Title: Factors Predicting Help Seeking Propensity in Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Introduction: Early diagnosis and intervention may confer an advantage for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Koegel et al 2014. Reichow 2012, Itzchak & Zachor 2011). These benefits are evident throughout the lifespan (Koegel et al 2014). One important factor in ensuring that children are identified and treated early is parents’ willingness and ability to seek help. While a number of studies have examined parent help-seeking retrospectively (e.g. Chakrabarti 2009, Al Anbar et al 2010), few have examined parents’ help-seeking propensity before their child has been diagnosed. The purpose of this study is to examine factors that contribute to ASD-related help-seeking propensity among parents of young children in the U.S.

Method: An online survey was distributed through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to parents (N=484) who had a child 2-years or younger without an ASD diagnosis. The following variables were examined based on their hypothesized relationships with help-seeking propensity: Stigma related to ASD, treatment attitudes, positive aspects, fear of disclosure and social support/provision. Structural equation modeling was utilized to predict relationships between the variables studied, and several established likert type scales were adapted by the research team to serve these ends.

Results: The study’s hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation implemented in Mplus statistical computing software (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2011). Results of the analysis indicated the data fit the model well: χ² (2) = 8.40, p = .02, SRMR = .02, CFI = .98. The model accounted for 33% of the variance in help seeking (R² = .33, p < .001) and 12% of the variance in attitudes toward treatment (R² = .12, p < .001). As hypothesized, attitudes toward treatment, social support, and positive aspects, were all positive predictors of help-seeking, as denoted by statistically significant path coefficients (β = .296, .242, and .119, respectively; p < .001). Also, as predicted, social support (β = .199, p < .001) and positive aspects (β = .153, p < .001) were positively associated with participants’ attitudes toward treatment. Contrary to our expectations, neither stigma nor fear of disclosure was significantly associated with help-seeking.

Discussion: These results can inform health education efforts to increase help-seeking among parents of young children in the U.S. Specifically, results suggest that help-seeking propensity may be increased when parents hold positive attitudes toward ASD treatment, have ample social support, and have positive, non-stigmatizing beliefs about ASD. Furthermore, findings indicate that attitudes toward treatment were predicted by higher levels of social support and positive beliefs about ASD. Future longitudinal and health research can confirm the direction and magnitude of these relationships.

Reference:

- Muthén & Muthén.
