



Positive Experiences of Parenting Kids with Autism

Raising a child diagnosed with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) can be challenging and stressful. Researchers at the University of Windsor in Canada examined the positive experiences of parents raising school-aged children with autism, within the context of parenting stress.

This study was unique for two reasons. The first was the use of a Canadian sample from several cities in Ontario. The second was the inclusion of fathers who are typically less represented in the literature. The inclusion of fathers allowed for family based evaluations of the similarities and differences experienced by mothers and fathers raising the same child with autism.

Participants included 23 mother/father pairs raising autistic children (ages 5 to

11 years). In addition to addressing the relationship between positive experiences and parenting stress for parents of autistic children, the researchers also examined gender differences in the positive experiences parents reported, in order to achieve an accurate understanding of the complexities of raising a child with autism.

KEY FINDINGS

- Mothers reported more sensitivity and awareness of people with disabilities.
- Mothers experience more positive aspects of children with autism from an early age than do fathers and these differences remain as the children grow older.
- Both mothers and fathers reported more positive experiences and co-occurring positive experiences when they reported lower levels of parenting stress.
- Both mothers' and fathers' reports of their total positive experiences were significantly negatively related to their levels of parenting

distress. Mothers' and fathers' parental distress scores were significantly positively related to each other. Results also indicated that fathers' reporting of more positive experiences was significantly negatively associated with their partner's reporting of parental distress.

- Mothers rated significantly higher than fathers on more positive experiences. Mothers also rated significantly higher than fathers on learning through the experience of special problems; strength and family closeness; understanding life's purpose; and expanded social network. While not statistically significant, there was a medium effect indicating mothers rated more personal growth and maturity than fathers.

THINGS YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Write down two to three positive experiences that you have with your child on a daily basis. This helps to take some of the focus off negative experiences of child rearing.
- ✓ Practise continued support for you and your partner. Take time out together or individually, enlist the help of extended family or professional services if appropriate.
- ✓ Take care of yourself with a healthy diet, exercise and sleep regime.
- ✓ For children on the spectrum, changes in routine can cause huge anxiety. Keep routines predictable, offer limited options, and use language, symbols or pictures to help prepare them for any changes to routine that are necessary.
- ✓ Encourage cooperative behaviour by role modelling sharing, taking turns and communicating where appropriate.
- ✓ Keep instructions and language as positive as possible.
- ✓ As with daily routines, set limits for behaviour and ensure these are consistent. Any inappropriate behaviour or crossing of boundaries can be followed up with consequences appropriate to the negative behaviour.
- ✓ All members of the family can be allotted jobs and tasks, so ensure everyone is pulling the

weight regardless of whether they feel like it or not.

- ✓ Before giving instructions, make sure you have your child's engagement.
- ✓ Additional patience is often required to navigate a child from an instruction to following through on what they've been asked to do. Other family members can be enlisted on occasions to help the child comprehend and understand the request and subsequent action required.
- ✓ Help build your child's self-esteem with praise and affirmation for trying their best or a job well done. Giving them opportunities to make decisions also boosts self-esteem.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Positive mental health is uppermost. If you need counselling, support group, a friend to talk to or simply downloading strategies from the internet, then give yourself permission. Also give yourself permission to have those down days when you've lost the plot completely. In short, be kind on yourself.

TAKEAWAY

FROM PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERNARD
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Every family member benefits when the home front runs smoothly. Parenting a child on the autism spectrum is challenging and at times confronting and there will be intense occasions when chaos reigns if routines need to be changed or inappropriate behaviour challenged. The role modelling and encouragement of cooperative behaviour has to be constant, and this can be stressful not only for parents, but also for kids who have difficulty communicating and processing what's being asked of them. A positive mindset helps build resilience and nurturing ourselves as we would our child, needs to be high on the list of priorities.

Source: A. D. Kayfritz, M.N. Gragg_ & R. Orr (2010). Positive experiences of mothers and fathers of children with autism. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 23, 337-343.