

The Role of Formal and Informal Social Support in Predicting the Involvement of Mothers and Fathers of Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract : Parents' involvement in the care of their children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its beneficial effect on the children's developmental and educational outcomes is well documented. At the same time, parents of children with ASD tend to experience greater psychological distress than parents of children with other developmental disabilities or with typical development. Positive social support is an important resource used by parents to reduce their psychological distress. The goal of the current research was to examine the contribution of formal and informal social support in explaining mothers' and fathers' involvement with their young children with ASD. The sample consisted of 107 parents who live in Israel (61 mothers and 46 fathers) of children aged between 2 and 7, all diagnosed with ASD and attending special kindergartens or special day care for children with ASD. Parental involvement and social support perception were assessed. Initial analysis focused on the relations between involvement, support, and demographic variables. In addition, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test differences between mothers and fathers. Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the predicted factors in the involvement model while controlling for group (mothers/fathers). Results indicate that mothers reported significantly higher levels of parenting involvement than fathers. Mothers reported higher levels of general involvement and all sub-types of involvement. For example, mothers reported that they were more interested in and have higher levels of attendance in their child's educational program. They were also more collaborative in their child's educational therapeutic program, and socialized with other parents of children from their child's kindergarten than fathers. Mothers' involvement was found to be related to their informal support (non-formal relatives). Findings also reveal significant differences between mothers and fathers on the formal support subscale measure of specializes services. Fathers, more than mothers, reported more specializes services support such as social workers or professional therapists. Separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed a unique gender difference in the factors that explained parental involvement. Specifically, informal support only had a unique positive contribution in explaining mothers', but not fathers' involvement. This study highlights the central role of mothers in maintaining constant contact with the educational system and the professionals who help care for their child with ASD. At the same time, this research emphasizes the crucial role of both mothers and fathers in their child's development and well-being at every development stage, particularly in early development. Further, different kinds of social support seem to relate to the different kinds of parental involvement. It is in the best interest of educators and family therapists who work with families with children with ASD to support the cohesiveness of the family and the collaboration of the parents by understanding and respecting the way each member addresses the responsibilities of parenting a child with ASD, and her or his need for different types of social support.

Keywords : parental differences, parental involvement, social support, specialized support services

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