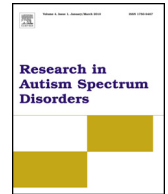


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# Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders

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## Parents on the autism continuum: Links with parenting efficacy



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### ABSTRACT

The extent to which parental traits of autism are related to parenting efficacy has yet to be explored. Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were studied in three groups: (a) families in which both the parent and the child had a DSM-IV-TR ASD diagnosis ( $n = 109$ ); (b) families in which only the child had a DSM-IV-TR ASD diagnosis ( $n = 128$ ); and (c) families in which no member had ASD ( $n = 109$ ). Each subject completed the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ) and a measure of parenting efficacy. Fathers with ASD had the lowest parental efficacy, but mothers with ASD had comparable levels of parental efficacy to parents without ASD in the family. Results suggest that screening and intervention to build fathers parental efficacy may be a useful adjunct to therapy.

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### 1. Parents on the autism continuum: self-perceived autistic traits and parenting efficacy

Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have consistently reported higher parenting stress than those with typically developing (TD) children and children with other developmental disorders, and the effect sizes are large (see Hayes & Watson, 2013 for a review). To date, high parental stress in ASD populations has been attributed to the child's ASD symptomatology (e.g., Estes et al., 2009; Hall & Graff, 2012; Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006; Tomanik, Harris, & Hawkins, 2004). Previous studies suggest that characteristics of ASD may exacerbate challenging behaviours in children (Kleinmans, Akshoomoff, & Delis, 2005; McCrimmon, Schwean, Saklofske, Montgomery, & Brady, 2012; Ozonoff, Pennington, & Rogers, 1991; Semrud-Clikeman, Walkowiak, Wilkinson, & Butcher, 2010), and that child behaviour problems are the most common reason for referral of children with ASD to mental health services (Mandell, Walrath, Manteuffel, Sgro, & Pinto-Martin, 2005). Demand characteristics in children may not only cause stress to parents, but also influence parental sense of competency (Abidin, 1992). Indeed, in the ASD population, higher levels of parental stress have been associated with parents' negative perceptions of their own care-giving abilities (e.g., Hastings & Brown, 2002; Kuhn & Carter, 2006; Tomanik et al., 2004). For instance, mothers of children with ASD report a lower sense of efficacy in parenting than mothers of TD children (Giallo, Wood, Jellett, & Porter, 2013; Meirsschaut, Roeyers, & Warreyn, 2011). Hastings and Brown (2002) found lower parenting efficacy in parents of children with ASD compared to those with TD children, and that parenting efficacy mediated the association of child misbehavior and paternal anxiety, and maternal anxiety and depression. Similarly, Kuhn and Carter

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(2006) reported a negative correlation between maternal sense of efficacy and parenting stress and depression among those raising children with ASD. Not only can perceived self-efficacy in parenting buffer the stress of child rearing on parental psychological well-being (Bloomfield & Kendall, 2012), it is found to be amenable to brief parent-focused intervention (Sofronoff & Farbotko, 2002). Thus, improving our understanding of the links between parenting efficacy and ASD characteristics in parents may service to improve therapies for families experiencing these challenges.

## 2. Gender effects related to parental stress

Research on the experience of parenting children with ASD has predominantly sampled mothers. Lee (2013) reviewed 28 empirical studies examining the well-being of mothers of children with developmental disorders. Only 13 of the 28 studies specifically included subjects diagnosed with ASD and the age of participating children was wide ranging (1.5–50 years of age). Comparison groups were diverse, including parents of TD children, children with Down syndrome, Fragile X Syndrome, and developmental delay. Despite the heterogeneous sample, results generally indicated that mothers of children with ASD reported significantly higher parenting stress and more depressive symptoms than controls, including those with children with other developmental disabilities. Parenting efficacy was not a feature of most of these studies with

**Table 1**  
Previous studies on parents of children with ASD using the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ).

Authors (year)	N (parents)	Gender distribution	Total AQ score	Significant Effect Child Diagnosis (in which subscales)	Significant effect parent gender (in which subscales)
<i>Kose et al. (2013)</i> <i>Turkish sample</i>	100 ASD	47 Fathers 53 Mothers	19.08 (4.4) 18.85 (6.5)	ASD > TDC (Social skills, communication)	Male = Female
	100 TDC	48 Fathers 53 Mothers	17.50 (4.8) 17.15 (5.7)		
<i>Ruta, Mazzone, Mazzone, Wheelwright, and Baron-Cohen (2012)</i> <i>Italian sample</i>	245 ASD	115 Fathers 130 Mothers	18.90 (9.16) 16.39 (7.30)	ASD > TDC  (Social skills, communication, imagination)	Male > Female  (Social skills, attention to details, communication, imagination)
	300 TDC	150 Fathers 150 Mothers	16.77 (4.61) 14.51 (5.17)		
<i>Mohammadi, Zarafshan, and Ghasempour (2012)</i> <i>Iranian sample</i>	204 ASD	96 Fathers 108 Mothers	23.43 (5.46) 20.75 (4.11)	ASD > TDC  (Attention switching, communication)	Male > Female  (Attention to details, communication, imagination)
	210 TDC	108 Fathers 102 Mothers	19.22 (2.13) 18.25 (3.13)		
<i>Wheelwright, Auyeung, Allison, and Baron-Cohen (2010)</i> <i>UK sample</i>	2000 ASD	571 Fathers 1429 Mothers	19.2 (9.5) 16.4 (9.5)	ASD > TDC  (Social skills, communication, imagination, attention switching)	Male > Female  (Social skills, attention switching, communication, imagination)
	1007 TDC	349 Fathers 658 Mothers	17.7 (6.9) 13.1 (6.3)		
<i>Scheeren and Stauder (2008)</i> <i>Netherlands sample</i>	25 ASD	13 Fathers 12 Mothers	102.6 (23.3) <sup>a</sup> 90.0 (13.9)	ASD > TDC (Attention to details)	Male > Female (Communication)
	25 TDC	13 Fathers 12 Mothers	96.1 (18.4) 100.8 (14.8)		
<i>Bishop et al. (2004)</i> <i>Australian sample</i>	121 ASD	52 Fathers 69 Mothers	18.10 13.80	ASD > TDC (Social skills, communication)	Male > Female (Social skills, communication, attention switching, imagination)
	89 TDC	37 Fathers 52 Mothers	16.13 13.17		

Note: ASD denotes parents of ASD; TDC denotes parents with typically developing children.

<sup>a</sup> Scored using 4-point Likert scale instead of the conventional scoring protocol proposed by Baron-Cohen et al. (2001).

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