Caregiver Stress and Coping Strategies in Families who have a Child with Autism

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BACKGROUND

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the most frequent neurodevelopmental disorders in children.[1]
- The literature is still scarce on stress within the mother-father dyad (i.e., couples).
- Yet, marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction have shown to be critical predictors of caregiving experiences for parents raising a child with ASD.[2,3]

OBJECTIVES

- The goals of the present study were to:

(1) examine through quantitative analyses, mothers' and fathers' levels of stress at the time of their child's diagnosis and over time.
(2) depict through qualitative analyses how mothers and fathers coped with their levels of stress, both individually and as a couple.

METHOD

Parent sample: 258 mother-father dyads recruited from two public services agencies that offer services to individuals with developmental disabilities in Québec, Canada.

Child sample: 203 boys and 55 girls (M_{age} = 3.84 years, *SD* = 0.93).

Quantitative Data:
- Measure: Parenting Stress (PSI-SF)
- Analysis: Descriptives (SPSS V28)

Semi-structured interviews:
- Participants: Sub-sample of 4 mothers & 4 fathers
- Analysis: Thematic content analysis

Time 1: Shortly after receiving an ASD diagnosis

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Time 2: One year follow-up (immediately after children finished receiving intervention services)

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Time 3: One year follow-up (when children were entering primary school)

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Semi-structured interviews: When children were attending primary school

RESULTS

	Mother		Father	
	n	Mean	*n*	Mean
Time 1 Stress	253	**95.6**	254	89.6
Time 2 Stress	192	**91.9**	151	88.6
Time 3 Stress	81	**91.9**	61	89.2

Note. Clinical levels of stress = total score > 90.

Coping with Stress Individually: Themes

- **Seeking Professional Help** (13%)
"I [am] still contacting…the social worker to, you know, in case anything […] oh, what would I do [for] this […] what do these do? And at the end of the day, the advice I think [my son] is working [in[the and he's doing well, you know."

- **Perceiving Own Child as Every Other Child** (25%)
"There's other things in the world to be stressed about. Not your child. As far as you know him being on the spectrum, he's just like anybody else."

- **Engaging in Physical Activity** (13%)
"I go for a run. I was professional volleyball player […] I didn't wanna like pity myself so I start to exercise."

Coping with Stress as a Couple: Themes

- **Giving Personal Time to Each Other** (13%)
"[My partner] lets me run away all day. He lets me go […] and he just lets me have my minute."

- **Sharing Responsibilities** (25%)
"Let's say Saturday I [would say], "Okay, I'm going to be [by] myself all day with the child, you do other things."

- **Understanding Each Other** (13%)
"Understanding each other. I think that's what help[ed] us."

- **Working as a Team** (13%)
"I overdo to make [my kids] happy. And he's one of those dads that are like the kids got what they have. They don't need more. So…like, we work it together somehow."

- **Having a Positive Outlook** (13%)
"I would tell you that the stress that it could cause is very minimal compared to the benefits it brings, so hey, I think we were able to rationalize it quite well and overcome it without too much impact on our family relationship."

- **Communicating with Each Other** (13%)
"By talking, that's it."

- **Being Present in Child's Life** (25%)
"We were really present on a day-to-day basis. We try to strengthen the relationship between [our son] and his sister… we ask, "Could you play together?" and we involve him indirectly."

- **Supporting Child's Development** (13%)
"We really have to […] just try, continue working. We can't stop. We need to try our best to make sure that he's independent. To make sure that he's in the right place to, you know, to speak in [public]."

CONCLUSION

- Mothers and fathers demonstrated elevated levels of stress at the time of diagnosis and after children received intervention services.
- Mothers and fathers managed their stress in different ways as individuals and as a couple.
- These findings highlight the need for more intervention services for both parents of children with ASD that target aspects of partnership and co-parenting such as: sharing responsibilities, understanding each other, teamwork, communication, and presence and support by both members of the dyad.

References

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