

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

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Funding by NIH (R01 MH0091 and U54 HD090256).

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 Scale⁵, 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

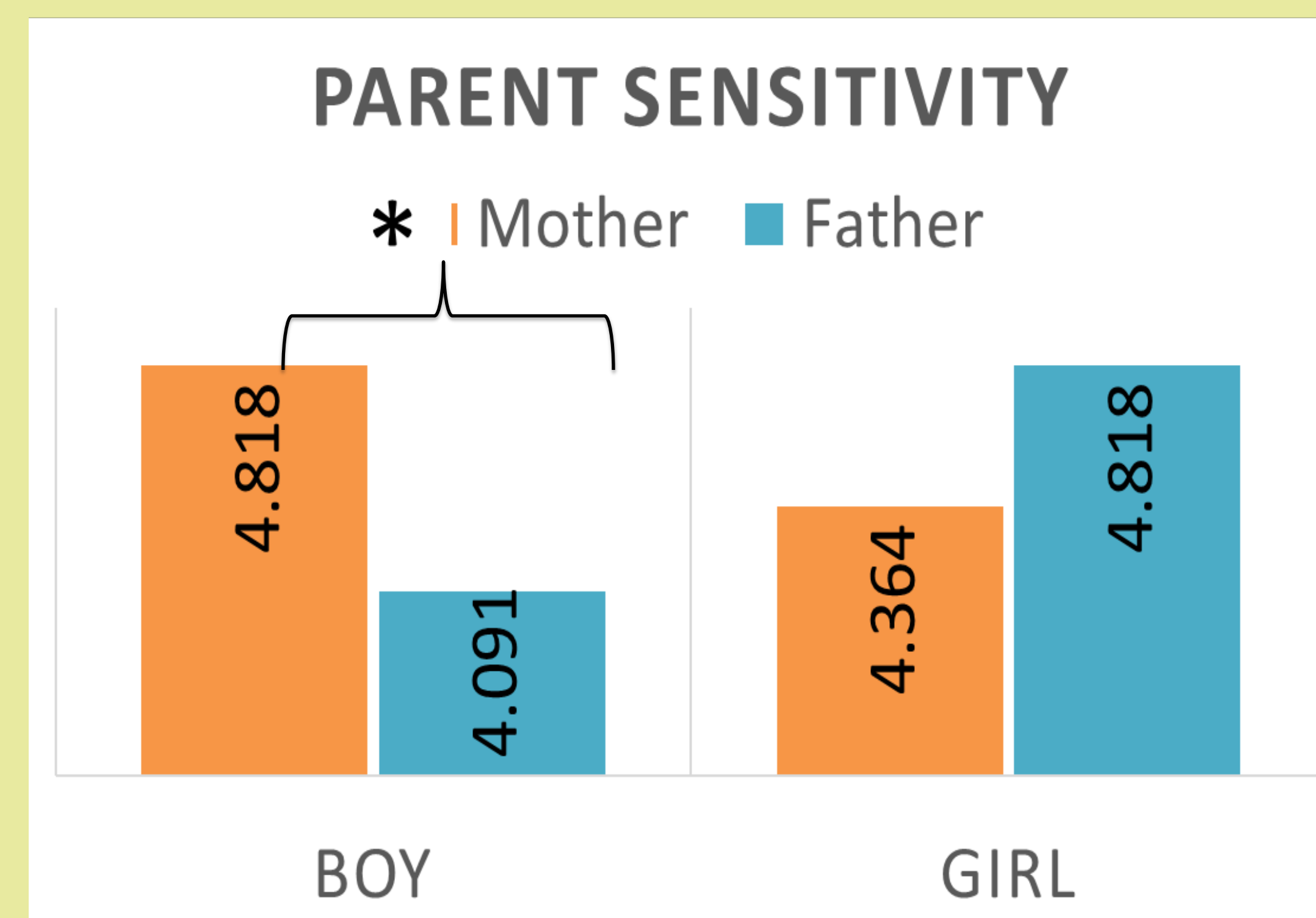
RESULTS

- 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

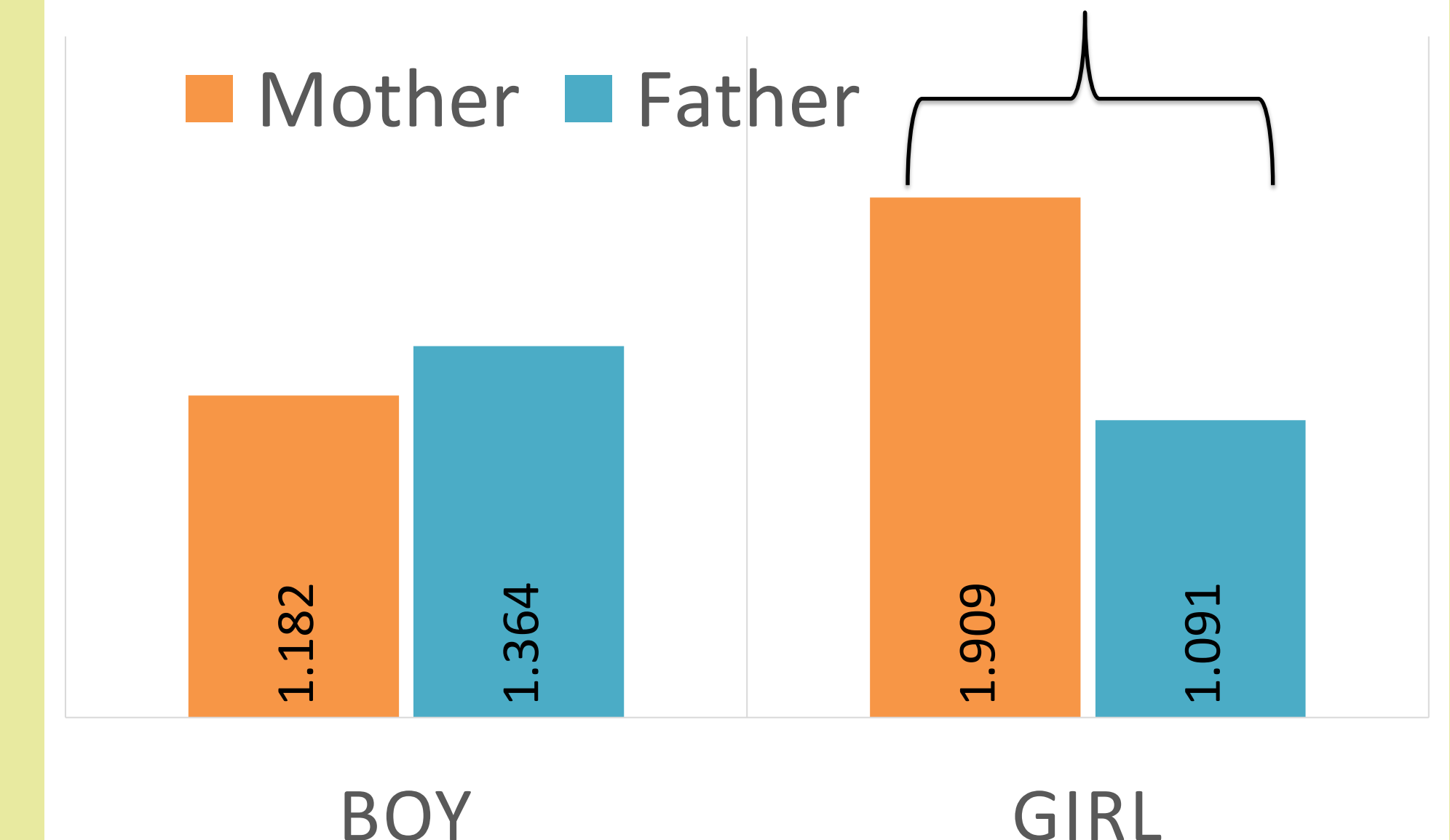
Coded Variable	MOTHER		FATHER	
	Girl (M, SD)	Boy (M, SD)	Girl (M, SD)	Boy (M, SD)
Parent Positive Affect	3.54(.33)	4.00(.33)	4.00(.33)	3.45(.33)
Parent Negative Affect	1.09(.08)	1.00(.08)	1.00(.08)	1.18(.08)
Sensitivity	4.36(.18)	4.82(.18)	4.82(.18)	4.09(.18)
Intrusiveness	1.91(.26)	1.18(.26)	1.09(.26)	1.36(.26)
Stimulate Cognition	3.82(.29)	3.64(.29)	3.73(.29)	3.27(.29)
Dyadic Pleasure	2.00(.39)	2.09(.39)	1.73(.39)	1.91(.39)
Child Positive Mood	2.91(.37)	2.64(.37)	3.00(.37)	2.54(.37)
Child Negative Mood	1.18(.13)	1.09(.13)	1.18(.13)	1.18(.13)
Child Lively Active	3.09(.19)	3.09(.19)	3.00(.19)	3.27(.19)
Sociability	3.18(.32)	3.00(.32)	3.54(.32)	3.00(.32)
Sustained Attention	4.45(.26)	4.82(.26)	4.64(.26)	4.00(.26)

- 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** [$F(1, 43) = 3.559, p = .06$].



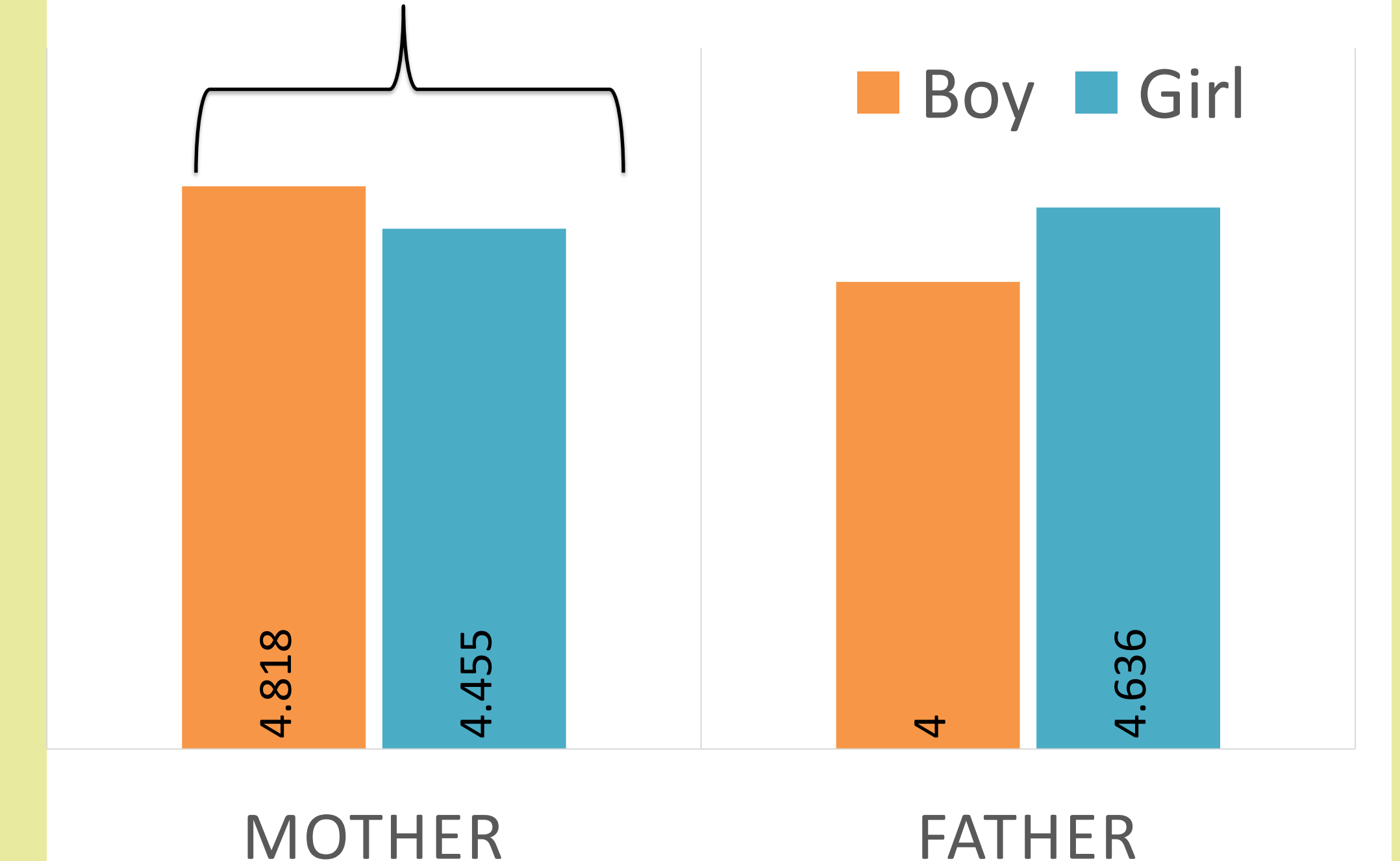
Mothers were more sensitive than fathers to sons ($M_{diff} = 0.73, p = .008$).

PARENT INTRUSIVENESS



Mothers more intrusive with daughters than fathers ($M_{diff} = 0.82, p = .04$).

CHILD SUSTAINED ATTENTION



Boys more sustained attention with mothers than fathers ($M_{diff} = 0.82, p = .04$).

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.

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