Autism: A family affair

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Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)

Social interaction & understanding

Autistic Disorder
Asperger’s Syndrome
PDD-NOS

Non-verbal and verbal communication

Restricted behaviors and activities
Autism Spectrum Disorder

DSM-V Proposed Revision

Social communication

Restricted behaviors and activities

Autism Spectrum Disorder
1 out of every 110 children is diagnosed with ASD
(Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009)

...a new study of South Korean children points to even higher rates
(Kim et al., 2011)
Research on ASD in Goldberg Family Lab

- Conducted since mid 1990s
- Study children with ASD and at risk for ASD from infancy – adolescence
- Comparison groups of typically developing children
- Include parents and other family members
- In-depth methods: interviews, questionnaires, observations, direct testing of child; home and lab settings
- Sample sizes mostly 50-200 per study
Theoretical Underpinnings

- Bronfenbrenner’s Social Ecological Model
Family Systems Theory

Mother

Father

Child with ASD

Siblings

Grandparents & Other Relatives
Marriage and Divorce

TD

- Divorced: 13.8%
- Married: 86.2%

ASD

- Divorced: 23.5%
- Married: 76.5%

Hartley et al. (2010)
Challenges for Marriages

Compared to mothers of TD children, mothers of children with ASD report:

levels of marital quality, intimacy, & satisfaction

Brobst et al. (2009); Fisman et al. (1989); Rodrigue et al. (1990)

* $p < .05$

Ly, Abdullah, & Goldberg (under review)
Challenges for Parenting

Ly, Abdullah, & Goldberg (under review)
Similarities for ASD-TD

Ly, Abdullah, & Goldberg (under review)
Coparenting

Mother  Father

Coparental relationship

Child with ASD
What is Coparenting?

- It is how parents work as a team in raising their child.
  - Do you agree on the types of therapy your child should have?
  - Do you support each other with efforts to be involved with your child?
  - Do you both hold similar goals and expectations for your child?
Coparenting Challenges

- Compared to mothers of TD children, mothers of children with ASD report:

  level of coparenting with their spouse

Ly, Abdullah, & Goldberg (under review)
Possible Solutions to Marital and Coparenting Challenges

- **Improve communication**
  - Focusing on problem-solving strategies
  - Compromise
  - Soften “start up”, de-escalate

- **Support and respect** each other’s views and contribution to the child’s development
  - Focus on the positive aspects

- Recognize that coparenting is an **ongoing process** that may need “revising” with time and developmental changes of child

Gottman (1999); McHale, et al. (2010)
Family Systems

Mother

Child with ASD

Father

Grandparents
Grandparents of Adolescents

Becerra, Tran, Abdullah, & Goldberg (2011)
Family Systems

- Mother
- Father
- Child with ASD
- Siblings
Sibling Relationship Quality

- Children reported as more severe had less positive SRQ \((p < .05)\)

- Children reported as more severe spent less time interacting with siblings on weekdays \((p < .05)\)
  - But no difference on weekend days

Matthews & Goldberg (in preparation)
Theory of Mind (ToM)

- The ability to infer the mental states of the self and others
- Typically develops during the preschool period
- However:
  - Delayed or inconsistent in children with ASD; some children with ASD pass ToM tasks

Wellman (2002)
The Litmus Test for ToM: False Belief

- Change of Contents ("Smarties") Task
Siblings and ToM

- Preliminary Results:
  - Replication of findings in TD children: do better if have child-age sibling
  - No difference in ToM between children with ASD who do and do not have sibs

Some other aspect of sibling relationship?

Matthews & Goldberg (in preparation)
Younger siblings may be at risk

- **Domains:**
  - Responds to Social Interaction
  - Initiates Joint Attention
  - Responds to Joint Attention
  - Requesting Behaviors

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Fig. 1. Group differences in rank scores on ESCS subscales.
Early Identification Challenges

- Barriers to early identification
  - Parental knowledge/recognition?
    - Raising a child with autism increases mothers’ knowledge of autism in general, but not knowledge of the very early signs (Thorsen, dissertation in progress)
Early Identification:
Possible Solutions

- Boost parent knowledge/recognition
  - Free, online screening questionnaires
  - Training to recognize early signs

- Expedite referral/evaluation/services
  - Don’t settle for “wait and see” approach
  - Seek monitoring by a pediatrician/health care professional

- Take videos, make notes, keep records
Reasons for Optimism!

- Great strides are now being made in parents’ and health professionals’ recognition of early signs
- Greater understanding of causes
- Better treatments
- More awareness and support from community and schools for children and their parents
- Challenges are there, but we are making progress in meeting them!
Find Support in Local Community

- KiDA
- Regional Center
- For OC Kids
- Grandparent Autism Network
- Pretend City
- Autism Speaks
- Online parent networks & support groups
Participate in Research

- Ongoing studies in my lab examine:
  
  - Coparenting, play interactions, and child behavior
  
  - Parent-adolescent and parent-parent relationships
  
  - Online parent-training program to identify early signs
Thanks to my graduate students...my support group!

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http://www.ucifamilylab.com/