Title: Parenting Styles and Associations with Child Behavior Problems in Parents of Children with and without ASD

Authors: Greta Goetz, Sigan Hartley

Introduction: Families who have a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience a uniquely stressful parenting context. Indeed, parents of children with ASD report higher levels of parenting stress compared to both parents who have a child without disabilities and parents who have a child with other types of disabilities (e.g., Estes et al., 2013). Little is known about how this heightened level of parenting stress influences parenting styles and/or how parenting styles are linked to the child with ASD’s level of behavior problems. According to Baumrind (1971), there are three main parenting styles - authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Research in the general population has found that authoritarian and permissive parenting styles are often related to maladaptive child outcomes, including higher levels of child behavior problems, whereas an authoritative parenting style is related to more adaptive child outcomes. However, whether these same patterns emerge in families of children with ASD is largely unknown. The specific aims of the current investigation are to: 1) determine if parenting styles differ between parents who have a child with ASD and parents who have a child without disabilities; and 2) examine whether parenting style is related to level of behavior problems in children with ASD.

Method: Analyses included 189 couples in longstanding relationships who have a child with ASD (5-12 years) and 186 couples who have a child without disabilities (5-12 years). Parents were 87.2% white, non-Hispanic, and 34.1% had a bachelor’s degree. Mean household income was $80,000-$89,000. Mothers and fathers individually reported on personal parenting style using the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 2001) and child behavior problems using the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000).

Results: ANCOVA analyses indicated that reported authoritarian (F (1, 362) = 3.83, p < 0.01) and permissive (F (1, 362) = 2.11, p = 0.04) parenting styles differed significantly between mothers who have a child with ASD and mothers who have a child without disabilities. Reported authoritarian (F (1, 358) = 3.83, p < 0.01) and permissive (F (1, 358) = 4.58, p = 0.01) parenting styles also differed significantly between fathers who have a child with ASD and fathers who have a child without disabilities. Multiple linear regressions indicated that child behavior problems were significantly positively associated with mother report of authoritarian (b = 0.10, p = 0.04), father report of authoritarian (b = 0.236, p = 0.04) and father report of permissive (b = 0.24, p < 0.01) parenting styles. Father report of authoritative parenting style was significantly negatively associated with child behavior problems (b = -0.14, p < 0.01). Additionally, group (ASD vs. comparison) moderated the association between mother report of authoritative parenting style and child behavior problems (b = -0.92, p = 0.02), and there was a trend for group to moderate the association between father report of authoritative parenting style and child behavior problems (b = -0.39, p = 0.08).

Discussion: Parents of children with ASD differed in their use of parenting styles compared to parents of children without disabilities. In both groups, higher levels of child behavior problems were associated with more authoritarian and permissive parenting styles. However, having a child with ASD appeared to moderate the use of an authoritative parenting style in mothers. Time-order pathways between parenting styles and child behavior problems need to be teased out in future studies. Findings have implications for family supports and interventions.

References/Citations: