellectual disability	-0.08	0.00	0.09	1.00	-0.01
Child age	0.03	-0.03	0.03	-0.01	1.00

Note: Fathers' values reported below diagonal and mothers' values reported above diagonal. Values on diagonal indicate correlations between fathers' and mothers' reports of that variable

Table 2. Predictors of Closeness in the Parent-Child Relationship

Variable	Mothers B	Fathers B
Constant	39.91***	41.50***
Frequency of sex	-5.35	-4.91
Satisfaction with sexual intimacy	1.86**	1.80**
Presence of intellectual disability	-1.36	-1.11
Child age	0.23	0.08
R <sup>2</sup>	.28	.25
F	3.64**	2.83*

Yes = 1, No = 0

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
SexRateW	180	.00	.58	.1457	.14511
SexRateH	179	.00	.88	.1479	.16106
PairSexW	188	.14	4.00	2.5732	.92220
PairSexH	188	.14	4.00	2.2287	.98361
BengW	188	27.00	60.00	45.7793	6.72536
BengH	188	22.00	60.00	45.3101	6.99565
IDyn	189	.00	1.00	.3175	.46672
ChildAge	189	5	12	7.90	2.248
Valid N (listwise)	179				

Number of children with ID: 60

## Findings

- Mothers and fathers of children with ASD reported the same patterns of closeness in the parent-child relationship ( $t(187) = 0.82$ ,  $p = .411$ ), but mothers reported higher sexual satisfaction than fathers ( $t(187) = 4.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ).
- Closeness in the parent-child relationship was positively correlated with satisfaction with sexual intimacy for both mothers and fathers, but not correlated with frequency of sex for either mothers or fathers (see Table 1).
- Satisfaction with sexual intimacy was a significant and positive predictor of closeness in the parent-child relationship, but frequency of sex was not (see Table 2).
- The presence of an intellectual disability and child's age were neither correlated to or predictive of closeness in the parent-child relationship (see Tables 1 and 2).

## Discussion

Our findings suggest a strong association between parent-child and marital relationships in families who have a child with ASD, in that satisfaction with sexual intimacy is a strong predictor of closeness in the parent-child relationship. This suggests the importance of services addressing multiple facets of the family system in which the child develops. We hope that in the future more research and social support services will take a 'family-wide' perspective in an effort to assist parents in the difficulties they experience and guide them in recognizing the importance of maintaining a healthy marital relationship for both parents and the child.

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## References

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