



Are Stress Levels Higher for Parents of a Child with Autism or with a Developmental Delay?

A team of researchers from the US has found that parents of toddlers with Autism Spectrum Disorder demonstrate increased parenting-related stress compared with parents of toddlers with a developmental delay and parents of a child with typical development.

The researchers sampled 96 families with children aged between 18 and 30 months -the participants were part of a larger research study on early ASD intervention.

The impact of child problem behaviour and daily living skills on parenting and psychological distress were also investigated.

KEY FINDINGS

- Parenting-related stress was shown to be higher in mothers of children with autism.
- Child behaviour problems, not daily living skills, emerged as a significant predictor of parenting-related stress and psychological distress. This was true for both mothers of children with autism and development delays.
- In order to improve a child's functioning and decrease parent stress, parents benefit from having the skills to manage and reduce behaviour problems.

- Lack of parental acceptance of behaviours associated with autism may be important contributors to parental adjustment.
- Birth order may contribute to the amount of stress experienced by parents. Having a typically developing older child may build skills and confidence with the day-to-day demands of parenting, and therefore reduce the stress of parenting a child with autism. On the other hand, this may create expectations for developmental milestones that, when not met by a child with autism, could cause additional stress.

- ✓ Make sure you make time for you. Nurture yourself as you would your child. Time alone on the iPad, coffee with a friend, dinner with your partner. Where possible try to share responsibilities for care with other members of the family.

Source: A. Estes et al., *Brain & Development*, 35 (2013) pp 133-138.

THINGS YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Encourage cooperative behaviour by role modelling sharing, taking turns and communicating where appropriate.
- ✓ Set limits by reinforcing what your child is and is not allowed to do. Follow this up with consequences for inappropriate behaviour. Try not to let your child wriggle out of chores and responsibilities just because they don't like doing that particular task.
- ✓ Before giving instructions, make sure you have your child's attention.
- ✓ Keep instructions simple and positive in tone.
- ✓ Ask if they understand what it is they have to do and give your child the time and help to move on from the instruction to completing the task.
- ✓ Help build your child's self esteem by allowing them to make decisions and praise them for good choices and appropriate behaviour.
- ✓ Give your child options, but not too many at one time and keep routines predictable. Prepare them for a change in routine by using language, symbols or pictures to make it easier for a child to comprehend.
- ✓ Take time and patience to introduce stimulating situations. Overstimulation can trigger stress in both child and parent. Consider factors such as short visits, tiredness, changes in routine.

TAKEAWAY

FROM PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERNARD
FOUNDER, YOU CAN DO IT! EDUCATION

Parents, children with autism or those with a developmental delay, benefit from strategies that recognise and encourage cooperative behaviour. But to role model appropriate behaviour to a child whose specific needs must be met, especially one who may have difficulty understanding what's required, it's important that we as parents recognise that our needs must also be met.

To maintain constancy when the parenting becomes intense, time out for interests, hobbies and body/brain nurture comes highly recommended.