

Mothers of children with autism report worse immunity

Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) report higher levels of parenting stress than almost any other group of parents of children with disabilities. In addition, parents of children with ASD often report high levels of tiredness and fatigue, as well as a range of mental health problems, such as depression. It has also been noted that mothers of children with ASD report worse quality of life than mothers of typically developing children. The current study assessed the degree to which there was a relationship between stress from a variety of sources reported by mothers of children with ASD, and the levels of health-related quality of life and immune-related ill health reported by those mothers.

One hundred and twenty-two mothers of children with ASD responded to an online survey that included questionnaires on their levels of general stress (produced by day-to-day events), parenting stress (produced by their children), health-related quality of life, and physical health symptoms. The mothers reported very high levels of stress, both from parenting their child with ASD, who can display very challenging behaviours, and also from general events in their lives – often connected with obtaining support services for their child. In general, the levels of immune problems reported by the mothers were related to the severity of their child's ASD. Mothers whose children had a diagnosis of autism reported more colds, more respiratory illnesses, and more incidences of flu than mothers whose children had a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. The quality of life reported by the mothers was negatively impacted by the stress of being a parent of a child with ASD (i.e. their parenting stress). However, this source of stress did not appear to impact on immune-related ill-health; their physical health was more related to the general stress that they experienced in their lives.

It has long been known that parenting a child with ASD can be particularly stressful – not only in itself, but also because of the difficulties in accessing services and help. These data show that this struggle may have negative consequences for the health of the mothers coping with their child's problems. Previous findings regarding the impact of parenting a child with ASD on various physiological systems, such as the cortisol system, and suggest that the stressors have a disruptive impact on these systems' responses, which, in turn, impair the ability of the immune system to deal with infection.

The relationship between psychological pressures and ill health is emerging in all sorts of fields, and these results show that the impact of one on the other is not restricted just to the person with the problem, but extends to their family as well. The research suggests that difficulties often associated with attempting to get support and services for children with ASD, and the resultant impacts on their parents' socio-economic status, as this can limit their ability to work, could play a role in establishing the link between caring for a child with ASD and ill health.

Even if these results were viewed in purely economic terms, they mean that these mothers are even more financially and socially disadvantaged due to their child's condition. There is no reason

to suppose that these results would not also be seen for many other sets of carers, implying potentially huge health-cost impacts, which there is a need to address.

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Publication

[Relationship Between Self-Reported Health and Stress in Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders.](#)

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