



Disruptive Behaviour in Children with Autism and STRESS in their Families

by Colleen Mousseau

Ask any family you know that has a family member with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) if they have ever experienced high levels of stress. Ask them if their family member with ASD has ever behaved in a disruptive manner. Chances are that their answers will be similar. Recent research has highlighted a correlation between levels of maladaptive behaviour in children with ASD and levels of stress in their parents. Generally, children with ASD who show high levels of disruptive behaviour have parents with high levels of stress. On the other hand, children with ASD who do not exhibit high amounts of disruptive behaviour have parents who are not experiencing as high levels of stress as the parents of more disruptive children with ASD.

Based on previous literature outlining the relationship between parental stress and child behaviour, this study intended to determine what causes what. Are high levels of disruptive behaviour causing parents high levels of stress? Or, is it that parents who experience high levels of stress cause their child with ASD to have bad behaviour? In order to answer these questions, series of data needed to be collected over a sufficient time period to identify which variable comes first—the disruptive behaviour in children with ASD or the high levels of stress in their parents.

This study followed 63 children with ASD and their families over a period of 13 years. Data was collected at five points as the children were growing up; the first phase when the children were between 4 and 6 years old, the second between ages 7 and 9, the third between 11 and 13, the fourth between 14 and 16 and lastly between 16 and 19 years old. At each point, assessments of the child's levels of maladaptive behaviour and parental stress were taken. Maladaptive behaviours are those that interrupt everyday activities—trouble following rules, for example, or refusing to go to school, frequent disagreements, etc. Parental stress was measured by both the amount of stress parents felt as a direct result of their child with ASD and the amount of stress they felt from external sources such as their job, social life and personal health.

So, what was found? Overall, the children in this study exhibited higher levels of maladaptive behaviours than the typical average. The parents in this study had only slightly higher than average levels of stress. The relationship between child behaviour and parent stress appears to be stable through child and adolescent development. It appears that children with ASD do not have dramatic changes in their behaviour between the ages of 5 and 18.

And finally, to answer the motivating question behind this project: Do high levels of parent stress during childhood result

in high levels of disruptive behaviour in adolescence? The answer is no! Parent stress levels at the first three stages were not found to predict behavioural problems during adolescence (the fourth and fifth data collection periods). See Figure 1 below for a visual. Therefore, maladaptive behaviour in children and teens with ASD cannot be accounted for by highly stressed parents. It appears that the stresses in these parents' lives are coming not only from their child with ASD but from other factors as well—feelings of incompetence, isolation, attachment to their child, their own health and spousal support.

To sum it all up, parents of children with ASD can relax!

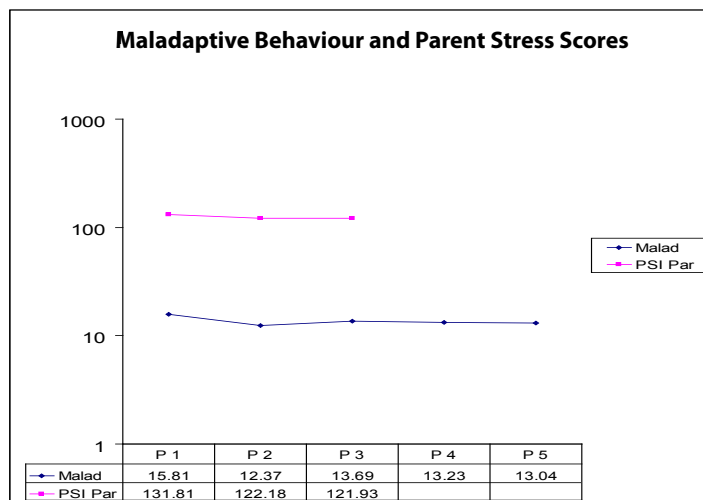


Figure 1: Parent Stress Levels measured against Maladaptive Behaviour (Malad = level of maladaptive behavior; PSI Par = level of parental stress)

Their feelings of stress appear to be normal and do not seem to influence the behaviours in their children with ASD. Hopefully this news is a relief for parents who have a child with ASD. Previous research indicates that parents of children with ASD have extremely high levels of stress—even higher than parents of children with other developmental disabilities such as Down's Syndrome. It is reassuring to know then, that these relatively high levels of stress do not have a dramatic impact on the child's development.

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