

HARTLEY LAB NEWSLETTER

Family Outcomes in Autism Spectrum Disorder



Thank you for being a part of our study on Family Outcomes in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). We have learned so much from you! The goal of this study is to examine the family dynamics of families with a child with ASD by exploring the connections between the experiences of parents, marital interaction, and the functioning of the child with ASD. By looking at how these family dynamics evolve over a period of 5 years, we hope to better understand these processes and relationships. We hope our study findings can help inform support services and identify ways to help increase overall well-being for families like yours!

To date, 175 families from Wisconsin with a child or adolescent with ASD have participated in our study. We're looking forward to beginning our second cycle of data collection this August.

The purpose of this newsletter is to keep you updated on some of the initial findings from our study as well as put you in touch with other ASD research and local resources for families with a child with ASD.

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Division of Labor in Families of Children and Adolescents with ASD

Couples who have a child or an adolescent with ASD are faced with the challenge of balancing childcare and employment. In our study, we looked at the division of labor in the family and its relation to parenting stress and marital adjustment, or the way couples adapt to roles and challenges together. We looked at data from 73 couples with a child or adolescent with ASD. We asked mothers and fathers to report on their parenting stress and marital adjustment and to complete a 14-day daily diary. This diary asked about time spent in childcare and time spent in paid employment, as well as how satisfied parents were with the amount of time their spouse spent in childcare. This study was guided by three important research questions.

Study Question 1: How do families of children or adolescents with ASD divide childcare and paid employment responsibilities?

We found that families of children or adolescents with ASD often engage in *role specialization*, or unequal divisions of labor. In other words, we found that mothers spent around 41% less time in paid employment than fathers. Similarly, fathers spent about 26% less time than mothers in childcare. Despite these differences, mothers and fathers in this study reported being equally satisfied with how much time their spouse spent in childcare.

There are several potential explanations for this finding including the possibility that mothers and fathers may not notice this unequal division in labor. Another possibility is that parents are aware of unequal divisions of labor, but are satisfied with the arrangement. Our finding that parents with a child or adolescent with ASD are likely to engage in *role specialization* led us to ask our next research question.

Study Question 2: Which families are more likely to engage in *role specialization*?

We found that *role specialization* was more likely to occur in families with children or adolescents with severe autism symptoms as well as in families of younger children with ASD. These findings are in line with the demand-response hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that parents faced with stressful and demanding childcare will often use a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy, where parents split up responsibilities to make them more manageable. Because children or adolescents with more severe autism symptoms, and young children with ASD often need more hands-on daily assistance, parents seem to adapt to these extra challenges by using this ‘divide and conquer’ strategy.



Mothers spent 41% less time in paid employment than fathers and fathers spent 26% less time than mothers in childcare.

Study Question 3: How is time spent in paid employment and *role specialization* related to parenting stress and marital adjustment?

Study results showed that the time spent in childcare was not related to parenting stress for either mothers or fathers. Mothers’ time spent in paid employment also was not related to parenting stress. Fathers, on the other hand, were more likely to report greater parenting stress if they spent more time in paid employment. One possible explanation for fathers experiencing more stress at home when they work more, is that these fathers may experience more work-related stress and this stress could spillover into their parenting. Mothers, however, do not seem to experience the same work-related spillover.

Importantly, parents who engage in a “divide and conquer” strategy do not experience more parenting stress or poorer marital adjustment, as long as they are satisfied with this arrangement.

Take Home Messages:

Encouraging parents to discuss their division of labor and to problem-solve areas of disagreement may lead to a decrease in parenting stress as well as an increase in marital adjustment. Families of young children or children and adolescents with more severe autism symptoms are the most likely to use a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy. This strategy does not appear to be related to poor outcomes as long as both parents are satisfied with the arrangement.

Family Support Needs

Little research has looked at the support needs of mothers of children with ASD and even less is known about the support needs of fathers. In terms of formal support, parents of children with ASD often interact with professionals including pediatricians, speech-language pathologists, physical and occupational therapists, behavioral therapists, psychologists, and special education teachers. Ideally, the treatments and supports provided by these professionals should reflect ‘family-centered care’. This means that professionals should establish open and respectful communication with parents, match the changing needs and priorities of the family, and provide parents with choices and control over treatment decisions for their child. Unfortunately, the reality is often different from these expectations. To identify gaps in support, we examined the support needs of mothers and fathers in 73 married couples with a child or an adolescent with ASD.

Study Question 1: What support needs are rated as most important by mothers and fathers?

For the most part, mothers and fathers agreed on which support needs were most important. Mothers and fathers in this study both reported having their questions answered honestly was the most important support need. However, there were a few differences between mothers and fathers. Specifically mothers placed more importance on the specific qualities of the professional (e.g., being respectful and knowledgeable about ASD) and on talking with other parents of

children with ASD. In contrast, fathers placed more importance on therapies and treatments for the social development of the child or adolescent with ASD.

Study Question 2: Which important support needs are not being met?

Mothers and fathers agreed that having time to spend alone with their partner was an important support need not being met. Mothers were more likely than fathers to report having unmet important support needs related to more access to treatments and therapies, more ASD education, opportunities to talk with parents of other children with ASD, and help with housework. In contrast, fathers were more likely than mothers to report unmet support needs related to more leisure activities and relaxation.

Take Home Messages:

Overall, mothers and fathers generally agree on the family’s support needs. However, mothers and fathers also have different perspectives on which types of support are important and currently being unmet. Findings suggest that professionals should consider the overlapping and unique support needs of mothers and fathers when creating treatment plans.



Highlighting Student Projects

Graduate and undergraduate students in the Hartley Lab are analyzing the rich and varied data collected from families to better understand dynamics of families with a child or adolescent with ASD. These student projects highlight the exciting and important ways our study can contribute to greater ASD research as well as the scholarship and innovation of our students. You may even see some familiar faces!

Iulia Mihaila**Graduate Student**

In her research, Iulia sought to better understand how daily experiences of parents of children with ASD

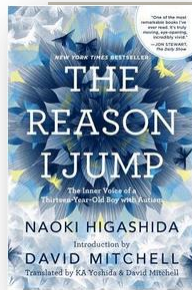
contribute to their positive and negative moods. She did this by looking at time spent daily on activities like work, chores, childcare, and time spent in sleep, and how these activities were related to positively and negative moods each day. Through her analysis of data from 79 couples, Iulia found that, while sleep is important for parents' positive mood, even the effects of getting a good night's sleep can be counteracted by experiencing severe or stressful child behaviors. Iulia's research suggests that services and interventions be geared toward helping parents manage child behavior problems, as this is critical for enhancing the day-to-day mood of parents with a child with ASD.

Paige Bussanich**Graduate Student**

Parents faced with the same child behaviors respond in different ways, depending on their parental attributions,

or beliefs about what caused the behavior. Paige's research focused on parental attributions of positive

behaviors of children with ASD. Through her analysis, Paige found evidence that parents of children with ASD are more likely to believe that they play a role in causing and controlling their child's positive behavior than they do for their child's negative behaviors. Additionally, parents were more likely to believe that positive behaviors from their children were due to factors stable and controllable by the child. Paige also found parental attribution to be affected by the level of parent education, severity of the child's autism symptoms, and whether or not the child has an intellectual disability. Parental attribution for positive behaviors was also found to be related to parenting stress which suggests that targeting parental attribution through services might help decrease parenting stress.

**Worth A Read!****The Reason I Jump**

by Naoki Higashida, a teen with ASD, gives

readers a one-of-a-kind glimpse into the mind and experiences of an individual growing up with ASD. An evocative and fascinating read.

A Look Into the Future

We are continuing to recruit new families for the study.

We will also begin contacting families who have already participated to see if they are willing to participate again at time 2.

Please let us know if your contact information changes!

**Future Research Topics**

Our lab is continually engaging with the data and creating new research questions and areas of exploration. Future research from the lab includes:

- Sibling Experiences
- Friendships
- Co-parenting behaviors
- Physiological responses during partner conversations

In the Community

Autism Night at the Central Wisconsin's Children Museum- Free

1st Monday of every month 5-7pm
Stevens Point, WI

Athletes for Autism, Inc. Family Days

Saturdays 12:30-2:30pm at 770 N. Jefferson St, Milwaukee, WI
(414) 803-9676

Waisman Center: John D. Wiley Seminar Series – “Family Dynamics in the Context of Autism”

Friday, November 07, 12:00pm
Madison, WI

Camp Awesum – Ages 9-15

June 27- July 2

**Autism Summer Institute
Sponsored by Kettle Moraine**

Tuesday-Wednesday, August 12-13 Summit, WI

Autism Society of Wisconsin Conference – “Bridges to Adulthood for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder”

Tuesday, October 07
Green Bay, WI

Transition Resource Fair

Wednesday, October 15
West Allis, WI

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About Our Lab...



The Hartley Lab is located at the Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin – Madison.

The principle investigator is Dr. Sigan Hartley, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies