Title: The Role of Mindful Parenting on Caregiver Stress and Depression in Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may display an array of externalizing problem behavior including aggression, non-compliance, and defiance. Such problem behaviors are associated with increased stress and depression in parents (e.g., Neece et al., 2014). There is a growing research base examining protective factors in parents, including mindfulness. Mindful parenting is defined as having a non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness of the parent-child interactions and relationships. Findings are mixed, with some reporting that mindful parenting mediates the relation between child problem behavior and parental stress and depression (e.g., Jones, Hastings, Totskia, Keane, & Rhule, 2014), while others have not found these relations (e.g., Beer, Ward, & Moar, 2013). The purpose of the current study is to further investigate the putative role of mindful parenting and test if mindful parenting mediates the relation between child problem behavior and psychological distress in families with children with ASD.

Method: This study was a part of a larger investigation that examined child, family, and community variables associated with early identification and intervention of ASD in the Pacific Northwest. Child and family data were collected through extensive in-person interviews with 75 families with a child ages 5 – 10 years old with ASD. Child problem behavior, caregiver stress and depression, and mindful parenting were measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Parenting Stress Index-Short Form 4th Edition (PSI-SF), Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), and the Bangor Mindful Parenting Scale (BMPS).

Results: Bivariate correlations were conducted to examine associations between child problem behavior, parental distress, depression, and mindful parenting. All associations were significant in the expected direction, with child conduct problems positively associated with stress and depression and mindful parenting negatively associated with stress and depression. In order to assess the proposed mediational models, a series of three regressions was employed to explore the basic assumptions regarding the relations among child conduct problems, parenting stress, and mindful parenting. A second series of regressions was used with depression as the dependent variable. After meeting the basic assumptions, mediation was tested through the use of a hierarchical linear regression analysis. After accounting for child conduct problems, mindful parenting had a direct effect on parenting stress (β = -.34, p = .001; overall R² = .32), but had an indirect effect on caregiver depression (β = -.49, p < .001; overall R² = .33).

Discussion: Mindful parenting was associated with lower reports of caregiver stress and depression. Findings suggest that mindful parenting mediated the relation between conduct problems and depression; however, mindful parenting had a direct effect on caregiver stress. Interventions that incorporate strategies to decrease child challenging behavior and increase mindful parenting may show positive outcomes for parent psychological health.

References/Citations:


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