

# Trajectories of Couple Relationship Satisfaction in Parents of A Child with Autism



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## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impairments in social communication and repetitive/restrictive interests or behaviors (APA, 2013). Mothers and fathers of children with ASD are at an increased risk for parenting stress (Estes et al., 2009). Research also suggests that parents who have a child with ASD experience poorer couple relationship outcomes including a lower level of couple relationship satisfaction and increased separation/divorce relative to her peers who have children without ASD (Saini et al., 2015). However, to date, research has been almost exclusively cross-sectional; virtually nothing is known about change in level of couple relationship satisfaction across time.

In part, a risk for poor initial couple satisfaction and/or declining couple satisfaction across time may be related to child-related challenges associated ASD. Alternatively, it may be linked to an increased presence of broad autism phenotype (BAP), involving subclinical levels of ASD traits (e.g., aloofness, rigidity, and pragmatic language difficulties) in parents of children with ASD (Ingersoll, Hopwood, Wainer et al., 2011).

## Study Aims

1. To understand the initial level and rate of change in level of couple relationship satisfaction across 3 years in parents who have a child with ASD.
2. To understand parent and child factors that predict initial level and rate of change in couple relationship satisfaction in parents who have a child with ASD.

## Methods

### Sample

- 189 couples with a child with ASD
- Parents: Age ( $M = 39.54$ ,  $SD = 5.80$ ); 86.70% White, non-Hispanic, 62% college education; mean income of \$80,000-\$89,999 (\$30,000)
- Years in couple relationship ( $M = 15.01$ ,  $SD = 5.54$ )
- Child with ASD: Age ( $M = 7.91$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ); 85.30% male; 34.80% with intellectual disability (ID)

### Measures

- *Broad Autism Phenotype*: Broad Autism Phenotype Questionnaire (BAPQ; Hurley, Losh, Parlier, Reznick, & Piven, 2007)
- *Child Behavior Problems*: Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000 & 2001)
- *Self-Reported Marital Quality*: Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007)
- *Severity of ASD Symptoms*: Social Responsiveness Scale – Second Edition (SRS-2; Constantino & Gruber, 2012)

## Results

Table 1.

Mothers CSI Pearson Correlations				
	CSI Time 1	CSI Time 2	CSI Time 3	CSI Time 4
CSI Time 1	1	.798**	.774**	.758**
CSI Time 2	.798**	1	.789**	.800**
CSI Time 3	.774**	.789**	1	.875**
CSI Time 4	.758**	.800**	.875**	1

Fathers CSI Pearson Correlations				
	CSI Time 1	CSI Time 2	CSI Time 3	CSI Time 4
CSI Time 1	1	.745**	.741**	.764**
CSI Time 2	.745**	1	.794**	.745**
CSI Time 3	.741**	.794**	1	.854**
CSI Time 4	.764**	.745**	.854**	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

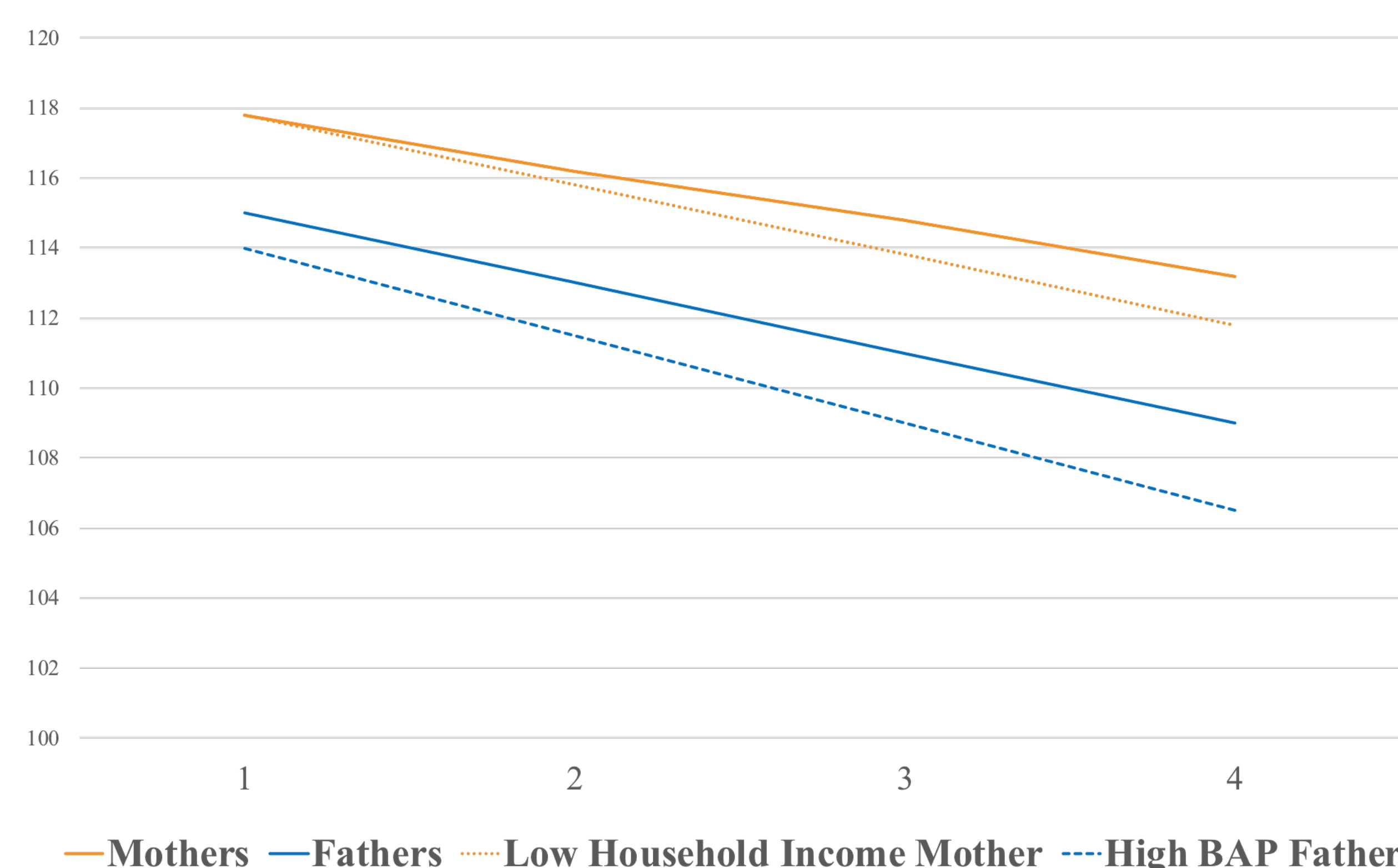
Table 2.

Mothers CSI Descriptive Statistics					
	M	SD	Min.	Max.	% of couples distressed couples
Time 1	115.23	31.43	37	161	20.2%
Time 2	114.13	35.18	31	161	21.4%
Time 3	115.78	35.62	18	159	23.6%
Time 4	117.61	31.64	17	158	22.8%

Fathers CSI Descriptive Statistics					
	M	SD	Min.	Max.	% of couples distressed couples
Time 1	117.34	27.49	26	159	21.7%
Time 2	117.51	28.67	30	159	21.6%
Time 3	118.26	29.67	23	160	22.3%
Time 4	117.53	29.11	18	158	22.5%

Note: "Distressed" =  $CSI < 51.5$  (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007)

## Results



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Main study analyses involved multilevel models (MLM) using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush, 2011) software. In each MLM, mother and father variables were included separately at Level 1 with family-level data entered in Level 2. Dichotomous variables and our time variable were entered uncentered at Level 1. Continuous Level 1 and 2 variables were grand-mean centered. The intercept was taken out of Level 1 to allow for a separate mother and father variable at Level 2.

On average, mothers' level of couple relationship satisfaction decreased by 1.64 points per year. On average, fathers' level of couple relationship satisfaction decreased by 2.01 points by per year. Father level of BAP was associated with a lower intercept level of couple relationship satisfaction in both mothers and fathers. Household income was associated with a greater decline in mothers' level of couple relationship.

## Conclusions & Implications

- Thus, parents of children with ASD, on average, become more dissatisfied with their couple relationship over time. This change is stronger in fathers than mothers. Despite decline in couple relationship satisfaction, the majority of couples do not fall into the distressed range.
- Family support services should consider these patterns in terms of directing resources to families that may be most at risk for couple relationship problems.
- There may be a need to work with couples for whom men have a high level of BAP, as these couples were at greater risk for feeling dissatisfied in their couple relationship.
- Given difficulties with social and emotional communication seen in BAP, it may be important to help couples learn ways to explicitly communicate feelings and preferences.
- Future research should examine subgroup trajectories.

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