

Title: Marital Satisfaction and Child Outcomes in Families of a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Testing Indirect Effects through Parenting Styles

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Introduction: Within a family systems perspective, the marital or romantic couple relationship is often considered a cornerstone of family life, laying the groundwork for the functioning and well-being of other members and subsystem relationships in the family (Davies & Cicchetti, 2004). Theory and research on the general population suggests that parents' marital relationship quality is associated with children's emotional and behavioral functioning directly, as well as indirectly by affecting parenting attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Benson, Buehler, & Gerard, 2008; Parkes, Green, & Mitchell, 2019). Disruption and stress within the marital relationship is a major theme found across studies of couples who have a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Saini et al., 2015); however, little has been done to investigate the potential connection between parent marital satisfaction and parenting styles and outcomes for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Method: Using longitudinal data (three timepoints, ~ 12 months apart) collected from 188 couples parenting a child with ASD, this study tested the time-ordered indirect effect of parent marital satisfaction (assessed at Time 1) on the internalizing and externalizing problems (assessed at Time 3) of children with ASD (originally aged 5-12 years; 85.6% male) via parenting styles (assessed at Time 2). Mothers and fathers independently completed the Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007) at Time 1 and the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ; Robinson et al., 2001) at Time 2. The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, Rescorla & Maruish, 2004) was used to assess child internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

Results: Results of a series of mediation analyses using bias corrected bootstrapping via the PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013) for SPSS indicated that a lower level of marital satisfaction at Time 1 predicted impaired child outcomes at Time 3 via its impact on parenting style at Time 2. Specifically, for both mothers and fathers, lower marital satisfaction predicted more child externalizing problems via reports of more authoritarian parenting style. In addition, lower marital satisfaction predicted more child internalizing problems via reports of more authoritarian parenting style in mothers. The significant indirect effects remained significant after controlling for the child's baseline ASD, internalizing, and externalizing symptoms.

Discussion: The current study is one of the first longitudinal studies to assess the time-ordered effect of parents' marital satisfaction on parenting styles, and subsequently the emotional and behavioral problems of children with ASD. Findings highlight the need for family-wide services that include both mothers and fathers and support the marital relationship, along with ASD-specific programs that promote effective parenting practices. Given the high prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems in children with ASD (Hudson et al., 2019), understanding modifiable mechanisms that contribute to these problems and that could be targeted in interventions, is of critical importance to the field of ASD.

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