

Examining Mother and Father Stress in Parents of Children With a Special Needs Diagnosis

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BACKGROUND

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the most frequent neurodevelopmental disorders in children.¹
- The behavioral problems associated with this disorder pose significant challenges for families, creating parenting stress, a negative reaction that occurs when demands placed on caregivers exceed their expectations of parenting.²
- More recent research has started to acknowledge the importance of fathers' involvement in family functioning and parenting. However, extant literature investigating mothers' and fathers' stress in families with children with ASD has yielded mixed findings.³

OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

- The goal of the current study was to investigate the associations between mothers' and fathers' stress in families whose children recently received an ASD diagnosis.
- It was hypothesized that (1) mothers' and fathers' stress would differ based on family-level variables and (2) mothers' and fathers' stress would be associated with each other.

METHOD

Participants

- 59 mother-father dyads, recruited from a diagnostic evaluation clinic in Québec, Canada.
- Participants' children were between the ages of 2-7 years old ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 1.1$).

Procedure

Parents completed the following measures ~5 months after receiving a diagnosis for their child:

- Family demographics (i.e., income, employment, education, number of children, immigration)
- Parenting stress (PSI-36)
- Child adaptive behavior (ABAS-II)
- Child behavioral and emotional problems (CBCL)
- Child autism symptom severity (CARS)

Analyses

- Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and hierarchical multiple regressions

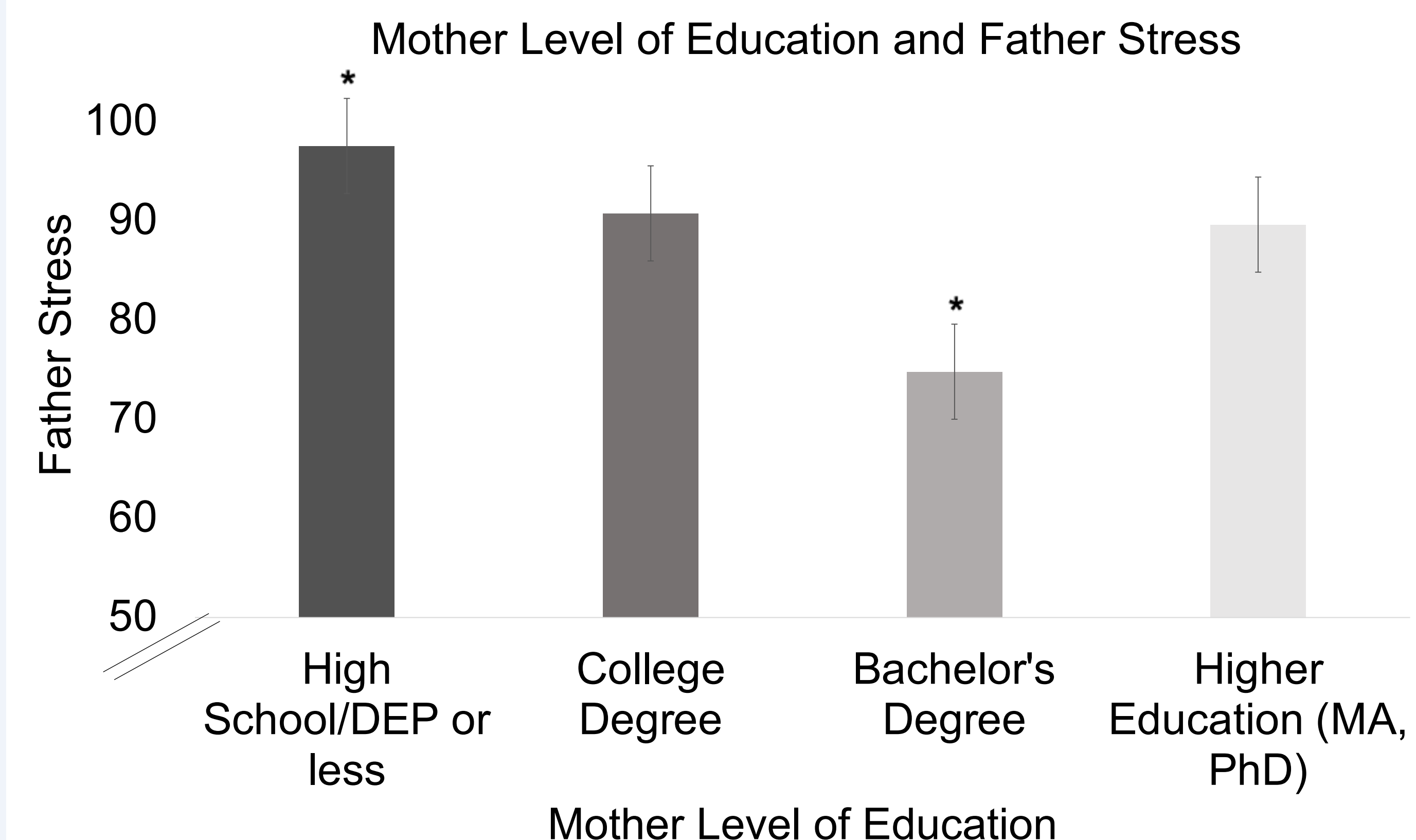


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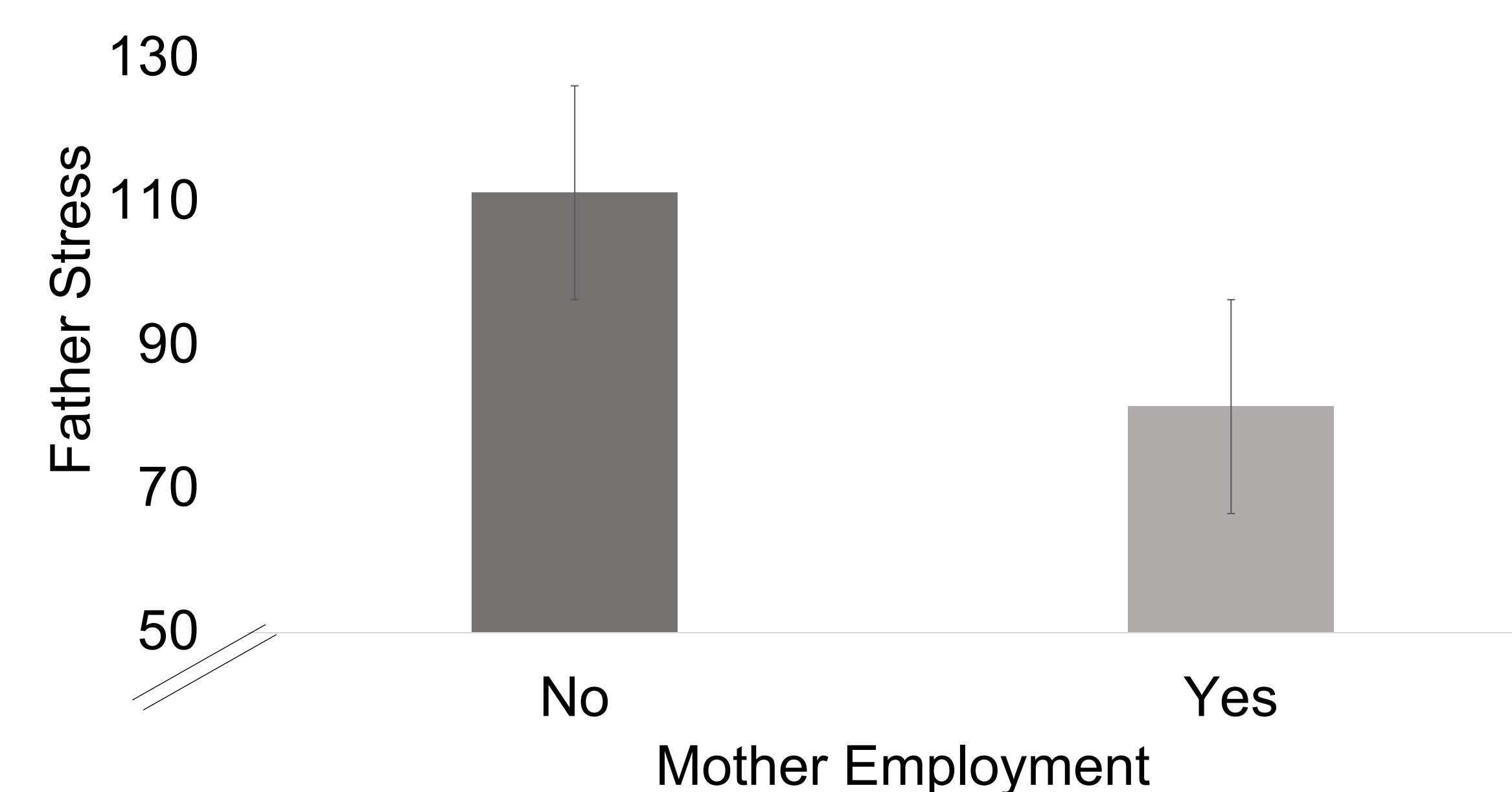
RESULTS

ANOVAs: Father Stress as a Function of Mother Level of Education and Mother Employment



$F(3, 42) = 3.25, p = .03, \eta^2 = .19$

Mother Employment and Father Stress



$F(1, 51) = 3.82, p = .06, \eta^2 = .07$

Associations between Mother and Father Stress

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. F Total Stress	-							
2. F Difficult-Child	.82**	-						
3. F Parent-Child DI	.82**	.52**	-					
4. F Parental Distress	.81**	.44*	.52**	-				
5. M Total Stress	.36**	.46**	.26	.15	-			
6. M Difficult-Child	.29*	.52**	.10	.05	.86**	-		
7. M Parent-Child DI	.32*	.33*	.39**	.08	.78**	.60**	-	
8. M Parental Distress	.28*	.26	.19	.24	.79**	.47**	.40**	-

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Step	Outcome: Father Stress		
	β	ΔR^2	ΔF
1. Child Characteristics	.13 - .45	.30	5.80**
2. Mother Difficult-Child	-.32	.01	0.54
3. Mother Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction	.24	.04	2.35
4. Mother Parental Distress	.13	.01	0.59

Step	Outcome: Mother Stress		
	β	ΔR^2	ΔF
1. Child Characteristics	-.04 - .45	.27	4.97**
2. Father Difficult-Child	.26	.04	2.07
3. Father Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction	.27	.00	0.01
4. Father Parental Distress	-.45	.09	5.44*

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

- Our findings demonstrate that only fathers' stress varied based on family-level variables and predicted significant variance in mothers' stress.
- Each parent's stress seemed to be impacted by different child characteristics (fathers: symptom severity and behavior problems; mothers: behavior problems only), highlighting that parental stress varies within the dyad, despite living in the same household.
- These results may be accounted for by traditional caregiver roles, wherein mothers are generally more involved in child-care and may be more affected by their child's behaviors.⁴ Thus, mothers and fathers may have unique support needs, emphasizing why behavioral interventions (e.g., ACT) that account for respective roles and facilitate co-parenting are necessary for both members of the dyad.