Parenting stress in autism: Associations with specific behavioral characteristics and significant reductions in stress over time

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ABSTRACT

Research shows parents of children with autism experience high levels of parenting stress. Specifically, higher maladaptive behaviors (e.g., disruptive or hyperactive behavior) common to children with autism and lower adaptive skills (e.g., self-care and communication skills) are associated with higher levels of stress. The present study examines current findings by investigating how specific child characteristics are correlated with parental stress and further explores the reduction of parental stress following three years of intensive treatment using Applied Behavior Analysis. Seventy-four percent of the sample reported significantly elevated levels of stress, which negatively correlated with low levels of several adaptive skills.

INTRODUCTION

Background & Significance. Research shows parents of children with autism experience high levels of parenting stress (Koegel, et al., 1992; Estes, et al., 2009; Tomanik, Harris, & Hawkins, 2004). In a study by Tomanik et al. (2004), mothers of children with autism obtained clinically significant scores on a parenting stress measure. Mothers of children with autism display higher levels of parenting stress and psychological distress than mothers of children with other disabilities (Estes et al., 2009).

Maladaptive behaviors common to children with autism are associated with higher levels of parenting stress or anxiety (Toman, et al., 2005). Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, (2000); Estes, et al., (2009); Hastings, (2003). Tomanik et al. (2004) found irritability/agitation (e.g., disruptive behavior), lethargy/social withdrawal, and hyperactivity/noncompliance to be significantly related to maternal distress. In addition, Lecavalier et al. (2000) found conduct problems and disruptive, maladaptive behaviors are more strongly associated with parental stress than other child and caregiver characteristics.

Research also suggests lower adaptive skills in children with autism are associated with higher levels of parenting stress (Tomanik, et al., 2004, Davis & Carter, 2008). Tomanik et al. (2004) found mothers experienced greater stress when their child displayed poor self-care, communication, and interaction skills. Davis and Carter (2008) showed deficits in the social skills of toddlers with autism were associated with stress in both parents. Children’s difficulty with self-regulation skills (e.g., eating, sleeping, and emotion regulation) is associated with greater levels of maternal stress.

METHOD

Participants

Data was collected from 27 caregivers and their children that attend The Vista School. The Vista School is a day school which provides educational and therapeutic programs for children diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. See Tables 1 and 2 for other descriptive statistics. All participants received six hours of education and treatment a day, following along a typical school calendar (included fine work in the summer).

HYPOTHESES

1. Self-report of parenting stress and child’s measured adaptive behavior skills will be significantly and negatively correlated. Self-report of parenting stress and child’s measured maladaptive behavior skills will be significantly and positively correlated.

2. Self-report of parenting stress will significantly decrease over a three-year time period.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 was tested using correlations to explore the relationship between self-reported parenting stress levels using the PSI-SS and child characteristics as reported by parents, teachers, and mental health professionals using the VABS-II and the BPI-05. Hypothesis 2 was tested using oneway analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the scores of parenting stress over the past three years.

Hypothesis 1: Associations between parenting stress, adaptive behavior, and maladaptive behavior. Using Pearson correlations, authors calculated several significant negative relationships between the PSI-SSF and VABS-II scores. Parental Distress was negatively correlated with participants’ domestic, coping, and socialization skills. Total stress was negatively correlated with interpersonal, play and leisure, and coping skills. Additionally, a positive correlation existed between Parental Distress and the severity of aggressive/destructive behavior as measured by the BPI-05. See Table 3.

Hypothesis 2: Parenting stress scores over a three-year time period. Analyses found that over time parenting stress was significantly decreasing in the Total Stress and Difficult Child subscales. Parent comparisons noted using dependent samples t-tests determined the significant change occurred between the first and third years. See Table 4.

ASSOCATED REFERENCES


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