Girls vs. Boys with Autism: Differences in the Parent-Child Relationship Quality

Theresa Schinkowitch¹, Jessie Greenlee, Ph.D.¹, Geovanna Rodriguez, Ph.D.², & Sigan Hartley, Ph.D.¹

¹Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin – Madison
²University of Oregon

INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by impairments in social communication and repetitive/restrictive interests that affects in 1 in 54 children in the U.S.¹

Substantial research indicates that the parent-child (p-c) relationship is crucial in shaping child development².

Most research on the p-c relationship in ASD has focused on the mother-child relationship, with little known about the father-child relationship. In non-ASD samples, important mother-father differences have been found in p-c interactions³.

In the context of ASD, little is known about how child sex or child ASD symptom severity impact p-c interactions.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of this study was to evaluate potential differences between boys vs. girls in observed p-c interactions with mothers and fathers.

METHOD

Data came from a larger, longitudinal study of families with a child with ASD. Families of girls with ASD were matched with families of boys with ASD based on child age and child intellectual disability status.

Participants:
- 22 children [5 to 18 years; Mean age 10.77(4.53)] with ASD and both parents.
- All parents were Non-Hispanic, White and 74% had college education.
- Median household income was $80-89K.

Procedure:
- Mothers and fathers separately engaged in a 7-minute, videotaped interaction with their child.
- Interaction involved a goal-directed task (e.g., puzzle or Lego set).
- 15% of videos were coded by two observers to establish interrater reliability (ICC range = 0.84-0.96).

P-C Interaction Coding:

Videos were coded on parent, child, and dyadic variables, on a scale of 1 to 5 using the Parent Child Interaction Rating Scale⁴, a well-established coding system.

- Parent variables: Positive Affect, Negative Affect, Intrusiveness, Sensitivity, *Detached, Stimulate Cognition
- Child variables: Positive Mood, Negative Mood, Lively/Active, Sociability, Sustained Attention, *Demandingness
- Dyadic Variables: *Conflict, Pleasure
- No variability in coded behavior, was not included in analysis

RESULTS

- 2x2 ANOVAs conducted in SPSS 26 to test differences in p-c interactions by parent and child sex. Follow-up simple main effects used to determine the nature of differences.

- No significant main effects of parent (mother v. father) or child sex (girl v. boy).

Table 1. Marginal means for all study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coded Variable</th>
<th>MOTHER</th>
<th>FATHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Positive Affect</td>
<td>3.54(3)</td>
<td>4.00(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Negative Affect</td>
<td>1.09(0)</td>
<td>1.00(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>4.36(18)</td>
<td>4.82(18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrusiveness</td>
<td>1.91(26)</td>
<td>1.18(26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate Cognition</td>
<td>3.82(29)</td>
<td>3.64(29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic Pleasure</td>
<td>2.00(39)</td>
<td>2.09(39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Positive Mood</td>
<td>2.91(37)</td>
<td>2.64(37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Negative Mood</td>
<td>1.18(13)</td>
<td>1.09(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Lively Active</td>
<td>3.09(19)</td>
<td>3.09(19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociability</td>
<td>3.18(32)</td>
<td>3.00(32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustained Attention</td>
<td>4.45(26)</td>
<td>4.82(26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Significant parent X child sex interactions for parent sensitivity [F(1, 43) = 10.432, p = .002].

- Trend-level parent x child sex interaction for parent intrusiveness [F(1, 43) = 3.667, p = .06] and child sustained attention [F(1, 43) = 3.559, p = .06].

CONCLUSIONS

- Findings indicate some differences in the ways mothers and fathers interact with their boys vs. girls with ASD.
- Mothers were more sensitive towards sons than fathers in this study, which has also been found in non-ASD samples.
- Other differences may exist, but not detected due to sample size.
- Future research should incorporate a more diverse sample.

REFERENCES