



## Experts Speak!

*Family Services interviewed Dr. Sigan Hartley and Dr. Marsha Seltzer of the University of Wisconsin-Madison who presented a research study at the International Meeting for Autism Research in San Diego about fathers of children with autism.*

### **WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF DEALING WITH A CHILD WITH AUTISM ON FATHERS?**

In contrast to the large body of research on mothers, there has been little research on fathers of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Moreover, the few studies that have examined fathers included families of young children. Little is known about the experiences or well-being of fathers of grown children with an ASD. Yet, ASD is a lifelong condition and parents often continue to live with their son or daughter into their adolescence and adulthood and have a high level of day-to-day parenting responsibilities. Thus, there is a great need for research to evaluate the lives of fathers of grown children with an ASD.

The fathers in our analyses were involved in an ongoing longitudinal study led by Marsha Mailick Seltzer and Jan Greenberg at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Gael Orsmond at Boston University. The study started in 1998 and originally involved 406 families of adolescents and young adults with an ASD. Although the study was focused on mothers, we invited fathers to participate in the study during the second wave of data collection.

Our research indicates that fathers are not immune to the challenges of parenting a child with an ASD. Of the 91 fathers of adolescents and young adults with an ASD in our study, almost one-third reported depressive symptoms warranting clinical attention. This percentage is similar to the percentage of mothers of adolescents and young adults who reported clinically significant levels of depressive symptoms, but higher than the percentage of fathers of adolescents and young adults with Down syndrome or fragile X syndrome who reported clinically significant levels of depressive symptoms. Fathers of adolescents and adults with an ASD also reported more pessimism about their son or daughter's future than did fathers of adolescents and adults with Down syndrome.

### **HOW DOES IT/OR DOES IT DIFFER FROM THE IMPACT ON MOTHERS?**

Of the 91 families in which parents were married and lived with their adolescent or adult child with an ASD, fathers reported a similar level of parenting burden as mothers. However, fathers' parenting experiences tended to be more sensitive to the child's characteristics than were the parenting experiences of mothers. For instance, fathers of adults with an ASD felt closer to their son or daughter than did fathers of adolescents with an ASD, whereas child age was not related

to closeness in the mother-child relationship. Fathers were also more burdened by their grown child's health problems than were mothers. Moreover, the amount of time that the grown child with an ASD spent out of the family home (e.g., in day programs, jobs, or community activities) impacted the father-child relationship but not the mother-child relationship. Fathers reported having a closer father-child relationship with their grown child with an ASD spent more time engaged in activities outside of the family home.

Our research also indicates that parents' marital relationship is an important resource for helping mothers and fathers handle the challenges of having a grown child with an ASD. Parents with higher marital satisfaction reported less parenting burden than did parents with below-average marital satisfaction. One's spouse is often their main source of support for dealing with parenting stressors, and thus a strong marital relationship may help buffer the negative impact of child-related stressors. In contrast, a poor marital relationship may be an added source of distress, and make it more difficult for a parent to manage child-related stressors. We also found that fathers who were highly satisfied in their marriage, reported being emotionally close to their grown child with an ASD, whereas fathers who felt dissatisfied in their marriage reported having a more distant relationship with their child with an ASD.

## **HOW DO YOU THINK ORGANIZATION'S LIKE AUTISM SPEAKS CAN BEST SUPPORT FATHERS?**

Currently, services and supports for families of children with developmental disabilities tend to be directed toward mothers, with little consideration of fathers. Services also tend to be directed toward families of young children. Our research suggests that fathers, like mothers, are impacted by the challenges of parenting a child with an ASD. Moreover, these challenges are not limited to the early parenting years, but extend into the son or daughter's adolescence and adulthood. Thus, family supports and services geared toward these later parenting years are also needed for both mothers and fathers.

Mothers have been shown to benefit from a combination of services involving interventions focused on the child's symptoms and behaviors (e.g., behavioral support), interventions aimed at supporting parents in coping with child-related challenges (e.g., respite care and stress management), and the coordination of these services (e.g., case management). We do not yet know if fathers are also best served through this combination of service or the format of service delivery that is most appealing and beneficial for fathers.

However, our research suggests that a family systems approach should be used in services and supports. A family systems approach involves including multiple family members (e.g. mothers and fathers) in interventions and recognizing that the experiences and well-being of individuals in a family are interconnected. For instance, we found that fathers' depressive symptoms and pessimism about their son or daughter's future were related to the depressive symptoms of mothers. Moreover, the quality of parents' marital relationship is related to the parenting experiences of mothers and fathers. Thus, services aimed at helping parents' strengthen their marital relationship, such as by helping them find ways to communicate with and support each

other and spend private couple time together despite their extraordinary day-to-day caregiving demands may be an important avenue for helping them manage parenting stress.

## **ARE YOU PLANNING ON LOOKING AT THIS AREA FURTHER, AND IF SO WHAT WORK DO YOU HAVE PLANNED?**

We are planning to continue to examine the experiences and well-being of fathers of grown child with an ASD. We are inviting fathers to participate in the final wave of data collection in our longitudinal study so that we can examine how the fathers who originally participated in our study are doing 10 years later. We also have plans to continue to examine the marital quality of parents of young and grown children with an ASD and to evaluate the ways in which children with an ASD affect and are affected by parents' marital relationship.

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*Marsha Mailick Seltzer, Ph.D., Director of Waisman Center, Vaughan Bascom and Elizabeth M. Boggs Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

### **RELATED PAPERS:**

Hartley, S.L., Barker, E.T., Seltzer, M.M., Floyd, F.J., & Greenberg, J.S. (2011). Marital satisfaction and parenting experiences of mothers and fathers of adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorders. *American Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 116* 81-95.

Hartley, S.L., Barker, E.T., Seltzer, M.M., Floyd, F.J., Orsmond, G.I., Greenberg, J.S. et al. (2010). The relative risk and timing of divorce in families of children with an autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Family Psychology, 25*, 371-378.

Hartley, S.L., Seltzer, M.M., Barker, E.T., & Greenberg, J.S. (in press). Marital quality in families of children with developmental disabilities. *International Review of Research in Developmental Disabilities*.

Hartley, S. L., Seltzer, M. M., Head, L., & Abbeduto, L. (in press). Psychological well-being in fathers of adolescents and young adults with Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, and autism. *Family Relations*.

### **WEBSITE FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON PAST OR ONGOING PROJECTS:**

Sigan Hartley Research Website:

[www.waisman.wisc.edu/people/pi/Hartley\\_Sigan.html](http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/people/pi/Hartley_Sigan.html)

Seltzer/Greenberg Lifespan Family Research Lab Website:

[www.waisman.wisc.edu/family](http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/family)