

BRIEF REPORT: Parent Empowerment and Mental Health: Understanding Parent Perceptions of the Educational Experience

Abstract

Parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are important partners with schools in ensuring effective education, and it is important to examine the factors that influence parent perceptions of their children's educational experience. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relations among parent empowerment, parent mental health, and perceptions of children's educational experience in 176 parents of children with ASD. Parent empowerment and mental health were found to be significant predictors of parents' perceptions of their child's educational experience. The importance of understanding constructs such as empowerment and mental health and how they relate to school satisfaction is discussed.

Most children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) enter the education system and receive services through their school districts (Bitterman, Daley, Misra, Carlson, & Markowitz, 2008). Even though parents are important partners in developing effective educational supports for their children, parents often report being dissatisfied with the services that schools provide (Bitterman et al., 2008), and it is important to understand the factors that influence parent perceptions of the educational experience.

Parent empowerment and mental health represent two factors that may influence parent perceptions of the educational experience. Empowerment is defined as "an intentional, ongoing process...through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989, p.2), implying an ability to work with a system of supports (such as school supports) in an effective manner. Previous research indicates that parent empowerment is related to better outcomes in families. For example, Scheel and Rieckmann (1998) examined empowerment in parents of pre-school aged children receiving treatment from a counseling agency and found that greater empowerment was associated with better family functioning and reduced parent stress. Parent mental health is another factor that may influence parents' perceptions of their child's educational experience. Research consistently indicates that mothers of children with ASD experience considerable stress and mental health problems compared to mothers of typically developing children and children with other forms of disabilities (Baker-Ericzen, Brookman-Frazee, & Stahmer, 2005; Bouma & Schweitzer, 1990). In turn, stress and mental health issues have been linked to poorer satisfaction with life among mothers of children with Down Syndrome (Sloper, Knussen, Turner, & Cunningham, 1991).

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The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relations among parent empowerment, parent mental health, and parent perceptions of their child's educational experience. It was hypothesized that parents' perceptions of their child's educational experience would be positively correlated with parent empowerment and negatively correlated with parent mental health problems. It was also hypothesized that empowerment and mental health would be independent predictors of parents' perceptions of their child's educational experience.

Method

Participants

Participants included 176 parents (159 mothers, 17 fathers) of children diagnosed with ASD aged 4-20 years (150 boys and 26 girls; $M = 11.5$, $SD = 3.6$). Children's diagnoses included Asperger syndrome (50%), high functioning autism (15%), PDD-NOS (13%) and autism (20%; 2% were missing). Approximately 46% of families had a total income of at least \$81,000 before taxes.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through several Canadian Asperger and Autism advocacy websites and newsletters (e.g., Autism Ontario, Asperger Society of Ontario). Participants gave informed consent before completing online or paper-and-pencil surveys. Ethics approval for this project was received through York University.

Measures

Socio-economic Status (SES). SES was measured by asking participants to indicate their total household income using various levels of income brackets as response options.

Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version (AQ-C; Auyeung, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Allison, 2008). The AQ-C is a 50-item parent-report questionnaire that assesses symptoms of autism in children. The questionnaire consists of five different subscales including social skills, attention switching, attention to detail, communication, and imagination. Internal consistency is reportedly high for the questionnaire as a whole ($\alpha = 0.97$) and for each of the five subscales (rang-

ing from 0.83 to 0.92). The measure also has excellent test-retest reliability (Auyeung et al., 2008).

Family Empowerment Scale (FES; Koren, DeChillo, & Friesen, 1992). The FES is a parent-report measure that assesses empowerment at three different levels: family, service system and community/political. The current study focuses on the family level, which assesses the family's ability to handle day-to-day situations. The measure also assesses three different expressions of empowerment at each of the levels: attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours. The family subscale consists of 12 items (four items for each of the three expressions of empowerment) with responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *very untrue* (1) to *very true* (5). The family subscale is reported to have high internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$) and strong test-retest reliability ($r = .83$; Koren et al., 1992).

Kessler 6 (K6; Kessler et al., 2002). The K6 is a six-question screening scale of psychological distress. The measure includes items that ask about feelings of depression, hopelessness, and guilt. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *all the time* (0) to *none of the time* (4). The scale has been shown to discriminate between community cases and non-cases of DSM-IV disorders with high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.89$; Kessler et al., 2002).

Parent Perception Measure (PPM; Lauderdale & Blacher, 2008; Lauderdale, Howell, & Kaladjian, 2009). The PPM is a 55-item parent-report questionnaire that assesses parents' perceptions of their child's school experience. The measure consists of six different subscales: School Communication, Child's School Experience, Child Socialization, Positive Aspects of School/Happiness, Child Relationship with Teacher, and Family and School. The subscales have high internal reliability (α coefficients range from 0.70 to 0.96; Lauderdale & Blacher, 2008; Lauderdale et al., 2009).

Results

Correlations

Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were conducted to examine the zero order associations between the PPM subscales and parent empowerment and mental health (see

Table 1). All of the PPM subscales were significantly positively correlated with empowerment, except for Child Socialization. Three of the PPM subscales were significantly negatively correlated with parent mental health: School communication, Child's School Experience, and Child Relationship with Teacher.

Simultaneous Regressions

Child age, child gender, SES, ASD symptoms, parent empowerment, and parent mental health problems were simultaneously entered into a standard regression model to predict total scores on each of the PPM subscales (see Table 2). After controlling for age, gender, SES, and ASD symptoms, parent empowerment significantly predicted School Communication, Positive Aspects of School/Happiness, Child Relationship with Teacher, and Family and School ($p < .05$). More parent mental health problems were a significant predictor of less satisfaction with the Child's School Experience and with the Child's Relationship with Teacher, but more involved Family and School relationships. Child age, SES, and ASD symptoms were also significant predictors of some of the PPM subscales.

Discussion

The results from this study indicate that parent empowerment and mental health are linked to parents' perceptions of their child's educational experience. Child age, SES, and ASD symptoms also appeared to influence parents' perceptions of specific aspects of their child's educational experience.

Among parents, higher levels of empowerment were associated with more positive perceptions of how well the school communicates with them, the quality of their child's relationship with his or her teacher, the involvement of the family in the school, and their child's happiness. The greater a parents' mental health problems, the less they were satisfied with their child's experience at school, and with their child's relationship to his or her teacher. In addition, the greater the parents' mental health problems, the more likely they were to be involved with the school system.

The findings support the hypothesis that fostering parent empowerment and addressing mental health issues in parents could lead to improved satisfaction with their child's educational experience. However, this is cross-sectional research and the reported relations are likely bi-directional, since a more positive school environment likely impacts parents' sense of empowerment and mental health, and parents who are more psychologically healthy are likely able to engender more positive school experiences. Another limitation of the study is that only one informant per child completed the measures of the child's educational experience.

Future research is needed to include measures completed by teachers and/or another informant, and to follow-up with families over time. Future research could also examine other factors that might impact parents' perceptions of their child's educational experience, such as the severity of ASD symptoms. Overall, mental health issues and empowerment are important constructs to consider when examining parents' perceptions of their child's educational experience.

Table 1. Correlations between PPM Subscales and Empowerment and Parent Mental Health Problems

Subscales	Empowerment	Parental Mental Health Problems
School Communication	.33**	-.25**
Child's School Experience	.16*	-.27**
Child Socialization	.02	-.04
Positive Aspects of School/Happiness	.23**	-.12
Child Relationship with Teacher	.33**	-.23**
Family and School	.26**	.05

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting PPM Subscales

Variable	School Communication		Child's School Experience		Child Socialization		Positive Aspects of School/Happiness		Child Relationship with Teacher		Family and School	
	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Child age	-.19	.02	.04	.61	-.23	.004	.06	.43	-.09	.24	-.32	<.001
Child gender	.05	.52	-.08	.33	.00	.96	.02	.84	.02	.82	.01	.93
SES	.07	.37	-.12	.14	.10	.21	.15	.06	-.16	.04	.01	.89
ASD Symptoms	.01	.93	.01	.86	-.22	.006	-.25	.002	.05	.51	.14	.07
Empowerment	.28	.001	.09	.26	.06	.48	.25	.002	.28	.001	.29	<.001
Parent Mental Health Problems	-.15	.07	-.27	.002	-.02	.82	-.05	.54	-.17	.05	.17	.04
R ²	.18		.11		.12		.14		.17		.20	
F for overall model	5.25	<.001	3.02	<.01	3.15	<.01	4.03	<.01	4.91	<.001	6.07	<.001

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