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## Parenting dimensions in mothers and fathers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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### ABSTRACT

Rearing a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a unique challenge for both parents. Previous studies addressed how mothers are affected by the challenges of raising a child with ASD, mostly in terms of stress pattern. In this study, we focused on comparisons between mothers and fathers of children with ASD in parental stress, attitude and mental health. We examined 99 parents of children with ASD using the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form, the Parental Style Questionnaire, the Self-Perceptions of the Parental Role and the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised. The results revealed the gender differences in the parental attitude and mental health. Mothers reported that they engaged in more social behaviors with their children than fathers. In addition mothers reported higher level of depression than fathers. No difference among parents emerged in the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form. The results of a multiple regression analysis revealed that parenting distress is associated with depression, balance of parents' diverse roles in their life and dysfunctional interaction between parents and children. These findings highlight both similarities and differences between mothers and fathers of children with ASD and the existence of a relationship between parental stress, mental health and attitude. Results suggest the importance of developing specific intervention programs which incorporate these fundamental parenting domains.

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## 1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction and communication as well as the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These difficulties do not only affect the diagnosed people throughout their life, but also their parents who play salient and influential roles in child development (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012). Parenting an infant constitutes the initial and all-encompassing ecology of infant development (Bornstein, 2002) and it is a process which constitutes a key foundational component in the child's life. In addition, the birth of any child with special needs presents significant difficulties to the parents. Taking into account the characteristics of ASD, rearing a child with those developmental difficulties is an important and unique challenge for both mothers and fathers.

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In the last decade many studies have tended to focus on how parents are affected by the challenges of raising a child with ASD, particularly in terms of their stress (Baker-Ericzn, Brookman-Fraze, & Stahmer, 2005; Davis & Carter, 2008; Eisenhower, Baker, & Blacher, 2005; Hastings, 2003; Hoffman, Sweeney, Hodge, Lopez-Wagner, & Looney, 2009; Moes, Koegel, Schreibman, & Loos, 1992; Sharpley, Bitsika, & Efremidis, 1997; Tehee, Honan, & Hevey, 2009). However, far too little attention has been paid to other important domains of parenting, such as parental attitude which is the way parents behave, and mental health which describes a level of psychological well-being. In addition, there is a little discussion about fathers of children with ASD, even though fathers are important as mothers in children's development (Parke, 2002). In the present study, we aimed to examine the profiles of both mothers and fathers of children with ASD addressing parenting stress, parental mental health, and parental attitude. It is crucial to take parents into account in order to gain a better and deeper understanding of family dynamics of children with ASD, and to develop strategies to support both parents and children.

One of most frequently examined aspects of parenting is stress. In the past decade, a number of researchers have attempted to describe parenting stress (Crnic & Low, 2002; Deater-Deckard, 2004), as a set of processes that lead to aversive psychological and physiological reactions arising from attempts to adapt to the demands and it is often experienced as negative feelings toward and about the self and the child (Deater-Deckard, 2004). A variety of interacting variables contribute over time to parents' perception of stress, such as presence of challenging situations (Crnic & Low, 2002; Deater-Deckard, 2004). Considering the fact that ASD affects not only the world of a child, but also the parents' life, the child's disability which is a considerable challenging situation is a fundamental variable to take into account in the topic of parenting stress.

The majority of studies have focused on maternal stress, mostly comparison between mothers who are differentiated due to their children's conditions (e.g., existence of disability). Eisenhower and colleagues (2005) found that mothers of children with ASD demonstrated more parenting stress than mothers of children with Down syndrome, undifferentiated developmental delays, cerebral palsy and typical development. Similar results were obtained by Estes, Munson, Dawson, and Koehler (2009) in their comparison of mothers of children with ASD and children with developmental delay without autism. Hoffman and colleagues (2009) reported the difference also between mothers of children with ASD and mothers of typically developing children.

However, little attention has been specifically directed toward fathers (Flippin & Crais, 2011). In 1992, Rodrigue, Morgan, and Geffken (1992) suggested that fathers adapt relatively well to the demands associated with raising a child with a developmental disability. With respect to fathers of children with ASD, fathers as well as mothers, were found to have elevated stress compared to those of typically developing children (Baker-Ericzn et al., 2005; Rao & Beidel, 2009), however there is no general agreement in whether one of parents of children with ASD experience higher level of stress than other. Some studies reported that mothers were significantly more stressed and more involved than fathers (Moes et al., 1992; Sharpley et al., 1997; Tehee et al., 2009), other studies showed that mothers and fathers had similar stress levels (Davis & Carter, 2008; Hastings, 2003). Similar debate stands in the researches which focused on the comparisons between mothers and fathers of children with other disabilities or without disabilities (Baker, 1994; Beckman, 1991; Deater-Deckard, 2004; Perry, Sarlo-McGarvey, & Factor, 1992; Theule, Wiener, Tannock, & Jenkins, 2010). It is interesting to note that, although they had similar stress levels, fathers of children with ASD were mostly distressed by the child's externalizing problems, while mothers were more affected by the child's regulatory problems (Davis & Carter, 2008).

Although many studies of parenting a child with ASD have concentrated in parenting stress, also mental health and well-being of parents are an important domain of parenting. Mental health has been shown to have effects on parenting; compared to non-depressed woman, depressed mothers have been found to be more negative with their children from infancy through adolescence (Foster, Garber, & Durlak, 2008; Jacob & Johnson, 1997). Moreover, it has been pointed out that paternal and maternal depression were similarly associated with child adjustment problems and more impaired parent-child communication (Gottman & Wilson, 2002; Jacob & Johnson, 1997). In addition, well-being of adults and children alike is linked to the types and degrees of stressful circumstances that they face in their daily lives; those who experience more stressful events are more likely to suffer from depression and other problems in mental and physical health (see Deater-Deckard, 2004).

In terms of comparison between parents who are differentiated due to their children's conditions, researchers showed that parents of children with ASD demonstrated higher levels of mental health concerns than parents of typically developing children as well as children with other impairments such as intellectual disability (Gau et al., 2012; Karst & Van Hecke, 2012; Olsson & Hwang, 2001). However, there is no agreement in the existence of similarities or differences in the level of various psychopathologies between mothers and fathers of children with ASD. Some studies reported that mothers have higher levels of depression (Davis & Carter, 2008; Hastings et al., 2005; Olsson & Hwang, 2001) and anxiety (Hastings, 2003) than fathers, other studies found no differences in depression (Hastings, 2003).

Another well-known domain of parenting is parental attitude. All we know about parental attitudes toward rearing a child with ASD come from studies on parental beliefs and style. Parental belief is a perception about childrearing and an idea on which components parenting consists of. Specifically, beliefs are key aspects of parenting because they generate and organize parental behaviors and mediate the effectiveness of parenting and ultimately affect child development (Bornstein & Lansford, 2010; Bornstein & Venuti, 2013; Bornstein, 2002; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Senese, Bornstein, Haynes, Rossi, & Venuti, 2012). In terms of the different parents' beliefs, Melson, Ladd, and Hsu (1993) found that mothers who attributed difficulty in helping their children to attain specific qualities perceived more difficulty than did those mothers who made casual attributions to maternal characteristics or behavior. Crnic and Low (2002) suggested that this might be especially salient for children who have special needs.

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