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Siblings of children with autism: Predictors of adjustment

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ABSTRACT

As the prevalence of autism increases, so does the need to examine the effects of autism on family members of children with autism. The current study evaluated possible predictors of adjustment in siblings of children with autism. Aspects of the parents' functioning as caregivers for a child with autism were examined to determine whether they predicted the adjustment of the child's sibling. Two hundred caregivers of 4–10-year-old children with autism who had at least one sibling without autism participated by filling out questionnaires online. Parental satisfaction with the role of caregiver for the child with autism was negatively correlated with difficulties in sibling adjustment, and it was the only significant predictor of sibling adjustment in a hierarchical regression analysis. Parental stress and parental self-efficacy were not unique contributors to sibling adjustment when other parental variables were considered. No significant relationship was found between parental therapy involvement and sibling adjustment, or between parental educational involvement and sibling adjustment. The lack of parental involvement as a predictor of sibling adjustment adds new findings to the current literature, which had found such a relationship in a previous study with a smaller sample.

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1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of disorders characterized by impairments in social skills and communication, and are often accompanied by repetitive and ritualistic behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Matson, Dempsey & Fodstad, 2009). In addition, cognitive deficits and challenging or unusual behaviors such as self-injury, difficulty with changes in routines, aggression, and characteristics such as sensitivity to sensory stimuli are often present in individuals with ASDs (Matson, Wilkins, & Gonzalez, 2007). The estimated prevalence of ASDs (referred to in this paper as autism) has been increasing in recent years, with an average prevalence rate of 1 in every 88 children reported in 2008 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). As the prevalence of autism increases, so does the need to evaluate the difficulties families face living with a child affected by autism. In this study, we examine the adjustment of siblings of children with autism and identify possible predictors of siblings' adjustment. When using the term adjustment, we refer to the internalizing and externalizing behavior problems of the sibling of the child with autism.

Previous research findings on the effects of autism on sibling adjustment are mixed; it has been shown that siblings are affected both positively (Pilowsky, Yirmiya, Doppelt, Gross-Tsur, & Shalev, 2004) and negatively (Ross & Cuskelly, 2006) by having a brother or sister with autism. Giallo and Gavidia-Payne (2006) found siblings of children with

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developmental delays to have significantly higher overall adjustment difficulties, emotional symptoms, and peer problems and lower pro-social behavior compared to normative levels. Similarly, [Ross and Cuskelly \(2006\)](#) found siblings of children with autism to be at increased risk for internalizing behavior problems. On the other hand, [Pilowsky et al. \(2004\)](#) found that, when measuring the social skills and behavior problems of siblings of children with autism, the siblings were overall well adjusted when compared to a normative sample and a sample of siblings with other diagnoses. In addition, [Kaminsky and Dewey \(2002\)](#) found the siblings of children with autism to be well adjusted, with similar levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems when compared to siblings of children with Down syndrome and a normative sample.

Raising a child with autism or another developmental disability is often stressful for parents and can affect sibling adjustment as well. [Hoffman, Sweeney, Hodge, Lopez-Wagner and Looney \(2009\)](#) found parental stress to be higher among mothers of children with autism compared to both mothers of typical children and mothers of children with developmental delays. Children with an intellectual disability often have higher levels of behavior problems than children without an intellectual disability ([Baker et al., 2003](#)). When examining child-related stress in parents of a child with an intellectual disability, [Baker et al. \(2003\)](#) found child behavior problems contributed to increased parental stress a year later. Similarly, [Keen, Couzens, Muspratt, and Rodger \(2010\)](#) found that parents of children with autism reported high levels of child-related stress and indicated that children with autism displayed qualities that they found challenging, such as demanding behaviors and distractibility. Parenting stress has been shown to be a strong predictor of sibling adjustment ([Giallo & Gavidia-Payne, 2006](#)). The adjustment of siblings of children with a disability was predicted better by levels of parent stress than the siblings' report of their own stress and coping ([Giallo & Gavidia-Payne, 2006](#)). Additionally, [Quintero and McIntyre \(2010\)](#) found that maternal parenting stress was significantly correlated with both teacher and parent report of adjustment in siblings of children with autism.

In addition to stress, parental competence in the role of caregiver has been related to behavior problems in children. [Johnston and Mash \(1989\)](#) describe parental self-efficacy as an instrumental dimension reflecting how much a parent feels capable and competent, familiar with the parenting role, and able to problem solve. Further, the authors define parental satisfaction as an affective dimension reflecting how much a parent feels frustrated, anxious, or poorly motivated as a parent. [Johnston and Mash \(1989\)](#) found that parental competence (parental self-efficacy and parental satisfaction combined) was negatively associated with internalizing and externalizing child behavior problems for mothers and fathers in a normative sample. [Sanders and Woolley \(2005\)](#) found that mothers of children with conduct problems who were seeking professional help with parenting reported lower levels of self-efficacy than mothers of a control (community) sample. [Hastings and Brown \(2002\)](#) established that self-efficacy in mothers of children with autism was negatively associated with child behavior problems in the child with autism as well.

Parents are often involved in the in-home therapy programs for children with autism, and they frequently assume the role of the therapist and directly provide therapy ([Hastings, 2003](#)). Studies suggest that having a parent involved in the intervention for the child with autism is related to increased parent self-efficacy and decreased parenting stress. For example, [Kuhn and Carter \(2006\)](#) found that when mothers of children with autism were actively involved in promoting their child's development, they reported higher levels of self-efficacy. [Solish and Perry \(2008\)](#) were the first to operationalize involvement and examine predictors associated with parental involvement in terms of parents of children with autism in intensive behavioral therapy settings. These authors found that parental self-efficacy was a strong predictor of parental involvement in the child's intensive behavioral intervention at home ([Solish and Perry, 2008](#)).

Studies have suggested that the family's role in therapy needs to be examined to assess any effects therapy may have on the siblings of the child with autism ([Hastings & Johnson, 2001](#); [Hastings & Symes, 2002](#)). [Benson and Karlof \(2008\)](#) examined several predictors of later adjustment in siblings of children with autism, including severity of symptoms in the child with autism, parenting stress, family climate, and parental involvement in the education and therapeutic services of the child with autism. The authors found that increased levels of parental involvement were associated with greater positive sibling adjustment ([Benson & Karlof, 2008](#)). By identifying predictors of sibling adjustment, proactive measures can be taken to prevent or counteract adjustment difficulties in the siblings of children with autism. For instance, professionals can offer support (e.g., sibling support groups, therapy referrals, access to resources) to enhance siblings' adjustment. In addition, if parents are aware that factors such as their own stress, satisfaction, and self-efficacy in caring for a child with autism may also influence the sibling's adjustment, they themselves can seek treatment for stress or change various aspects of their life to improve their functioning as a parent.

The current study evaluated whether aspects of parents' functioning as caregivers of a child with autism predicted the behavioral adjustment of siblings. Specifically, we investigated the relationship between parental stress, parental sense of competence (self-efficacy and satisfaction), and level of parental involvement with the child with autism in both the in-home therapy setting and in school setting, and overall sibling adjustment. Based on prior research, we hypothesized that the parent variables would contribute to predicting sibling adjustment. No studies to date have used the *Parental Sense Of Competence (PSOC)* ([Johnston & Mash, 1989](#)) scale to assess the effects of parental satisfaction and self-efficacy on siblings of children with autism; thus, this study provided an initial test of the instrument's usefulness in detecting relationships between these two dimensions of parental competence and sibling adjustment in this population. We expected that more positive levels of sibling adjustment would be predicted by higher levels of parental involvement in school and home therapy (for the child with autism), higher parental self-efficacy and satisfaction, and lower parental stress (with the child with autism).

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