

# Mother-Father Differences in Parenting Experiences and Marital Quality in Families of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder



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## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong developmental disability that involves impairments in social communication and restricted and repetitive interests and behaviors (Center for Disease Control, 2015). Parents who have a child with ASD are faced with a high level of challenges related to their child's ASD symptoms, as well as their child's co-occurring behavior problems (e.g., disruptive behavior, inattention, aggression). Indeed, parents of a child with ASD report a heightened level of parenting stress (McStay, 2014).

Family systems theory posits that parenting experiences are interdependent with marital experiences. Parents of a child with ASD are at risk for negative marital outcomes, such as divorce and low marital adjustment. One factor contributing to negative marital outcomes may be differences in parenting experiences. For example, parents who have different perspectives may feel less understood or supported by their spouse. Differences in parenting experiences may also create heightened opportunity for couple disagreement.

## Study Aims

1. Examine whether, at a within-couple level, mother-father differences in reports of the child with ASD's symptoms and behavior problems are related to self-reported and observed marital quality.
2. Determine if, at a within-couple level, mother-father differences in level of parenting stress are related to self-reported and observed marital quality.

## Methods

### Sample

- 189 couples with a child with ASD
- Parents: Age ( $M = 39.54$ ,  $SD = 5.80$ ); 89.70% White, non-Hispanic; 69.90% college education; and mean income of \$70,000-\$79,999 (\$30,000)
- Child with ASD: Age ( $M = 7.91$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ); 85.30% male; and 34.80% with intellectual disability (ID)

### Measures

- **Severity of ASD Symptoms:** Social Responsiveness Scale - Second Edition (SRS-2; Constantino & Gruber, 2012)
- **Child Behavior Problems:** Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000 & 2001)
- **Parenting Stress:** Burden Interview (Zarit, et. al., 1980)
- **Self-Reported Marital Quality:** Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007)
- **Observed Marital Quality:** Assessed based a videotaped 7-minute couple problem-solving interaction. The interaction was coded for global quality based on factors, such as warmth, criticism, positivity, and negativity.

## Results

Table 1. Multiple Regression Model for Self-Reported Marital Quality

	Mother			Father		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Constant	117.08	117.0		104.65	21.90	
Parent Characteristics						
Age	-.30	.35	-.07	.25	.26	.07
Ethnicity	.55	4.43	.01	-.59	1.72	-.03
Education	-1.14	1.04	-.09	-.21	.88	-.02
Household Income	1.07	.85	.10	.06	.58	.01
Child Characteristics						
Gender	2.48	5.51	.03	-.58	4.38	-.01
Age	.12	.90	.01	-.35	.69	-.04
Parent Rated						
CBCL	.44	.31	-.07	-.28	.25	-.12
SRS	-.16	.27	-.07	.50*	.22	.24
Parenting Stress	-.82*	.29	-.28	-.94	.69	-.04
Mother-Father Difference (Absolute)						
CBCL	-.04	.40	-.01	-.09	.31	-.03
SRS	-.15	.36	-.04	.09	.30	.03
Parenting Stress	.41	.39	.09	.20	.28	.05
R <sup>2</sup>	.08			.13		
F	1.21			1.98		

Note: CBCL = Child Behavior Checklist, SRS = Social Responsiveness Scale-Second Edition, \* $p < 0.05$

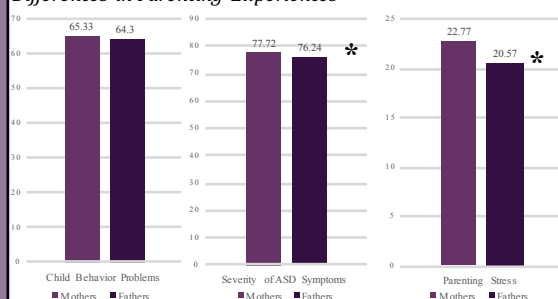
Table 2. Multiple Regression Model for Observed Marital Quality

	Mother			Father		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Constant	3.18	1.39				
Mother Characteristics						
Age	-.01	.03	-.02			
Ethnicity	-.14	.25	-.06			
Education	.04	.05	.06			
Household Income	.01	.04	.01			
Father Characteristics						
Age				.01	.02	.04
Ethnicity				-.17	.12	-.14
Education				.07	.06	.12
Household Income				-.02	.04	-.06
Child Characteristics						
Gender				.38	.28	.11
Age				.02	.04	.03
Mother Rated						
CBCL	-.002	.02	-.01			
SRS	-.01	.02	-.06			
Parenting Stress	.01	.02	.04			
Father Rated						
CBCL				-.02	.02	-.15
SRS				.03*	.02	.25
Parenting Stress				-.01	.02	-.08
Mother-Father Difference (Absolute)						
CBCL				-.01	.28	.11
SRS				.01	.02	.02
Parenting Stress				-.03	.02	-.13
R <sup>2</sup>	.10			.10		
F	8.2			8.2		

Note: CBCL = Child Behavior Checklist, SRS = Social Responsiveness Scale-Second Edition, \* $p < 0.05$

## Results

Figure 1. Paired-Sample T-Tests for Mean Mother-Father Differences in Parenting Experiences



## Discussion

On average, mothers and fathers had slightly different perceptions of the symptom severity of their child with ASD, and different levels of parenting stress. However, our findings suggest that these global differences are not associated with poorer marital quality in neither self-reported nor observed measures.

It is possible that differences in parenting experiences are not directly related to maladaptive outcomes as long as spouses support each other – such as by demonstrating empathy and respect. It is also possible that effective communication between spouses about child-related experiences and perceptions protects against any negative impact on the couple relationship. Moreover, it is important to note that mean mother-father differences in ratings of the child with ASD's symptoms and level of parenting stress were small, and such a slight discrepancy may not be enough create rifts in the couple relationship.

## Next Steps

- Despite the lack of average group effects, additional research is required to explore whether mother-father differences in parenting experiences within-couples is maladaptive for other family outcomes or under certain conditions.
- Explore the relationship between parenting experiences and marital quality at a day-to-day level.
- Explore the relationship between parenting experiences and specific domains of the marital relationship.
- Examine the connection between varying parenting strategies and the marital relationship.

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