

BACKGROUND

- Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) report more mental health difficulties than parents of typically developing children or children with other disabilities.
- The early childhood period is rife with stressors as parents adjust to the diagnosis and seek out appropriate services. The presence of challenging behavior and emotional difficulties (CBED), which frequently co-occur with ASD, can compound and interact with parents' difficulties.

OBJECTIVES

- Examine parenting stress and family quality of life in mothers of children recently diagnosed with ASD (prior to receiving early intervention)

METHOD

Participants

- 218 mothers of children with ASD (83% male, $M = 4.3$ years, $SD = 1.1$) participated in the study on average 5 months after receiving a diagnosis for their child.

Child Variables

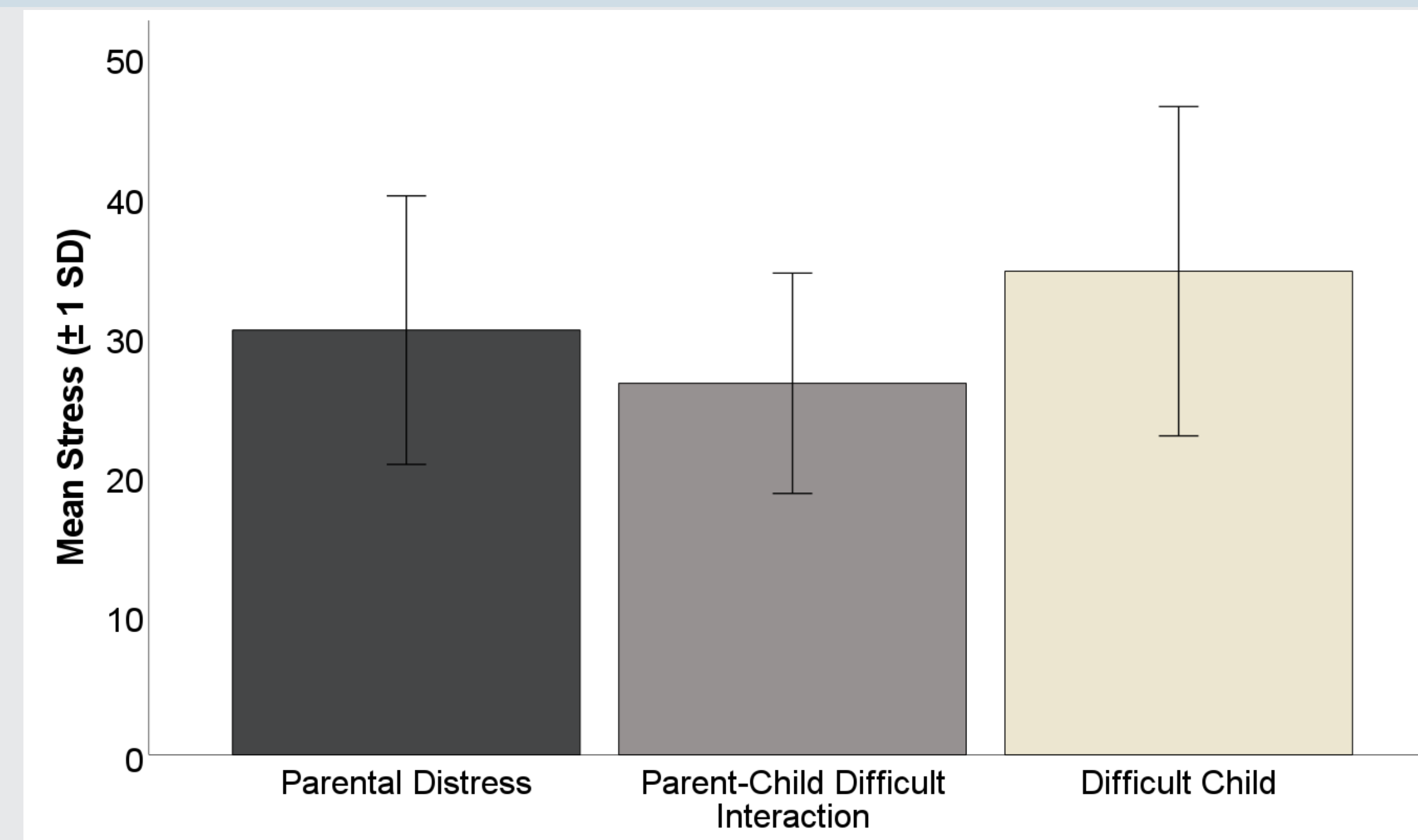
- Autism symptom severity: Childhood Autism Rating Scale Intellectual functioning: Weschler, Bayley, or Leiter Scales
- Adaptive behavior: Adaptive Behavior Assessment System by mother (M) and daycare educator (E)
- CBED: Child Behavior Checklist (M) and Caregiver Teacher Report Form (E)

Mother Variables

- Parenting Stress Index
- Beach Center Family Quality of Life (FQOL) Scale

RESULTS

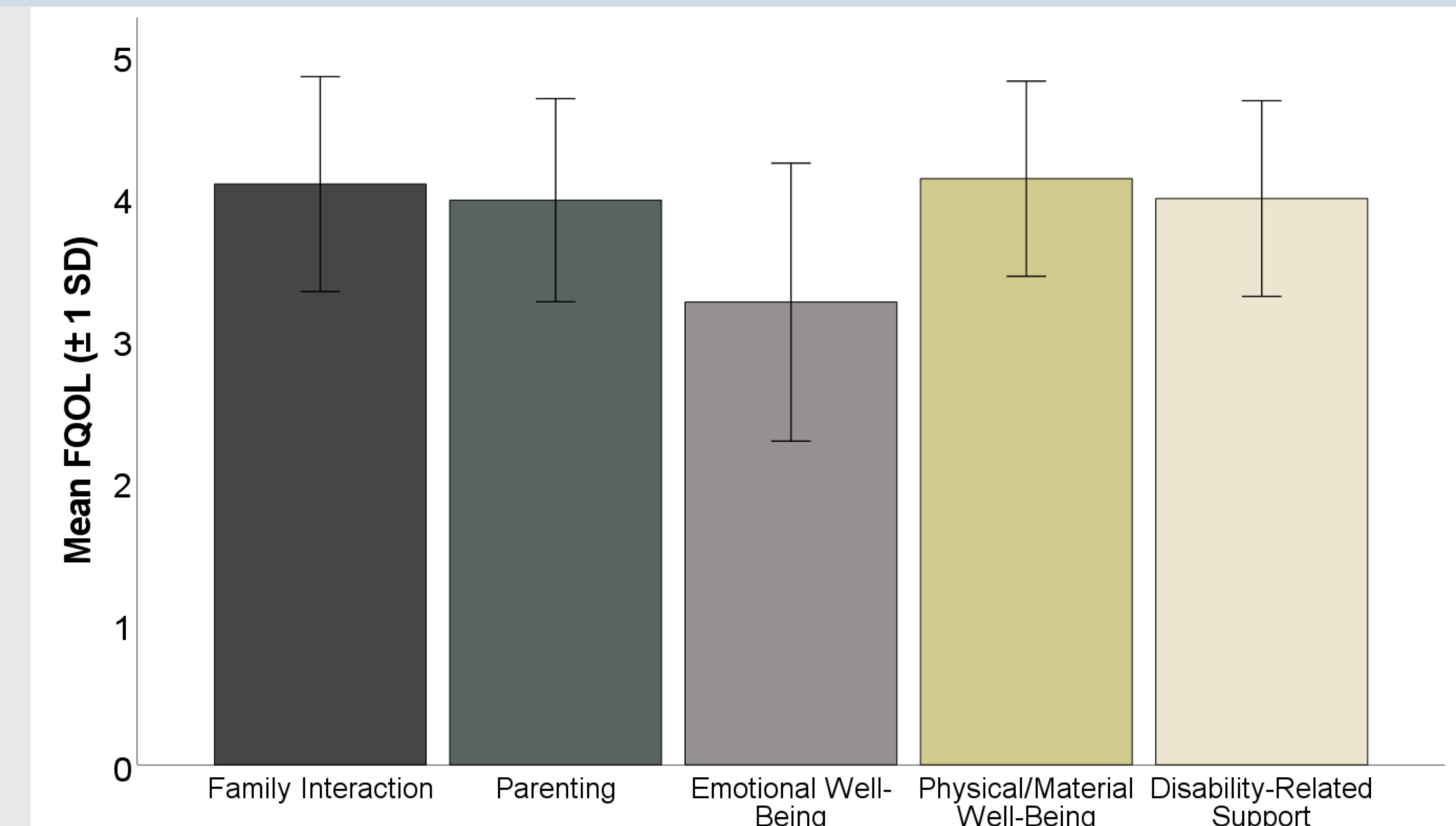
Parenting Stress



Note: Subscale scores of 33, 27, 33 (respectively) or greater denote clinically significant distress

	Total Stress	Parental Distress	Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction	Difficult Child
Age	.04	-.00	-.03	.10
Intellectual functioning	.11	.11	.10	.07
Adaptive behavior (E)	-.01	-.06	-.03	.06
Adaptive behavior (M)	-.03	.02	-.19*	.06
Autism symptom severity	.28***	.10	.38***	.25**
CBED – Internalizing (E)	-.14	-.06	-.17	-.13
CBED – Externalizing (E)	.11	.17	-.03	.10
CBED – Internalizing (M)	.18	.25**	.13	.08
CBED – Externalizing (M)	.20*	.08	.04	.34**
	$R^2 = .33$	$R^2 = .17$	$R^2 = .33$	$R^2 = .33$

Family Quality of Life



	Overall FQOL	Family Interaction	Parenting	Emotional Well-Being
Age	.02	-.01	-.04	.03
Intellectual functioning	.09	.05	.03	.05
Adaptive behavior (E)	-.08	-.02	.03	-.09
Adaptive behavior (M)	.01	-.07	.01	-.06
Autism symptom severity	-.16*	-.01	-.20*	-.23**
CBED – Internalizing (E)	-.11	-.13	-.08	-.04
CBED – Externalizing (E)	.13	.07	.11	.07
CBED – Internalizing (M)	.07	.05	.09	.03
CBED – Externalizing (M)	-.27*	-.33**	-.22	-.20
	$R^2 = .11$	$R^2 = .08$	$R^2 = .09$	$R^2 = .11$

DISCUSSION

- Mothers' experience of parenting stress, and to a lesser degree FQOL, is strongly linked to the manifestations of ASD and co-occurring CBED. Distress was linked to internalizing (e.g., withdrawn, anxious) behavior, whereas child- and interaction-related stress were more closely tied to ASD symptoms and externalizing (e.g., aggressive) behavior.
- The high levels of stress and distress, as well as lower ratings of emotional well-being, in mothers whose child was recently diagnosed underscore the importance of preventive interventions. Indeed, the diagnostic evaluation period and the post-diagnosis waiting period are opportunities to proactively promote parental adjustment alongside strategies to intervene on CBED at home.