Symposium Title: Co-parenting Relationships among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Chair: Robert Hock

Overview: Research suggests that the coparenting relationship, in which parents support, negotiate, and coordinate parenting of children (Feinberg, 2003) is an important contributor to the well-being of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their parents. This symposium presents findings from three different research teams examining coparenting dyads through three unique lenses. The first presentation examines the relationships between coparenting quality, mothers and fathers’ perceptions of the father’s role, and parent well-being. The second presentation provides valuable insight into mothers’ and fathers’ attributions about their child’s behavior. Similarities and differences in these beliefs play an important role in the agreement and supportiveness between coparents. The final presentation reports on the feasibility and acceptability of a new coparenting intervention for parents of children with ASD. Results suggest that parents perceived a coparenting focus as relevant to their needs, and that it was feasible to engage two parents in a peer-support intervention. The discussant, a national family support research expert, will draw connections between the three studies and consider implications for the family support agenda nationally.

Discussant: Sandra Magana

References/Citations:

Paper 1 of 3

Paper Title: The Coparenting Relationship and Well-Being of Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Authors: Megan M. Pruitt1, Lisa Timmons2, Naomi V. Ekas3

Introduction: Fathers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have been relatively neglected in research; however, recent research has investigated the quality of the coparenting relationship and its association with parental well-being (May, Fletcher, Dempsey, & Newman, 2015). Parents of children with ASD typically have lower levels of well-being and romantic relationship quality (Gau et al., 2012). However, a positive coparenting relationship beneficially impacts well-being (May et al., 2015). One factor that may influence the quality of the coparenting relationship are parental perceptions of the father’s role in raising his children (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). The purpose of this study was to examine associations between perceptions of the father’s role, coparenting relationship quality, and well-being in mothers and fathers of children with ASD.

Methods: Thirty-three cohabitating couples of a child with ASD (age 4–12) completed online questionnaires to assess perceptions of the role of the father (ROFQ), the quality of the coparenting relationship (CRS), depressive symptoms (CESD), and romantic relationship satisfaction (CSI).

Results: For fathers, coparenting closeness mediated the relationship between paternal perceptions of the role of the father and depressive symptoms (95% CI: -.69, -.01) and relationship satisfaction (95% CI: .05, 3.34). Greater perceptions of the role of the father were associated with greater coparenting closeness, $b = .07$, $SE = .04$, $p < .05$, which was associated with fewer depressive symptoms, $b = -.81$, $SE = 1.19$, $p < .05$, and higher romantic relationship satisfaction, $b = 15.72$, $SE = 2.75$, $p < .001$. For mothers, coparenting closeness also mediated the relationship between maternal perceptions of the role of the father and depressive symptoms (95% CI: -.92, -.08) and romantic relationship satisfaction (95% CI: .67, 3.26). The pattern of associations was similar to that for fathers.

Discussion: This study provides preliminary evidence that the coparenting relationship is associated with better individual well-being and better dyadic well-being. Although studies have yet to investigate the role of the father in the context of ASD, it

1 Texas Christian University
2 Texas Christian University
3 Texas Christian University
appears that both mothers and fathers believe that the father has an important role, which allows them to not only be closer as parents but also as a couple. Therefore, interventions could help enhance perceptions of a father’s role to encourage a positive coparenting relationship in order to benefit well-being.

References/Citations:

Paper 2 of 3

Title: Mother and Father Parental Attributions for Positive Behaviors in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Authors: Paige M. Bussanich, Sigan L. Hartley, Daniel Bolt

Introduction: There is substantial research on the negative behaviors of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In contrast there is a paucity of research on the positive behaviors of children with ASD. The present study examined parental attributions (i.e., beliefs about the cause) for the positive behavior of children with ASD compared to children without a neurodevelopmental disability from the perspectives of mothers and fathers in co-parenting partnerships.

Method: Analyses included 175 couples who had a child with ASD and a comparison group of 170 couples who had a child without a neurodevelopmental disability (aged 5-12 yrs). Mothers and fathers individually reported their parental attributions for a recent positive behavior by their child, along the dimensions of locus of control, stability, and controllability. Mothers and fathers also individually rated the child’s severity of ASD symptoms, overall level of negative behavior problems, and functional skills.

Results: Dyadic multilevel models using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) were conducted to account for the dependency in couple data and to examine group (parents of children with ASD vs. comparison group) differences in mother and father ratings of locus of control, stability, and controllability. There was a significant group effect for mothers and fathers on locus of control and stability; mothers and fathers in the comparison group rated their child’s positive behavior as caused by factors more internal to the child (b = -.62, SE = .12, p < .01, r = .27; b = -.58, SE = .11, p < .01, r = .27) and stable (b = -.44, SE = .13, p < .05, r = .18; b = -.40, SE = .11, p < .01, r = .19) than parents of children with ASD. There was also a significant group effect for mothers on controllability; mothers in the comparison group rated their child’s positive behavior as caused by factors more controllable by the child (b = -.49, SE = .11, p < .01, r = .23) than mothers of children with ASD. When all other variables were at their mean-level, the child with ASD’s age was significantly positively associated with ratings of locus of control (b = .13, SE = .05, p < .01, r = .19) and stability in mothers (b = .12, SE = .05, p < .05, r = .23). The child with ASD’s global level of negative behavior problems was significantly negatively associated with ratings of locus of control (b = -.04, SE = .02, p < .01, r = .19) in mothers. The child with ASD’s level of functional skills was significantly positively associated with ratings of stability (b = .01, SE = .01, p < .05, r = .15) in mothers. In fathers of children with ASD, there was a significant positive association between education level and ratings of controllability (b = .21, SE = .10, p < .05, r = .16).

Discussion: Overall, mothers and fathers of children with ASD were less likely to believe that their son or daughter’s positive behavior was due to factors internal to the child and stable than parents of children without neurodevelopmental disabilities. Mothers of children with ASD were also less likely to believe that their son or daughter could control their positive behavior than mothers of children without neurodevelopmental disabilities. Parents’ experience of positive child behaviors has important links with parent psychological well-being and the parent-child relationship. Findings offer insights for interventions aimed at fostering adaptive parental attributions in the context of ASD.
**Paper Title:** Feasibility and Acceptability of an Intervention to Strengthen Co-parent Relationships among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

**Authors:** Robert Hock, Nina Nelson, Katherine Wallace

**Introduction:** Recent research points to the value of the coparenting relationship as an intervention target for parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The value of a coparenting approach is supported by findings with ASD families that greater coparenting quality is associated with reduced parent stress (Boyd, 2002; May, Fletcher, Dempsey, & Newman, 2015) and lowered perception of child symptom severity (Hock & Ahmedani, 2012). Likewise, a conflicted coparenting relationship - exacerbated by the stresses of rearing a child with ASD - diminishes parents' ability to adhere to behavioral and medical treatments in the earliest years of a child’s life, when consistent and extensive treatment for children with ASD is crucial (Osborne et al., 2008). Yet despite its importance to parents and children, no ASD interventions explicitly target the coparenting relationship. To address this gap, we have created the Autism Parent Navigator (APM) program, which combines the core components of an evidence-based intervention (Family Foundations (Feinberg, Kan & Goslin, 2009)) with an innovative delivery mechanism (parent-to-parent support) to target coparenting relationships shortly after a child has been diagnosed with ASD. The aim of this study is to assess the feasibility and acceptability of this intervention approach.

**Methods:** We conducted a pilot-randomized controlled trial of APM in which coparent dyads were assigned to the PN condition (n=11) or the control condition where they received standard parent-to-parent support (n=8). Coparent dyads of children (ages 2-6) who had been diagnosed with ASD within the last year were recruited through diagnostic clinics and pediatricians. We measured acceptability through weekly feedback surveys and post-intervention phone interviews. Measures of feasibility included program completion rates, time to completion (# of weeks), and total intervention duration (in hours).

**Results:** With regard to acceptability, parents reported that the intervention sessions were very helpful (mean=4.59 on a Likert scale from 1 to 5). They also reported high levels of connection with their peer interventionist (mean=4.88), and that their ASD-related questions were answered (mean=4.5). During phone interviews, 90% of parents reported that the length and pace of the intervention was “just right” for them. Regarding feasibility, 90% of parents completed all sessions (two families dropped out). Families who completed the program took an average of 9.38 weeks (Range of 6-16 weeks) to complete all sessions. During this period, they spent 9.25 hours in the sessions. Participants also provided detailed feedback on the session activities and content, and provided helpful suggestions for improving program materials and processes.

**Discussion:** The APM program uses peer support staff to target coparent relationships in family homes. Results suggest that the program is feasible and acceptable to deliver to parents of newly diagnosed children with ASD. Fathers, mothers, and grandparents found the content helpful in meeting their needs. These findings provide support for relational focus, as well as the feasibility of engaging coparent teams in intervention. Results support the continued development and testing of the APM program.

**References:**